

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE BENNISON TRIAL WITNESSES

August 20, 2010

TO: The People of the Diocese of Pennsylvania
Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori
Members of the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies
Bonnie Anderson, D.D., President, House of Deputies
Episcopalians Everywhere

We were shaken, but not undone, by the reversal of the verdict of the Trial Court by the Court of Review for the Trial of a Bishop. We have had, after all, disappointing experiences with bishops, spanning three decades, and we have been routinely discouraged with their responses. We are particularly concerned that Bishop Charles E. Bennison stated publicly at trial that he still believes that he acted appropriately in this matter and would take the same approach again if called to do so. He has learned nothing.

The light of truth shone in the verdict of the Trial Court. They had the courage to listen to our testimonies with open hearts. Always with spiritual presence, they acted with utmost integrity and diligence. How brave they were. Their landmark ruling gave us hope that the Episcopal Church could be a guiding beacon to all people everywhere who are affected in some way by clergy sexual abuse and the complicit behaviors of those bishops who again and again choose to protect their own, instead of protecting their flock.

Now the Trial Court judgment has been overturned by the Court of Review. In an incredulous turn of events, Bishop Bennison has been restored to the fold. To our great sorrow, this ruling illustrates that we cannot assume that clergy will protect the vulnerable or that our churches are safe sanctuaries. Episcopalians, be watchful for signs of sexual misconduct and abuse of power. Do not blindly think you are safe.

Yet there is pure gold that has been refined from the dross. The wisdom and insight of the Trial Court are shining illustrations of implementing the spirit of the law. The members of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Pennsylvania do, indeed, stand up. We also salute the many compassionate clergy and laity who have consistently offered us affirmation in letters and articles of support, followed up with bold actions. We cannot imagine a finer company of courageous pilgrims, wending with us through these uncharted waters. We are grateful to share this faith journey with you.

These words from Hymn 637 feed us:

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design the dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

“The soul that to Jesus hath fled for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes; that soul, though all hell shall endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no, never, no, never forsake.”

To the faithful in Pennsylvania: Do not be disheartened; the story is not over. It was here in your City of Brotherly Love that we survivors were given opportunity to finally be heard. We were offered compassion and dignity. We are adamant that our church is not solely the clergy, or the buildings, or the canon laws. It is absolutely the People and the love of Christ. Through you, the Episcopal Church has the opportunity to speak out in faith to make its people safe, and to expect, and to demand, that its clergy, including bishops, stay true to their vows of ordination.

Will you undertake to be a faithful pastor to all whom you are called to serve, laboring together with them and with your fellow ministers to build up the family of God?
Book of Common Prayer, p. 532, The Ordination of a Priest

Will you do your best to pattern your life [and that of your family, or household, or community] in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that you may be a wholesome example to your people? BCP, p. 532, The Ordination of a Priest

Will you be merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper? BCP, p. 518, The Ordination of a Bishop

Along our journey, we have written impassioned letters to bishops and met with many of them face to face, only to hear the hollow refrain, “our hands are tied.” Now we have heard from the Court of Review that their hands, too, are tied, by their narrow interpretation of the canonical letter of the law regarding the statute of limitations. Yet in the same breath, they have upheld the verdict of Charles Bennison being found guilty of “conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy.” It is time to untie.

The statute of limitations regarding sexual abuse needs to be removed entirely. The crime of complicity and cover-up needs to be regarded as equal in seriousness to that committed by the perpetrator because it allows the abuse to continue. Further, in matters of clergy sexual abuse, there needs to be a church-wide mechanism that supersedes the autonomy of individual diocesan bishops. At stake are the safety of the people and the credibility of the Episcopal Church as a whole.

In closing, Julia and Martha would like to share a message they received at church the Sunday following the court ruling. In a series entitled “Fierce Faith, When Believing Isn’t Easy,” the illustration used was David’s battle with Goliath. The lessons learned were: Face Your Enemy. Trust in God. Expect Victory. Little more needs to be said; this is another clear example of the Holy Spirit speaking to us when our need was great.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. Romans 8:35-37

Yours in Faith,

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Rev. Margo Maris, our pastor, advocate and editor, Episcopal Diocese of Oregon