

NEWS

'We failed,' archdiocese says, admitting it mishandled child sex-abuse claims

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The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis publicly confessed wrongdoing for the way it handled the sexual-abuse allegations of three boys.

"Today, I, as the leader of this archdiocese, stand before you to say we failed — in what we have done and what we have failed to do," Archbishop Bernard Hebda said after a court hearing Wednesday, mirroring a prayer traditionally said in each Mass.

Criminal charges against the archdiocese over its handling of a child sexual-abuse case were dropped that morning, after prosecutors announced additional accountability measures.

Ramsey County Attorney John Choi said that his office has insisted on the "direct admission of wrongdoing from the beginning," and could not consider dismissing charges until it was made.

"It is my expectation that, never again, will the facts of this case be repeated and the protection of children will forever be of paramount importance within this archdiocese," Choi said.

CRIMINAL AND CIVIL CHARGES

The Catholic archdiocese **faced six gross misdemeanor counts of child endangerment** for allegedly turning a blind eye to repeated misconduct by Curtis Wehmeyer, a former priest at Church of the Blessed Sacrament in St. Paul who is now in prison. Wehmeyer was convicted of molesting two boys in Minnesota and one in Wisconsin.

Ramsey County prosecutors accused top church officials of failing to respond to "numerous and repeated reports of troubling conduct" by Wehmeyer, dating back to when he entered the seminary in 1997 until he was defrocked.



Archbishop Bernard Hebda admitted that the archdiocese mishandled a sex-abuse case at a news conference in St. Paul, Wednesday. (Pioneer Press; Scott Takushi)

A civil petition was filed at the same time as the criminal case and led to a **"landmark" settlement** in December. It called for a new child-protection plan and protocols defining how such issues should be handled. Elements included broader background checks for clergy and volunteers, child-protection training, the mandatory reporting of abuse and regular reviews of protocols subject to prosecutor review.

The settlement also called for reviews every six months for three years. The first of these was held Wednesday morning.

After the first reviews, officials said they are pleased with the progress. Additional measures were also added, expanding the December agreement and extending it to four years.

"You rolled up your sleeves and you looked at what you could do to protect kids going forward," Ramsey County Chief Judge Teresa Warner told archdiocesan representatives, including Hebda, at the hearing. "This is a significant single step."

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

While the initial settlement was far more extensive than anything the court could have mandated, the additions make it "really unprecedented," Choi said.

"It should be, I hope, a model for child protection protocols and how they would work ... with governmental agencies," he said. "That has not been seen before."

The agreement announced Wednesday in Ramsey County District Court includes:

- An additional year of oversight, with progress reports by the archdiocese to continue until February 2020.
- A public admission of wrongdoing by the archdiocese with respect to the victims in the civil and criminal cases.
- Restorative-justice sessions with the victims to be scheduled by the court. Hebda will be directly involved in at least three.
- A seat on the archdiocesan Ministerial Review Board to be filled by a person appointed by the prosecutor's office.
- The release of any prior litigants from confidentiality requirements in previous settlements. There will be no additional confidentiality agreements unless requested by the victim.
- A guarantee of continued counseling resources for the three victims and their immediate families, if necessary.

The victims and their families appreciated the archdiocese's admission and "wholeheartedly" supported the Ramsey County Attorney's resolution of the case, Choi said.



Hebda said he was “very happy” to hear of the victims’ approval.

“We’re sorry for what’s happened and we want to work with the county attorney’s office, certainly with the community, to do all that we can to make sure this doesn’t happen again,” Hebda said.

Jeff Anderson, a St. Paul attorney who has represented hundreds of people in abuse cases against the church, praised the decision to drop charges in exchange for concessions from the archdiocese. He said it was the right thing to do for survivors and their families, and would push new information into daylight.

CRITICISM AND CONCERN

Some continue to criticize Choi for not pursuing criminal charges against **specific officials within the archdiocese**.

“Wrongdoing is deterred when wrongdoers are punished,” said David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. “But not one Twin Cities Catholic official is being punished – in the courts or in the church – for repeatedly deceiving parishioners, moving predators, hiding evidence, stone-walling police or endangering kids.”

Clohessy specifically called out former Archbishop John Nienstedt, who stepped down shortly after charges were filed against the archdiocese last year.

Both he and Anderson said it was incumbent on the Vatican to take stronger action, including defrocking, against Nienstedt and others involved.

When asked about the decision not to charge any church leaders, Choi said that in order to bring criminal charges, he has to believe his office can prove the case beyond a reasonable doubt.

“There just wasn’t sufficient evidence to point to one particular person, but there certainly was, with respect to the entire corporation,” Choi said.

WETTERLING TO SERVE

The Ramsey County Attorney’s appointment of child advocate Patty Wetterling to the Archdiocesan Ministerial Review Board was announced Wednesday.

After Wetterling’s son was abducted in 1989, she became an advocate of child safety education. She now serves on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s board of directors.

"For me, this is a great opportunity to help champions that I have always admired build a world where children can grow up free from sexual exploitation. I am honored to serve," Wetterling said in a written statement.

The Ministerial Review Board is responsible for examining abuse allegations and is made up of 12 members, 10 of whom are lay people. Lay members include a survivor of clergy sexual abuse and two non-Catholics.

Marino Eccher contributed to this report.

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS

Documents related to [the criminal case](#) against the archdiocese were made available to the public online Wednesday afternoon by the Ramsey County Attorney's Office along with the archdiocese's first [six-month status report](#) and the full [amendment to the settlement](#) agreement. The archdiocese's admission of wrongdoing is on page two of the amendment to the settlement.

To print the document, click the "Original Document" link to open the original PDF.
At this time it is not possible to print the document with annotations.

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Tory Cooney is covering local news for the Pioneer Press while on a Collegiate Network fellowship for 2016

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