

Knoxville Diocese is silencing sexual abuse victims, breaking church rules on settlements, according to survivors group's complaint letter

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The Tennessee chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests is requesting the Catholic Church's U.S. governing body investigate of the Diocese of Knoxville for allegedly silencing victims of sexual abuse through a practice outlawed by the church nearly 20 years ago.

The complaint letter, sent Thursday to the National Review Board, said the diocese pushed for a nondisclosure agreement in the December settlement of a sexual abuse case brought by Michael Boyd. In July, Boyd filed a lawsuit alleging he was repeatedly sexually abused between 1991 and 1995 in Knoxville by Monsignor Francis Xavier Mankel, Bishop Anthony O'Connell, visiting priests and diocesan employee William Michael Lovelace.

Boyd's settlement contains a nondisparagement agreement, which bars him from speaking negatively about the diocese. The complaint letter says non-disclosure and nondisparagement agreements [violate the Catholic Church's 2002 charter on addressing abuse](#), which states dioceses are "not to enter into settlements which bind the parties to confidentiality."

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Review Board guides the policies of the church on protecting youth and audits dioceses for compliance.

DOCUMENT

Complaint letter from Tennessee chapter of SNAP

[View](#)

In the complaint, Susan Vance, founder of Tennessee's SNAP, said all settlements since 2002 by the Diocese of Knoxville, as well as the Diocese of Nashville and Diocese of Memphis, should be investigated for similar violations.

As of Friday afternoon, the diocese said in a statement it is reviewing the letter.

The letter comes during a week when the diocese answered questions about how it handled Boyd's sexual abuse allegations a year before his lawsuit was filed. Documents obtained by the Times Free Press suggest the Diocese of Knoxville [may have known about those allegations for almost a year](#) before suspending the accused employee.

Thomas Doyle, an expert in church law and longtime advocate against sex abuse, offered his support for the complaint in an attached letter also sent to the review board. The nondisparagement agreement is an attempt to intimidate victims of abuse who must watch what they say so they are not drawn back into a retraumatizing and expensive court battle, Doyle said in his letter.

"The on-going attempts by the USCCB and by individual bishops to create the impression of a radical change from their past behavior as well as the impression that they sincerely care about and are concerned for the pastoral welfare of the many victims of sexual violence by clerics are trivialized by the actions of Bishop Stika and any other bishops who follow similar policies," Doyle wrote.

[\(READ MORE: Documents contradict Knoxville diocese's timeline of knowing about sexual abuse allegations against priests and teacher\)](#)

The diocese [announced the settlement in the Boyd case](#) on the final day of 2019, six weeks after the settlement was signed. In the announcement, the church maintained its denial of the validity of Boyd's claim and said if the lawsuit had gone to trial it would be "detrimental to [the church's] mission of service."

Vance and Doyle emphasized that while Boyd's settlement represents one case, it remains unknown how many similar settlements or nondisclosure agreements the Knoxville diocese has signed.

David Brown, a clergy abuse survivor in Nashville, said being able to speak out is an important part of the healing process for victims. In 2005, Brown was released from a confidentiality agreement he signed with the church.

When people share their stories, it empowers other victims to come forward, he said. When the church pushes nondisclosure or nondisparagement agreements, they are silencing victims, Brown said.

"They're trying to control the victim," he said. "They're trying to control what they say. That's not healing."

The complaint letter continues a decadeslong struggle by the church to address the sexual abuse crisis that was revealed nearly 20 years ago. In August 2018, a Pennsylvania grand jury released its report detailing the systematic abuse of children by hundreds of priests in the state. Other states, including New York, Virginia and Nebraska, are working on their own investigations.

The SNAP letter was sent to the review board, the Vatican, all Tennessee dioceses and the Catholic congregation tasked with protecting church doctrine.

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