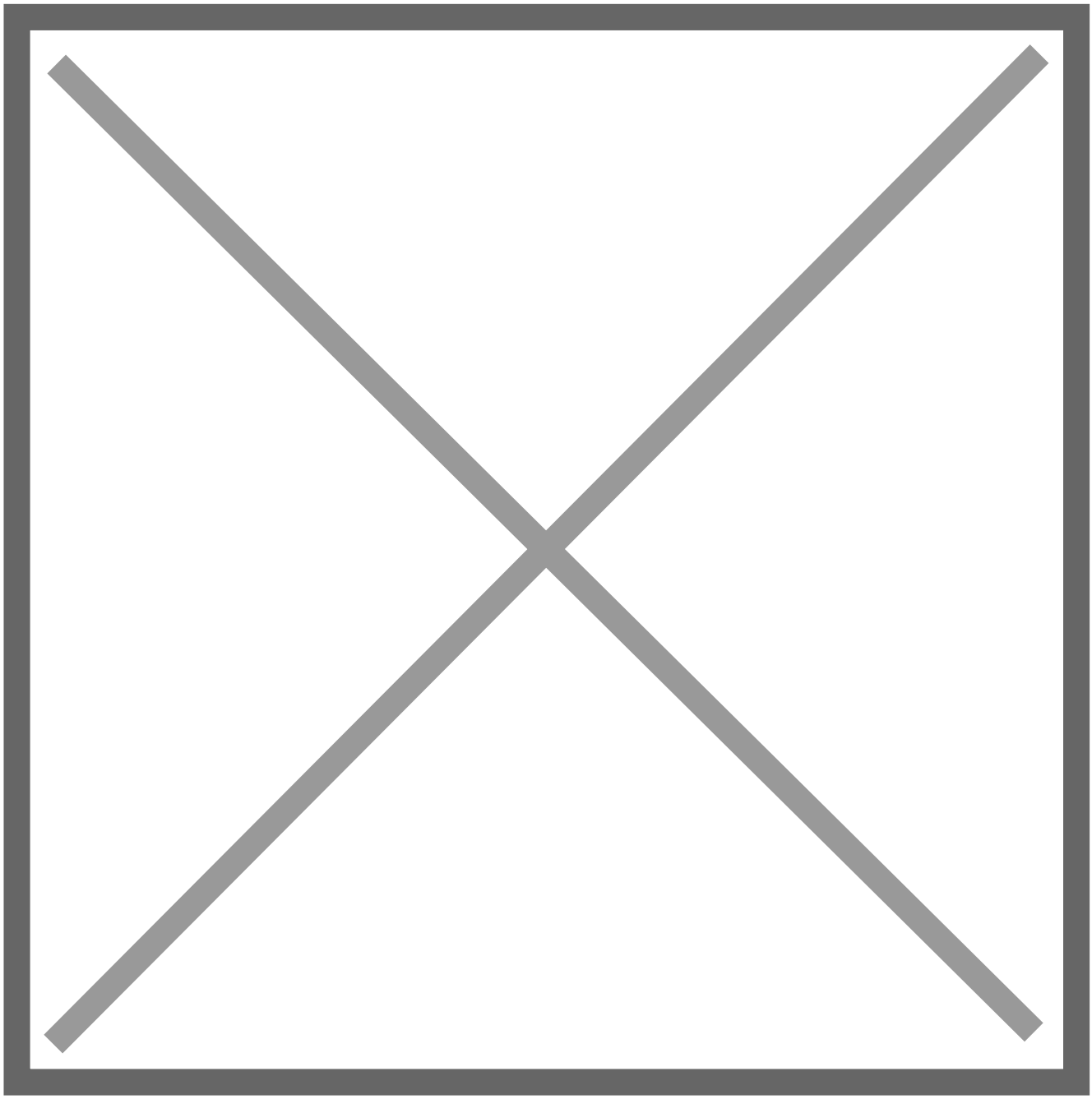


Left: Bishop Shawn McKnight (CNS/Nancy Wiechec); right: Bishop Steven Bigler (CNS/West River Catholic)



by David Clohessy

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In the spirit of the holiday season, SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) finds it worth noting a couple of U.S. bishops who have distinguished themselves from their largely complacent and sometimes duplicitous colleagues when dealing with clergy sex crimes and cover-ups.

Most noteworthy is Bishop Steven Biegler of Cheyenee, Wyoming. His two predecessors largely ignored credible abuse reports against another of their predecessors, Bishop Joseph Hart, a Kansas City native.

In an unprecedented move, Biegler announced that a 2002 law enforcement investigation against Hart was "flawed." He opened an internal investigation. And he declared that Hart's accusers were telling the truth.

Here's an important fact: Hart's still alive. That's what makes Biegler's steps so significant.

Several bishops under pressure, notably in Pennsylvania, have been belatedly critical of their deceased predecessors. But it's much tougher to speak out against a colleague who's still around.

Biegler's actions stand in stark contrast to the inaction of his immediate predecessor, Bishop Paul Etienne (who, sadly, has since been promoted to Anchorage's archbishop).

For years, Etienne continued to honor Hart. Even after at least six child sex abuse lawsuits against Hart were settled, Hart's name continued to grace a children's home in Torrington, Wyoming.

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(In 2014, Etienne also stayed silent while another bishop, this one credibly accused of both committing and concealing sexual abuse, said Mass at a conference both prelates attended.)

Even worse was Etienne's immediate predecessor, Bishop David Ricken, who told National Catholic Reporter in 2005 that "none of the [six] accusations against Hart have been deemed credible. ..."

Could Biegler do more? Certainly. We've urged him to aggressively seek out other Hart victims and expose and punish any Wyoming church staff who ignored or concealed Hart's wrongdoing.

Still, he's taken firmer action against a credibly accused bishop than perhaps anyone in the U.S. hierarchy.

However, Bishop Shawn McKnight has an even more impressive record on abuse than Biegler. In just one year as head of the Jefferson City diocese, he has:

- Held a news conference to disclose that a credibly accused Pennsylvania predator priest, Fr. John A. Pender, had worked in his diocese
- Read a statement at a parish urging victims of convicted molester Fr. Fred Lenczycki to come forward, even though the priest only lived at a local rectory and apparently never had permission to work in the diocese.
- Publicly acknowledged that another out-of-state predator, Fr. Kenneth J. Roberts, lived in his diocese, even though Roberts was also not given permission to work here.
- Posted on his website names of 33 credibly accused abusers in his diocese.
- Included on that list the names of accused men who belong to religious orders (instead of ducking and dodging, as many of his peers do on this issue, professing to have no control over these clerics)
- Pledged to accept no more religious order clergy into his diocese unless their supervisors had listed proven, admitted and credibly accused child molesting

clerics on their websites
- Also posted on his website comments from parishioners made during listening sessions on abuse.
- Revealed how much his diocese spent on this crisis: $4.7 million since 2003 and roughly $2.3 million in the years prior to that.

Again, all of this, he did in less than a year.

Could McKnight do more? Of course.

He could — and should — post his "accused" list more prominently on the diocesan website, give their work histories, include several more out-of-state clerics on it and insist that parishes also publish the list.

Even more important, he could disclose right now how many of the 18 new abuse reports he's received in recent months have been deemed credible, especially with still-living clerics who have never been exposed yet as predators. (Most bishops wait until it's convenient for them and disclose several more allegations in one fell swoop, rather than disclose each time accusations against a never-before-"outed" predator are deemed credible. That's self-serving and keeps kids at risk of more abuse.)

Still, this is a good start for a newer bishop. Here, he explains why he felt compelled to speak out.

While we hope both Biegler and McKnight show more concern for kids who are still vulnerable now, we are grateful for the leadership they've shown so far on this critical issue.

[David Clohessy is the former national director of SNAP and currently serves as volunteer director of SNAP in St. Louis.]