

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 21, 2011 at 11:53am

Responsibility for sex abuse and Wisconsin's new Senator

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

The swing state of Wisconsin swung back to the Republican Party Jan. 3.

Outgoing Democratic Governor Jim Doyle was replaced by Republican Scott Walker after a blowout against Democratic candidate, and Milwaukee mayor, Tom Barrett. And three-term Senator Russ Feingold lost his seat to a political newcomer and Tea Party empathizer, Republican Ron Johnson.

Not much is known about Johnson. He has no political experience, so we have no record of how he might vote on any of the issues.

Johnson helped start a company based in Oshkosh that manufactured plastic for medical device companies. He poured \$4.4 million of his own money into his political campaign. He has been quoted on record as denying climate change.

Johnson ran a campaign based on negative political ads, saying that Feingold's tenure has seen the largest increase in the national debt in U.S. history. He claims that the Senate needs more accountants and business people -- not lawyers like Feingold. Business people, Johnson says, have experience creating jobs.

Feingold is my hometown hero. He ran his first campaign in 1992 when I was in middle school. His house was right across the street from the school building on Donna Drive. In eighth grade we all built and launched rockets for industrial tech class, and mine landed on his roof.

I went to Feingold's door to get it back, and he answered it with one of those old radio-sized cell phones and told me not to worry about it. I was bummed at the time but now realize that he was in the midst of

being the underdog winner of a Senate race.

It was on the garage of that house I briefly visited where Feingold famously painted his campaign platform in bold letters.

One of Feingold's campaign promises was to keep his daughters in public schools if he were elected. While Middleton High School is no urban public school like we hear about in Chicago, New York or Philadelphia, his oldest daughter graduated with me from the school six years after the election, fulfilling one of her father's personal campaign promises.

Feingold crossed the aisle and worked with Republican Senator John McCain to pass campaign finance reform. He was the lone Senator to vote against the Patriot Act (some say because he was the only one to actually read it), stating Oct. 12, 2001, that:

In the play, "A Man for All Seasons," Sir Thomas More questions the bolder Roper whether he would level the forest of English laws to punish the Devil. "What would you do?" More asks, "Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?" Roper affirms, "I'd cut down every law in England to do that." To which More replies:

"And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you ? where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast . . . and if you cut them down . . . d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake. ?

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We must maintain our vigilance to preserve our laws and our basic rights.

Now we are left with the enigma, Ron Johnson. Aside from campaign events, Johnson (a Lutheran) did speak before the Wisconsin State Senate early last year on behalf of his position on the finance committee for the Green Bay diocese.

At the time, Johnson claimed that a diocese -- or any business -- should not be responsible for sex abuse perpetrated by its employees. The diocese was dealing with a victim who was suing over an abusive priest who had been moved around 14 times in 14 years.

Daniel Bice recapped Johnson's testimony in a June 6 column in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Bice quoted the main point of Johnson's testimony: "I believe it is a valid question to ask whether the employer of a perpetrator should also be severely damaged, or possibly destroyed, in our legitimate desire for justice."

Bice also threw this in: "This bill could actually have the perverse effect of leading to additional victims of sexual abuse," Johnson argued, "if individuals, recognizing that their organizations are at risk, become less likely to report suspected abuse."

I'm trying to entertain Johnson's argument.

Finance committees are responsible for diocesan budgets, and, under canon law, are also responsible for settling all lawsuits against the diocese. The challenge that members of finance committees have in

balancing the diocesan budget is that they have many variables to consider.

There is the fiduciary responsibility, to be sure, but also the responsibility to meet the needs of the people that the diocese serves and ministers with.

Similar to an environmentally-friendly business having to meet the "triple bottom line" of balancing a budget while weighing a commitment to protecting the environment, a diocese should have a commitment to upholding Catholic Social Teaching as well as a responsibility to protecting the people it purports to serve.

A diocese should not imply that it has no culpability in the crimes abusive priests commit. In Johnson's case, the priest was not even booted from the priesthood, but rather moved to other ministries. Men have done far less to get booted from the priesthood.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) held a press conference asking Johnson to challenge the diocese on the issue of abusive priest cover-up. Johnson stated that his testimony to the State Senate contained his own thoughts and was not representative of the Green Bay diocese.

SNAP pointed out in the conference that there are 51 priests in the diocese who are accused of abusing children and minors. Johnson later resigned from his position on the finance committee to focus on his run for U.S. Senate.

Johnson further stated to the media after his testimony in front of the state senate:

Actually, had I not been put on the clock (in the state Senate), I would have made another statement. I can't think of a penalty that would be too harsh for these guys. I don't think people that prey on children deserve a second chance. I guess God can give them one, but I sure don't think our courts and legal system should.

It remains to be seen what Johnson will do to address this issue, given that the legislation he testified against didn't end up passing (critics claim that it wasn't well-written and not ready for prime time).

I hope that Johnson will be true to his word and will remain a supporter of Catholic institutions, while pursuing punishment for those who have abused children -- and the institutions that have let their crimes slide.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. He lives with his wife in his hometown in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultholics-blog.com.]

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