



Diocese of Prince George
The Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Prince Rupert
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Over the past five years, the diocese has been named as a defendant in a growing number of lawsuits arising primarily from the 1970s and 1980s, alleging historical abuse of minors by clergy, religious and lay people at our parishes and schools. These lawsuits are not related to residential schools.

These allegations of historical abuse were not made known to the diocese until we were served with the lawsuit or a notice indicating an intention to file a lawsuit. In our review of diocesan records, we have found no information to suggest that these matters were reported or previously known prior to this time. Furthermore, we have located no information to suggest that the diocese was aware that the alleged perpetrators of the abuse had any propensity or predilection to commit such harm.

Nevertheless, even in the absence of any knowledge on the part of the diocese of the possibility or likelihood of harm, the diocese faces financial exposure in many of these cases because of its vicarious liability. Vicarious liability of an institution, such as the diocese, can arise in the absence of any fault on the part of the institution. Thus, where the alleged perpetrator is employed by or is within the control of an institution, and the duties given to the perpetrator create an opportunity for harm to occur and/or place the perpetrator in a position of power, the institution (e.g. the diocese) may be found liable to the victim regardless of the fact that it did nothing wrong.

It is important to note that many of the lawsuits allege that the diocese had knowledge or ought to have known about the alleged abuse and failed to stop it. We have found nothing to support these claims.

Because claims reach back decades, many of those who have been accused and those who supervised them have died. This makes our defense more challenging as there is no way to directly refute the allegations that have been made. We have engaged very experienced lawyers who have been working hard on our behalf. They are doing the best work they can to sort through all of the available data so that they can provide us with good counsel and defend us in court if a resolution cannot be reached.

We don't know whether the alleged abuse did or did not occur. Christian charity requires us to hear these claims and respond accordingly. The virtue of prudence requires us to test what is claimed in order to defend against unfounded accusations.

The diocese has some insurance that has gone toward paying for our lawyers and contributing financially to settlements of these lawsuits. However, for some of the years in question, we have no provable insurance. While we know that insurance was purchased, the policy documents have not survived and insurers are not willing to cover us without adequate proof of insurance. For the years where we do have insurance, the number of claims puts us at risk of exhausting the coverage we have. Together, these factors create great exposure and risk for the entire diocese.

It is important to note that the Church in Canada has taken enormous steps to increase the standards for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. Our own Safe Parish program is responsible for ensuring that our clergy, staff and volunteers have a clear understanding of what is required to keep others safe from harm. New training has been rolling out this past year as part of continuing improvements to the program.



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We also report to our insurers each year about our safekeeping policies and procedures. Their expectation is that we are complying with these policies and procedures, as a condition of being insured and, more importantly, ensuring that children and vulnerable adults are actually being protected from harm. This requires the full participation of everyone in our parishes and schools.

Our Safe Parish program also ensures that those who work for the Church and those who volunteer have safeguards against false accusations. Unfortunately, some litigants proceed on the basis of inaccurate information and when this occurs, innocent people can be accused of acts they did not commit.

A number of years ago, the diocese set up an abuse reporting line where people can contact an independent agency that will take reports of abuse, no matter when it happened, and begin the process of investigation and counseling for those affected. You can get information about this program at <https://www.pgdioocese.bc.ca/sexual-abuse-reporting/>. **In cases where you believe that a minor or vulnerable adult is abused, call the RCMP immediately.**

Why are these lawsuits happening now?

We believe the situation in which we find ourselves has arisen due to a confluence of events: laws which eliminated the time limits on litigation relating to matters of sexual abuse and physical abuse of minors by an adult; a higher degree of societal awareness of the injury resulting from sexual assault; a social environment in which there is a trend toward increased litigation; a greater number of lawyers practicing in the field of sexual abuse litigation following the introduction of no-fault automobile insurance in British Columbia in 2021; and a dramatic increase in the amounts being claimed in these lawsuits.

Why does this matter to the whole diocese?

More than one hundred years ago, when dioceses and vicariates apostolic were being established as civil legal entities by the House of Commons, they used a model where all of the assets of our parishes, schools and the diocese are held by a single corporation: The Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Prince Rupert. Because all of the assets are held by one entity, all the assets are vulnerable to lawsuits.

Depending on the ultimate number and resolution of these matters, we may be in a very difficult financial situation potentially leading to the sale of our assets. This would include any investments held by the diocese, parishes and schools, any land and buildings, and any other salable assets.

What steps is the diocese taking to ensure future ministry?

We are fortunate that there are foundations supporting ministry in Northern B.C. that stand ready to help when we need to rebuild. While they are not part of our diocese, they are committed to supporting the life of the Church. Donations you make to these foundations can help parishes and schools when they need it. We will provide more information on these charities and foundations in the near future.

In addition, we have engaged lawyers and financial professionals to look at how we would start to rebuild. A lot of effort has gone into this task, but much remains to be done.

What can we do to help?

Right now, the most important thing that parishioners can do is to pray. We need to pray for our parishes and schools, but we also need to pray for all of those who are involved on both sides of these lawsuits.