

Delegate Krizek and all the other distinguished members of the committee,

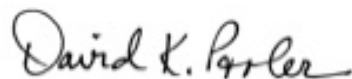
My name is Dr. David Pooler and I am Professor of Social Work at Baylor University in Waco, TX. I have done primary research on clergy perpetrated sexual abuse (specifically of adults) and want to offer strong support for HB 2475.

First, I want to express my deep gratitude for your consideration of this bill. Every state needs to criminalize clergy perpetrated sexual abuse. Virginia is now on the precipice of joining 15 other states and the district of Columbia that have similar laws. Virginia can be a model state for legislation to protect vulnerable people from abusive clergypersons and I hope you will choose to lead this change effort.

In 2015-2016 I completed a national survey of 280 adult survivors of clergy perpetrated sexual abuse and have documented the incalculable harm done to people when clergy persons abuse their position and power to be sexual with someone who trusts them. I followed up and interviewed 27 of them. I have been inspired by their courage, their resilience, and their wish to see abusers held accountable. Only 4% of women I surveyed saw their perpetrators prosecuted. And most of the survivors knew they were not their perpetrator's only victim. This has to change and the only way to see it happen is to make it a crime.

Too often abusive clergy are moved to another church only to harm again. There is no other profession that works with people where the practitioner could be sexual with a client or patient and walk out and call it an affair, ask to be forgiven and continue to practice (not medicine, nursing, psychology, or social work to name just a few). These professions know that the public needs to be protected from incompetent or unethical people. In these professions, sexual activity with someone under their care would be labeled misconduct or abuse and the professional would be charged with a crime and likely lose the ability to practice their chosen profession.

Criminalizing clergy perpetrated sexual abuse is the first step in making faith communities safer. It could dissuade a potential perpetrator from harming someone, change the way clergy are trained and assessed, and most importantly it can hold a perpetrator accountable and hopefully stop them from harming again. States do need to be involved because the religious systems and institutions in which clergy serve are unable and unwilling to self-regulate or adequately hold perpetrators accountable, and there are no clergy licensing laws like there are for other professions. Therefore, in order to promote the wellbeing of its citizens, states must put forth legislation to criminalize sexual abuse of congregants. I appreciate you taking the time to hear from me. I trust your effort to do good, enhance safety, and care for your citizens.



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