

MONTH 5: MAY

Knowing Your Options: A Gentle Introduction to Legal Rights

Word Count: ~750-850 words

[Content Warning: This article discusses clergy sexual abuse and related topics. Please take care of yourself as you read. You can stop anytime.]

If you've experienced clergy sexual abuse, you might be wondering: "Do I have any legal options?" The answer, in many cases, is yes. But I want to be very clear: having options doesn't mean you have to use them. This article is simply offering information. What you do with it (if anything) is entirely up to you.

WHAT "LEGAL OPTIONS" MEANS

When I say "legal options," I mean: • Criminal reporting (police) • Civil lawsuits (suing for damages) • Professional licensing boards • Denominational authorities You can pursue one, some, all, or none. All choices are valid.

WHY SOME SURVIVORS WANT TO KNOW THEIR RIGHTS

Some find that knowing legal options: • Gives them a sense of control • Validates that what happened was serious • Provides a framework for accountability Others find learning about legal options overwhelming or anxiety-inducing. Both responses are normal.

LEGAL RECOGNITION

Many states have laws specifically addressing clergy sexual misconduct: • Some treat it as criminal sexual assault • Some recognize it as professional misconduct • Some have specific "clergy sexual abuse" statutes This legal recognition exists because lawmakers understood: power dynamics in clergy relationships make equal consent very difficult.

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT TIMING

Many survivors worry: "It's been too long." Here's what might help: • Many states have extended or eliminated statutes of limitations • Some allow "delayed discovery" (time starts when you realized it was abuse) • Civil lawsuits often have longer windows than criminal cases
If you're worried you've "waited too long," it might be worth consulting an attorney. Many offer free consultations.

REPORTING DOESN'T REQUIRE CHURCH PERMISSION

Important: You don't need the church's permission to report to police or file a civil lawsuit. External reporting is always an option, regardless of what the church says.

WHAT IF YOU DECIDE NOT TO REPORT

Many survivors choose not to pursue legal action. That's completely valid. Reasons include: • Protecting privacy and peace • Avoiding retraumatization • Focusing on healing instead of fighting • Not having support/resources • Simply not wanting to
All valid. Not reporting doesn't mean what happened wasn't serious.

YOU GET TO DECIDE

Whether you: • Research laws or don't • Consult an attorney or don't • File a report or don't • Pursue legal action or don't ...is entirely your decision. Options exist, if you want them. And if you don't, that's okay too.

RESOURCES: Crisis support: RAINN: 1-800-656-4673 | Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
Information: | Faith Trust Institute: faithtrustinstitute.org You are not responsible for what happened to you. You deserve support, whatever you decide. Take care of yourself. ❤️