

Three more resign after priest was allowed to work with kids despite lifetime ban



The Rev. Michael Fugee poses with Michael and Amy Lenehan, longtime friends and the youth ministers at St. Mary's parish in Colts Neck, during an annual pilgrimage to Canada. The couple has resigned their positions in the wake of the scandal surrounding Fugee's contact with kids. (Facebook Photo)



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COLTS NECK — The pastor and two youth ministers at the Monmouth County church where a visiting priest violated a lifetime ban on ministry to children have stepped down from their posts, the latest fallout in an [escalating scandal enveloping Newark Archbishop John J. Myers](#).

The Rev. Thomas Triggs, pastor of St. Mary's Parish in Colts Neck, announced his resignation from the pulpit during Mass on Saturday evening, hours after meeting with Trenton Bishop David M. O'Connell.

In one of his final acts, Triggs accepted the resignations of the youth ministers — Michael and Amy Lenehan — who had invited the Rev. Michael Fugee to take part in youth retreats and other activities with teens, a spokeswoman for the Trenton Diocese said in a statement.

O'Connell, in a message read to parishioners during Mass on Saturday and today, said recent "troubling events" and the "intense scrutiny" surrounding them made it clear a change in parish leadership was in "the best interest of all concerned."

"There are few things in life as important as protecting our children and young people," O'Connell said. "We must all recommit ourselves to that goal by supporting the policies of the Diocese of Trenton designed to do precisely that."

Triggs will go on sabbatical until he receives a new assignment, the diocese spokeswoman said.

The diocese's statement did not indicate whether O'Connell demanded that Triggs and the Lenehans step down.

O'Connell previously announced the resignations in an e-mail to priests of the diocese, said the Rev. John Bambrick, a diocesan priest who received the message. Bambrick said the bishop met with Triggs at the church Saturday morning.

The shake-up at St. Mary's comes a week after The Star-Ledger disclosed that Fugee, a priest of the Archdiocese of Newark, had been involved with the parish youth group in defiance of an agreement that bars him from ministering to children or holding any position in which children are involved.

Fugee, 52, agreed to the terms in 2007 to avoid retrial on charges that he fondled the genitals of a 13-year-old boy. The Newark Archdiocese also signed on to the agreement, pledging to supervise Fugee and to keep him away from children.

But The Star-Ledger has found that supervision was, at best, lax, allowing the priest to interact with minors not only at St. Mary's but at Holy Family Church in Nutley, where Fugee is friends with the pastor, Monsignor Paul Bochicchio. Fugee was granted leave from ministry Thursday.

Bambrick, an advocate for victims of clergy sex abuse, sharply criticized Myers in an interview today, saying that by allowing someone who admitted to groping a child to work as an active priest, the archbishop has violated the policies of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the landmark Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, adopted by the nation's bishops in Dallas in 2002.

"Essentially, Archbishop Myers has erased 10 years of hard work by the church in the United States to ensure people are safe," said Bambrick, a survivor of clergy sex abuse. "He has called into question the integrity of all of us who work so hard to ensure the safety of children, and it's really disheartening."

Bambrick added that the "body count" spawned by the controversy is now up to four, with the pastor, the Lenehans and Fugee.

"The person who caused all this upset is Archbishop Myers, and he's still in office," Bambrick said. "It seems like the archbishop needs to take responsibility for his own actions, as everyone else has in this crisis."

Myers has declined to directly comment on the issue. His spokesman, James Goodness, initially defended Fugee's interactions with children, saying they did not violate the memorandum of understanding Fugee signed with the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office because the priest was always under the supervision of other clergymen or lay ministers.

Late last week, amid a criminal investigation by the prosecutor's office and national criticism of Myers, Goodness took a contrary stance, acknowledging Fugee violated the court-sanctioned agreement and saying the priest had acted without the knowledge of the archdiocese. Fugee concurred with those statements in his letter seeking leave, stating it was "my fault alone."

O'Connell, the Trenton bishop, took swift action after The Star-Ledger disclosed Fugee's connection to St. Mary's, immediately barring him from working in the diocese. O'Connell has said Fugee was in the diocese without his knowledge or permission.

Such permission is a prerequisite for any priest who wants to work in another diocese, though some bishops enforce the rule more strictly than others.

In the Diocese of Trenton, Bambrick said, O'Connell has made clear that every visiting priest must file a letter of suitability, in which officials in the priest's home diocese attest that the priest is in good standing, has not been disciplined or convicted of a crime and has not acted with minors in an inappropriate manner, among other conditions.

