



Living in Freedom Together Releases Statement Regarding Exploitation of Vulnerable People by Billy Reilly, St. John's Parish

Living in Freedom Together (LIFT), Worcester, MA, March 15th, 2022: LIFT is committed to supporting Survivors of prostitution and holding perpetrators accountable. Perpetrators are (mostly) men who harm vulnerable people (mostly women, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+ communities) by buying access to their bodies. LIFT believes all perpetrators, regardless of the positions of power or authority they hold in our community, must be held accountable for the violence and abuse they commit.

People in positions of power at St. John's Church and its food pantry are exploiting our most vulnerable community members. LIFT is disappointed to learn that this has been common knowledge in our neighborhoods, in the church, and at the diocese. When asked, the diocese responded that it "could not act" or do anything for that matter because the reports contained "second and third hand" information. Despite multiple reports, no investigation was initiated. The onus to protect vulnerable women should not be placed on the shoulders of victims. The church and our community failed to protect prostituted people. Prostituted women should not have to have their bodies purchased and violated to access basic resources, including food, in our community.

This was reported to the leadership at St. John's over the years and the abuse of vulnerable women continued because the church failed to act in any way. When Survivors are telling you that they are experiencing abuse, we, as a community, need to listen and act. Billy Reilly was enabled by the church to use the soup kitchen as a hunting ground to find vulnerable women to buy. He was able to do this unimpeded for years. The church and the community allowed him to inflict violence and abuse on people living at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities, including homelessness, commercial sexual exploitation, and un/undertreated substance use disorder (SUD) and mental health disorders. He was allowed to betray and abuse people coming to him and the church in need of food. We are sickened and disappointed by the lack of response and are outraged that people continued to dismiss the voices of women struggling with SUD, homelessness, and sexual exploitation.

Survivors deserve and demand accountability. Only after a reporter questioned the diocese and only after a survivor came forward herself to make a direct report (in light of the diocese's stance that it would not take action without "first hand" information), Mr. Reilly has been placed on leave and an investigation is forthcoming. However, given its years of inaction, it is clear that the diocese is reluctant, at best, to acknowledge the situation let alone take responsibility for it. LIFT questions the integrity of an investigation paid for by the church. We strongly urge the diocese to act and remove Father Madden immediately. Father Madden did nothing when he received reports from abuse victims. He did nothing when he witnessed Mr. Reilly taking prostituted women from the soup kitchen to live with him in his home. If Father Madden had done something, anything, this abuse would not have spanned decades. Father Madden's inaction enabled and empowered Mr. Reilly.

Prostitution is an act of power wielding violence, and it is always our community's most vulnerable that suffer at the hands of perpetrators. Women were forced to choose between access to food and warmth or stopping the abuse and that is not fair or just. We demand justice for Survivors and are proud of those who came forward to use their voices to stop this egregious violation of human rights.

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LIFT is a Survivor-led organization working to end the sex trade and support individuals in exiting and recovering from/ the harms of prostitution. Ending prostitution required shrinking the harmful sex trade, which disproportionately impacts BIPOC women and girls and LGBTQIA+ communities, by implementing key components of the Equity Model: closing entry ramps into systems of prostitution (“the life”), such as poverty, child abuse, foster care systems, juvenile justice systems, creating off ramps from the life through quality exit services like trauma-informed crisis centers, training/education and job opportunities and reducing barriers to exiting by clearing prostitution and other related charges from records, and improving social benefit systems.