

Developing a model for ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost-Ghana

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Abstract

This article presents some of the findings of doctoral empirical study on ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost-Ghana, over the past thirty years, with a view to developing a model of ecclesiastical discipline for the church¹. Osmer's (2008) approach is applied to assist developing the envisaged model. Thus, the article asks: What model of ecclesiastical discipline can be established for the Church of Pentecost-Ghana?

Thirty participants, including ministers, elders, and members of the Ghana Conference of the Parties in Accra, were interviewed. The participants viewed ecclesiastical discipline as relevant to the Church of Pentecost-Ghana to show the church, Christ's bride, as holy and to protect the church's reputation and aid it in fulfilling its divine mandate of preparing Christ's return. They raised concerns regarding the application of ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost-Ghana, as well as suggested some suitable approaches in ecclesiastical discipline in the church. The researcher then developed a model based on the concerns and suggestions of the participants.

Keywords

*ecclesiastical discipline; ecclesiastical model; Church of Pentecost (CoP);
Church of Pentecost-Ghana (CoP-Ghana)*

1 Kumi-Woode, B.G. 2022. Establishing a model of ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana. unpublished PhD thesis. Johannesburg, South African theological Seminar.

Introduction

The authors note that it is not easy to promote ecclesiastical discipline because of the influence of human rights and the conflicting views of older Christians who see it relevant and younger Christians who see it as outdated and unnecessary. Hence, this article explores the praxis, over the past thirty years, in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana (CoP-Ghana) and proposes a model to be adopted in the church.

The CoP-Ghana is the head office of the global Church of Pentecost (CoP) which lays much emphasis on fundamental values like individual conversion, belief in the speaking of tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and demonstration of the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as working in miracles and healing (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013: 1–4). According to Koduah (2004:49), the CoP also lays emphasis on what it calls the “The Four-Square Gospel” which portrays Jesus Christ as the Savior, the healer, the baptiser in the Holy Spirit and the soon coming king, and these are part of the tenets of the church and enshrined in the church’s constitution and ministerial handbook.

However, like other Pentecostal churches in Ghana, CoP faces the challenge of membership turnover as they are disciplined. It must also address and find a way to balance the differing views of church discipleship practices from older church members and younger church members. This article thus examines the complex and important question of church discipline in the subdiscipline of practical theology. Thus, the article asks: What model of ecclesiastical discipline can be developed for the Church of Pentecost–Ghana?

The article uses Osmer’s (2008) four phases: descriptive-empirical task, the interpretative task, the normative task and the pragmatic task because they help address local congregation issues with the goal to introduce change that could lead to transformation. These tasks ask: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? Then finally, How might we respond? (Osmer 2008:4–29). The intended transformation relies on the following four sub-questions based on Osmer’s method assist to answer the main question: (a) How has ecclesiastical discipline been conducted in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana over the generations? (b)What has influenced

the Church of Pentecost to practice ecclesiastical discipline? (c) What do theologians and the Scriptures teach about ecclesiastical discipline? and (d) What model of ecclesiastical discipline can be developed for the Church of Pentecost-Ghana?

The article consists of three main sections. First, it presents an overview of theological perspectives on ecclesiastical discipline, then discusses ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost. Second, it continues with an analysis of ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost in Ghana. Third, it concludes with a proposed model for ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost in Ghana. The third section includes an analysis of interview responses from participants to assess current practices in ecclesiastical discipline within the Church of Pentecost in Ghana, with the goal of suggesting an improved model for transformation and improvement.

A brief theological perspective on ecclesiastical discipline

Ecclesiastical discipline is part of pastoral care. Generally, the theological basis for the practice of ecclesiastical discipline can be found in these six biblical texts: Matthew 7:1–5; Matthew 18:13–18; Acts 5:1–11; 1 Corinthians 5:1–8; 1 Timothy 1:18–20; and Hebrews 12:6–11. While the church has for abbreviated stints in its history upheld the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and practiced ecclesiastical discipline, the practice of ecclesiastical discipline has largely been disconnected from a robust doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (Bulley 2000:256). According to Smith (2013:4), churches continued in maintaining the doctrines and practices of ecclesiastical discipline from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century. Duncan (2010: 1) contends that one of the many problems regarding ecclesiastical discipline is the negative connotation it has acquired. Cloud (2017:32) adds that ecclesiastical discipline is a difficult practice because there is often uncertainty and worry. Long (2015:3) notes that instead of loving people enough to guide them when they go astray, contemporary churches ignore the problem and hope it will disappear. He further contends, ultimately, that, this approach hurts the offender, the church, and the community at large. The offender suffers because s/he continues to walk in unrepentant sin thinking the church does not

care, thus jeopardizing his or her soul. According to Wills (2012:150) the abandonment of ecclesiastical discipline is linked to the church's creeping accommodation to contemporary societal culture of moral individualism.

It is essential to note that Leech (1977:78) argues that ecclesiastical discipline flows from "a life of prayer, discipleship and the struggle for holiness" and that Duncan (2010:4) views ecclesiastical discipline as an integrating force that works in a positive way through repentance, restoration, and reconciliation.

Ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost

Rev. James McKeown's, the founder of the church, based his teachings on holiness on Hebrews 12:14b and members of the CoP were instructed to consecrate their bodies to the Holy Spirit as a temple; those who fell into known sins or visited questionable sites were disciplined (Church of Pentecost 2005: 53–54). The strong holiness ethic is noticed in several of the songs of the church (Church of Pentecost 2005:54).

The church classifies membership status into three, namely, members, ordained officers and ministers when dealing with disciplinary matters. Two cardinal principles of ecclesiastical discipline in CoP is the right of the accused person to be heard and to know clearly what s/he is being accused of. Every opportunity should be given to the person to present his or her defence, call witnesses, seek appropriate counsel and cross examine anyone who testifies against him or her (Church of Pentecost 2005:188). There is an appeal process for disciplined people who desire to appeal the decision.

Second, is the principle of restoration. Restoration is the process of bringing back a disciplined offender into fellowship and completing the discipline process (Church of Pentecost 2018:188). Members who are suspended may be restored to full fellowship by the district pastor by announcing in the congregation or through circulars at the level where the discipline was implemented. Restored members may later be commissioned as officers if they are suitable. However, restored members can only be recommended for a fulltime ministry after the area or a counsellor or a mature Christian is assigned to the person under discipline for counselling and support to

be able to go through the process of ecclesiastical discipline (Church of Pentecost 2018:188).

Once restored, the person is relieved of the limitations imposed by the disciplinary procedure and could be called into a leadership position later if the person exhibits a commitment to the church and the congregation expresses readiness to have the person in leadership (Church of Pentecost 2018:188).

Ministers who face suspension will be suspended by the Executive Committee and reinstated as fellows in due course, but not fulltime ministry. These restored ministers could be appointed to a position of leadership (Church of Pentecost 2018:186). Getting other ministers and church members to fellowship with suspended ministers during the suspension period and assigning counsellors to suspended ministers has been a challenge faced by the church. Excommunicated members who repent and wish to return to the church should personally initiate the process at the local (congregational) level, after which the presiding elder notifies the district pastor. That person must then go through formative ecclesiastical discipline and extended the right hand of fellowship before resuming fellowship (Church of Pentecost 2018:188).

Analysis of Ecclesiastical Discipline in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

The researcher obtained ethical clearance letter from the South African Theological Seminary (SATS-NPC) to conduct the study. The participants agreed to participate after seeing the letter of informed consent from SATS-NPC. The data from the interviews were categorised into (1) awareness of ecclesiastical discipline, (3) following of ecclesiastical procedure, (4) factors influencing ecclesiastical discipline, (5) the relevance of ecclesiastical discipline, and (6) concerns about ecclesiastical discipline.

Awareness of ecclesiastical discipline

The study probed to find out whether the participants are aware of ecclesiastical discipline in the CoP-Ghana. From the findings, all the participants reiterated that they are aware of the church's practice on

ecclesiastical discipline. The participants were later asked to explain how they learnt about ecclesiastical discipline in the CoP-Ghana. From the findings of the study, the participants stated that they learnt about it from the ministerial manual, observation, teachings such as Bible studies, new convert classes, and children ministry classes. The study revealed that almost 85% of the participants said they became aware of ecclesiastical discipline through observation. This is followed by the Minister's Handbook (76%), Bible Study lessons (75%), New Convert Classes (70%), and Children's Ministry lessons (50%).

Following of ecclesiastical procedure

Most participants reiterated that certain procedures were followed before disciplining church members. That is, 88.9% of the participants reiterated that a procedure was followed (twenty-nine ministers, twenty-seven members, and twenty-four presbyters) while 11.1% indicated that no procedure was followed (six presbyters, three members, and one minister). The entire procedure is outlined in the Church of Pentecost (2014: 44, 73).

Notable among the steps mentioned include setting up an investigative committee to investigate the matter, calling of a person in front of congregation, narrating the offense, applying the necessary sanctions, and then praying for the person. However, the participants did not elucidate all these steps in the points they made. Some mentioned part of them or gave inferences that were like the points being made. This situation seems to show that the ministers and most presbyters are aware of the disciplinary procedure and are certain that they are followed. However, some members, presbyters, and a minister were not convinced that there was a clear procedure for applying ecclesiastical discipline. The responses indicate that ministers, presbyters, and members were not very clear about the procedure being used in handling issues of ecclesiastical discipline although they believed some procedures exist. Such a situation may create arbitrariness in dealing with offenses and cause disquiet in those disciplined and observers.

Factors influencing ecclesiastical discipline

The study went further to find out the factors influencing ecclesiastical discipline. The findings suggest that ecclesiastical discipline is influenced

by many factors. Notable among these factors are the tenets of the church, the church's practices, the Scripture, and core values of the church.

From the findings of the study, 34.4% of the respondents confirms that ecclesiastical discipline is informed by the tenets of the church while 22.2% of the respondents reiterated that it is informed by core values of the church as well as scripture and biblical principles, respectively. Another, 21.1% said it is informed by church practices. The opinions of presbyters certainly were not limited to the biblical point of view and its implementation as an act of church's doctrine or principle, others viewed it as a neo-coercion on the church to pursuing laid down rules from the past and as such had to because they are compelled to. Others stipulated that the focus is to bring restoration and change, and yet still others deem it to be an act of punishment mainly for "seen" sin and gross "specific" misconduct. Members' views covered the authority of God's Word and the principles of human governance, doctrinal dictation, restoration, and helping to restore members.

The relevance of ecclesiastical discipline

From the results of the study, most participants mentioned that they believe ecclesiastical discipline is relevant today. According to the survey results, 93.3% of the participants echoed that ecclesiastical discipline is relevant in today's era, while 6.7% of the participants said that it is not relevant in today's era. Most of the ministers indicated that they see ecclesiastical discipline to be relevant. However, five elders and one pastor said they don't think ecclesiastical discipline makes sense today.

Most ministers cited biblical reasons for the relevance of ecclesiastical discipline for the church, ranging from presenting the bride of Christ as holy, to discipline as an expression of God's love. Others explained that it is beneficial in the transformation of the believer and in serving as a sort of "checks and balances" to the church.

Ordinary church members conceded that ecclesiastical discipline is relevant in keeping orderliness in the church, improving the church's image outside, and in giving vivid blueprints of acceptable conduct. From the biblical point of view, many asserted that it is in the Word of God to punish wrongful attitude as it is a kingdom principle, some also explained

that it is an important part of the transformation experience, with many others mentioning that it is the nature of God to be holy and the Church of God must strive to emulate his example. The responses from the opinions of ministers, presbyters, and members, show a train of thought regarding key areas where ecclesiastical discipline is relevant as being in holiness, as an expression of love, Christian transformation, as well a warning. One member and five presbyters did not provide reasons but said it is not relevant in the 21st century.

Concerns about ecclesiastical discipline

The findings identified some of the CoP-Ghana members' concerns about ecclesiastical discipline. Notable among these issues were related to how leaders discipline members who are remorseful about what they have done, leaders not being gentle when punishing offenders, lack of counselling to people who are disciplined by the church, informing the congregation of the wrong someone has done, overdoing the punishment, and applying different sanctions for the same or similar events.

Ministers are concerned about the lack of a clear outline for ecclesiastical discipline and the lack of avenues for consultation, the validity of the report provided and the trustworthiness of the personality behind the report, and criticism of the process. Added that the process of ecclesiastical discipline is devoid of the Holy Spirit's influence and direction; other fellow ministers wielding discipline as a weapon of "mass destruction" rather than as an instrument of love, and absence of, or inadequate teachings on the topic.

The concerns postulated by presbyters paint a picture of the lack of a suitable approach, the credibility of the herald or witness to the sin committed, the inadequacy of communication to church members on the sin of the punished, the relative neglect of younger generations to their sin and the lack of teachings for them in their case. However, others queried the necessity of ecclesiastical discipline since some supposed "giants" of the faith or leaders also sometimes falter, the weakness of the entire system and that some leaders are afraid of the members' general opinion. They also suggested that ecclesiastical discipline should be removed in certain circumstances, or a milder form of punishment in some specific cases, rather than suspension in almost all cases. Further pointed that added the nature and impropriety of the current system outdated; the inadequacy of

practice in some areas, the scarcity of appropriate teachings on the topic; the deficiency of counselling applied in the process; the resulting confusion in the punished; the rather opulent vibrancy of announcing the sin of the defector and condemning them.

Suggestions to address concerns about ecclesiastical discipline

To address the raised concerns, the participants intimated that there should be regular counselling sessions for those who are disciplined, not all ecclesiastical discipline should be done in public, there should be increased education on ecclesiastical discipline matters, and that the offenders should be visited.

The pastors' views do not differ with those of the presbyter. They point to the need to counsel offenders and show them love. The presbyters affirmed that the old position of the church on ecclesiastical discipline but appreciated the need to rework the execution of the practice by mentioning the need for education in members and the church, counselling for the accused, and preservation of the image and dignity of the offending person by removing public display from the process. Other steps to take include post-discipline follow-up and counselling, Spirit-led intervention, and re-strengthening the entire system by seeing it as necessary in the church's public life.

A proposed model for ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Church leaders (pastors and presbyters) and members are acutely aware of the necessity and dangers of ecclesiastical discipline to the Christian life. A gradational and distributive approach to ecclesiastical discipline in the CoP-Ghana, which calibrates disciplinary demands according to convert's level of "spiritual maturity" among others is proposed. The proposed model for ecclesiastical discipline in the CoP-Ghana covers specifics for ecclesiastical discipline, determinants of sanctions and procedures for restoration.

Specifics of causes for ecclesiastical discipline

Heathley III (2004:3) states that ecclesiastical discipline has both general and specific causes.

General Causes: These involve conduct that is prejudicial to good order and discipline in the church. Such issues include disorderly conduct that is clearly out of line with biblically-prescribed commands, which negatively impact the testimony and unity of the church (2 Thess 3:6–15).

Specific Causes: Specific causes that would warrant ecclesiastical discipline include.

1. Difficulties arising from relationships between members at the interpersonal or small group level (Mt 18:15–17).
2. Contentious or factious people causing divisions in the church, which if unchecked could disrupt the unity in the body of Christ (Rom 16:17–18; Titus 3:9–11).
3. Immoral conduct including sins of the type mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5, such as incest, immorality, covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, swindling, or idle busybodies who refuse to work and run around spreading dissension (1 Cor 5:1, 11; 2 Thess 3:10–15).
4. Doctrinal breaches involving false teaching or teaching erroneous of doctrine and views that concern the fundamentals of the faith and not lesser differences of interpretation (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17–18; also implied in Rev 2:14–16; Phil 3:2–3, 15–19; Rom 16:17–18). The church could deal with people whose teachings are contrary to the tenets of the church.

Any one of these factors is crucial enough to warrant an action to be taken, though not always culminating in a sanction. Key concerns that serve as a guide in these cases are the holy character of God, the testimony of the church, the effect on the unity and purity of the local church, and the edification and restoration of the individual.

Sanctions that are informed by biblical guidelines

The goals or purposes of ecclesiastical discipline should govern the spirit in which all ecclesiastical disciplinary action is to be taken. Therefore, the attitude of the discipliner and the offender is crucial in determining the sanction of ecclesiastical discipline. Dependence on the Holy Spirit as councillor and the One who is able to comfort and guide (Jn 16: 7,13) is

undoubtedly essential in exercising ecclesiastical discipline. The following can provide useful guidance to inform ecclesiastical discipline:

- It must be done by those who are spiritual, sensitive to the Holy Spirit and growing in the Lord (Gal 6:1).
- It must be done in a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience, being aware all are tempted (Gal 6:1–2; 2 Tim 2:24–25).
- It must be done without favouritism or prejudice (1 Tim 5:21).
- Those who walk disorderly are to be admonished, warned, and approached in love (1 Thess 5:14–15; 1 Tim 5:1–2; Eph 4:15; 2 Tim 4:2). This admonishing is not restricted to church leaders but may be done by any person in the body (cf. 1 Thess 5:14 with Gal 6:1).

The attitude and character of the offender are also critical to the decision on sanctions. Depending on the nature of the sin and the character of the perpetrator, a private reprimand may be sufficient. However, if there is no response of repentance and obedience, then the offending party will be publicly condemned, and the member will be discontinued from close fellowship. If there is still no response of repentance and obedience, the church will implement a process of suspension or excommunication as directed in Matthew 18:19. The sanctions are aimed at indicating to the offender that the offense has dishonoured the Lord and has caused estrangement in the harmony of the body, and to be a deterrent to the rest of the membership as a warning against sin (1 Tim 5:20).

Factors that determine the kind of sanction to be given to an offender must include spiritual maturity, nature of the offense, status of the offender, attitude of the offender, mode of disclosure of offense and type of offense. All these factors ought to be considered, analysed and conclusions made to determine what to do about an offender vis-à-vis the dynamics of the offense. Considering these factors will ensure that offenders are not lumped together in the sanction they receive regardless of where they are at in their spiritual journey.

The offense is evaluated and scored based on the factors, where each factor is scored objectively on the traits under the assessment of factor. The cumulative score, total score, is then used as a guide in determining the

sanction that is appropriate. The goal is always so that the person is still to be counted as a fellow believer (2 Thess 3:14–15).

Since the goal of ecclesiastical discipline is to lead to the repentance and restoration of the offender, the announcement of the sanction should not make it more difficult for the offender to be fully restored. In this regard, public rebuke and sanctioning that involves calling the offender in front of the congregation and while standing there stating the details of the offense and sanctions may be reviewed. The name of the person should be mentioned, offense narrated, sanctions announced and prayed for without calling the person forward. Such approach will ensure the entire church's participation in the ecclesiastical discipline of the offender without aggravated embarrassment for the offender and afford an easier task of restoration.

The constitution of CoP determines the nature of the offense determines to a large extent the form of sanction. In cases where the offense is not deemed grievous, and/or the offender shows signs of repentance as well as other mitigating factors, private rebuke and admonishment may be offered. However, if the offense is public knowledge as well as other auxiliary factors, the sanction ought to be public, albeit rebuke, suspension, or excommunication. This is to save the church from rumours and other tendencies that would affect the unity and purity of the body of Christ. The nature of the sanction as to whether it is to be public or private rebuke will determine the form in which the presentation will go. A private rebuke and admonishment, if the leadership agrees, mean the matter will not be publicly announced in the church. Rather, some leaders, particularly the minister, will be assigned to rebuke the offender and offer guidance on steps to take as a step to repentance, reconciliation, and restoration as applicable.

Procedure for restoration

The purpose of ecclesiastical discipline is the reconciliation and restoration of the offender. The restoration of the offenders requires a careful procedure so that the recovered individual can function effectively in the church. The procedure for restoration should include clemency, godly counselling, and ministry of love on the part of the church community and through pastoral counselling.

Clemency

Clemency is in keeping with the goal of restoration. The role of the church as an instrument of correction must change into being agents of reconciliation and restoration after there is repentance. This means accepting the person and forgetting the past as alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:7a. True repentance will be shown by his behaviour and attitude. The repentant person will:

1. Freely acknowledge her/his sin (1 Jn 1:9; Prov 28:13a).
2. Cease from participating in the activity for which s/he was disciplined or at least seek help if it is a case of life-dominating patterns (Prov 28:13b; Gal 6:1; Jas 5:19–20).
3. Make restitution, apologise, and seek forgiveness from those hurt as applicable (Phil 18–19; Mt 5:23–24).
4. Demonstrate a genuine change of heart, a real concern and godly sorrow over her/his actions, not in order to be forgiven, but because of the harm caused to the glory of God and the hurt caused others (2 Cor 7:8–11; Ps 51:17).
5. Begin to manifest the fruit of the Spirit and a concern for the things of Christ (Gal 5:22–23).

When the sinning party has shown some of these signs as proof of repentance, the church ought to show mercy and compassion and forgive so that the sinning party can be restored to fellowship. Restoration should not be time-limited but dependent on the fruit of the perpetrator's repentance. On the other hand, the church must wholeheartedly forgive repenting members and promote the full restoration of God and the church.

Godly counselling

Godly counselling by the spiritually mature and the minister is required to get the offender to repent and be shown clemency. Godly counselling entails offering the sinning party support, and encouraging, exhorting, and challenging them to move past the offense and get back to God in order for them not to be overwhelmed with excessive sorrow (2 Cor 2:7b). There must be inwardness in the provision of pastoral care and counselling where the minister or other delegated believers meet with the disciplined member at least twice a month for engagement.

Also, other presbyters can be assigned to provide pastoral care and counselling especially where the offender is a member, from the biblical admonition that where there is an offending brother those who are spiritual are to assist in his restoration (Gal 6:1). There is the need to support the offender to appreciate the gravity of the offense, the justification to the ecclesiastical discipline, and the need to return to the fold of the church and how to do so. Godly counselling needs to be done with humility, scripturally and prayerfully. In the case of a sinning minister, other senior ministers may be assigned to provide pastoral care to him.

The authors holds that such course of action should be guided by the teaching in Romans 2:1–2, which emphasizes that believers should not view themselves as judges but rather as supporters for those who are suffering after falling into sin and undergoing church discipline.

Ministry of love

The ministry of love should be the foundation is done to bring the lost believer home and not be rather overly angry at her/his sin, to the extent of godly counselling by which reconciliation and restoration can be achieved in the sinning party. The ministry of love involves showing God's nature and love to the sinner to the extent that everything possible that we become a hindrance to her/his return as in the case of the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:31–32.

Patience during the offense is one of the most shining examples of biblical love. During the offense, we should not withhold forgiveness but rather. When we are hurt by offenses, it is tempting to reserve a secret place in our hearts to nurture bitterness, even long after apologies have been exchanged, and this may lead to a wish to change or even break off relationships; true forgiveness reconciles and restores. This is the shepherd's heart (Lk 15:1–7). In the case of offenders who held positions of leadership, there should be a time of testing to demonstrate their qualifications by proving themselves, and they may not hold the same positions as before.

Conclusion

Ecclesiastical discipline has been a controversial praxis in this modern world of Human Rights. The CoP–Ghana has had to deal with this

subject as one of the challenges to pastoral care, church culture, growth in membership and image to the outside world. To resolve the challenges faced by CoP-Ghana due to ecclesiastical discipline, this article ought to answer the main research question being: What model of ecclesiastical discipline can be established for the CoP-Ghana? The model is the outcome of analysing the views of ministers, presbyters, and members interviewed about ecclesiastical discipline in the CoP-Ghana. The participants' opinion could be summed up as follows: support the process with love, apply a great deal of counselling to the process, teach offenders the need for discipline, lessen the severity of the procedure, do it regardless of how anyone feels about it, and, of course, never forsake the Spirit's counsel on each unique matter in order to correct the situation and make the practice of ecclesiastical discipline achieve its goal of restoring sinning parties.

In as much as the participants appreciated the value of the ecclesiastical discipline, they had concerns about the procedure and implementation. At the end, a model was developed that considers the views and concerns of the participants. It also considers sinning party's maturity, status, attitude, nature of the offense, mode of disclosure and type of offense.

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