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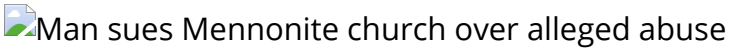
MAN SUES MENNONITE CHURCH OVER ALLEGED ABUSE

ALLEGES ADOPTIVE FATHER MOLESTED HIM, CHURCH OFFICIALS FAILED TO NOTIFY AUTHORITIES

February 12, 2016 at 5:00 am | JEFF SELLE/Staff Writer



As Starla Toews and Clayton Peaster listen, attorney Craig Vernon, right, explains at a press conference on Thursday how Peaster was allegedly sexually abused when he was a child by Peaster's father and how how no protection was given to Peaster after he informed leaders of his local Mennonite Church of his alleged abuse.

COEUR d'ALENE — A lawsuit filed Wednesday claims a child was sexually abused by his father, while leaders of a Mennonite church in Bonners Ferry failed to protect the boy.

The lawsuit was filed late Wednesday by attorneys with the Coeur d'Alene firm of James, Vernon and Weeks. It states Clayton Peaster was 11 when the alleged molestation occurred. He is now 27.

The defendants named in the suit are Mt. View Mennonite Church, Inc., the National Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, and Clayton's adoptive parents, David Peaster and his wife, Cynthia Peaster.

During a press conference held Thursday at the firm's office, Clayton's attorney, Craig Vernon, said the child was adopted by the Peasters who both belonged to Mt. View Mennonite Church. The Kansas-based Church of God in Christ Mennonite, commonly known as the Holdeman Mennonites, is the parent organization of Mt. View.

Vernon went over details of the suit, which alleges that David Peaster sexually molested Clayton and an older boy several times over a four-year period. The suit claims during that time, Clayton told a deacon in the church that he was being molested.

Vernon said Clayton remembers his father was then excommunicated, or expelled, from the church. Clayton "recalled his father not sitting at the table for the next couple of weeks," Vernon said.

The lawsuit states that approximately 10 days later, David Peaster was reinstated into the church after repenting, and was no longer shunned by his family and church. According to Vernon, the abuse then began to occur again, and the church never reported the incident to law enforcement as the law requires.

Clayton's attorney said they are not only suing for an amount to be determined at trial, they are also suing the church for non-economic damages. Vernon said they want the court to force the Holdeman Mennonites national church to establish a policy requiring the church to report all sexual abuse allegations to the police rather than trying to deal with those crimes internally.

Clayton spoke to reporters during the press conference.

“I know I am not going to change the world’s problems,” he said. “But if we can get some policies in place to help other kids get the help that they need when this happens — there is always going to be abuse. It doesn’t matter where you are.”

“I don’t hate the religion I grew up in,” Clayton continued. “I don’t hate my father. I will always love him. He’s my dad, but the problem is people should have listened.”

He said when he confided in the deacon of his church, he was called a liar. He said he also told police that he had been molested when they picked him up for running away from home, and they simply returned him to David Peaster’s home.

Another attorney for Clayton, Lee James, asserted there is a pattern of the church attempting to deal with claims of sexual abuse internally rather than reporting the incidents to law enforcement experts.

He pointed to two similar cases in Texas and Canada.

The first case involves a minister for the El Campo Mennonite Church in El Campo, Texas, who was arrested for and ultimately convicted of the crime of failing to report child sexual abuse involving a 14-year-old girl who attended his church and who was sexually abused by her father. According to the Coeur d’Alene attorneys, police reports of the El Campo case state the minister’s reason for refusing to provide information about the sexual abuse of the girl was that he was Mennonite.

The second case was in Abbotsford, B.C., Canada, and involved the Abbotsford Mennonite Church of God in Christ. The plaintiff’s attorneys claim that case, in which the father was convicted, was similar to Clayton’s in that the church knew that a father had molested his daughter over the course of 18 years. The church also excommunicated the father for a period of two weeks before he was reinstated.

No charges have been brought against David Peaster or the deacon who failed to notify authorities.

James called Clayton's decision to go public with the story “a courageous act that will help other survivors, especially those in the Mennonite Church.”

“He's helping to destigmatize the shame that many survivors carry with them. The shame is not his; it is theirs,” James said.

The civil complaint alleges Mt. View Mennonite Church in Bonners Ferry, and the larger Church of God in Christ Mennonite in Kansas, acted negligently by failing to protect the plaintiff from further alleged sexual abuse.

The complaint also makes claims against the national Holdeman Mennonite Church organization for having a pattern and practice of discouraging local congregations and leaders from contacting law enforcement when they receive a report of sexual abuse.

No dates have been set for a trial, but attorneys are seeking a jury trial.

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Clayton Peaster expresses to members of the press on Thursday his hopes of protecting future sexual abuse victims using the sexual abuse case he's bringing against local and national Holdeman Mennonite churches. Between the ages of 12 and 16, Peaster was allegedly sexually abused by his father, and no lawful action or protection was given to Peaster after he informed leaders of his local Mennonite Church. There are multiple reports of similar cases in the Mennonite Church in the U.S. and Canada.