Suit accuses Holdeman church of not reporting sexual abuse

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An Idaho man has brought a lawsuit against the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, alleging a culture of excommunication and quick forgiveness allows sexual abusers to avoid the court system.

Clayton Peaster has accused his stepfather of sexually abusing him for years beginning when he was about 12 years old. He says his congregation — Mountain View Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, near Bonners Ferry, Idaho — acting on the teachings of the national church (often known as the Holdeman Mennonite Church), handled the matter internally without contacting law enforcement or child protective services.

Peaster alleges this negligence protected his stepfather, allowing him to continue abusing multiple children for multiple years.

The lawsuit was filed Feb. 10 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where a jury trial has been requested in district court. It lists four defendants: stepfather David Peaster; Clayton Peaster's mother, Cynthia Peaster; Mountain View Church; and the national Church of God in Christ, Mennonite.

The complaint alleges Clayton Peaster, now 27 years old, was sexually abused by his stepfather, David Peaster, for four to five years from 2000 to 2004. According to the complaint, when Clayton Peaster informed a leader at his congregation, David Peaster was excommunicated from Mountain View and the national church for about 10 days before repenting, promising to no longer sexually molest children and being readmitted. Law enforcement was never involved, and David Peaster allegedly continued to sexually abuse Peaster and at least one other child "for an extended period of time."

Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, representatives said church leaders who could best respond to questions about the case were not available for interviews by *MWR*'s deadline.

The complaint states the national church structure "encouraged the practice that all followers report any misconduct by any other follower to [congregation or denomination] leaders, and to not report misconduct to state law enforcement authorities, without regard to the mandated reporting statutes."

It cites the 2009 arrest of Staven Schmidt, a minister for El Campo (Texas) Mennonite Church, who was convicted of failing to report sexual abuse of a 14-year-old girl in his church by her father. Police reports indicate the Holdeman minister's "reason for refusing to provide information about the sexual abuse of the girl was that he was 'Mennonite.' "

In another 2009 case, Kenneth Duncalfe was convicted of sexually abusing his daughter, both members of Abbotsford (B.C.) Mennonite Church of God in Christ. The trial revealed congregational leaders knew of the abuse for 18 years but did not contact law enforcement.

In addition to at least $10,000 in damages from each of the four defendants, the complaint requests that Mountain View and national Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, leaders participate in training about protecting and preventing child abuse, implement policies to protect children when charges are made and to report suspicions to law enforcement or child protection services. It also requests the group establish an age-appropriate sexual abuse education program for children and reserves the right to make additional claims for punitive damages.