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Accused First Baptist deacon resigns

By Scott Butler
Times-Union staff writer,

A First Baptist Church deacon arrested on molestation charges has resigned his leadership positions with the Jacksonville church, the church's pastor said yesterday.

"I was deeply saddened when I learned of the heartbreaking reports involving one of our 25,000 members. I immediately visited the man and his family when I returned to the city," the Rev. Jerry Vines said in a one-paragraph statement.

Vines was out of town when Stephen Lee Edmonds, 44, was charged Monday with felony lewd and lascivious molestation after a teenager said he had been fondled and had inappropriate Internet messages sent to him.

"He has resigned his position as one of our 285 deacons and all other places of leadership in the church," Vines said. "While I do not minimize nor condone sinful behavior, I continue to pray for the family and all who have been hurt. We are all reminded that Jesus said he came to heal the brokenhearted."

The church would not elaborate on what other leadership positions Edmonds served and how he reacted during the minister's visit.

Edmonds also stepped down as president of the Northeast Florida Builders Association.

He is owner of The Edmonds Co. of North Florida, a Jacksonville home-building company. Police confiscated two computers from his San Viscaya Drive home and office and are investigating additional molestation claims. Edmonds was released from jail on a \$50,000 bond Tuesday. He has not been available for comment.

At First Baptist, deacons are nominated by other deacons or ministers and voted on by the deacon board and then church members, said Barbara Denman, spokeswoman for the Florida Baptist Convention. Deacons often serve on decision-making boards at their church and handle other leadership roles.

There's no indication whether the minors are members of the church.

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