

Accused Pedophile Baptist Preacher Dies

By: Bob Allen, EthicsDaily.com

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The former pastor of Florida Baptist mega-church charged with sexually abusing 21 women and one man when they were children won't face his accusers in court. Bob Gray, 38-year-pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., died Saturday, just days before his criminal trial was scheduled to start.

Gray, 81, had been scheduled to stand trial on six counts of capital sexual batter, with jury selection beginning Nov. 13. Gray entered a Jacksonville hospital Oct. 20 with an undisclosed medical condition. A judge delayed his trial pending a Dec. 12 status hearing. Last week media reported Gray had been taken off life support.

"The family is confident, as he was confident, that he is in heaven now by God's grace," Gray's family said through an attorney. "The family prays everyone involved can find peace."

Gray's death won't affect six civil lawsuits pending against his former church. They accuse Trinity Baptist of knowing Gray was a child molester but doing nothing to protect children and covering it up to protect the reputation of the church. Weeks before falling ill Gray took a 27-page deposition, in which he reportedly invoked the Fifth Amendment 150 times.

Adam Horowitz, a child sex-abuse attorney in Miami representing the plaintiffs, said the civil lawsuits could be worth millions of dollars.

A woman who says she is a former victim told a local TV station she is "heartbroken" Gray's victims won't get a day in criminal court but glad the civil trials will move forward. The woman, who claims Gray abused her in 1969, wasn't involved in the criminal case because of her case's statute of limitations but will testify in the civil lawsuits.

Trinity Baptist Church was part of the Southern Baptist Convention before Gray, a close friend of the late Jerry Falwell, led it to become an independent Baptist church in the 1960s.

The congregation is also part of the Southwide Baptist Fellowship, a group of independent Baptists reaching out to a Southern Baptist Convention they now see as purified by the so-called "conservative resurgence" of the 1980s.

Jerry Vines, a past president of the SBC, spoke favorably of Trinity Baptist Church at a conference in 2006, reportedly without mentioning the pedophilia scandal.

While the church is no longer affiliated with the SBC, a victim advocate, Christa Brown of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, says the type of collusion alleged in lawsuits against Trinity is all too common in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Brown, a former victim who runs a Web site called StopBaptistPredators.org, is asking the nation's largest Protestant denomination to create an independent panel to investigate allegations of clergy sexual abuse to help churches weed out pedophiles before they strike again. The SBC Executive Committee is studying a motion referred from last summer's annual convention about the feasibility of a database of offending clergy.

Jacksonville TV station First Coast News first reported in 2006 allegations that leaders in the church knew their former pastor was a pedophile, but instead of bringing it to light quietly shipped him off as a missionary to Germany, where he served 10 years, possibly with access to other children.

Current leaders of Trinity Baptist Church deny any wrongdoing. The church got additional unwanted publicity last month, when a former counselor at the church was charged with 16 counts of taking indecent liberties with children between 1977 and 1981, while employed as a music minister at Baptist church in North Carolina.

While most allegations against Gray involve women in their 20s and their 30s, one woman told a Jacksonville TV station that he molested her in 1949, when she was 9 and he was young assistant pastor a Southern Baptist church in Waldo, Fla.

Bob Allen is managing editor of EthicsDaily.com.

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