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The widening scandal

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Accused Baptist pastor is protected by elders

In many churches, control stays local

By **Walter V. Robinson, Globe Staff, 11/1/2002**

WINCHESTER - On Sept. 26, The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts notified lay leaders of the First Baptist Church of Winchester that their pastor, the Rev. Lawrence French, had been found guilty by a church panel of sexually molesting three boys between 1960 and 1982.

The penalty was the most severe TABCOM, as the governing body of churches is known, could impose: It withdrew recognition of French's ordination.

But First Baptist is a congregation that reveres its pastor. And so a dozen church elders decided unanimously that French, who says he is innocent, should remain as pastor. Convinced that the 72-year-old pastor could not have committed the alleged offenses, they also concluded that it would be unfair to French to notify other members of the church about the allegations.

Yesterday, after inquiries from the Globe, First Baptist's elders rushed to inform church members, and to send out a letter explaining their decision to retain French. But it may be too late.

French, during two emotional interviews yesterday, insisted he is innocent of the charges, which stem from alleged incidents long before he came to Winchester seven years ago. But he said he will probably resign because of the public notice about the finding against him. He expressed concern that others may now make false accusations against him. The allegations against French were reported to law enforcement officials. But since the most recent accusation was two decades old, the statute of limitations had long since expired.

"Emotionally, this has destroyed my life," the pastor said. "The church is bigger than me. And now the church will be hurt by my being there, no matter how much they love me." He added: "I'll have to decide I cannot continue on."

Ten months after the sexual-abuse scandal erupted in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, some Protestant denominations are struggling with their own sexual-abuse problems, though the number of alleged offenders seems, proportionally, much smaller. As the Winchester case demonstrates, the greater independence from governing bodies that Protestant congregations enjoy has produced its own set of problems.

For example, the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, the state's largest Protestant denomination with 430 churches, is struggling with one rebellious congregation where a small group of lay leaders has refused to put their minister on leave even though authorities have been notified that he allegedly molested a child.

The Rev. Nancy S. Taylor, the president of the conference, said the congregation's leaders have yet to even inform other leaders in the congregation about the alleged crime. The congregation itself, she said, is unaware of the allegations.

Taylor said a UCC panel seeking to investigate the allegation has been barred until recently from access to a document describing the abuse and from talking to a church counselor with information about it. For that reason, she said, the six-member panel formally suspended the minister's UCC ministerial authority. But with the support of the small group of leaders, the minister has retained his post.

Taylor declined to identify the minister or the congregation, citing the minister's right to privacy until the allegations are resolved. No children in the church, she said, are in any danger.

In a second UCC case, a Paxton minister, the Rev. Donald W. Whitcomb, was given a four-month suspension for alleged misbehavior that included giving alcohol to minors. The UCC found it could not substantiate another allegation that Whitcomb made a sexually inappropriate remark to a minor. Whitcomb has refused to abide by the suspension, and will probably lose his UCC ministerial standing, Taylor said.


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But in that case, too, the local congregation has balked: The First Congregational Church of Paxton has voted to keep Whitcomb on.

The handling of abuse allegations in the Protestant denominations contrasts sharply to that of the archdiocese. In the last nine months, the archdiocese has summarily suspended 24 priests accused of sexual misconduct - often to the dismay of devoted parishioners who are convinced, at least at first, that the allegations cannot be true. But the parishioners have no say in the matter; decision-making power rests with church officials.

By contrast, neither the UCC nor TABCOM can force the removal, even temporarily, of a pastor. "I think we're doing it right," Taylor said of the UCC process. "But no matter how carefully this is done, it is excruciatingly painful."

That has surely been the case for TABCOM, the Baptist confederation that has 265 member churches in Massachusetts.

"My view is that Rev. French should not be the pastor of that church," the Rev. Linda C. Spoolstra, executive minister of TABCOM, said in an interview. Spoolstra, who sat on the six-member committee that took testimony from French and his three accusers, said the committee's conclusion was unanimous.

"The victims were very believable," Spoolstra said last night. "Rev. French often had lapses of memory." She said French often responded to questions by claiming he did not remember.

Yet in interviews yesterday and Wednesday, several of the church's deacons, and the congregation's moderator, James I. Rawding, adamantly asserted that a minister they described as "loving," "genuine," and "caring" could not possibly have harmed anyone, much less molested a child.

"If it was not for the Catholic situation, this would never have come up," said Rawding, who as moderator is the church's ranking lay member. Noting that one of the alleged incidents took place in 1960, Rawding, expressing a view common among the lay leaders, said, "Why are they yelping now?"

After Spoolstra informed the leaders of the finding a month ago, Rawding said he and other congregation leaders came to unanimous decision the conclusion the allegations were "suspect."

That decision has infuriated one of French's alleged victims. "I was really outraged. I had thought that his removal would bring about justice, and would bring closure for his victims," the man said in an interview. "I understand loyalty and trust. But it seems reckless to me for such a small group of people to make such an important decision without consulting with the congregation."

He declined to be identified. Under Globe policy, alleged victims of sexual abuse are not identified without their permission.

Spoolstra, too, said she believes the congregation's leaders erred in not notifying the congregation's membership, especially after TABCOM sent an Oct. 15 letter to all of its ministers alerting them to the decision.

But the leaders of the Winchester congregation said they acted properly. Rawding, for one, said the lay group is charged with responsibility for "the moral life of the church." And their belief in French remains unchanged.

"He is a wonderful person and a caring minister," Carol Bouchard, a deacon, said yesterday. "I cannot believe he has been guilty of any improper behavior."

Heidi Savino, another deacon, expressed total confidence in French's innocence.

"The kids love to go to his Sunday school class," Savino said. "He is wonderful in their eyes."

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