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Parents Say Baptist Church Enabled Abuser

By LISA COSTON

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CANTON, Ga. (CN) - A Baptist Church failed to protect a boy from a church volunteer who sexually assaulted him, though the senior pastor knew of the man's history of sexual misconduct with minors, the boy's parents claim in court.

Parents C.A. and B.A. sued the First Baptist Church of Canton, its senior pastor George Anderson, church employee Shawn Finch, and the alleged assailant, Matthew Brent Sheffield, in Cherokee County Superior Court.

"Defendant Sheffield sexually abused multiple victims, while working for the Cherokee County Board of Education and through his employment and volunteer work with First Baptist," according to the complaint. "His continued sexual abuse was enabled by the negligent oversight of Sheffield by defendant First Baptist, defendant Dr. George Anderson and defendant Shawn Finch."

The A.s claim that Anderson and Finch were alerted to Sheffield's misconduct, after meeting with parents of his alleged victims.

"Defendant First Baptist, defendant Dr. George Anderson, defendant Shawn Finch met with parents of male students who attended Cherokee High School who reported that their children were receiving sexually explicit text messages from defendant Sheffield, who was also making suggestive remarks to male students," the complaint states.

The parents say the church and its employees told Sheffield to stop sending the text messages to boys at Cherokee High School, but never notified the school board.

The school district fired Sheffield after parents told it his sexual misconduct, the parents say. And, they claim, First Baptist, Anderson and Finch fired Sheffield for "insubordination" when they learned he had continued to send "sexually explicit text messages male high school students."

Nonetheless, the parents say, the church let Sheffield return to work as a volunteer, running a sound system for the Bible School program: "It was at that time that defendant Sheffield initiated actions that led to his sexually abusing the plaintiffs' minor child by sending him text messages and making inappropriate remarks to the minor child," the parents say in the complaint.

They say the abuse escalated from text messages to physical abuse: "On June 14, 2010, when plaintiffs' minor child, while participating in a Bible school at First Baptist, Defendant Sheffield committed sexual battery upon the Plaintiffs' minor child."

The parents say their child refused to return to Bible School, but did not tell them why. Unaware of what happened, his parents say, they signed him up for a church beach trip a week later.

"Unknown to plaintiffs and other parents, but known to defendant First Baptist, defendant Dr. George Anderson and defendant Shawn Finch, defendant Sheffield was allowed by First Baptist to accompany the group of children on the out of state trip to the beach," the complaint states.

"It was on this trip that defendant Sheffield was allowed by defendant Finch to be alone and unsupervised with the children.

"It was during this time that defendant Sheffield again committed sexual battery upon plaintiffs' minor child who reported the matter to his sister and mother.

"The incident was reported to law enforcement by the child's father."

The parents say that Finch refused to tell the police about Sheffield's history, "but instead attempted to cover for Sheffield by portraying to officers that plaintiffs' child was an unruly youth, thus not worthy of belief."

And, they say: "First Baptist rented defendant a car so he could get away before plaintiffs were able to get to Florida to pick up their child."

After that trip, in a meeting at the church, pastor Anderson "attempted to downplay the abuse that occurred on the trip to the beach, indicating that the matter was closed," the complaint states.

Then others spoke up, the parents say: "Subsequently another party came forward, whose grandson, who had attended youth programs at First Baptist, had been approached by defendant Sheffield who offered to pay the grandson \$50 to give Sheffield a 'blow job.'"

The parents claim that "Sheffield sexually abused multiple victims," while working for the [nonparty] school district and "through his employment and volunteer work with First Baptist."

They seek punitive damages, costs of medical and psychological treatment for their son, and attorney's fees.

They are represented by Channing Ruskell, of Woodstock, Ga.



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