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Former pastor faces 10 counts of sexual assault of two teen girls



By Michael Leathers

OLNEY, Ill. (ABP) -- If things had gone as planned, 35-year-old Leslie Mason would have preached the keynote sermon at this year's annual meeting of the Illinois Baptist State Association Nov. 7.

Instead the former pastor of Olney Southern Baptist Church faces 10 counts of criminal sexual assault involving two teenage girls who attended his southeastern Illinois congregation.

The latest charges against Mason were filed Oct. 24 by the Illinois Attorney General's office, which took over prosecution of the case at the request of the local state's attorney. Mason pleaded not guilty Oct. 27 during a preliminary hearing in the Richland County Courthouse in Olney. A jury trial is scheduled for March.

Mason was first charged with two counts of criminal sexual assault a year ago, just days before sources say IBSA leaders had planned to nominate him to preach the convention sermon in 2002.

The association's two top elected officials at the time, Tim Lewis and Pat Pajak, both pastors, met with the state association's committee on order of business and advised them of the pending charges.

The committee agreed to remove Mason's name and instead recommended that messengers elect André Dobson, pastor of Calvary Baptist of Alton, to deliver the high-profile message.

Mason had been pastor of Olney Southern Baptist since 1994. Church members unanimously voted to dismiss him during a special meeting on Oct. 24, 2001, according to a copy of the church's minutes on file in the Richland County Circuit Clerk's office. An e-mail addressed from one of the alleged victims to Mason, also on file at the courthouse, says the girl was 13 years old when the two began having sexual relations.

Before his arrest, Mason's star had been on the rise in leadership among the state's Southern Baptists. He was vice chairman of the constitution-and-bylaws committee. He was also spokesman for a group of conservative pastors seeking inclusion of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" into the IBSA's constitution. He was appointed

to the national Southern Baptist Convention's committee on committees in 1997.

Mason is a graduate of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary of Germantown, Tenn., where he earned a master's degree in religion and education, and of Southwest Baptist University of Bolivar, Mo.

If found guilty on all 10 counts, Mason could face up to 150 years in prison. Each count is a Class 1 felony, carrying a sentence of four to 15 years.

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