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## Despite warnings, Whitewater church let sex offender work with children

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NICO SAVIDGE  
December 7, 2013



Dennis Rintala

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WHITEWATER—After a middle-aged man named Dennis Rintala started showing up to services at the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church in 2005, Pastor Thomas Fuller got a call.

Recounting the story to Whitewater police years later, Fuller said the call was from Rintala's former pastor in his home state of Michigan, warning Fuller that Rintala had been convicted there of "sexual misconduct with a teenage boy," according to a

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Over the past nine months, three men who worshiped at Whitewater's Kettle Moraine Baptist Church have pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting children.

**Dennis Rintala** became a sex offender in 2003, when he pleaded guilty to fourth-degree criminal sexual misconduct in Houghton County, Mich., for fondling a 16-year-old boy over a period of years. He was sentenced to two years of probation.

Rintala later moved to Wisconsin, where he registered as a sex offender, and in 2005 started showing up to services at the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church. The church's pastor, Thomas Fuller, soon learned Rintala was a sex offender.

Former members say Rintala was allowed to be alone

detective's report.

In 2010, a Whitewater police sergeant said she told Fuller that Rintala was a convicted sex offender after police got reports that he was approaching young boys near the church.

Despite these warnings, Rintala was allowed to regularly work and spend time with children he met through the church —often driving children unsupervised to events or to evangelizing around Whitewater, according to police reports and interviews with former members.

Although Fuller was informed of Rintala's status as a registered sex offender and said he told church leadership and some families, parents from some church families told The Gazette they were never warned about Rintala.

“We had no clue,” said one mother, whose family included three sons and who asked to remain anonymous. “We didn't find out until it happened again.”

From the winter of 2011 through the summer of 2012, Rintala sexually assaulted two young boys, both of whom he met through the church, according to court documents.

On Dec. 10, 2012, Rintala pleaded guilty in Jefferson County Court to one count of repeated sexual assault of a child.

In the year since then, two other men from the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church also have pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting children, court records show.

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with children at church events and often took children—unsupervised in a church van—to evangelize around Whitewater, despite Fuller knowing about his conviction.

Rintala, 53, went on to sexually assault two boys between December 2011 and August 2012. Both boys were younger than 13, and he met both through the church.

Judges in Walworth and Jefferson counties sentenced him to a total of 20 years in prison for assaulting the boys.

**Samuel Shelton** had sexual relationships with four girls, all younger than 13, between summer 2011 and January 2013, according to police reports.

Shelton, 18, assaulted girls at their homes, at Camp Joy, a Baptist youth camp where Shelton lived and worked, and at a small school run out of the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church, authorities said.

Amanda Rasmussen, a Waterford woman whose family spent years in the independent fundamental Baptist church's tightly knit, insular community, said she finds the number of offenders disturbing.

“There's no concern for the children,” Rasmussen said. “I'm sick of hearing about all of the victims that come out of that church.”

Fuller, who has been Kettle Moraine Baptist's pastor since 2004, declined an interview request but responded to questions via email.

Fuller said the Michigan pastor didn't give an accurate account of Rintala's crime, and Fuller said he didn't find out the truth until it was too late.

“We didn't know back in those days what we know now,” Fuller said. “No one did.”

Still, Rasmussen blames Fuller for allowing a convicted sex offender to have unsupervised time with children.

“If you want to call him pastor—which would be a shepherd of the flock—you're shepherding your flock, you're caring for their safety,” Rasmussen said. “And (Fuller) doesn't care for the safety of the most vulnerable of the flock.”

#### **FEW WARNINGS**

Rintala's 2003 conviction in Houghton County, Mich., was for fourth-degree sexual misconduct, a misdemeanor.

According to a Whitewater detective's account of a conversation with a Houghton

Shelton pleaded guilty to one count of repeated child sexual assault in September, court records show, and a sentencing hearing is scheduled for February.

**Matthew Vander Pluym, 19, sexually assaulted a pre-teen girl multiple times at a Whitewater home between May and July of 2012.**

He pleaded guilty in March to first-degree child sexual assault and was sentenced to five years of probation.

Fuller told The Gazette.

Though Fuller says he was misled, his recounting of the story still acknowledges he knew Rintala had been convicted of a sex offense that involved a teen boy.

When he got the call, Fuller said, he passed the message along to some parents from the church “as we had reason to believe it was warranted,” he wrote in an email.

Fuller didn't tell everyone, however. Three former church families say they were never informed about Rintala's prior sex offense even as some of their children spent time with him.

“The fact that Pastor Fuller never mentioned anything about it is kind of disturbing,” said a father from another church family, who also asked to stay anonymous.

County deputy, Rintala admitted to fondling a 16-year-old boy “on numerous occasions over many years.”

He pleaded guilty, was sentenced to two years probation and was required to register as a sex offender, which he did.

A couple of years later, Rintala started attending services at the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church.

Soon after that, Rintala's former pastor gave what Fuller now calls a “woefully wrong report” of Rintala's past.

The pastor told Fuller that Rintala was convicted of a sex offense, but recounted a crime that was far less severe than what actually happened—essentially, that Rintala and a boy engaged in inappropriate behavior but that he didn't touch the boy,

The father said he wasn't aware of Rintala's 2003 conviction until a Gazette reporter called to ask him about it this fall.

Rather than tell all the parents, Fuller said he considered a variety of factors to determine who found out.

“We were trying to weigh both liability and appropriateness in the context of the information we had,” Fuller wrote.

Meanwhile, Rintala was spending unsupervised time with children from the church, often going out on “soul-winning” trips with kids in his truck or a church van, according to police reports.

Whitewater police interviewed Rintala in August 2010 after he had started talking with two young boys at Hillside Cemetery and their mother thought he was suspicious.

Rintala told police he would go out in the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church's van to hand out religious flyers, “specifically to juvenile males,” according to a police report.

That prompted Sgt. Tina Winger to call the church and a Baptist youth camp called Camp Joy where Rintala worked “to inform them of Rintala's status as a sex offender,” she wrote.

Though Rintala would go out to distribute flyers, Fuller said, if he spent time with children doing that “he would have done so under parental discretion and with parental permission.”

“He would not be in one-on-one situations with young men in those settings,” Fuller wrote.

But Sam Rasmussen, Amanda's teenage son, recalled times when he and other boys went with Rintala on outreach trips unsupervised and other occasions when he and Rintala went alone.

Rasmussen wasn't aware her son was spending time alone with Rintala and said Fuller never told her Rintala was a convicted sex offender.

“As long as I was at that church, (Fuller) did not ever say that,” Rasmussen said.

Her family left in 2009. Fuller's emails indicate he knew Rintala's status years before then.

Rintala's time with children wasn't limited to those outreach trips, according to police reports, and he ultimately assaulted two boys he met through the church.

In December of 2011, Rintala fondled a young boy in the front seat of a car as he drove the boy and other children home from a baseball game.

And for months in the spring and summer of 2012, Rintala repeatedly sexually assaulted another boy, who he often went out canvassing with for the church.

The assaults happened at Rintala's home, the boy's home and, on some occasions, sitting in a car in the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church's parking lot, police said.

Church leaders eventually found out about the assaults and quickly pressured Rintala to turn himself in, records show.

Prosecutors in Jefferson and Walworth counties charged him with three felony sex offenses, and earlier this year judges in those counties sentenced him to a total of 20 years in prison.

## **TWO OTHER OFFENDERS**

Rintala was arrested in August of 2012—a month after another man from Kettle Moraine Baptist Church was charged with fondling a young girl and a few months before a third was arrested for assaulting children.

Matthew Vander Pluym, 19, pleaded guilty earlier this year to one count of first-degree child sexual assault for touching a pre-teen girl he knew, court records show. A judge gave him a stayed jail sentence and five years probation.

Between 2011 and 2012, 18-year-old Samuel Shelton had sexual relationships with four girls, all of them younger than

13, police said.

Shelton told authorities he assaulted the fourth girl “about two times a week” at the Kettle Moraine Baptist Academy, a small religious elementary, middle and high school run out of the church.

He pleaded guilty in September to one count of repeated sexual assault of a child and is scheduled for a sentencing hearing in February.

Police said Shelton also assaulted girls at his home, located at the same Baptist youth camp where Rintala worked: Camp Joy.

Camp Joy isn't under the same organization as the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church, but the camp on the northeast shore of Whitewater Lake lists the church as one of its 36 “Association Churches” in Wisconsin and Illinois.

It's also part of the same world of independent fundamental Baptist churches, Rasmussen said.

Former members of IFB churches have started a number of blogs and online forums to criticize the churches, which they say are highly conservative and breeding grounds for abuse.

The Kettle Moraine Baptist Church and its academy are the kinds of places where wearing a necklace or having pop music on your iPod will get kids disciplined by leadership, Rasmussen and her sons said.

On its website, the Kettle Moraine Baptist Church says a goal of its academy is to, “build Scriptural convictions that will stand under the destructive influence of modern culture.”

To Rasmussen, the lack of action to keep Rintala away from children and the two other cases that have come out of the church recently show a culture with misplaced priorities.

For that, she blames the pastor.

“Fuller is far too busy measuring the hemlines of skirts on

women than dealing with a sex offender,” Rasmussen said.

In Rintala's case, Fuller said the church can “learn from this and do better.” But he blamed authorities in Michigan for only convicting Rintala of a misdemeanor sex offense, and later not giving an accurate picture of his history.

“We would definitely do some things different,” he wrote, “and we are very grieved that any shortcoming may have given an occasion for this horrible crime.”

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 Just as in any community or organization, it's made up of "people". People are fallen. These people don't represent the Christian community or any community! They're responsible for their own actions, nobody else!


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 "Fun with a Purpose"  
Very sad situation.

By garyprimer at 9:19 am Sunday, December 8, 2013 | [Report Abuse](#)

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 Ministers, (including Priests) are normal people like the rest of us and also make human mistakes.  
However this is just plain wrong wrong and wrong, as well as pathetic.

By hdonlybob at 2:18 pm Saturday, December 7, 2013 | [Report Abuse](#)

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