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## Ex-pastor sentenced on sex charges

By [Noelle Steele](#)

Staff Writer

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GREENFIELD — A former New Palestine youth minister pleaded guilty to sexual misconduct with a minor Tuesday morning after admitting to the court he fondled a young girl at his church.

Steve Harding, 61, was sentenced to two years in Hancock County Community Corrections and one year of probation after accepting a plea agreement in which he pleaded guilty to the Class D felony charge. Harding's community corrections sentence could include participation in work-release, a program that allows offenders to leave the facility to go to and from their jobs, or home detention.

State law does not require someone convicted of sexual misconduct with a minor to register as a sex offender.

Harding did not address the court in detail about his misconduct but was required to answer a series of yes-or-no questions as part of a plea agreement. When asked if he had touched the girl in a sexual manner, he answered, "Yes."

Harding's case was days away from going to trial when he agreed to plead guilty. He had faced a Class A felony charge of child molest amid allegations he had sex with the young parishioner.

Harding served as a youth pastor at New Palestine United Methodist Church at the time. He no longer works with children at the church.

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