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Ex-Minister Gets 33-Year Sentence In Child Sex Case: Gilstrap Guilty of 3 Molestation Counts

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GAINESVILLE, Ga. - The Rev. L.G. Gilstrap, a defrocked pastor and former clerk for the Georgia House of Representatives, was convicted Thursday on three counts of child **molestation** and sentenced to 33 years in prison by a judge who said he must recognize the darkness in his soul.

The former Assemblies of God **minister** showed no emotion when the verdict was read, but many of his family wept openly. The **minister** stared forward as Hall County Superior Court Judge John Girardeau sentenced him.

"When we reflect upon our true nature, we recognize that it is seldom all good or all evil," the judge told Gilstrap. "We are capable of doing great good and great harm simultaneously . . . and we must recognize the darkness within our souls."

The jury of six men and six women deliberated five hours before reaching the verdict. Gilstrap was convicted on two counts of child **molestation** and one count of aggravated child **molestation** stemming from a string of incidents last year involving two Norcross brothers.

The boys, ages 10 and 13, testified during the six-day trial that Gilstrap frequently fondled them and once took showers with them in the nude. The older boy also testified that the **minister** tried to have sex with him in the shower.

Neither the boys nor their parents could be reached for comment after the trial.

The 54-year-old **minister** claimed that the boys had lied about him and were involved in a conspiracy at his former church, the Lanierland Christian Center in Murrayville. Eight men, who Gilstrap said were also part of that conspiracy, testified during the trial that they, too, were molested by the **minister** when they were boys.

Defense attorney Bob Andrews, who said Gilstrap will appeal the verdict, said he was disturbed by the testimony of the eight men. He said their statements, offered before the two young boys took the stand, prejudiced the jury.

"The so-called similar transactions had nothing to do with this case," Mr. Andrews said. "They were presented only to poison the minds of this jury. If the whole truth of this matter is ever known, there will be a lot of apologies to make."

Three of the eight men who testified against Gilstrap said the <minister> occasionally took them to Atlanta to serve as House pages. After spending the day working at the Capitol, they said, the <minister> would take them to an Atlanta hotel and molest them.

In defense of Gilstrap, his attorney said the charges are the result of a conspiracy at Lanierland that surfaced last year when Gilstrap threatened to expose a group of homosexuals who were parishioners there. He said a Sunday school teacher at the church had been molesting boys for years, but blamed Gilstrap for those actions.

In fact, three of the men who testified that Gilstrap molested them also testified they were similarly abused by the Sunday school teacher. That testimony was given outside the presence of the jury, after each side had presented all witnesses, for the purpose of a future appeal. Judge Girardeau had previously ruled the conspiracy testimony irrelevant.

District Attorney Andy Fuller insisted that no such conspiracy existed. Mr. Fuller would not comment when asked if he was investigating allegations against the Sunday school teacher.

During his closing argument, Mr. Fuller called Gilstrap "the Pied Piper of pedophilia" and urged jurors "not to follow his merry path like everyone else has."

He said during his hourlong summation that the <minister> had continually lied about his relationship with boys. He also attacked the preacher's claim that he has been "sexless" since 1985 because of prostate surgery and therefore could not be guilty.

During his closing argument, Mr. Andrews said the eight men who testified against Gilstrap were liars and could not be believed. He reminded jurors that 35 character witnesses testified they would not believe the eight men, but that they would believe Gilstrap. Most of those defense witnesses were members of Gilstrap's new church, the New Hope Ministries.

But two of those alleged victims said after the trial they were telling the truth about their former pastor.

"I'm just glad it's over," said one of the men, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "I'd like to get on with things, but it's going to be real hard. I don't think anyone could possibly ever know."



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