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## Lake Wales minister arrested in sexual assault case

The Associated Press

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The pastor at the Church of the Nazarene in Lake Wales has been charged with sexually assaulting a 17-year-old youth leader three times in 2001.

The Rev. Gene Francis, 52, of Lake Wales, was arrested Tuesday and charged with unlawful sexual activity with a minor. He was released Tuesday night from the Polk County Jail on \$5,000 bail.

Francis denied the allegations when he was confronted by a Florida Department of Law Enforcement agent on Sunday, a police report said.

Francis did not return a telephone call for comment Wednesday.

A Lake Wales police report said detectives began investigating Francis after the teenager reported telling Nazarene church officials about the abuse but could not persuade them to discipline the pastor.

Wednesday, the church issued a statement denying it took no action.

Church officials said they called a meeting with the youth leader after he complained of inappropriate comments being made to him. The pastor was confronted with the allegations and denied them, said the statement from the Central Florida District, which is made up of 90 churches and located in Lakeland.

"The complainant was told more than once that his allegations were being taken seriously by the church and he was free to report these events to anyone he chose, including the police," the statement said.

Francis has been suspended until the matter is resolved, church officials said.

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