


Los Angeles Times

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Man With Sex-Abuse History Runs School

Court: Legal loophole lets psychologist operate private facility despite criminal conviction, revoked license.

April 28, 1998 | [STEVE BERRY](#) | TIMES STAFF WRITER



They came to court Monday to watch 66-year-old John Gottuso, a Pasadena psychologist who runs a church and Christian school, be sentenced for demonstrating a sex act with a teenage girl.

And they came to bemoan the fact that he will still be able to operate a school.

It was nine years ago that Gottuso lost his license to practice because a state agency found that he was having sex with some of his patients.

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Two years later, another state agency forbade Gottuso from having any involvement with his church's preschool, partly because agency investigators said he once played "sex tag" under a blanket with two girls.

Then last month, Gottuso settled a sexual- and psychological-abuse lawsuit by 11 plaintiffs.

And Monday, a Pasadena Municipal Court judge sentenced him to 30 days house arrest and five years probation after he pleaded no contest to demonstrating a sex act with a 15-year-old girl in late 1995 in front of a class at his Christ-Bridge Academy, now based in Altadena.

But because of a loophole in a state law, those legal problems have done little to restrict Gottuso's ability to counsel and teach children.

Even after the state Department of Social Services took action against his church's license to operate a private preschool in 1989, Gottuso continued to operate.

His church circumvented the department's restrictions on Gottuso's involvement in the school by simply changing the description of it. The church stopped calling the school a preschool, instead limiting enrollment to students in kindergarten through high school, said Pasadena Deputy City Prosecutor Connie Orozco, who handled the most recent case against him.

State law regulates preschools to shield them from abuse, but does not regulate private schools that serve kindergartners and grades above, Orozco said.

"The law absolutely needs to be changed," she said.

Paul Morantz, a Pacific Palisades lawyer who represented the six adults and five students in the civil suit against Gottuso, said: "We as a state owe the public some protection . . . to make sure that no one with this kind of track record can teach in private schools."

Outside court, Gottuso and his lawyer declined to comment.

Gottuso teaches and preaches to what disenchanted former followers describe as a sexually focused, psycho-religious cult based on unquestioning devotion and obedience to him.

In court papers, plaintiffs in the civil suit gave accounts of Gottuso verbally abusing them with sexually explicit street language and making them believe that they were virtually enslaved by their own sexual desires, and that the only way to free themselves was to engage freely in sex.

Adolescent girls said in court papers that he pinched or cupped their breasts, intimately hugged and kissed them and persuaded them to disrobe in front of him.

"We have been so hurt, so messed up for so long, it is virtually impossible for us to get over this," said plaintiff Marshall Rowe, a former follower who is the father of three children who were in Gottuso's school.

Rowe came to court Monday with about 15 other former followers to witness Gottuso's sentencing on the misdemeanor charge.

Debbie, who asked not to be further identified and is the mother of the 15-year-old victim in Monday's case, said she and her husband still are haunted by the fact that they were blind to what was happening to their daughter.

The school sometimes treated parents as outsiders, Debbie said. "She [her daughter] had been taught we were the bad guys."

Shortly before court convened, Gottuso dashed past the former followers, refusing to acknowledge them.

Gottuso, a New York native, began his career as a psychologist and preacher in the early 1970s. He obtained his doctorate in psychology and became pastor of Parkview Christian Church in Glendale in 1972. The church's name was later changed to Christ-Bridge Immanuel Church. In 1983, the church bought Holly Oaks Christian preschool in Arcadia, which later became Christ-Bridge Academy.

Gottuso espoused a counseling therapy that he called psytheosynthesis, which melded psychology and theology to solve people's problems.

He recruited some of his original followers, including the Rowe family, in 1979 when a member of the nationally known Campus Crusade for Christ invited him to a retreat in Guam to explain his theories. Later, some Crusade leaders began "rescue missions" to dissuade people from following Gottuso after hearing women complain about sexual abuse.

Even today, Campus Crusade members periodically distribute fliers at the school warning parents and students of Gottuso's record.

In 1989, the state Board of Medical Quality Assurance revoked Gottuso's license to practice as a psychologist after nine female patients, including married women, complained to state regulators that Gottuso engaged in a variety of sexual acts with them in violation of professional standards.

Regulators found that Gottuso's treatment did more harm than good, leaving several of them "devastated emotionally, mentally, sexually and socially."

Morantz said that the insurers for the church and Gottuso agreed to pay \$3.2 million to settle the civil suit filed by 11 plaintiffs in 1996.

Some of the former followers in the courthouse hallway Monday attributed Gottuso's power over them to

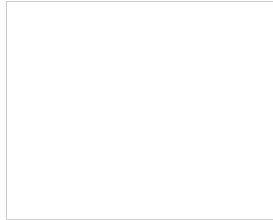
his charismatic, authoritative appeal, his incessant demands for loyalty and to their own vulnerability.

The 15-year-old victim in the criminal case said she never complained to her parents.

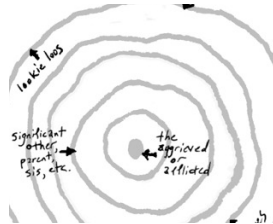
"I was subconsciously burying it," she said, referring to the way she was treated.



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