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Man still counseling at time of his arrest

The former church mentor faces child molestation charges.

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Jeff Brumley

A former Trinity Baptist Church counselor charged with molesting children in North Carolina 30 years ago was a counselor at a state hospital in Baker County until his arrest last week in Jacksonville, an official with the Florida Department of Children and Families said Tuesday.

Anthony Phillip Denton, 56, of Radnor Lane was once a part-time marriage and family counselor at the Westside church, a Trinity spokesman said. And he was still counseling for a local brain injury support group he helped launch, a friend of Denton said.

Denton was arrested Oct. 3 by Jacksonville police and is being held without bail on 16 counts of taking indecent liberties with children in North Carolina, according to the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office.

A grand jury in Cumberland County, N.C., recently indicted Denton on the felony charges involving incidents between 1977 and 1981, The Fayetteville Observer reported Tuesday.

Back then, Denton was the music minister at Berean Baptist Church in Fayetteville, the newspaper said. The three girls in the indictment were the children of church members, The Observer report said.

Neither the district attorney's office in Fayetteville nor the church returned calls seeking comment Tuesday.

Denton is scheduled to appear in court Nov. 2 in Jacksonville, police said.

A woman who answered the phone at Denton's home refused to comment or identify herself.

Denton resigned his position as a human services counselor with Baker County on Thursday, said Al Zimmerman, a spokesman for the Florida Department of Children and Families.

The department runs Northeast Florida State Hospital in Macclenny. Denton counseled mentally disabled adults at the hospital, which contracted with Baker County for counseling services, Zimmerman said.

Denton began his job in October 2006 after an FBI background check cleared him, Zimmerman said.

The Times-Union was unable to reach Baker County health officials for comment because it was after business hours when Zimmerman made his statements.

Trinity spokesman Daniel Riddick said in an e-mail that Denton's duties never involved one-on-one contact with children at the church.

Riddick's e-mail also said Trinity pastor Tom Messer was contacted by authorities regarding Denton about a year ago, asking if the church had any problems with Denton. Messer said he had not.

"All our experiences had been positive," Riddick's e-mail quotes Messer as saying.

Riddick would not say why Denton's employment at the church ended in 2006.

The developments shocked a friend of Denton's who helped him start the First Coast Brain Injury Support Group seven years ago.

"I just can't believe it - it just doesn't fit," said Jane Mercer-Elkins, executive director of the group.

Mercer-Elkins had nothing to say about the charges Denton faces but said he was living out a calling and a talent to help people through counseling.

He's especially good at helping the support group's clients because he suffered brain injuries in a 2000 car crash, Mercer-Elkins said.

"He knows how to connect with them," she said. "He understands what they're going through because he's one of them."

Pat Cassell, a former Trinity member who knows the jailed ex-music minister, said Denton was hired as a maintenance worker by former pastor Bob Gray before eventually becoming a church counselor.

Gray, 81, has also been accused of molesting children. He faces trial in November on charges of capital sexual battery related to allegations of molesting girls in the 1960s and '70s.

"For 20 years he has had access to very vulnerable, hurting people," said Cassell, a vocal supporter of the women who've reported being abused by Gray.

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