



March 21, 2002

## Officers hunt minister charged with statutory rape Pastor of Springfield's Westport Baptist Church accused of sex with girl under age 14.

By *Eric Eckert*  
*News-Leader*

WEBSTER COUNTY — Investigators with the Sheriff's Department are searching for a Baptist minister charged with five counts of statutory rape.

Officials say the Rev. Steven Rear, 40, pastor of Westport Baptist Church in Springfield, has been on the run since the charges were filed against him on Monday.

Rear is charged with raping a girl under 14 years old. According to court documents, the abuse allegedly occurred throughout the 1990s.

"He's hiding out. There's no doubt about that," said Webster County Chief Deputy Tom Simmons. "We think he's still in the area." Simmons said investigators went to Rear's Marshfield home to arrest him Monday after county prosecutor Don Cheever filed the charges. "There was no one there when we got there," Simmons said.

Cheever said each of the five felony counts carries a maximum sentence of life in prison. "I filed the charges based on the probable-cause statement I received from the Sheriff's Department," the prosecutor said. According to the court document, the victim, now 20, said Rear had sexual intercourse with her "about every other day" when she was between the ages of 13 and 16.

The report said Rear admitted to several people, including his wife, Kerrie, that he had sex with the girl. According to the report, he said "the devil had taken over his body."

Members of Westport Baptist, where Rear has preached for the past 10 years, refuse to believe the charges.

"The church is behind our pastor all the way," said deacon Billy Elliott of the 75-member congregation.

Meanwhile, Wednesday night services at Westport Baptist were not

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held at the church. Elliott said the congregation would meet instead at an undisclosed location. Rear was not expected to attend the service.

“We’re avoiding all media contact,” Elliott said, adding that the conflict has brought the congregation closer together.

Simmons said the investigation started about a week ago when they received a tip from the prosecutor’s office. The chief said he was unaware of any further allegations against Rear.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*



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