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Child molester preacher sentenced

Pace pastor gets 20 years

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Pace pastor Floyd Linder was sentenced to 20 years in prison Tuesday and told he could never again speak to the girls, now women, he molested as he raised them.

Linder, 55, did not comment in Circuit Judge Nickolas Geeker's courtroom and was taken into custody immediately. Prosecutors expect he will serve at least 10 years.

"The problem I had was trying to balance the enormity of the crime this man had committed against so many children with the age of the case and the necessity of bringing all these women out and have them be required to testify," said Anne Patterson, assistant state attorney.

One case dated back to 1976.

The trauma that victims would suffer having to relive their encounters during the trial was a significant factor in the plea agreement reached last week.

Linder pleaded guilty to charges of lewd and lascivious or indecent assault against four victims in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, the result of months of negotiations. He originally was charged with multiple counts of capital sexual battery, which could have resulted in a life sentence.

"Had he gone to trial and been convicted on almost any of those cases, he would have gotten life in prison without parole," said Barry Beronet, Linder's attorney. "This is a sentence that would give him some hope that he would get out."

The prosecution was prepared for trial - "We already had the plane tickets ordered," Patterson said - but the victims, most of whom no longer live in the area, did not relish the idea of testifying.

"It's embarrassing, it's mortifying, it's traumatic - even for grown women," Patterson said. "It was traumatizing for them to have to talk to me about it."

Linder, who preached to few congregants other than his family at Pace Apostolic Church, combined the role of preacher and father and wielded that authority over his children, daughter Lauren Linder said.

His kids characterized him as a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde type of man, Patterson said, a tyrant at home but an angel to others.

As a preacher involved in the community, Linder was able to gain legal custody of many children. Lauren Linder said there were as many as 18 kids in their Pace home at once.

"He did not victimize any of his own blood daughters," Patterson said. "Only his stepchildren, adopted children and foster children."

Prosecutor Harmon Massey oversaw the four Santa Rosa County cases.

"I can tell you that all the victims said this is not enough," he said, "but it's enough to satisfy us that we don't have to come forward and testify, and we can go on with our lives."

On release, Linder plans to move to North Carolina and live with his

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sister. He will have to register with local authorities as a convicted sex offender.

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