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Parishioner claims pastor sexually abused her: Baptist leaders call lawsuit `vindictive'

BYLINE: By Anne Rochell and Celia Sibley STAFF WRITERS

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A 22-year-old woman has accused a Southern Baptist minister from Gwinnett County of **sexual abuse**, saying he touched her improperly several times over a period of almost 10 years.

The woman, who was a member of the now-defunct Grace Reformed Baptist Church in Atlanta, alleges in a civil lawsuit that the Grace **pastor**, the Rev. William Franklin, sexually abused her and threatened her so she would not reveal his actions.

The Rev. Franklin "has engaged in a persistent pattern of conduct wherein he offensively and without her permission touched the plaintiff's body in a sexual manner, and attempted to conceal his improper conduct by verbally assaulting and degrading the plaintiff," states the suit, filed in September in Gwinnett State Court.

The Rev. Franklin, now **pastor** of Northbrook Baptist Church in Lawrenceville, could not be reached for comment, but his attorney said Tuesday that he denies the allegations.

"It just did not happen," said attorney B. Thomas Cook Jr. "As far as he knew it was just a standard relationship between a minister and a parishioner."

The woman, who no longer lives in the Atlanta area, has not filed a complaint with the Gwinnett District Attorney's office, or made any other attempt to have the Rev. Franklin charged with a crime.

"This was a matter that the family wanted handled as discreetly and privately as possible," said her attorney, Keith Richardson. "What they're after is for Mr. Franklin to come to repentance for what he has done. Their desire is to avoid criminal prosecution and to avoid penalties more severe than they were actually seeking."

The suit alleges that the woman has incurred heavy medical expenses because of her experiences with the minister, and that she has suffered and "continues to suffer severe emotional trauma and depression which may be permanent."

She also claims that she had not taken legal action until this fall because she had repressed until recently the memories of his alleged advances.

The family is seeking general and punitive damages, to be determined by a jury, plus legal fees.

The Rev. Sid Hopkins, executive director of the Gwinnett Metro Baptist Association, said his association's leaders are aware of the charges.

"They reviewed everything and feel like the charges are frivolous, untrue and vindictive in their nature," the Rev. Hopkins said.

Northbrook, which has about 90 members, became a mission church of Peachtree Corners Baptist Church more than a year ago.

The Rev. Franklin, a Baptist minister for more than two decades, was ordained into the Southern Baptist ministry about two years ago. His background was examined thoroughly before joining the Southern Baptists, the Rev. Hopkins said.

The Rev. Franklin has filed a motion to dismiss the case, which will be heard in state court on April 19.



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