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Pastor Facing Trial Apparent Suicide Victim

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A Glendale church pastor facing felony child molestation charges was killed after he apparently threw himself in front of a truck on the southbound Golden State Freeway, police said Thursday.

Los Angeles police said the death of Walter Heroldo Solis, 54, of Arleta on Tuesday appeared to be a suicide. An attorney representing the church, however, said Solis' family and members of the congregation are viewing the death as a tragic accident that robbed the pastor of a chance to clear his name.

The Los Angeles County coroner's office has not determined whether Solis committed suicide.

Solis, who was pastor of Glendale Spanish Seventh-day Adventist Church, was arrested Oct. 27 on charges of molesting three sisters who were members of his congregation during a period of nearly three years.

He was killed at 10:30 a.m. shortly after pulling his wife's car onto the shoulder of the freeway, just south of the Terra Bella Street on-ramp in Arleta, police said.

Solis got out of the car and raised its hood, indicating he had engine problem. A short time later, as a southbound tractor-trailer truck was going by, Solis apparently jumped into the freeway lane and was hit by the truck, witnesses told police. He was then hit by a car, police said.

Neither of the drivers of the two vehicles was injured or cited in the death. Investigators later found nothing wrong with Solis' car, said Detective Jim Boissier.

Robert Peterson, an attorney for the church, said Solis' wife and three children, as well as other members of the church, do not believe Solis committed suicide.

"The church views this as a tragic accident," Peterson said. "We had absolutely no hint at all that he was suicidal. The family feels very strongly that it was an accident.

"He absolutely asserted his innocence," Peterson said of Solis. "Now he'll never have the opportunity to clear his name."

Solis, who denied molesting the girls and was scheduled to be arraigned next month, had been emotionally upset since being arrested, Detective Al Ferrand said.

"We have no note," Ferrand said. "But he was despondent."

Peterson said Solis was taking his wife's station wagon for a test drive because of engine trouble when he pulled off to the side of the freeway. Solis apparently experienced problems with the way the car was running, Peterson said.

Solis was facing six charges of felony child molestation. The case involved three sisters, ages 7, 11 and 14, authorities said.

Solis was charged with repeatedly molesting the children in his office between November, 1986, and June of this year.

Glendale police began an investigation when a doctor contacted authorities to say he discovered evidence during a medical check-up that one of the girls had been molested.

Solis was arrested and suspended with pay by the Southern California conference of Seventh-day Adventist Churches.

Most church members said they never believed the charges against Solis, Peterson said.

"The vast majority of the congregation was supportive of him, even after the charges," said Peterson. "He was a beloved and successful pastor. They are going to miss him a great deal."

Staff writer Santiago O'Donnell contributed to this report.