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Pastor out at King's Way as 1990s allegations of abuse in Michigan resurface

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Mitch Sneed / Editor | 0 comments



A well-known local minister with more than 15 years service at his church is no longer at his post. A reason for his departure has not been made public, but in recent weeks, allegations of child molestation from more than a decade ago in Michigan recently surfaced on the web.

Rev. Bill Winger, who had served as minister at King's Way Baptist Church in Douglas County for more than 15 years, is no longer the minister and any mention of him is no longer on the church's website. All previously recorded messages or sermons that were on the site have also been taken down.

King's Way officials were cordial and understanding when contacted, but did not provide a statement on the matter in time for this report. Calls to a number listed for Winger were not returned Tuesday. The home listed as his private residence is for sale and no one answered the door Tuesday.

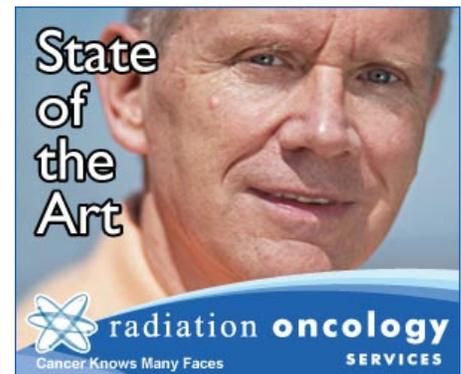
Officials did inform parents at King's Way Christian School about Winger's departure in a letter dated Oct. 18 and that they were aware of the allegations in a second letter dated Oct. 27.

"We want to prayerfully inform everyone that we have been informed that our pastor has resigned and will be submitting his formal resignation immediately," Dr. Ray Conway, King's Way Christian School administrator, wrote in the Oct. 18 letter. "Pastor Winger will no longer be involved in the ministry of The King's Way Baptist Church and King's Way Christian School. As many of you already know, our pastor has inflicted life-threatening harm upon himself and we would prayerfully ask that you pray for his well-being."

The letter went on to offer counseling to any of those who needed it in wake of the developments. The Oct. 27 letter addressed the abuse allegations.

"I have been receiving a few inquiries regarding the allegations against our former Pastor, Bill Winger. As most of you know, we have accepted Bro. Winger's resignation," Conway wrote in the letter. "Regardless of these events, the church and school leadership are committed to doing what is right and Godly.

"The allegations and charges that are surfacing on the Internet today were events that occurred while Bill Winger pastored in Michigan 18 years ago. As administrator, I am not aware of any accusations, by students or minors,



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made against The King's Way Baptist Church or any of the ministries. Moving forward, the safety and well-being of every child in the ministries of the King's Way Baptist Church and Christian School has been and will continue to be our highest priority.

"We appreciate your prayers and support for our school, our staff, and our church."

The Sentinel has learned that initial allegations were made by a woman who is now 25 years old about three years ago. She reported that she was just 3 when a wide-ranging pattern of abuse began while she attended North Sharon Baptist Church in Grass Lake, Mich. She first officially reported the alleged abuse 17 years later.

The Michigan State Police verified Tuesday that they do have an active investigation into the allegations made against Bill Winger. Sgt. Mark Thompson of the Brighton Post of the Michigan State Police did say that the investigation was active and that no charges have been filed at this point. Sgt. James Bundshuh is listed as the lead investigator on the case, according to Thompson.

Steven Hiller, a spokesman for the Washtenal County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, said the office had reviewed the case previously and did not pursue charges.

"I can confirm that this office reviewed an investigation report at the request of the Michigan Department of State Police on a William Max Winger," Hiller wrote. "Following the review this office has denied criminal prosecution based on that investigation. I cannot release any further information about this matter at this time."

That review was before new allegations surfaced from other alleged victims.

"A police agency may resubmit a case on which a denial has been issued, with new information," Hiller said. "In that circumstance, this office will review the case in light of the additional evidence. However, this office will not prosecute the case submitted by the State Police based on the evidence available at this time."

Because of the status of the investigation, Thompson did not indicate if there had been any other allegations or reports filed by alleged victim with investigators.

It is important to point out that Winger has not been charged with any crimes at this point in Michigan or in Georgia. Douglas County Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Stan Copeland confirmed Monday that while he had heard "a little about" the allegations, there is no local investigation.

"We have had no local victims come forward and to my knowledge we have not been contacted by authorities in Michigan about any investigation that is going on there," Copeland said. "Obviously, if that changes, we will take steps at that point. As of now we are not involved in anything to do with this case."

Winger's primary accuser is Bethany Foeller Leonard, who recently made her allegations public. Leonard, whose father and father-in-law were acquitted of molestation allegations at the same church decades ago, said she is trying to free herself from the trauma caused by her treatment by Winger as a child and to hopefully give any other victims the courage to come forward.

In a written statement about her ordeal posted on the Facebook page she started called Justice for the victims of Bill Winger, she talks freely about what happened and why she is now going public. She said that she fears there are others out there who suffered the same fate, possibly even in Douglas County, and hopes to give them the strength to come forward and assure that Winger is not allowed to do this to anyone else.

Without giving graphic details of the acts, here is part of how Leonard explained the torment she claims to have endured at Winger's hand.

"He taught me what it was like to wish I could die, to long for the pain to stop but instead it just kept burning deeper inside of me, a fire that would not go out," Leonard wrote. "Before I could tie my own shoes, he taught me the physical difference between a male and a female. When I was still riding tricycles, he showed me what happens when a man is sexually aroused. Before I could write my own name, he taught me that even though we have one body on the outside, there can be two different people hiding inside."

She said she first told her sister, who then told her mother about the alleged abuse.

"At first I was mad with her because I thought my mother would be mad at me, but she wasn't and helped me," Leonard said in a telephone interview Tuesday. "The way she handled it and believed in me gave me the courage to move forward. Now by doing that, it has helped others come forward as well. Now by bonding together, hopefully we can go public and keep this from happening to anyone else."

While there has been talk of a cover up by those who run online blogs, Rev. Bobby Toler of North Sharon Baptist Church said nothing could be farther from the truth. Toler said that when officials at his church learned of the allegations more than two years ago from Leonard's mother Shelly Foeller, they immediately went to the Michigan State Police.

"When Mrs. Foeller came to us with allegations about two years ago, a deacon and I went with her to the Michigan State Police and asked for them to investigate," Toler said in a telephone interview Tuesday. "We did exactly what they asked and have been cooperating with the investigation. Right now, it is in their hands and we will continue to

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support them in anyway that we can."

While Internet sites are filled with stories of alleged impropriety, the Sentinel was able to confirm that Janeane Johnson, 34, claims to have filed a formal complaint with the Michigan State Police. In a phone interview Tuesday, said she has also been contacted by the Washtenal County Prosecuting Attorneys Office. Johnson alleged her abuse by Wininger happened in 1994 and 1995 when she was a teen.

"I know how it made me feel," Johnson said Tuesday. "I knew it was wrong and it wasn't my fault, but I felt ashamed and dirty and I didn't want anyone to know. I mean the state of confusion that resulted made me question everything about the way I live my life. I have been through so much, but my hope is that by sharing my story, others can see that there is hope at the end of this and they have others who will believe them and stand beside them."

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