

## Preacher's Journey: Long Trail of Abuse

By RONALD SMOTHERS, Special to the New York Times  
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For nearly 30 years, an evangelist preacher traveled the Southeast shouting to worshipers about fire and brimstone and for much of that time whispering to boys about sexual pleasure.

Last month the preacher, Tony Leyva, pleaded guilty here to Federal charges of criminal sexual activity that he said involved up to 100 boys. Now the victims, their families and law-enforcement officials are left with bitter questions: Why did this go on so long? Where can they go for help? How can they restore the faith they once had in both God and man?

"This has been going on for years and there ought to have been some mechanism so that police from state to state could know about complaints about sex offenders," said the father of a southeastern Alabama boy who was molested by Mr. Leyva four years ago.

As the case illustrates, pedophiles like Mr. Leyva can often hide in plain sight for years, deflecting suspicions and evading detection despite many complaints, both informal and to the police in various towns.

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The self-ordained preacher rarely remained any place more than a week or two, and investigators said Mr. Leyva's mobility hobbled their ability to build a case against him. But his status as a minister may also have contributed to lax investigations and increased official desire to handle such accusations quietly. Such factors have been cited in cases where a pattern of sexual abuse by priests and other clergymen has continued for years. Accusations Were Condemned

This particular case illuminates the Manichaeic universe of Pentecostalism in which ministers are paramount and the forces of good and the forces of evil are personified and actively warring in the world. Accusations, even if they were made or reported to the police, were often condemned from the pulpit by Mr. Leyva as the Devil's work.

"He had such personality and contact that he could always talk his way out of it," said Louis Scheuch, a retired minister from Port Orange, Fla., who said he broke off his association with Mr. Leyva 11 years ago as the rumors of his activities increased. The victims themselves, as is typical in abuse cases, were often people who either from shame or from lack of assertiveness did not make a complaint.

"I didn't say anything because I thought I was the only one," said an 18-year-old who said he was molested by Mr. Leyva five years ago. "I was scared. I was so young." 'Knew How to Pick a Victim'

Edwin R. Leach, an assistant Commonwealth's Attorney in Roanoke County who won a conviction of Mr. Leyva on Virginia charges in September, said, "Tony Leyva knew how to pick a victim - troubled boys from rural areas who were naive."

"The first time he met my son," said a divorced mother of a 14-year-old Florida boy whom Mr. Leyva has admitted sexually abusing in 1987 and 1988, "he asked him if he had a daddy. After it all ended, my son told me that he didn't tell anybody because he figured he would put up with the little bit of the bad with Tony so that he could have the good."

Many victims come from poor families and have complained about the lack of publicly financed counseling services available to them.

"My son is hollering for some kind of treatment and I can't afford it," said one victim's mother.

Jennie Montgomery, the Assistant United States Attorney here who worked on the case, said the young man whose complaint about Mr. Leyva led to the investigation had tried to commit suicide, had no job or job training and was unable to return to his family. She said she briefly considered charging the youth with a minor crime so that he would be eligible for counseling and help in finding a job.