

Probation For Abuser Stirs Anger Minister Molested Girls Who Sought Counseling

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By William C. Lhotka

A judge's decision to sentence Thomas Jolly to five years' probation has outraged the victims and their parents, who argue that the 83-year-old defrocked minister should have gone to jail for molesting three girls.

"The fact that he is now in his 80s should not deter the court from punishing him like anyone else," the mother of one of Jolly's victims told Judge James R. Hartenbach on Tuesday.

The father of a second victim said the children had been deceived by "the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. He robbed them of their childhood, and he robbed them of their innocence."

Hartenbach said the conditions of probation protect society from Jolly.

"Incarceration, given his age and physical condition, is inappropriate," he said.

Hartenbach convicted Jolly on Tuesday in St. Louis County Circuit Court of first-degree sexual abuse, a felony; two counts of sodomy, both felonies; and two misdemeanor counts of sexual abuse.

The convictions were based on police and psychiatric reports. No evidence was presented in court.

Jolly was accused of molesting three girls, ages 9, 13 and 16, between September 1987 and August 1988 at the Gospel Assembly Church, a nondenominational church at 13169 Tesson Ferry Road in southwest St. Louis County.

Jolly was minister for the congregation of 600. The girls had sought counseling from him. Instead, he molested them, Hartenbach ruled.

Jolly was ousted as pastor in 1991; he was arrested last September. He was stripped of his ministry and is living in Caseyville.

Shuffling with a cane, Jolly was helped into court Tuesday by friends and supporters.

Half of the courtroom was packed with the victims, their friends and relatives. Across the aisle, Jolly's supporters filled two rows.

Outside the courthouse, Jolly was helped into a car while angry relatives of the victims hurled epithets at him and his backers.

As a condition of his probation, Hartenbach ordered Jolly to get counseling and barred him from any unsupervised contact with teen-agers.

"I understand the defendant has been defrocked, but as a condition of probation he is not to perform any functions in any organized church," Hartenbach added.

Defense attorney Donald Wolff said Jolly has never admitted any wrongdoing.

Wolff said Jolly has served as a minister for 61 years in 11 churches in several states.

Wolff said the congregation at Gospel Assembly Church not only removed him as their minister but also took away his pension benefits, leaving Jolly nearly penniless.

Wolff said a psychiatrist determined that Jolly suffered from dementia, a mental illness that caused memory loss and impaired judgment.

But Prosecutor Maura McShane said a state evaluation found Jolly competent to stand trial.m

McShane said she was pleased that Hartenbach had found Jolly guilty. "I understand the court's position on probation, but I feel he should have gone to jail."

Theresa Rode, a spokeswoman for St. Louis NOW (National Organization for Women), criticized the sentence.

"It is unfortunate that the judge is telling young women that the crimes against them are inconsequential," Rode said. "We are afraid it could happen again and he could molest children in the future."

The father of the 13-year-old victim said he had witnessed Jolly's "intimidation and manipulation of the congregation" when the allegations were first disclosed.

The father said children need good models such as teachers, coaches, judges - and ministers.

That's what made Jolly's case so hard to take.

"He was God's representative," the father said.

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