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## Prominent Missouri Church Reaches Settlement in Sexual Assault Suit

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Independence, Mo. (ABP) -- A prominent Missouri Baptist church has settled a sexual assault lawsuit that a former intern filed against the pastor's son, who was a staff member at the time of the assault.

The Missouri 16th Judicial Circuit Court dismissed the suit against Mark Brooks, his father Paul Brooks and the First Baptist Church of Raytown, Mo. Raytown is a suburb of Kansas City.

S.R. Prewitt, a former church intern, had filed a civil suit against the younger Brooks -- naming his father and the church -- in 2005. It accused Mark Brooks, who is married, of several accounts of sexual assault, unlawful imprisonment and infliction of emotional distress over a period of several months in 2003-2004. It also accused the church and Paul Brooks, its longtime pastor, of negligence in failing to prevent the abuse.

In court papers, Prewitt -- who was a third-generation member of the congregation -- claimed that, beginning in September 2003, he assaulted her sexually on multiple occasions, claiming that "it was God's will" that they be together. After a January 2004 encounter, the plaintiff became pregnant. Sometime thereafter, the suit said, Mark Brooks left the church's staff to become a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary but remained on the church's payroll until September 2004.

The seminary reportedly expelled Brooks after news of the lawsuit broke.

The suit also alleged that, after the plaintiff's pregnancy was discovered, Mark Brooks told his father about it and that it was a result of his having sexually assaulted her. It further claimed that Paul Brooks then arranged for his son and the plaintiff to see a counselor, who informed the plaintiff's mother "that it would be a sin for her to have this child and requested that she have an abortion."

Church leaders investigating the case released a public statement in 2005 acknowledging that Mark Brooks had fathered Prewitt's child.

Court records did not reveal terms of the settlement other than that each party would assume responsibility for the legal fees it incurred in the case.

But the website EthicsDaily.com reported Dec. 10 that the settlement "required the woman and her mother ... to relinquish membership in the church. All parties agreed never to contact the other. The child may initiate contact with her father or grandfather after she turns 18. The mother gave up future claims of child support. Brooks gave up parental rights. The child was adopted by her maternal grandfather."

The lawsuit caused considerable dissension in the 6,000-plus-member congregation, one of the largest in the Missouri Baptist Convention. Paul Brooks is a former convention president, and the church perennially leads all others in Missouri in annual giving to the Cooperative Program, the Southern Baptist Convention's unified budget.

Mark and Paul Brooks both reportedly apologized to the congregation in two closed-door meetings. The younger Brooks apologized for his admitted sexual impropriety, while the elder Brooks admitted he had made mistakes in attempting to protect his son.

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