

International Church Named in Sexual Assault Lawsuit

Case No. 31,691-98, is set for trial 04/23/01 in the 12th judicial district of Angelina County, Lufkin Texas. Defendants in this case are e)United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) in Saint Louis MO, k)Texas District of the United Pentecostal Church, g)United Pentecostal Church of Eastland Texas, n)Bobby Hart and Jonathan Mark Hart. Jonathan Mark Hart was convicted in Eastland, TX, Feb. 1999, on 3 counts of sexual assault of a minor child. The female children were 15 and 16 years of age and members of the Youth Group at Eastland United Pentecostal Church. Jonathan Hart attended Bible College at o)Gateway College of Evangelism and was acting Assistant Pastor at the Eastland United Pentecostal Church. He and his wife were the designated Youth Directors as well. Assaults on these young girls occurred on Church property and on Church related trips supervised by Jonathan Hart. Bobby Hart is the Father of Jonathan Hart and was also the Pastor of the Eastland Church at the time of the assaults. Bobby Hart appointed Jonathan Hart to both leadership positions.

Bobby Hart and wife Debbie became aware of their Son's activities some months before the parents of the victims learned of the crimes on 6/15/98. Bobby Hart allowed Jonathan to continue working with children and to retain his position as Assistant Pastor, even after learning of his crimes.

Bobby Hart is a licensed minister with UPCI and the local church in Eastland is affiliated with UPCI. A certified letter detailing the assaults was sent to k)James Kilgore and received by him on 7/09/98. UPCI sent three representatives to investigate the situation. Representatives for UPCI were h)Wendell Elms, i)Kerry Sharp and j)David Bernard. Victims were told that there was evidence of Ministerial misconduct but the investigative team took no immediate action. Bobby Hart refused to resign and was allowed to continue as Pastor. He finally resigned in late November 1998. Bobby and Son, Jonathan Hart, along with their families, have since moved to Athens Texas and are involved in the m)United Pentecostal Church there. Bobby Hart still holds a license with the UPCI and has never been reprimanded in any way.

The Plaintiffs in this case maintain that UPCI either knew or should have known the risks associated with leadership roles involving children. An aggressive campaign by UPCI to recognize and minimize these risks would have afforded substantial protection to the victims in this case and potential victims in other UPCI churches. However, UPCI's top man, f)Nathaniel Urshan, insists that UPCI has no duty to protect children in their more than 21,000 churches. The lack of adequate safeguards places thousands of children at risk of similar assaults. The fact that no disciplinary action has yet been taken in this case, gives rise to grave concern that UPCI will continue to ignore its duty in this area and responsible ministers will go unpunished. UPCI has substantial resources to implement and maintain programs to minimize known risks to children attending Sunday school and Youth oriented events endorsed by its Churches. Plaintiffs' goal is to see that UPCI recognizes this responsibility and begins a policy of prevention to be implemented at the Local Church level.

Defendants in this case deny any responsibility. UPCI claims that local churches are autonomous. However, the UPCI manual and constitution provide for a substantial level of control over affiliated churches. For example, the Pastor of any affiliated church must be licensed by UPCI. Licensed ministers pay \$303 per year to maintain their license. The f)General Superintendent for UPCI must approve and sign all licenses issued to ministers. Affiliated churches must follow a form of government approved by UPCI. Affiliated churches may only disaffiliate through a formal process requiring the presence and approval of UPCI. Members of UPCI affiliated churches are forbidden to swim with persons of the opposite sex and there are strict rules against owning a television. Affiliated churches participate in soliciting donations to UPCI sponsored fundraisers. These include Sheaves for Christ, Home Missions and Foreign Missions, to name a few. The "Sheaves for Christ" fundraiser boasts over 57 million dollars in donations since its inception. It is frightening to think that this International organization, with this kind of resources and power to influence millions of people, has not recognized its responsibility to protect the children in its local churches.

The United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) in North America lists 3,876 churches, reports a Sunday school attendance of more than 400,000 and has an estimated constituency of at least 600,000. UPCI is headquartered in St. Louis MO. And has district offices located in every state. UPCI also has a presence in 136 other nations. With 15,882 licensed ministers, 21,407 churches and meeting places, and a foreign constituency of over 1.9 million, the total worldwide constituency is more than 2.6 million. UPCI website: <http://www.upci.org/>

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