

SOURCES SAY MINISTER ACCUSED OF RAPE RAN HIS CHURCH LIKE A BANK

SAMUEL MAULL, Associated Press 

May. 18, 1988 6:05 AM ET

NEW YORK (AP) — A pastor charged with raping two teen-age members of his church told female worshipers they could end up in hell if they refused his sexual advances, and controlled many members' savings accounts, officials say.

Law enforcement officials have spent two years investigating the tangled finances of the Rev. Thomas Streitferdt, who lives with his wife on a \$1.1 million Long Island estate that is tax-exempt because it is used as a parsonage. Streitferdt, 59, is free in \$25,000 bail after he was arraigned Monday on two counts each of first-degree rape and first-degree sodomy involving two sisters, ages 14 and 16.

The pastor, who is white, founded his nondenominational True Church of God in a Harlem storefront in 1964, officials said. The church, whose members are mostly black, now takes up an entire block and features a highly regarded grade school and day-care center.

Sources who spoke on condition of anonymity said Tuesday that Streitferdt required his 700 members to pay him 10 percent of their annual income. The practice, known as tithing, is common among fundamentalist sects and is not illegal. Every third year, Streitferdt demanded 30 percent, the sources said.

The sources said Streitferdt took complete personal charge of the savings accounts of many members of his church and offered them other banking services.

The information about Streitferdt's unusual financial activities was provided by records and unhappy church members during a two-year probe, the sources said.

Streitferdt's lawyer, Benjamin Herzweig, said his client was not a wealthy manipulator. "He is meticulous," he said. "He crosses his t's, dots his i's, and does everything by the book. On paper, he's worth zero."

Herzweig said Streitferdt and his family were "shocked" by the sexual misconduct allegations.

Manhattan Criminal Court Judge Charles Solomon scheduled a hearing for Friday when, the sources said, a grand jury will hear rape and sodomy charges against Streitferdt.

The judge also ordered Streitferdt to surrender his passport after Assistant District Attorney Karen Silberman said the pastor planned to flee.

The prosecutor hinted that new charges could be forthcoming against Streitferdt because a third woman had alleged he forced her to have sex with him during a marriage instruction class a week before she was to be married.

Ms. Silberman told Solomon that Streitferdt had sexual relations with "numerous" adult members of his congregation over "a period of time." She said the pastor told women worshipers they could end up in hell if they refused to have sex with him.

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