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South Dakota Pastor Is Convicted of Killing His Wife

by Alexa Smith

LOUISVILLE, Ky. - A Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister in South Dakota has been sentenced to life in prison for the May murder of his wife of 30 years.

The Rev. William Guthrie - formerly the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Wolsey, S.D., and of the Bonilla Presbyterian Church nearby - is now incarcerated in the state penitentiary in Sioux Falls, approximately 150 miles from the two churches that he served.

The seven-woman, three-man jury deliberated for five hours on Jan. 21 before handing down the guilty verdict that ended the 11-day trial - the first murder trial in Beadle County, S.D., in six years. Guthrie was sentenced by Circuit Judge Eugene Martin on Jan. 24.

According to "The Plainsman," the daily newspaper in Huron, S.D., the judge asked Guthrie at his sentencing, "Mr. Guthrie, do you have anything to say?" Guthrie replied, "No, your honor."

Guthrie had pled not guilty to the murder charge.

Guthrie's attorney Phil Parent of Madison, S.D., had no comment on whether or not his client intends to appeal. The Beadle County State's Attorney Michael Moore, who prosecuted the case, is expecting notice of an appeal within the next 25 days. Moore's office did not seek the death penalty.

"I feel that 12 people in the community were fair and impartial. They heard the facts and they made a decision and I am satisfied with the verdict they made. The best thing is that it gives some finality to this ... for the family, for the church[es] and for the community," said Moore, who told reporters last August that Guthrie was the prime suspect in the drowning death of his wife, Sharon.

Sharon Guthrie, 54, drowned in the bathtub of her Wolsey home May 14. An autopsy revealed the contents of 10-20 capsules of Temazepam in her body, a sleeping pill that was prescribed for her husband.

The defense, according to "The Plainsman," suggested that she committed suicide because of a combination of medical and financial stresses. Prosecutors argued, however, that Guthrie killed his wife because he wanted to resume a relationship with a former female parishioner in Nebraska.

The prosecutor's office presented evidence from a computer expert that Guthrie's wife's alleged suicide note - found in a book months after her

May demise - was apparently typed onto the hard drive of a computer three months after her death. Further, a computer in one of Guthrie's parishes had been used to research household and bathtub accidents, according to Moore.

Moore also said that there were unusual accidents in the Guthrie home just before Sharon Guthrie's death: a lamp falling into her bath (when her husband was in the room), a string found across the basement steps and she apparently had woken up groggy at least once.

"Both congregations came daily to the trial to support the family," said the Rev. William Pfautz, the interim pastor who served Guthrie's two churches after his arrest, who added that the preponderance of evidence convinced many parishioners of their pastor's guilt before the actual verdict was handed down.

"But both congregations," he said, "are in good health and have largely worked through their hurt and are on track with their fall and winter program."

A new pastor is beginning in those congregations this week.

Guthrie resigned his pastorates months ago so that the lives of the churches were not further disrupted.

A committee is being formed within the Presbytery of South Dakota to conduct an ecclesiastical investigation into Guthrie's conduct. Its members will be announced at the Feb. 25 presbytery meeting.

The Rev. Bill Livingston, the presbytery's interim executive, told the Presbyterian News Service: "We are deeply saddened by the guilty verdict issued to Rev. Guthrie. We pray God's comfort for his family as they live through these most difficult times."

The Guthries have three grown daughters.

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