

Warrant issued for former Chico church staff member for alleged child sex abuse

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Chicoer.com

OROVILLE -- An arrest warrant has been issued for a former associate pastor of a Chico church charged with misdemeanor child molestation.

Jesse Daniel Ruhl, formerly of Pleasant Valley Baptist Church, is being sought after he missed a Jan. 18 arraignment hearing in Butte County Superior Court for an alleged relationship with a 16-year-old girl that was first reported in February 2011.

The church is also being sued in local court for a 2002 incident where then-teacher and associate pastor David Joseph Jorgensen committed lewd acts on a female student when she was 14.

Reached for comment Friday, Ruhl's father, senior pastor Tim Ruhl, said he was unaware of the pending case against his son and did not want to comment further without knowing more.

Tim Ruhl is also a defendant in the civil lawsuit, along with the church and Jorgensen. He declined to comment on that case because it is currently being litigated. The attorney representing Ruhl and the church also declined comment.

In Jesse Ruhl's case, Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey said notice was sent to a Banning address in San Bernardino County. He said the defendant had been cooperative in the past, but there has been no recent contact. However, there also hasn't been any indication that Ruhl did not receive the notice.

Ramsey said Ruhl, 30, was a music teacher at the church's school, and the girl and her family were church members. The girl would baby-sit his children.

The relationship allegedly became more intimate in October 2011, when they exchanged 20-30 intimate text messages. Ramsey said the relationship ended when Ruhl's wife discovered the messages.

According to a motion filed related to the warrant, a Chico police officer interviewed Tim Ruhl on Feb. 19, 2011. Tim Ruhl reportedly said his son confessed his actions to his family, which led to Jesse Ruhl's immediate termination as a pastor.

An officer interviewed the girl, who acknowledged text messages were sent. She and Jesse Ruhl also met several times each week for about 2-3 months. There was allegedly hugging, kissing and Ruhl allegedly touched her bottom.

Police also contacted Ruhl, who reportedly said he visited the girl at her residence when her parents were away. They also met in public places and at his house.

He allegedly confessed to touching the girl's breasts and bottom between five to 10 times, including some skin contact.

The warrant was issued to Chico police on Feb. 28. Bail was set at \$3,000.

The next court date is for the civil lawsuit on April 13. Attorneys representing the church and Tim Ruhl are seeking summary judgment for a relationship that came to light in 2003.

In that case, a now-23-year-old woman is seeking damages for sexual battery, negligence, emotional distress and defamation.

According to the anonymous plaintiff's complaint, Jorgensen initiated inappropriate contact on her 14th birthday in April 2002. She claims he exploited her immaturity and abused his position of authority at the church to take advantage of her.

Jorgensen pleaded no contest in May 2003 to two felony counts of committing lewd acts upon a child, according to online court records. After he completed probation, he sought to have the crimes reduced to misdemeanors and had his record expunged in September 2006.

The victim is suing the church and Tim Ruhl for being negligent in hiring and supervising Jorgensen. She also claims that Ruhl failed to report Jorgensen's actions when she told him about it.

The woman also alleges that Ruhl retaliated against her by expelling her six months before graduating high school and later claiming she was having a child out of wedlock.

In court filings, the defense for Ruhl and the church assert they are not liable for Jorgensen's intentional actions, which were outside of the scope of his employment. Also, Ruhl's handling of the woman's allegations were appropriate because they didn't rise to the level of reasonable suspicion.

The defense also asserts that the woman was expelled for violating the school's conduct code and that Ruhl did not defame her character.

There are currently two active defendants in the case. The plaintiff's attorney Larry Baumbach said Jorgensen is in default because he did not reply to the complaint, filed in December 2010.

According to Baumbach, when the allegations first came to light, the woman was forced to repeat her claims in a meeting with Ruhl and Jorgensen. Jorgensen denied the claims and accused her of lying.

Eventually, the woman's mother had her take a polygraph, which she reportedly passed.

According to a deposition of Ruhl, Ruhl said he confronted Jorgensen after the mother reported the results. Jorgensen admitted to the allegations and was terminated.

Baumbach said Ruhl reportedly expelled his client twice — after she first reported the allegations and again before graduation. He said the later expulsion came about after she felt guilty after a serious off-campus drinking incident that she reported to the school.

Upcoming dates in the civil suit include the April 13 hearing on the defense's motion and a jury trial on May 21.