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## Bethel church 'youth group leader' sentenced to prison for sexual assault of 13-year-old

Dirk Perrefort, Staff Writer  
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BETHEL -- A local man who admitted having a "sick and twisted" relationship with a 13-year-old girl while attending services at [Walnut Hill Church](#) was sentenced Wednesday in State Superior Court in Danbury to serve one year in prison.

While court documents state [Matthew Anastasia, 21](#), was a "youth group leader" at the church, its senior pastor said Wednesday Anastasia never held such a role.

Under a plea deal, Anastasia received a 10-year prison sentence, suspended after one year served, and five years of probation. He will also be required to register as a sex offender and is barred from having any contact with minors, including relatives.

He was on a special form of probation at the time of the relationship with the girl for a previous incident that involved sexual misconduct, according to court documents.

The victim's mother said in court Wednesday she was shocked the church would allow Anastasia to volunteer with children, given his prior arrest.

Anastasia pleaded guilty in April to several charges, including fourth-degree sexual assault, risk of injury to a minor and unlawful restraint.

According to court records, both Anastasia and the teen told police all of the physical encounters occurred during church services. Anastasia, whose father is a former church elder

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Matthew Anastasia Of Church Camp Ground Road, was sentenced to 10 years in prison, suspended after one year served. Pleaded guilty to several counts, including fourth-degree sexual assault and risk of injury to a minor, for relationship with a 13-year-old girl. Also pleaded guilty to unlawful restraint for an incident in 2008. Some say Anastasia was a youth group leader at the time of the relationship with the girl; church leaders dispute that claim.

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and whose mother works for the church, was 19 at the time.

It was during the third and final interaction between the two that Anastasia "touched my private parts over my clothing," according to the girl's statement to police.

"He tried to go further, and I told him I didn't want to at all," she said in her statement. "Matt tried to take my pants down."

Anastasia also sent the girl a photograph of his genitals as well as video of him touching himself, court documents state.

"I cut off the romantic involvement because morally it's kind of sick and twisted," Anastasia told police, according to the affidavit.

He was on probation at the time of the relationship for an incident that occurred in June 2008 when, according to an arrest warrant affidavit, he forced a 16-year-old girl to touch



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his genitals while parked in a car at a local industrial park.

The document states that Anastasia refused to drive the girl home or let her out of the car until she complied.

According to the arrest warrant in that case, police interviewed two other girls who claimed Anastasia forced them to kiss him.

The Bethel man pleaded guilty in April to the unlawful restraint charge stemming from the 2008 incident as part of a plea deal. Although he has previously been granted accelerated rehabilitation on the charge, he violated that probation with his second arrest.

"Considering his mother is an employee of the church and the father is on the Board of Elders, it is unfathomable to me that Matthew was allowed to serve with the youth ministry at the church," the more recent victim's mother said in court.

She added that church officials attempted to downplay the crime by telling the congregation "it was an Internet relationship between the two teens who attend the church."

Clive Calver, the church's senior pastor, said Matthew Anastasia's father, Jim Anastasia, served as an elder but that his term ended two years ago. Calver said church elders are responsible for helping to guide the spiritual direction of the church and are not involved in day-to-day management of the organization.

Janice Anastasia, Matthew's mother, works as the church's "children's ministry team coordinator," coordinates the organization's elementary school program and is charged with "ensuring that our kids have a safe, fun and pleasant time while their parents are worshipping," according to the church's website.

Janice Anastasia has years of experience working with children and "she does wonderful work and has never been criticized," Calver said.

"The fact is that Janice and Jim have tried to look after their boys," Calver said. "Kids don't always live up to what we hope for them."

He added that church members "are aware of what Matt has done."

"We've done everything to support everyone involved and we've kept (the victim's) identity as private as it could possibly be," Calver said. "The fact is that we've been very careful not to say too much, but that was entirely to protect her identity."

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Calver added that Anastasia's volunteer work was limited to several supervised occasions and was "on the level of making coffee."

Calver said the church voluntarily paid for 18 months of counseling for the victim in the case.

The incident "shattered" the victim's "trust, self-image and self-esteem," her mother said.

"Matthew's disgraceful actions toward my 13-year-old daughter continue to have devastating effects on her life and our family," she said in court Wednesday.

Jim Diamond, Anastasia's attorney, said if the case had gone to trial, the defense would have disputed prosecution assertions about the relationship with the 13-year-old girl.

"Anastasia is ashamed of his actions, and his family is shocked," the attorney said. "He is paying a heavy price for his actions."

Anastasia didn't make any comments during the sentencing and was led away in handcuffs by judicial marshals at the conclusion of the hearing.

An attempt to reach his parents Wednesday at the family home were unsuccessful. A recording said the phone number was no longer in service.

Contact Dirk Perrefort

at dperrefort@newstimes.com or at 203-731-3358.

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