

Eight more men claim pastor molested them

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Eight more men have come forward to join a lawsuit alleging they were molested as children during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by a now-deceased, one-time pastor of St. Thomas Lutheran Church in Brick.

That brings to 19 the number of men making allegations against the Rev. Robert L. Slegel.

In the year since the lawsuit was filed, the number of plaintiffs has grown from six, each of whom was seeking \$5 million in damages.

With the additional plaintiffs, the damages sought have grown to about \$95 million, said their Toms River attorney, Robert R. Fuggi.

The initial complaint has been amended twice, after addi-

tional plaintiffs read newspaper accounts of the case and came forward, Fuggi said.

The suit now names the bishop of the New Jersey Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as a defendant. The new complaint includes, as an exhibit to the lawsuit, letters written by the bishop in 1999 indicating that he knew of alleged wrongdoing by Slegel.

Slegel resigned as pastor of the church on Salmon Street amid scandal in 1993 and was removed from the rolls of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2000. He died on Sept. 1 at age 77 in Southern Shores, N.C., near Kitty Hawk, where he had been living.

In letters in 1999 to one of the alleged victims who subsequently became a plaintiff in the suit, the Rev. E. Roy Riley Jr., bishop of the New Jersey

Synod, discussed his intention to confront Slegel and ask him to resign from the church, or begin disciplinary proceedings that would seek his removal.

"Beyond what the church will do, I do not know whether you have considered reporting this matter to criminal authorities in New Jersey," Riley wrote in one letter to the alleged victim on June 3, 1999. "You would have to be willing to do that, since I could not do that in your behalf... I am deeply grieved that you and your family should have had to go through what you have experienced."

Fuggi said the correspondence shows that high-ranking church officials not only knew of allegations of wrongdoing by the pastor, but also deemed them to be credible and did not report them to authorities.

Church officials "should have gone to the authorities," Fuggi

said. "Had they gone to the authorities in 1999," the alleged offenses would still have fallen within the statute of limitations and the pastor could have been prosecuted, he said.

Riley, based in Hamilton, Mercer County, did not return a telephone call but released a prepared statement noting Slegel's resignation from St. Thomas, his removal from the church's roster, and that the allegations date back to before the existence of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Slegel was a pastor for a predecessor church body.

"Neither the New Jersey Synod nor the synod bishop had any prior knowledge of Slegel's behavior with plaintiffs as alleged in the lawsuit," Riley said in the statement. "It is too early to comment specifically on the allegations."

"The New Jersey Synod and the ELCA do not tolerate inappropriate sexual behavior of any kind by members of the clergy. When such behavior is alleged, the bishop of the synod in which the pastor serves will investigate immediately and take appropriate action as warranted," Riley added.

The lawsuit names St. Thomas Christian Academy and its school board; Slegel's estate; Slegel's wife, Cynthia, who was the academy's principal when the molestation is alleged to have occurred; the Rev. James Elstad, an associate pastor at St. Thomas who retired in 2004; and the Rev. Lowell G. Almen, secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The officials are identified in the suit only by initials.

The suit alleges that from 1967 to 1985, Slegel used his position to gain the trust of boys

and molest them. The youngest of the alleged victims were 6 when the behavior started, it charges.

Some plaintiffs endured the abuse until they were 15, the suit alleged. Most were molested over the course of several years, one for nine years, the suit said.

Slegel would make the boys feel special by inviting them into the school gymnasium or to his office or home and then giving them access to toys and sporting equipment, according to the lawsuit.

One alleged victim was taken out on Slegel's boat and allowed to steer while sitting on the pastor's lap, the suit said.

The pastor would fondle the boys and himself either in the church or his office, the suit alleged, and afterward, he would tell the boys they would be in trouble if they told anyone what had happened.

Some of the plaintiffs were congregants of the church, some were students at the academy and some were neither.

The defendants breached a legal obligation to "report reasonable suspicion of abuse by Slegel of children in their care and conspired to keep Slegel's behavior secret, placing his rights over the rights and safety of minor victims," the suit said.

The conspiracy by the defendants, the lawsuit said, was "motivated by their desire to prevent knowledge, prevent criminal prosecution and minimize disgrace and scandal."

Fuggi said there has been discussion by him and attorneys representing the defendants about seeking appointment of a special master, usually a retired judge, to manage the case and possibly steer it toward mediation.

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