

Lawsuit: LDS Church officials, teacher knew of abuse but kept silent



MARY JO PITZL | Arizona Republic

A lawsuit filed Monday charges that two Mormon bishops and a teacher failed to report a Bisbee father's repeated sexual and physical abuse of three of his children, despite a state law that makes reporting such offenses mandatory.

It argues that the "clergy-penitent privilege" in the law, which keeps confessions confidential, does not apply to such cases. The teacher, a former border-patrol agent as well as the children's Sunday school teacher, had a clear duty under the law in both of her roles to report the abuses to police, the

suit alleges.

"Each of the Defendants had personal observations of the abuse, and also knew of the abuse outside of any confidential communication," the complaint, filed in Cochise County Superior Court, alleges. The father's abusive practices were discussed by church officials in routine meetings, and led to his excommunication in 2015 after church officials learned of his abuse of his daughter, then age 5.

The lawsuit, filed on behalf of three of the six children of Paul and Leizza Adams, details Paul Adams' repeated sexual abuse of his daughters over a seven-year period, including the rape of his infant daughter. Paul Adams was indicted on 11 counts of child sexual abuse in 2017 and was awaiting trial when he hanged himself in his prison cell later that year.

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Leizza Adams, the mother, was convicted for child abuse in 2018 and was released from Perryville state prison in early October, state records show.

The children have since been adopted by various families and have different last names than their parents.

The suit names the Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as well as the Corporation of the Presiding Bishop of the Church.

In a statement Monday, an attorney for the church, Bill Maledon, wrote:

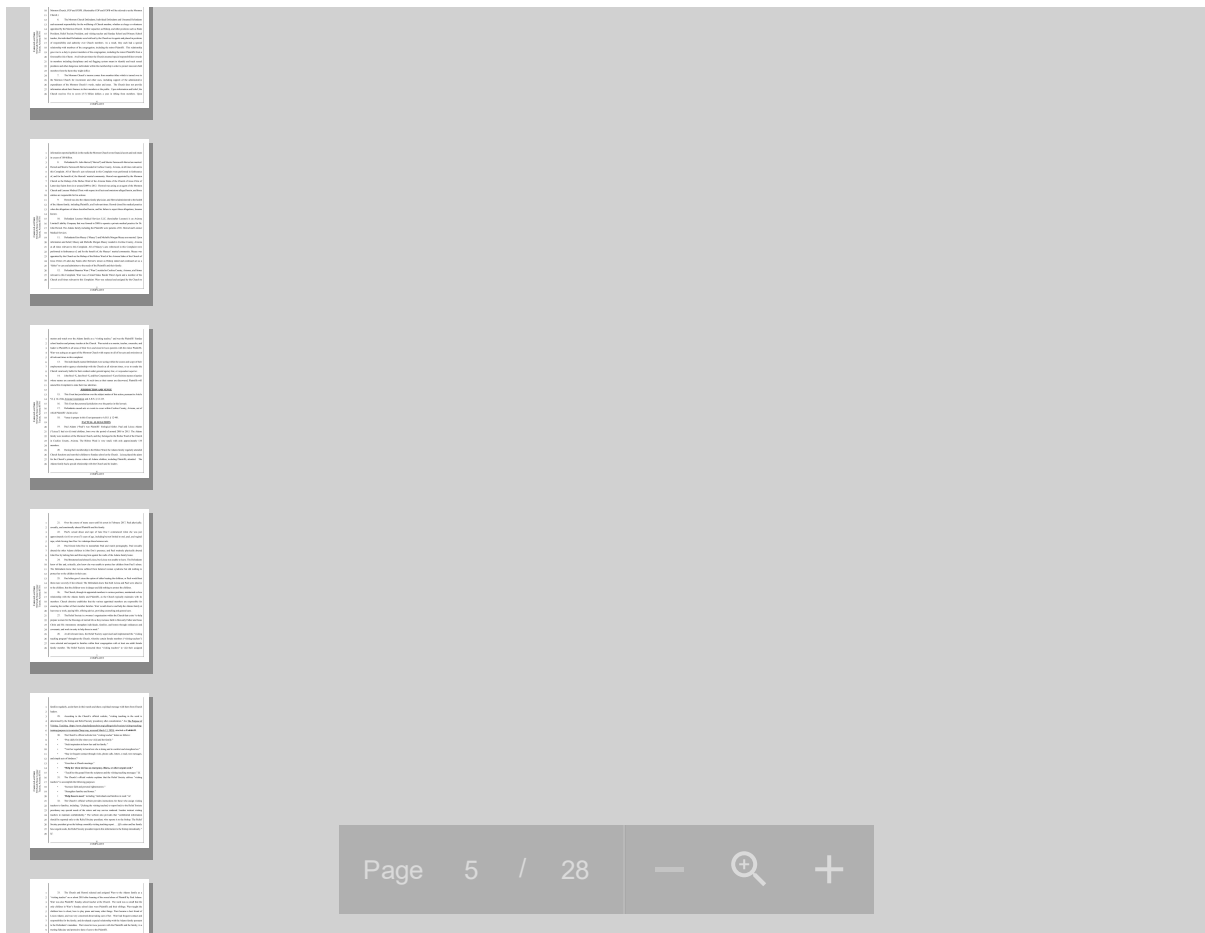
This tragic abuse was perpetrated by the young victims' own father who died of suicide in jail while awaiting trial. As clergy, the bishop was required by Arizona law to maintain the confidentiality of the

father's limited confession. Notwithstanding, the bishop took the few details he had and made efforts to protect the children, primarily through the mother. The bishop urged the family to report the abuse or give him consent to do so, but they refused. The bishop also convened a church disciplinary council and condemned the limited conduct he knew of in the strongest terms by excommunicating Mr. Adams from the Church in 2013. It was not until law enforcement made an arrest of the father that the bishop learned of the scope and magnitude of the abuse that far exceeded anything he had heard or suspected. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its clergy worked to handle this matter appropriately consistent with Arizona law. It has also tried to assist the victims and remains willing to commit significant resources to aid and assist these children. The Church has no tolerance for abuse of any kind. Our hearts ache for all survivors of abuse and go out to the victims in this case. The Church will continue to offer assistance to these young victims, but the Church will also vigorously defend against this baseless lawsuit.

Other defendants are John Herrod, who served as bishop of the Bisbee Ward from 2009 to 2012, and his successor, Robert Kim Mauzy. It also names the medical practice that Herrod ran. Herrod was the Adams family's doctor.

Also named is Shaunice Warr, a former agent with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, where she worked along with Paul Adams. She also was a member of the church and was appointed by the church's Relief Society to be a visiting teacher to the family, the lawsuit states.





The suit seeks findings of negligence, breach of fiduciary duty, and intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress against the defendants. It also seeks a finding of medical malpractice against Herrod, given his role as the family's physician. The filing asks the court for unspecified compensatory and punitive damages.

The case revolves around Paul Adams' abuse of his children and the people who knew of the abuse and did little to stop it.

When Paul Adams sought counseling for his pornography addiction from his Mormon bishop, Herrod at first brought in Paul Adams' wife, hoping her

knowledge of the sexual and physical abuse would put an end to it.

That didn't work, according to the lawsuit. Herrod then asked church leadership for permission to report the abuse, but was instead directed to the church's helpline.

He was advised to continue counseling and was told he did not need to report the abuse due to the "clergy-penitent privilege" in the law.

Herrod's successor, Mauzy, also called the helpline about Paul Adams and received the same advice. Helpline calls regarding sexual abuse are referred to the Salt Lake City law firm of Kirton McConkie.

"In other words, the Church implements the Helpline not for the protection and spiritual counseling of sexual abuse victims, as professed in Church doctrine and literature, but for Kirton McConkie attorneys to snuff out complaints and protect the Church from potentially costly lawsuits," the lawsuit states.

Without a report to police or child-welfare authorities, the abuse remains hidden. According to the lawsuit, this case came to light after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security followed up on a tip from Interpol about pornographic videos on the internet that were linked to Paul Adams.

An investigation into Leizza Adams' actions by federal officials uncovered that the clergymen knew of the abuse but were counseled to not report it. The Cochise County Attorney's Office confirmed in the spring that there is a criminal investigation into the matter by an "outside agency" but has provided no update on the probe.

Warr knew of problems in the Adams household through her role as a visiting teacher, as well as through her friendship with Leizza Adams.

"Despite the overwhelming evidence of Paul's abusive and psychotic behavior toward his children and wife, Warr failed to report Paul's abuse of Plaintiffs to any government authorities on the instructions of Church leadership," the claim alleges.

Attorneys representing the children acknowledge the clergy privilege, but argue the bishops and Warr knew of the abuse outside of any confessional-type setting. For example, Paul Adams' excommunication was directly related to his abusive behaviors.

Besides, attorney Lynne Cadigan said, state law does not bar anyone from reporting child abuse. It's church policy to not report, she said, a policy designed to protect the church from costly and damaging litigation. "It's not against the law, it's against church policy," she said.

John Manly, another attorney for the children, said the case reminds him of the Catholic Church in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

"It's like the Mafia hiring a pastor and using the pastor to hide their crimes," he said.

“What they’re really doing is hiding serial criminal conduct under the guise of religion.”

Beyond the repeated sexual abuse of his two daughters, Paul Adams also sexually abused his son, the lawsuit states. He beat him, forced him to watch pornography and witness the abuse of his sisters. This resulted in night terrors and hygiene issues while he was in foster care.

The daughters, the lawsuit claims, have permanent emotional and physical damage from the years of molestation.

Because their father posted pornographic images of them on the dark web, the girls' adoptive parents have been notified by the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force that they risk being stalked. Authorities have warned them to stay away from social media for fear that they will be identified and further traumatized.

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