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News 4 Tucson Investigators: Bisbee church at center of sexual abuse claim

By Lupita Murillo

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By Pablo Lopez

BISBEE, Ariz. (KVOA) - Disturbing details coming to light in the case of three Bisbee children physically and sexually abused by their father.

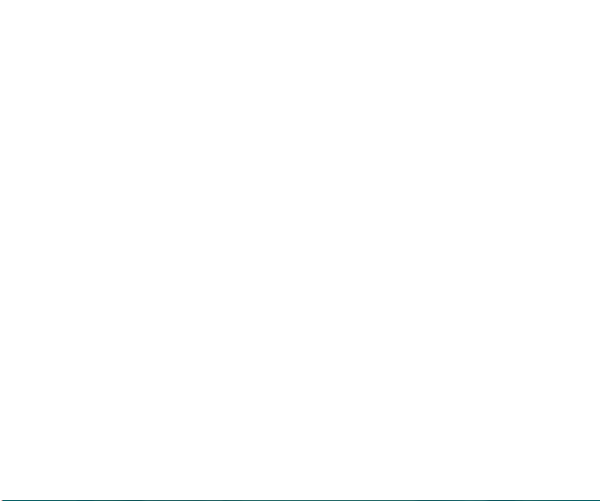
Their mother, was aware but didn't stop it.

Now, we learn the children's father confided in two leaders of his church over seven years admitting his sins.

Sins a Tucson lawyer said those leaders kept secret within their church hierarchy.

However, the church said its bishops were prohibited from reporting to law enforcement under Arizona law.

A 24-page civil complaint was filed in Cochise County against members of a Bisbee church. It accused them of not protecting three of their youngest members.



"It's the most shocking case I've ever seen in my 35 years of sex abuse cases," says Tucson attorney, Lynne Cadigan.

Cadigan is no stranger to sex abuse cases. She's represented victims for years but said that this case is different.

"I represent three victims in a sex abuse case against the Mormon church, the LDS church, and the bishops for failing to report what they knew was going on," states Cadigan.

In 2017, Leizza and Paul Douglas Adams of Bisbee were indicted on 27 counts of multiple charges involving sex crimes against children.

The victims were three of their kids.

Paul Douglas Adams was a border patrol agent. He committed suicide inside a jail cell before he could stand trial.

In 2018, Leizza pleaded no contest to two counts of child abuse endangerment. She was sentenced to two years in prison she was just released last month.

The children, now with new families are battling the effects of long-term abuse.

Lynne Cadigan said leaders within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Bisbee could have stopped it if they had just called police.

"The shocking thing about this is the church knew that these girls were being sexually abused and the subject of pornographic videos at least one of them," said Cadigan.

The church said it did everything it could under Arizona law and even ex-communicated Adams.

According to court documents, it all started a decade ago when Adams confessed to his bishop that he was sexually abusing his young daughter and putting videos of the acts on the internet.

The bishop, years later in police interviews said that he followed church policy and Arizona law and provided counseling to Adams, and included Leizza in the sessions.

The next bishop to head the Bisbee church said he did the same thing.

"And they sat next to these girls at church they taught them Sunday school, they gave them moral advice, they talked to them about God, yet they did nothing to stop the rapes, nothing," states Lynne Cadigan.

Clergy in Arizona are mandatory reporters for child abuse, with one significant exception called clergy privilege. Clergy privilege is when clergy learn about the abuse in a confidential form of communication.

According to Cadigan, the Mormon church said that this is how they learned about the abuse in the Adams case and believe it didn't have to be reported.

"I frankly think that's an absurd position when you weigh the right of a child to be free from rape versus the right of a church to keep a crime a secret. Clearly, the child's safety wins out," states Cadigan.

The recently-filed complaint states that both bishops reported the abuse not to law enforcement but to the Mormon church helpline.

When interviewed by the Department of Homeland Security, the first bishop stated that he was advised in the helpline call. "...that he needs to continue counseling sessions, and that there's no duty to report to authorities due to the clergy-penitent privilege."

So, he didn't call police.

The next bishop to run the Bisbee church also called the helpline according to the complaint, "...was also advised that the clergy-penitent privilege and church doctrine prohibited him from reporting the abuse."

The church sent us this statement.

"The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 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. 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 will continue to offer assistance to these young victims." The statement is from Sam Penrod Media relations manager, Church Communication Department

Cochise County Attorney Brian McIntyre disagrees, "it's been presented to your news agency that the statute prohibits disclosure, which is just not true. The statute provides a limited exception or times when disclosure is not necessary, based on certain bonified religious principles, but it is not both a sword and a shield." He added the criminal investigation is far from over, "these are class six felonies the statute of limitations is seven years from discovery or when we should have discovered the conduct and I realize it taking three years but no, no one is letting this go. The damage inflicted on these children was very significant and we intend to see it through."

Meantime, Cadigan says she plans to hold the bishops and the church hierarchy accountable in civil court.

"These bishops were told to keep this a secret for seven years. I don't know how you can look a child in the eyes and tell them to love God and Jesus, know they are being raped, and do nothing," she said. Cadigan added she filed the complaint in an effort to force policy changes within the church when it comes to mandatory reporting.

The News 4 Tucson Investigators learned that the father was excommunicated from the church three years after he first confided his crime to one of the bishops.

Below is the claim that was filed at the Cochise County Courthouse by Lynne Cadigan.

Jane-Doe-1-v-Mormon-Church-1

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