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Appeals court upholds molesting conviction of Hammond

March 24, 1996 12:00 am • Times Staff Report and The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS - The Indiana Court of Appeals upheld the conviction of a Baptist deacon from Hammond who was sentenced to five years in prison for molesting a 7-year-old girl.

The court on Friday unanimously rejected the latest attempt to keep A.V. Ballenger, 60, out of prison. Since his 1993 conviction, the First Baptist Church of Hammond deacon has remained free on an appeal bond.

"We were disappointed," said Ballenger's attorney, James E. Foster. "Now, (Ballenger) has got to make some personal and financial decisions."

Foster said obligatory appeals for a rehearing and transfer to the Indiana Supreme Court will be filed in the next two or three weeks.

The appellate court in its 11-page ruling summarily dismissed all five grounds offered in Ballenger's appeal, including allegations of juror misconduct and charges that the trial judge, Lake Criminal Court Judge Richard Conroy, erred by allowing witnesses to make accusations of prior sexual misconduct.

Ballenger, a Hammond steelworker, was convicted March 26, 1993, of fondling a girl in a Sunday School class in the summer of 1991 at First Baptist Church of Hammond, 523 Sibley St. Ballenger, who was a church deacon at the time, has continually denied any wrongdoing.

Just before he was sentenced in 1993, Ballenger told the court, "Even if I touched that little girl accidentally, there was no criminal intent. I wish I

could take my mind out, my heart out and let you have a look at it."

Although Ballenger was found guilty in only one case of child molesting, three additional women testified in 1993 during Ballenger's sentencing hearing that he also had molested them as children. Indiana law prevented the women from testifying during the trial because Ballenger was not charged with molesting them.

Ballenger was sentenced to five years in prison July 2, 1993, by Conroy.

It was not clear Friday when Ballenger must report to prison.

Five years have passed since charges of sexual abuse against Ballenger were first made. The allegations rocked the church and led to the ostracism of some members.

Telephone calls to First Baptist went unanswered Saturday.

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