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Deacon convicted of molestation: Man fondled teen in Cherokee church

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A Cherokee County church deacon was convicted Saturday of **molesting** ▶ a 14-year-old girl who attended his church.

Jurors deliberated about 14 hours Friday and Saturday before finding John M. Eatman guilty of child molestation and enticing a minor for indecent purposes. He is to be sentenced in several weeks.

Prosecutors said he showed the girl an adult magazine and made sexually explicit comments to her in August, then touched her buttocks during Sunday morning services Sept. 27 at South Cherokee Baptist Church.

Eatman, who is in his early 50s, pleaded guilty but mentally ill to a child molestation charge in 1984 involving a 10-year-old girl. He spent several years in prison and was on probation at the time of his arrest.

Kevin J. Rodgers, Eatman's attorney, said he expects prosecutors to ask a judge to sentence Eatman to life in prison. State law allows life imprisonment for someone convicted a second time of child molestation.

Members of Eatman's church, numbering 100 to 120, supported him after his arrest. His ▶ **pastor** and other members waited for the verdict well into the night Friday. Some supporters cried when the verdict was announced Saturday morning.

Investigators said he showed the girl an adult magazine and asked her a sexually explicit question as he drove her to services Aug. 19. She did not look at the magazine or answer the question.

On Sept. 27, the girl told investigators that Eatman "had touched her on her right buttock and squeezed her buttock at the same time" during services earlier that day, court records say. A search warrant for Eatman's house and car shows that detectives seized more than 40 sexually explicit magazines, 11 pistols, rifles and shotguns and four sexual aids.

It is against the law for convicted felons to have firearms. Eatman was charged with 11 felonies for having the guns, but his wife, Gina, testified that the guns belonged to her, Rodgers said. The jury acquitted Eatman of those charges. It also acquitted him of one count of cruelty to children.

Rodgers, who argued during the trial that Eatman's contact with the girl was misinterpreted, said Eatman's family is considering an appeal.

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