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Lawsuit claims church hid allegations of sexual abuse

By JEFF BRUMLEY
The Times-Union,

Trinity Baptist Church in Jacksonville covered up multiple allegations of sexual abuse against former pastor Robert Gray to avoid legal liability, according to a negligence lawsuit filed Wednesday.

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The civil action, filed in Duval County Circuit Court, was brought by an unidentified Hamilton County woman in her mid-30s who said she was molested by Gray several times when she was about 6 years old and a first-grader at the church's Trinity Christian Academy.

A Trinity spokesman referred all questions about the lawsuit to the congregation's attorney, Ed Trent.

Trent wouldn't comment on the specific allegations Thursday but noted that an investigation he conducted last year cleared the church of deliberately or inadvertently ignoring sex abuse complaints against Gray, who is now 80 and facing a criminal trial in November.

David Barksdale, an attorney defending Gray in his four-count criminal case, declined to comment because he hadn't seen the lawsuit.

Filed by Miami attorney Adam Horowitz, the lawsuit claims the Independent Baptist church failed to provide a safe environment for the plaintiff by concealing reports that Gray had "sexually abused numerous other minors" and by not reporting that information to authorities. The church also misled the congregation about "Gray's fitness to serve in the ministry," the lawsuit says.

The abuse occurred during the 1979-80 school year, growing from a series of nonabusive counseling sessions between Gray and the girl into meetings where he repeatedly molested her, the lawsuit says.

To keep her quiet, Gray told the girl her father could lose his job and she would be sent to live with someone else if she reported the abuse, which occurred in his office, according to the lawsuit.

The woman is seeking a jury trial and unspecified compensatory and punitive damages for permanent psychological, emotional and physical injuries resulting from the abuse.

Separately, Gray faces trial Nov. 12 on four counts of capital sexual battery, each carrying a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole for 25 years.

At least 20 accusers have come forward since May, all claiming some form of abuse by Gray dating as far back as the 1970s. The statute of limitations expired in all but four of the cases, hence the number of criminal charges filed against him. The woman who filed the civil lawsuit is one of the four whose accusations led to criminal charges.

The former pastor was arrested in May, when the first accusations surfaced, and again in July when others came forward. He was released on $25,003 bail and is living at home on house arrest, free to go only to medical and legal appointments.

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