



Sex Abuse at Church Shatters a Family

D.C. Deacon Is Sentenced to Prison as Boy and Relatives Try to Heal

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They were at a Safeway, of all places, when the little boy finally told his secret.

It was 1998, and he was 8. His family was waiting at the curb while his father ran in to buy diapers for the baby. In the back seat, his mother saw the boy crying.

Then his mother heard whispering: The boy was talking to his older brother. She could hear him say something about "my personal." That was the children's word for their private parts. She turned down the radio. What?

Then, for the first time, he told her he had been sexually molested. "My whole life passed before my eyes," she said. "I just started crying."

When he was 5 and 6 years old, the boy explained when they got home, he was abused by Robert D. Tardy, a deacon at Peace Baptist Church on 18th Street NE. This month, Tardy was sentenced to two to 10 years in prison for molesting the boy, plus 100 days for abusing a girl at the church.

Tardy pleaded guilty to molesting the boy and in the second case entered an Alford plea, in which he did not admit guilt but conceded that there was enough evidence to convict him.

Tardy, 45, is not the first religious figure to abuse a child. But his crimes happened in a special place, an active church in one of Washington's toughest neighborhoods. Peace Baptist tries to be an oasis, but instead of sheltering the boy, the church inadvertently put him in contact with a convicted child molester.

In interviews this spring and summer, the boy's family described the process of coping with the abuse of their son at the church. One of the toughest parts, they said, is accepting that their religious faith led them to Tardy.

"He loves the Lord," the mother said of her son. "He is very wary of people." She might be describing any members of the family.

The boy and his family are not being identified because *The Washington Post* generally does not identify victims of sexual abuse.

Peace Baptist, just off Benning Road NE, knows its neighborhood. Many children need a place to get off the street, so the church has an enormous child development center in the basement that can hold more than 100 children. For at least two decades, the church sent around a bus on Sunday mornings, picking up children who came to church alone.

In the early 1990s, when Tardy reportedly joined the church, he was a convicted child molester, having pleaded guilty in 1989 in D.C. Superior Court to molesting his 9-year-old stepdaughter.

Pastor Arie L. Mangrum Jr., who was in charge of the church in the early 1990s, said Peace Baptist did not know and did not inquire about Tardy's past when he joined as a parishioner. Neither did it investigate his past when he was promoted to deacon.

"As people of faith, we don't require a checkup on people [about] what their past life has been," said Mangrum, who retired in 1997 and has the honorary title of pastor emeritus. "We welcome them with love."

Tardy declined to comment for this article. He initially agreed to meet with a reporter at the Lorton Correctional Complex, where he is serving his sentence. But the day of the meeting, Tardy refused—citing his attorney's advice, according to Lorton staff.

Mangrum said that in the years after Tardy came to Peace Baptist, Tardy was known as an enthusiastic church member and eventually attained the rank of deacon. Deacons, according to Mangrum, are the highest-ranking lay members of the church, assisting ministers in running it. Tardy particularly enjoyed work with children, and he drove the church's bus on Sunday mornings, Mangrum said.

"He was quite faithful," Mangrum said. "I think he had a special interest in the bus ministry."

The boy's mother brought him to Peace Baptist when he was 6 months old. She had grown up in the church, gone to Virginia Union University in Richmond, then moved back to Washington, raising two children on her own and later marrying. She moved in with her mother and rejoined the church.

"Peace [Baptist] was there at a time when I really, really needed [the church] in my life," she said. She joined the choir, went to prayer meetings and brought her children to church.

She said Tardy began doting on her younger son when he was 5. It started with Tardy passing the boy a dollar on Sundays "for being good in church." Then Tardy, whose jobs included cleaning the church after services, asked the boy's mother whether the child could stay after and help, she said.

Seeing a good role model, she said yes.

You "trust your pastor, you trust your deacon," she said. "These are people you just trust."

The boy stayed after church with Tardy on several occasions for about a year, his mother said. His mother and father finally ended the visits after Tardy kept their son too late one day. The boy told his family that the abuse happened during those visits.

That day in the car, when the boy finally told his brother about the abuse, three years after it started, the news rocked his family.

One man close to the family stalked Tardy—carrying a gun, the boy's mother thinks. But she prevailed on him to stop.

Certain that her son was telling the truth, the mother in late 1998 told her pastor at a Prince George's County church she had attended since moving there. That pastor set up a meeting with several deacons at Peace Baptist. Mangrum had retired and a new pastor had not been chosen, so the deacons were in charge of the church.

At the meeting, Tardy admitted what he had done, the boy's family said. The deacons promised that Tardy would have no more contact with children, the boy's parents said. The family decided not to push for Tardy's prosecution.

But last year, they say, they saw Tardy working with children again at the church. They decided to call the police.

Michael T. Bell, who became pastor of Peace Baptist Church about three years ago, would not talk about the specifics of Tardy's crimes or the church's reaction. None of the deacons who attended the meeting would comment for this article.

After an investigation, police charged Tardy in December with four acts of sexual abuse of the boy. Tardy pleaded guilty to one of the charges in February. A girl, whose mother saw a notice of Tardy's guilty plea in the newspaper, came forward this spring to allege that Tardy had abused her in 1997, when she was 5.

At Tardy's sentencing July 13, the girl's mother spoke of being abused by someone in her church when she was a girl. Sobbing, she lashed out at Tardy and at the church.

She said she came to Peace Baptist "to get away from that cycle of abuse, and [then] it repeats itself with my child."

Police say her daughter, now 10, has had emotional problems since Tardy abused her, including drinking glue and cutting all her hair off.

"The devil comes in sheep's clothing," the girl's mother said. "He comes after our children, our future... . That's all I can say right now."

The boy also has had a hard time. He gets counseling, his parents say, though the family's HMO won't pay for any more this year. He has problems in school, at church, with authority figures of all kinds, his mother says.

"He trusted an adult, and the adult violated him," the boy's mother said. "He'll never be the same little child he was."

For the boy's mother, the revelation of the abuse unraveled a lot of things. Suddenly, she saw all men as predators.

"Even now, with my husband, he's changing the baby, I'll say, 'What are you doing? I'll change the baby,' " she said.

"It's not about my husband," she said. "It's about ... Robert Tardy But for me, Robert Tardy is every man."

During his sentencing in D.C. Superior Court, Tardy spoke to the families sitting in the court's gallery. He first apologized, then told them, "I feel your pain."

"You feel your pain, not mine," the boy's mother said back.

"I'm just [struggling] in myself right now," Tardy said. "Through the Lord."

He paused, still looking at the families.

"I say, I'm sorry."

Peace Baptist Church has not apologized, the boy's family said. Bell, the pastor who arrived three years ago, took a reporter out the church's front door and down the sidewalk, to a corner with a view of the adjacent Rosedale Elementary School playground.

There, dozens of children played on the cracked blacktop, with very little adult supervision. Bell talked about the church's role in the neighborhood. It is one of the few places where children can feel safe.

"What happens if we betray that trust?" he said.

The boy's mother takes her children to Sunday school at their new church as often as she can. But sometimes she has a hard time making herself go, given her experience.

"There are women at church looking for a husband; there are men there looking for a wife," she says now. "There are pedophiles looking for prey."

"But I've got to remember," she said, "why I'm going there."

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