

# Orlando Sentinel



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## Florida Baptist Convention accused of negligence in Lake County sexual molestation case

By Ludmilla Lelis, Orlando Sentinel

10:13 p.m. EST, May 9, 2012

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TAVARES — More than six years after a 13-year-old boy was sexually abused by a Baptist preacher, a jury this week is hearing a case to determine whether the Florida Baptist Convention is liable for failing to find out about past allegations of sexual abuse against the minister.

The Eustis boy and his mother are asking jurors to find the statewide Baptist group — comprising nearly 3,000 congregations and 1 million members in Florida — negligent for not thoroughly researching Douglas W. Myers, who is serving a seven-year prison sentence for molestation.



Florida Department of Corrections mugshot of Douglas W. Myers. (Florida Department of Corrections / May 09, 2012)

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Though he had no prior criminal charges, Myers faced allegations of abuse at churches in Maryland and Alabama, according to court testimony. Officials with the Baptist organization said the convention didn't "hire" Myers to be a minister and that a background check turned up nothing.

"We did not put him here," former missions director Cecil Seagle testified. "We didn't recruit him. We didn't place him."

Jurors will have to decide what responsibility should rest with the Baptist convention, which trained Myers and gave him grant money to open new churches in Lake County. Myers started Harbor Baptist Fellowship in Howey-in-the-Hills and later Triangle Community Church in Eustis. Both are now defunct.

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Myers, 63, pleaded guilty to molesting the Eustis boy over a six-month period in 2005. Before coming to Florida, he served as pastor of Dunkirk Baptist Church in Dunkirk, Md., and then briefly headed Concord Baptist Church in Russellville, Ala.

Jurors have heard testimony from church leaders in Maryland and Alabama that Myers faced allegations of inappropriate behavior with young boys. A Maryland youth minister gave a sworn statement that his son was abused and a former deacon at the Alabama church said Myers had taken children on a skinny-dipping trip and cornered a 10-year-old boy for inappropriate contact. None of the allegations resulted in criminal charges, though they were known among church members.

Gary R. Schoener, a Minnesota clinical psychologist who has testified in other cases involving sexual exploitation by clergy, said the statewide group should have done more.

"Had they had not in fact approved of him, he would not be in Florida doing that work," he testified. "The reality was they were the party that could have said no."

Circuit Judge G. Richard Singeltary ruled jurors to disregard the statement because Schoener had delved into whether Myers was an "agent" of the Baptist convention, or someone who is an authority or official representative.

Seagle expressed regret over what happened but said the Baptist group did what it could.

"We had nothing in anything we had seen that would suggest a moral impropriety," he said. "Of course, we are sad about it. It hurts my heart."

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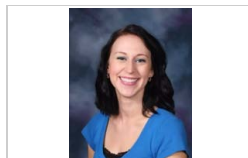
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