

The Miami Herald

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1994

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\$6.7 million awarded in sex molestation case

Church found negligent in hiring youth minister

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A Kendall Baptist Church was hit with a \$4.2 million judgement Friday for negligence in hiring a youth minister who sexually molested nearly a dozen teenage boys.

A Dade Circuit Court jury awarded one young man, Daniel Artis, \$4 million for his emotional pain and \$179,000 for psychological treatment.

Artis was abused by the youth minister at least four times in his mid-teens, from 1986 to 1988. Artis, the only victim to sue, sobbed on the witness stand as he described his ordeal.

The jury awarded Artis an additional \$2.5 million in punitive damages against the youth minister bringing the total jury award to about \$6.7 million.

"The jury showed we can keep children like Dan Artis safe in churches, schools, wherever," said Artis' attorney, Ron Weil. "They were not about to let somebody be careless."

Attorneys for Wayside Baptist Church said they would probably appeal Friday's verdict, which came after a contentious three-week trial. They said the church had no idea the youth minister lusted after boys and was not responsible for his actions.

"This could certainly lead to the bankruptcy and financial ruin of the church," said Wayside's attorney, Micheal Jenks.

Wayside, which was pummeled by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, has already suffered millions of dollars in rebuilding costs. Wayside plans to reopen its damaged church by Easter, but leaders there are still short about \$760,000.

The church carries \$1 million in liability insurance. If the judgement stands on appeal, it is not clear where the rest of the money will come from.

"I Want Justice"

Through tears, Artis said on the witness

stand that the church and its senior pastor, the Rev. Murrill Boitnott, were partly responsible for his suffering.

"The church has bankrupted part of my life," said Artis who now lives in Midland Michigan. "It's not that I want vengeance. I just wanted justice done, and to move on."

Artis sued Wayside in 1991, two years after Wayside's youth minister Keith Geren, confessed to sexually molesting about 10 teenage boys at the church, 7701 SW 98th St. Artis was abused between the ages of 15 to 17.

Geren, now 32, was also named in the suit. In 1990, Geren pleaded guilty to eight counts of lewd assault and one count of sexual battery

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and is serving a 15 year sentence in the DeSoto Correctional Institution in Arcadia, FL.

The jury found that Geren's actions were intentional, and slapped him with the \$2.5 million in punitive damages. Geren's attorney, however, said his client has no money.

"He doesn't have anything," said attorney Victor Womack. "His parents mortgaged their home to pay for his criminal attorney's fees."

Struggle with 'temptations'

In the suit, Artis charged that Wayside and Boitnott negligently hired and supervised Geren. Central to that argument: Before Geren

was hired by Wayside in 1985, he admitted urges to molest boys.

In 1983 or 1984, he confessed to a longtime struggle with "temptations" to molest boys to a youth minister, Michael Williams, at another Baptist church in Titusville.

Boitnott, who had become friends with Geren while working at a church in Lakeland, recommended that Wayside hire him. Geren also had a good reputation working with his youth.

Wayside did not request a formal job application, nor did it do background or reference checks, before naming him the new youth minister. Nobody at Wayside called Williams. Geren was ordained in 1987, two years after he was hired.

At Wayside, the youth minister invited the teenage boys to sleep-overs at his home. Geren confessed to abusing several of the youths who were between the ages of 12 and 17 during the sleep-overs.

"The conduct of the church was inexcusable," Artis' attorney, Weil, said in closing arguments. "The boys weren't hanging out with the wrong crowd. They were hanging out where they belonged, where they thought they were safe."

Jurors said they were moved by Artis' testimony, and believed the church should have been more responsible.

But Wayside's attorneys argued that the church acted responsibly. Geren, an outgoing and dedicated church leader, had shown no signs of sexual problems, the attorneys argued.

Although jurors did not find the church negligent for Geren's supervision, they did find that Wayside, as Geren's employer, was responsible for his acts and was therefore liable.