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Florida Baptist Convention vows to appeal \$12.5 million jury award in sex-molestation case

By Erica Rodriguez, Orlando Sentinel

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A Florida Baptist Convention attorney said today that the group will appeal a Lake County jury's decision to award a 21-year-old man \$12.5 million in damages for being sexually abused by a Baptist minister when he was a child.

Spokeswoman Barbara Denman said the minister, Douglas W. Myers, wasn't an "employee" of the convention and instead served as a "church planter" who assisted in starting churches and received a stipend from the church. Denman said the organization provides stipends to churches, which then made decisions on hiring.

"What we do is we provide money to the church, and our churches hire whoever they want to hire," she said.

Convention attorney Gary Yeldell said in a statement that post-trial motions and appeals "will be forthcoming."

The jury reached a unanimous decision on the award Saturday after a six-day trial regarding damages. In May 2012, an earlier jury held the Florida Baptist Convention liable in the case. Those jurors concluded the organization didn't adequately investigate Myers, 64, who previously had been accused of inappropriate conduct with children.

Now a college student, the victim is still living with the effects of the abuse, said his attorney, Ron Weil, who is with a Miami law firm. Myers recruited the youth as a volunteer to help start new churches and spread the faith, saying he wanted to be a mentor partly because he and his wife had lost a child, Weil said.

Myers founded two churches in Lake County in the mid-2000s: Harbor Baptist Fellowship in Howey-in-the-Hills and Triangle Community Church in Eustis. Both have been disbanded. The first jury found that Myers was an agent of the convention in his "church-planting" efforts but not an employee.

Myers served a seven-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to lewd and lascivious molestation. He met the boy at Bay Street Baptist Church in Lake County and abused him over the course of six months while also taking him on trips to Walt Disney World, giving him money and driving him to school.

During the trial, the victim testified that Myers "told me it was a normal part of growing up. He told me he had done it with plenty of other kids at other churches."

Myers was accused of improprieties with children while he briefly served as pastor at Dunkirk Baptist Church in

Dunkirk, Md., and Concord Baptist Church in Russellville, Ala., before he and his wife moved to Florida. The allegations included taking children skinny dipping and cornering a 10-year-old boy.

After he was released from prison in December 2012, Myers faced charges in the old cases in Maryland. He entered that state's equivalent of a no-contest plea to three counts of custodial child abuse and was sentenced in October in Calvert County, Md., to 45 years in prison with 30 years suspended, news reports show. The offenses occurred in December 1997, April 1999 and March 2001.

Testimony in the liability portion of Myers' Florida trial showed that the Jacksonville-based convention ran criminal-background, motor-vehicle and credit checks on Myers but failed to check his references or contact the churches where he previously worked.

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