

French Charismatic Faces Court Battle

In a land where charismatic churches are viewed as cults, pastor Samuel Peterschmitt could be jailed

The pastor of the largest charismatic church in France could be imprisoned if he loses a trial in a French court—where judges are now armed with a new law that labels his church a cult.

Samuel Peterschmitt pastors Mission du Plein Evangile La Porte Ouverte Chretienne (LPOC), or Full Gospel Mission the Christian Open Door, in Mulhouse. He is facing a penal trial for prophesying to and laying hands on a church member who later died.

Claude Onimus, a vowed opponent of Peterschmitt's ministry and husband of the church member who died, has promised to do everything he can to have the church condemned in court. Dominique Onimus, his wife, died on April 23 after having liver transplant surgery. She suffered from Hepatitis C.

Although Peterschmitt's trial is noncriminal, he could be imprisoned for five years if convicted. Onimus accuses Peterschmitt of "illegal exercise of medicine," "non-assistance to a person in danger" and "abuse of trust."

"[Abuse of trust] is the most serious of the three," Biro Bernard, Peterschmitt's lawyer said. He said Dominique's

tithes to the church will support the charge.

Onimus claims a prophecy Dominique received from Peterschmitt that she “was healed, and she could eat what she wanted” prove the other charges. Peterschmitt said the prophecy was a general one given during a church service and that Dominique believed it was for her. He said the church always advises the sick to continue medical treatment.

Dominique’s physician, who requested anonymity, said: “There is plenty of evidence that she was taken care of. I saw her regularly.”

In a country where evangelical churches are considered cults, the charges have severe consequences. Onimus’ complaints to the court come on the heels of the French Parliament’s passage of a bill “reinforcing the prevention and repression of sectarian movements.”

“It is not a favorable context for Mr. Peterschmitt. Almost all the judges are against the church,” Bernard said. French and British Broadcasting Corp. TV reports about the case have been blatantly in favor of Onimus.

Since 1994, Onimus personally has lobbied against cults, primarily, according to Bernard, to attack his wife Dominique in the process of their divorce. Bernard was Dominique’s lawyer before she died. He claims Onimus slowed the divorce process when he learned Dominique was independently wealthy.

Peterschmitt’s church in Mulhouse borders Switzerland and Germany and draws 2,500 people at its Sunday morning and Tuesday evening services. Five hundred

children attend its 14 Sunday schools.

The church worships in French, German and Hebrew. The Revival Channel broadcasts its services across Europe and North Africa. Peterschmitt, who preaches all over the world, said the Mulhouse church's faith in Jesus has produced many healings.

Peterschmitt's father, Jean, a former Mennonite farmer, started the church in 1962 after having a life-changing encounter with God, stemming from his wife's healing. His daughters and their classmates distributed 5,000 invitations for two meetings in one day, and about 30 people came. Today, the church distributes clothes to the poor, medicine to Africa and former Eastern Bloc countries, and medical equipment to Israel.

Peterschmitt's reaction to the case against him was a feeling of injustice, but he added: "Jesus warned us of all these things in His Word when He said, 'Happy are you when they say all kinds of evil against you.'"

In 1999, Onimus formed an official association against LPOC, the Association de Défense des Victimes de la Porte Ouverte Chrétienne (AVIPOC). For several years, LPOC members also were harassed by an anonymous letter-writing campaign that included vulgar propaganda misusing Scripture to mock the church.

The propaganda was sent to Peterschmitt's neighbor as well as the mayor. It contained the same tone and language Onimus used in a certified letter he sent to Peterschmitt.

"Mr. Peterschmitt, know that the devil has made my skin hard

and that I am determined to act with all the means disposable to me, of which, for the main part, the extremely overwhelming files against you and your schemes," the certified letter states.

Defending his letter, Onimus said, "This movement destroyed the perfect harmony of my family."

However, Peterschmitt and church elders said Dominique told them her husband was difficult to live with. "He [harassed] her constantly," said Sylvie Galiath, Dominique's sister. "She had a bodyguard to protect her."

Central to the case, but hidden from publicity, are claims that the couple's 3-year-old twin daughters were sexually abused. Medical certificates written by three independent physicians who interviewed and examined the girls from November 2000 to March 2001 document evidence of sexual abuse.

Onimus denies the abuse and said the church put the children up to making the accusations. Church officials dispute Onimus' claim, saying that two years ago he obtained a court mandate forbidding the girls to have any contact with the church.

Bernard believes Onimus' accelerated lobbying against LPOC and the case against Peterschmitt are a direct response to the sexual-abuse investigation. Dominique filed a complaint with the prosecutor in October. The prosecutor later closed the case and the judge claims he lost the court file. According to Bernard, Onimus has influence with the police and courts and has used it to halt the sexual-abuse investigation.

Onimus' alleged evidence that Peterschmitt caused Dominique's

death isn't paramount to the case, Bernard said. "It is probable [that Peterschmitt will be condemned] in the measures where the judges have an unfavorable opinion toward the churches. The judge who will be charged with the case is already conditioned himself by all the lobbying of Onimus on the cults."

Peterschmitt believes this is a spiritual war, but he is not afraid of going to prison, if that happens. "I know the Lord is with us, if we are condemned, that will be religious persecution for the church today has the faith that, whatever happens, it will subsist because we received a promise from God: 'Here, I opened before you a door that none can close.'"