

Texas Pastor Faces Abuse Allegations

Pastor Sherman Allen and the Church of God in Christ are named as defendants in a sex-abuse lawsuit

A lawsuit with far-reaching implications for the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) is working its way through the courts again after a delay caused by a bankruptcy filing.

Sherman Allen, pastor of what used to be known as Shiloh Institutional COGIC in Fort Worth, Texas, and COGIC are listed as defendants in a lawsuit filed in January 2007 by a former Shiloh employee.

Davina Kelly seeks unspecified compensatory and punitive damages for alleged abusive behavior on Allen's part that she claims escalated into sexual abuse two years ago. The lawsuit also alleges that COGIC breached its duty to supervise Allen despite complaints made to its leadership.

Seven other women came forward after the suit was filed, alleging similar mistreatment. Kelly's attorney, Stan Broome, said some might be added as plaintiffs, including a woman who charged Allen with rape in 1983 but later withdrew the complaint.

Last February, Shiloh filed for bankruptcy, but a judge ruled in May that Kelly's lawsuit could proceed without a judgment on the filing.

A married mother of three, Kelly said soon after she joined Shiloh in fall 2001, she began counseling with Allen for "emotional issues." She said as a form of punishment for not reading Scriptures, not completing work or being tardy, Allen beat her with a paddle, causing bleeding, bruises and scars.

Sometime in 2005 the beatings escalated into sexual abuse, the suit claims. "These sexual assaults were serious in nature and continued over approximately a six-month period," it states. "Allen instituted the sexual and physical assaults expressly under the guise of pastoral counseling."

In a court filing Allen denied all the allegations. His attorney, Frank Hill, said, "Whatever the nature of their relationship, it was consensual," but would not elaborate.

Bishop Charles E. Blake, who was elected COGIC's presiding bishop in November, suspended Allen from church and national responsibilities last May pending the outcome of the case. But Blake said when Allen's suspension was extended, the pastor presented copies of his church's deed and articles of incorporation, which showed that his ministry was never legally tied to the denomination.

"He informed us that we had absolutely no authority to suspend him and no authority to try him, no authority to discipline him in any way because we were not legally connected to him," Blake said. "So we accepted it as that and excluded him from any involvement in our denomination."

At press time, the ministry's Web site listed the congregation as Shiloh Ministries Church. But because Shiloh carried the COGIC moniker for years and Allen held offices within the national church, Kelly's attorneys said Allen's dissociating from the denomination won't affect the case.

"There are so many ties between his church and him and the national church that clearly they were the governing body, so it won't have any impact on the lawsuit at all," said Matthew Bobo, co-counsel on Kelly's case. He added that members of COGIC's general board were likely to be deposed early this year.

Kelly said she put up with the abuse because she was under the impression that God told the pastor to use a different kind of

counseling technique. "He never flat out said, 'God told me,' but he led me to believe that," she said. "[I thought] he was a man of God, he hears from God and works in the prophetic. I never thought, He's not supposed to be doing this."

The alleged rape victim said she dropped charges against Allen—then pastor of another Pentecostal church in Fort Worth—after he came to her apartment complex and threatened to do the same to her daughter. "Maybe I'll get some closure, just knowing he's not out there lurking around somewhere," said the woman, who plans to join the lawsuit under a "Jane Doe" identity. "I really want the pieces of my life put back together."

Blake said COGIC has long-standing policies condemning and forbidding harassment, inappropriate sexual involvement by ministers and misbehavior on the part of clergy and members alike. "In the past, and in this case, any word that we have received regarding this, we have aggressively sought to investigate these matters and ascertain the validity of the charges and nature of the case," Blake said.

"The lawyers are dealing with the matter in court, and it is our concern not to make media statements that complicate the process."

Ken Walker