

Web Site Seeks to Expose Clergy Sex Abuse in COGIC

✖ A new Web site aims to draw attention to alleged clergy sexual abuse within the nation's largest Pentecostal denomination.

D.L. Foster, the founder of , says sexual misconduct among ministers has become a growing problem within the 6 million member Church of God in Christ (COGIC). But he claims church leaders rarely take serious action when allegations are made against ministers.

"The pattern I saw was to deny that victims existed, to deny that the church had a culpable role in dealing with the situations," said Foster, who launched the Web site last month. "In many of the cases, church members went first to their denominational leaders, reported these actions and nothing was done."

Foster, an Atlanta pastor who grew up in COGIC but is not ordained through the denomination, said people began telling him their stories of abuse after he blogged about Texas pastor Sherman Allen. Allen was sued last year for allegedly sexually abusing female church members during counseling sessions. COGIC was named in the lawsuit because the alleged victim claims denominational leaders ignored her claims.

A similar suit was filed in North Carolina, where a longtime COGIC music minister was sentenced to 16 years in prison for molesting young boys. Several of the man's victims also say COGIC leaders dismissed their claims, and they are now seeking unspecified damages. Their case is scheduled to go to trial this month.

Among the 30 other cases Foster has tracked are a Tennessee pastor who was killed by a 21-year-old man who said the

minister tried to rape him and a bishop in Georgia convicted of molesting his 15-year-old foster daughter.

Elder Derrick W. Hutchins, chairman of COGIC's General Council of Pastors and Elders, said his denomination does not take allegations of sexual abuse lightly. "That's the part that I really find offensive," Hutchins said. "Because sometimes it's written like all we want to do is save ourselves from liability, we don't really care about people—and that's not true at all."

"Our first concern is the parishioners, not just pastors," he added. "We do not tolerate pastors in the pulpit who are found guilty of these improprieties."

He said the clergy sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church motivated COGIC to review its own policies. The denomination's constitution calls for ministers accused of egregious sexual misconduct such as rape or pedophilia to be immediately suspended while the claims are being investigated, Hutchins said. A pastor-led jurisdictional council investigates other kinds of allegations, such as sexual immorality among consenting adults, before taking action against a pastor.

Bishops who don't follow the procedures can themselves be brought up on charges, Hutchins added.

"I want to believe that every bishop is committed to carrying out the constitution as it relates to these grievous acts," Hutchins said. "Anybody who can find where it's not being carried out and can prove it, I'm sure that charges will be brought against that bishop who did not carry out his responsibility."

Foster said he launched the site on Sept. 8—the birthday of COGIC founder C.H. Mason—to make a statement. "Bishop Mason stood for holiness, and we don't believe he would have

approved or supported or remained silent in the face of what we see growing in the church that God gave him," Foster said.

Although Foster affiliates with other groups that report clergy abuse in their organizations, he said his mission is solely COGIC. "I don't know what's going on in other churches like I know about COGIC," he said.

He said his church is not affiliated with COGIC partly because of its handling of sexual abuse allegations. But Foster said his position outside the denomination's structure allows him to speak freely without fear of being blacklisted.

For Foster, the mission to expose sexual abuse in COGIC is personal. As a teenager, he says he was molested by another teen in the COGIC church he and his parents attended. He said his abuser threatened to tell the church he was gay, a threat that he says kept him quiet for four years.

"I was very fearful of that, in a small town," Foster said. "To me, it was almost more unbearable than what was being done to me."

He said the abuse came to a head during a trip to Memphis, where COGIC hosted its annual convention. Foster says the teen attempted to molest him in their hotel room, and he decided he'd had enough.

When he returned home, Foster says, he told a youth ministry leader about the abuse. "I'm not exaggerating-all hell broke loose," Foster said. "His family began to accuse me of seducing him. They made fun of me in school and put pictures on my locker. And I just had enough."

Two years later, when he turned 19, Foster said he left the church and began living a gay lifestyle. "I hated the church. I hated God, I hated all that I had been brought up to believe, and I left," he said.

In 1990, when he was in his late 20s, Foster recommitted his life to Christ and left the gay lifestyle. Today he is married with five children and leads Witness Freedom Ministries, a resource for those seeking to leave homosexuality.

Foster said his experience motivates him to “speak out for those who right now can’t speak for themselves.”

“When you see it happen to another person and then you see the same response from your leaders to that person, it’s not over,” Foster said. “It’s necessary, absolutely necessary.”

With its influence growing worldwide, COGIC can set an example for addressing clergy abuse, Foster believes.

“If you continue to deny you have a problem for the sake of your image, name and assets, then my fear is what God allowed Bishop Mason to build will be destroyed by evil men-and I do not use that term lightly-whose intention is not the integrity of the house of God but rather to cover for their own sins and the sins of others who perhaps know what they’ve been doing,” he said.