

# 'Cult-Like' Church Members Accused of Beating Teen to Death

Police charged six members of New York's Word of Life Christian Church after the death of one young man and the brutal beating of another earlier this week.

Bruce and Deborah Leonard allegedly bludgeoned their son Lucas to death with the help of four fellow church members. Their younger son, who has not yet been named, remains in critical condition.

Reports indicate both teens suffered injuries to their abdomens, private parts, backs and thighs.

The Leonards pleaded not guilty to first-degree manslaughter. The other members—Joseph Irwin, 26; David Morey, 26; Linda Morey, 54; and Sarah Ferguson, 33—pleaded not guilty to felony second-degree assault.

The beatings further neighbor's suspicions that the church is actually a cult

"When they first took over the building, they would post Mass schedules so people knew when there were services," neighbor Lisa Brown tells *The Utica Observer-Dispatch*. "Now, it's not like just anyone could go to church there. ... It's kind of been the running joke that there's a cult there."

Another woman tells she mostly saw members at night, sometimes at 3 a.m., and she heard chants emanating from the building.

"I really don't know much about the place. They keep to themselves," the Rev. Abraham Esper of St. Patrick's-St. Anthony's Church tells *ABC 15*. "I don't know of any regular

services that they have. They are certainly not a mainline church."