

False Pastor Pleads Guilty to Criminal Sexual Conduct

A self-styled Minnesota church leader who was arrested in Brazil last year on allegations of sexually assaulting two 15-year-old girls pleaded guilty on Tuesday to felony sex crimes, prosecutors said.

Victor Barnard, a 55-year-old self-proclaimed pastor, pleaded guilty to two counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and prosecutors are recommending a prison sentence of 30 years, Pine County Attorney Reese Frederickson said.

"The agreement was approved by both of our victims and essentially if we had gone to trial and prevailed on all counts he'd have only faced 30 years," Frederickson said by phone.

Barnard's attorney, Dave Risk, said Barnard chose to plead guilty to "spare the victims, the families, and the communities from what would otherwise be a difficult and salacious trial."

"From that perspective, that was a commendable thing he did," Risk said.

Barnard founded the River Road Fellowship, recruiting followers to a camp in rural Minnesota and convincing some to allow their young daughters to live with him, the U.S. Marshals Service said.

He allegedly kept the girls in a housing area known as Shepherd's Camp, it said.

After some adult members began questioning what he was doing, Barnard moved his family and the church to Washington state. A number of his followers, including the young girls, left with

him, the agency said.

Barnard was initially charged with the 59 counts related to the assaults, which authorities said occurred between 2000 and 2009, before he dropped from sight. It was unclear when he went to Brazil, but the U.S. Marshals Service said they believed he was receiving assistance from followers in Brazil before his capture there.

Risk said the two victims were 15-years-old at the time of the assaults for which he pleaded guilty and said Barnard admitted assaults continued over a period of years.

His sentencing is scheduled for Oct. 28, Frederickson said.
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