

Megachurch Sued for More Than \$1 Million Over Alleged Abuse

A young woman who was allegedly sexually assaulted by a youth minister at a church camp is suing the Village Church for more than \$1 million for gross negligence and the emotional distress the alleged abuse has caused her.

According to the lawsuit obtained by Religion News Service, the Village Church's former associate children's minister, Matthew Tonne, allegedly sexually violated the woman, identified only as Jane Doe One, when she was an 11-year-old girl at a 2012 program run by the Dallas-area megachurch at the Mount Lebanon Kids Camp in Texas.

Tonne had left a meeting of adult leaders, both male and female, in a meeting area in the same cabin where the girl slept—a violation of the church's policies and procedures, according to the suit.

That's when the suit alleges Tonne assaulted the girl as she lay in her bed. It claims he still was wearing the yellow T-shirt indicating he was a camp counselor when the alleged abuse occurred.

"It is without question that Tonne was able to access and abuse Jane Doe One because her cabin was the designated meeting location for some of the staff debrief meetings," the lawsuit says.

Tonne was indicted in January by a Dallas County grand jury on a charge of indecency with a child involving sexual contact. He has denied the allegations against him.

The Village Church is part of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant Christian denomination in the United States. Dealing with sexual abuse was a main focus of the

denomination's recent annual meeting.

Its popular lead pastor, Matt Chandler, addressed the allegations at a luncheon during that meeting.

"We just did the best we knew how to care for them. These issues are far more complex than one would imagine," Chandler said.

Chandler told his fellow Southern Baptists that Tonne, who was a family friend, was fired from the church last October because he had been repeatedly drunk in violation of church rules.

The church was unaware at the time that Tonne was accused of abuse, he said.

The victims' parents claim they had identified Tonne as the alleged abuser before he was fired, according to the lawsuit.

The suit also details the after-effects of the alleged abuse.

"Jane Doe One's parents saw their energetic, funny, caring child slowly become withdrawn and angry," it says.

The woman developed an eating disorder and began to suffer from depression, nightmares, chronic insomnia and enduring suicidal ideations, according to the suit.

She told her parents about the alleged abuse last year, it says. Her parents reached out to the church and police in February 2018 and identified Tonne in May of that year.

"To this day, (church elder Josh) Patterson and Chandler have never personally reached out to Jane Doe One or her family," the lawsuit claims.

The Village Church did not immediately return a request for comment from Religion News Service. {eo}

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