

Mother Pleads Guilty of Helping Beat Her Son to Death at Church

The mother who participated in the beating death of her son at an upstate New York church pleaded guilty on Wednesday to first and second-degree assault charges in exchange for her testimony against eight others accused in the case.

Deborah Leonard, 59, was initially charged with first-degree manslaughter in the death of her son Lucas Leonard, 19, and with assault in the severe beating of her son Christopher Leonard, 17.

Leonard told the court that Tiffanie Irwin, 29, pastor of the Word of Life church in New Hartford, had organized the beatings, which lasted from the evening of Oct. 11 until the morning hours of Oct. 12.

Irwin is scheduled to appear in Oneida County Court in Utica, New York, on Dec. 7 to face charges of murder, kidnapping, assault and gang assault.

Leonard testified that parishioners believe that Irwin is a "prophet who speaks to God."

Leonard wept as she described the events that led to her older son's death, and said the "counseling session" had been called because Lucas wanted to leave the church.

She spoke softly as she named the church members who beat her son with fists and an electrical extension cord, and said she had witnessed her sons held down and beaten but was "too scared and too weak" to intervene.

She admitted to hitting both boys with the cord and with an open hand but the last time she saw her late son "he was still

standing.”

She said Pastor Tiffanie’s son Joseph Irwin, 26, and parishioner David Morey, 26, were the main aggressors along with her husband Bruce Leonard, 65. Each of them faces felony charges of murder, gang assault and kidnapping.

“When [her sons] were forced to stand up against the wall I saw [David Morey] push up against them,” Leonard said, sobbing. “He was actually growling, seething. His whole body weight was pushed against them.”

Irwin, 24, pleaded not guilty to manslaughter, assault, kidnapping and gang assault charges last Monday. Bruce Leonard is due to appear in county court on Dec. 9.

Two others, Linda Morey, 54, and Traci Irwin, 49, are due in court on Dec. 7.

Leonard faces five years in prison and five years probation for the first-degree assault and two years in prison and two years probation for the second degree assault.

Judge Michael Dwyer adjourned the case until Feb. 1, pending Leonard’s cooperation with authorities against the others who have been accused in the case. She was remanded to jail without bail. {eo}

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