

Ohio Amish Families Struggle as Beard-Cutting Prison Terms Get Underway

Five members of a breakaway Ohio Amish sect head to federal prison on Friday to begin serving sentences for hate crimes, leaving behind a tight-knit religious group coping with the absence of parents for nearly 50 children.

The leader of the Bergholz sect, Samuel Mullet Sr., and 15 of his followers were convicted of federal hate crimes last year for a series of beard- and hair-cutting attacks on members of other Amish groups in Ohio in 2011.

After Friday, 14 of the 16 convicted members of the group will be serving their sentences in separate federal prisons across the United States, a rare form of isolation. Two other women will serve their sentences starting in 2014.

That is a huge blow for a community of 26 families that totals just over 100 people, said attorney Rhonda Kotnik, who represents one of the convicted women, Kathryn Miller.

Between them, the convicted Amish group members have nearly 50 children, including a newborn. Some children will be without both parents due to overlapping sentences after both their mothers and fathers were convicted of hate crimes.

The community held a celebration last weekend ahead of the departure of the four women and one man who are leaving on Friday to serve a year in prison.

Kotnik said her client's day now consists of watching her children and waiting for hours at a phone booth on the Bergholz property for her husband, Raymond Miller, to call from prison.

Kathryn Miller and Elizabeth Miller are not scheduled to report to prison until April 2014 – an arrangement intended to alleviate child care issues for the community.

The Amish live in small religious communities led by men, attending church services, often working and eating together, and abiding by traditional teachings as interpreted by a leader.

In the Amish culture, baptized men do not shave their beards and married women do not cut their hair as a sign of their devotion to God and their way of life.

Unable to Hold Services

The Bergholz group has been unable to hold traditional services since the imprisonment of Mullet and his sons, who hold the community's religious leadership positions.

"They can't do most of the things that make them Amish in their eyes," Kotnik said, questioning how the group could continue to function and hold together without the 14 members.

"I asked them when they will have church again and they said, 'When the men are out, we will have church again' but that could be 15 years," Kotnik said.

For now, the Bergholz families are headed by the women left behind, who in many instances are taking in the children of members serving prison sentences. Six couples are now in prison or headed for prison.

"They are doubling up the households and just doing whatever they can do to survive," Kotnik said.

Some of the women heading to prison signed over legal custody of their children to other women in the community for fear that non-Amish could take them away, Kotnik said.

Samuel Mullet was sentenced to 15 years in prison, while his 15 followers received sentences of one to seven years for

their roles in the attacks against six men and two women from other Amish communities.

Prosecutors had called Mullet, 67, “a megalomaniac cult leader” who sexually misappropriated his followers’ wives and orchestrated the attacks as retaliation for personal and spiritual disagreements he had with Amish in other groups.

During the trial, which was held in Cleveland, several victims said they were humiliated when the defendants sheared their hair.

The Amish shun modern technology and therefore do not drive or travel by airplane. They rely on horse and buggy for transportation and paid \$300 to \$500 per day for two vans driven by non-Amish to take them to Cleveland for the trial, a round trip of 200 miles (322 km).

The Federal Bureau of Prisons says it tries to assign inmates to prisons within 500 miles from their homes based on the required security level and program needs. The distances will be a hardship, defense attorneys say.

All but one of the Amish defendants have been assigned to prisons outside Ohio. The other prisons are in Minnesota, Illinois, Mississippi, Louisiana, West Virginia, Connecticut and Texas.

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