

Seventh-Day Adventist Church Hit With Multimillion-Dollar Lawsuit

Two men who say they were molested in the 1970s by a youth group leader in Oregon sued the Seventh-day Adventist church for \$13.5 million on Tuesday, saying it had appointed a known pedophile to head the program and failed to remove him despite abuse allegations.

The lawsuit said that church officials appointed Leslie Bovee in 1972 to lead a Seventh-day Adventist youth group in Veneta, Oregon, even though they knew he had previously served two years in prison for molesting three boys.

They allowed Bovee to work with children in a co-ed church program for youths called Pathfinder because he repented and was re-baptized, according to the lawsuit filed in Oregon state court against the church's national body.

Then in 1975, he was charged with sexually abusing a 12-year-old boy, but continued to lead the local Pathfinders group until he denounced his religious beliefs in 1979, the suit stated.

"This is a situation where they knew this guy had abused kids and they didn't just let him in the church, they put him in charge of the youth program," said attorney Peter Janci, one of two attorneys representing the plaintiffs.

Attorneys for the two plaintiffs, who said Bovee abused them in the Pathfinders program and who are now in their early 50s, described the lawsuit as part of a potentially growing legal battle against the church by people who say they were abused while involved in church activities.

The plaintiffs, identified only by their initials, filed their lawsuit after recently learning the church knew Bovee was a pedophile, said Steve Crew, the other attorney for the men.

They learned that in 2012, during a separate civil lawsuit filed on behalf of another victim in which they were called as witnesses, Crew said.

Richard Whittemore, an attorney for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, said the organization has previously settled three other cases involving allegations of abuse by Bovee.

“The church is very aware of all of the issues and takes great pains to make sure this kind of behavior is not going to be repeated,” he said.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has more than 18 million members worldwide, according to its website. In the past two decades, at least 525 people have lodged claims alleging child sexual abuse in the church, according to a report last year from its risk management organization.

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