

McAlester News-Capital, McAlester, OK

February 28, 2014

Sex abuse charges dropped for Jehovah's Witness elder

Statute of limitations cited

Editor

McALESTER — Charges have been dismissed for a McAlester church elder who allegedly molested, raped and sodomized three adults when they were children.

The charges were dismissed Wednesday for Ronald Lawrence, 76, of McAlester, an elder with the Jehovah's Witnesses, according to court records. Associate District Judge James Bland dismissed the charges based on statute of limitation arguments from Lawrence's attorney; the prosecutor in the case announced her intent to appeal Bland's decision.

Lawrence had been accused of 11 counts of lewd molestation, five counts of forcible oral sodomy, two counts of forcible sodomy and one count of rape by instrumentation of three separate children from 1977 to 1982. The alleged victims in the case include a McAlester woman who was 8 to 13 at the time, a Muskogee man when he was 5, and a Haskell woman when she was 10 to 13, according to court records.

A court affidavit had alleged Lawrence was a church elder at the time of attacks that occurred at his home, in a pool and lake, and in a basement and janitor's closet at a bank. The affidavit also alleges Lawrence named four church elders involved in his "dis-fellowship" from his McAlester church and that he lost his job at a bank due to some of the allegations.

Lawrence's attorney, Warren Gotcher, of McAlester, succeeded in his arguments to have the case dismissed based on an expiration of a statute of limitations.

Prosecutor Danita Williams, of the district attorney's office for Pittsburg County, had argued that the statute of limitations applies to the time the crime is reported to law enforcement. She also asked the court, in a Jan. 28 brief, to allow her to present "proof regarding the 'concealment' of this crime by the wrongdoer, defendant Ronald H. Lawrence and the entire church body, most especially the governing body of the Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses."

She alleged in the brief that "The actions of the church, their banishment of the defendant on more than one occasion and the directives of the governing body toward the victims and their family members regarding these crimes were actions of 'concealment' and further actions preventing the victims from reporting the crimes to law enforcement."

A phone call from the News-Capital to a man who said he was Ronald Lawrence was disconnected Friday, and neither Gotcher nor Williams immediately returned phone calls seeking comment on the matter. There was no answer at a phone listing for Jehovah's Witnesses in McAlester.

Lawrence had faced more than 365 years imprisonment if convicted of the charges.

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