

# All Hell Breaks Loose in Sex Abuse Lawsuit



Carpinteria Church, Presbytery of Santa Barbara Accused of Protecting Offenders and Neglecting Victims for Many Years

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The Carpinteria Community Church routinely ignored and covered up reports of sexual abuse committed by one of its youth ministers, a lawsuit filed Tuesday claims.

The lawsuit also alleges that the church's corporate parents, including the Presbytery of Santa Barbara and Presbyterian Church USA, harbored another sexual predator who molested multiple victims over the course of 30 years as he was transferred to different parishes in Santa Barbara, Ventura, and around the country.

"The Presbyterian Church has always held itself as different from the Catholic Church," said attorney Tim Hale about how the two institutions treat offenders within their ranks. "They say the right things, but this is a classic case of actions speaking louder than words."

Hale is representing a single plaintiff in the civil complaint, a former member of the Carpinteria Community Church who says youth minister Louis Bristol preyed on her during religious retreats and when he counseled her about her parents' divorce.

Bristol joined the church in 2000 as a teenager, and after he graduated high school, he started working for its "worship team" in 2004. That year, the lawsuit states, a church employee received a report that Bristol was having an inappropriate relationship with the 16-year-old victim.

But no calls were made to law enforcement or child protective services, and no warning was provided to church members, the filing claims. Instead, Bristol continued to sexually assault and harass the victim,

often inside the rooms of Carpinteria's Holiday Inn Express, where he also worked.

The hotel is named as a defendant in the suit. Hale contends Bristol was noticeably brazen about ushering the underage girl into rooms where she wasn't a registered guest, and that other staff members did nothing to stop him. Bristol also engaged in sexual activity on church grounds.

Hale, with law firm Nye, Peabody, Sterling, Hale & Miller, said in an interview Friday that the full scope of the abuse is still being determined. Bristol was never criminally charged in this case, and the victim only recently came forward following media reports about two other girls Bristol molested in 2012, eight years after her contact with him.

There is little doubt in his mind that Bristol preyed on additional church members in those intervening years, said Hale, who has successfully sued the Franciscan friars and the Boy Scouts of America in other high-profile sex abuse cases. "The three victims were bookends," he declared. "I'm sure there are more out there."

## **Fool's Paradise**

In August 2013, Bristol pleaded guilty to crimes he committed against the two other girls, who were also members of the Carpinteria Community Church. Some of the incidents similarly took place at the Holiday Inn. Bristol admitted to committing a lewd act upon a 14-year-old, having unlawful intercourse with a 16-year-old, giving marijuana to minors, and sending video of himself masturbating to a third victim. He was originally accused of forcible rape and sexual battery, but prosecutors doubted they could prove those charges in trial.

Bristol was sentenced to one year in Santa Barbara County Jail plus five years of probation, during which he is required to register as a sex offender. If he violates the terms of his probation, he will be sentenced to less than five years in prison. Bristol, now 31 years old, was released from jail on April 4, 2014. He currently resides in the City of Santa Barbara.

During Bristol's sentencing, the mother of one of the victims addressed him directly. "I would guess, Louis, that you still don't understand what you've done," she said. "You hid behind God to do your evil, and someday you will have to answer to him." She said her family has since moved to Ventura "where no one knows us" and that the lack of trust her daughter now feels will "last a lifetime." At one point during the hearing, the mother and Bristol's wife openly argued until a bailiff admonished them.

One of the girls read from a statement. "My life was centered in that church," she explained. "That church was my safe haven." But after she was molested, she "wanted to hide and forget what was happening." The girl said she turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with what she'd endured, and she watched her GPA plummet from 4.33 to 0.33.

"I really want to hear from church leaders how they justify not reporting that man to law enforcement," said

Hale of Bristol's alleged abuses in 2004, explaining he could have been stopped much sooner if the congregation cared more about its members and community than its reputation and financial interests. "It's outrageous," he said.

Hale also pointed to the church's reported mishandling of the 2012 incidents. Though a Carpinteria pastor was made aware of Bristol's misconduct — specifically, the pastor learned of a text message where Bristol "described Victim #2's breasts as beautiful," the lawsuit claims — he didn't call police. Instead, the lawsuit continues, the pastor told the person who made the complaint to confront Bristol herself.

A short time later, the same pastor allegedly acknowledged "there was something inappropriate going on" in Bristol's youth group and that Bristol had been accused of "lewd acts with a child." Still, Hale said, the pastor failed to act.

For its part, the Carpinteria Community Church and its Presbyterian overseers say they have "completely cooperated with law enforcement." A statement prepared for *The Santa Barbara Independent* by Dr. Jan Armstrong, head of the Presbytery of Santa Barbara, and Rev. Jarrett Johnson, pastor for the Carpinteria Community Church, reads:

"We can unequivocally state, contrary to the allegations in the lawsuit, that neither the Church nor the Presbytery had any knowledge of any inappropriate activity during Mr. Bristol's employment. In keeping with the church's commitment of providing safety for the congregation and the community, the allegations against Mr. Bristol were immediately reported to authorities."

"Our hearts go out to all of those affected by this situation," said Johnson. "We will be keeping them in prayer and invite the community to do so as well throughout this process." Due to the pending litigation and "respect for the privacy of everyone involved," the church said it would not comment further.

## **The Nearer the Church, the Further from God**

In the lead-up to his allegations against Bristol, Hale describes additional abuses within Santa Barbara's Presbyterian community. The lawsuit's sordid narrative starts at First Presbyterian of Santa Barbara and involves a man named Jeff Peterson-Davis who, Hale claims, has molested at least five male victims and has nevertheless been protected by church leaders. It serves to prove the religious institution as a whole and its local followers have long engaged in bad practices that enable sex crimes against children, the attorney explained.

When Peterson-Davis was a youth ministry intern at First Presbyterian in 1984, he allegedly molested a young boy. When the child's mother reported the incident to the church's pastor, the pastor expelled Peterson-Davis without explanation and recommended him to the youth ministry of First Presbyterian of Oxnard.

Within a year of arriving in Oxnard, Peterson-Davis began abusing one of two brothers from the church, the

lawsuit says. The next year, he started molesting the other brother. During that time, Peterson-Davis was also a student at Westmont College in Montecito, where members of the Oxnard church would sometimes visit and stay with him.

The brothers eventually reported their abuse to an Oxnard pastor, who asked Peterson-Davis to stop preaching and conducted an “internal investigation.” Soon after, in 1995, Peterson-Davis moved to Atlanta, Georgia. He began working as an associate pastor at Trinity Presbyterian Church. When a pastor there learned of the allegations against him in California, the pastor placed Peterson-Davis on administrative leave.

Peterson-Davis then quit Trinity, but only after signing a “severance agreement in which Trinity agreed to continue the secrecy surrounding the history of allegations of abuse,” the lawsuit states. “The confidentially provision required Trinity not to disclose the nature of any allegations of misconduct ... and to refer all inquiries from prospective employers to the local Presbytery.”

By April 1997, Peterson-Davis had moved on to another church in Georgia where his wife worked. But he was asked to resign after pornographic pictures of young boys were found on his computer, the lawsuit continues. Within a few years, he was back working as an associate pastor after receiving a positive recommendation from one of the parishes where he was accused of molestation.

Over the next 15 years, Peterson-Davis served at other churches around Georgia and Ohio. In that time, two more victims came forward. He stepped down from his post at Western Reserve Presbytery in October 2012 after the Presbytery filed charges against him but before he could stand trial in a church court. “However, the Presbyterian Defendants resolved the matter internally,” the lawsuit reads, “and Peterson-Davis has never been reported to law enforcement by another member or entity of the Presbyterian Church.”

As a result, Peterson-Davis has no criminal record, is not a registered sex offender, and is “unidentifiable as a sexual predator to anyone other than his victims, and those select few in the Presbyterian Church hierarchy who are aware of his history of sexual abuse,” Hale says in the complaint. Attempts to reach Peterson-Davis were not successful. Social media accounts put him in Solon, Ohio, at the moment, and up until 2011, he ran a wine blog called “Wine Ministry.”

## **Crosses to Bear**

Peterson-Davis’s alleged misdeeds are further disclosed in an internal report the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta published in August 2013. The report found the accusations against him credible. It said all five of the victims “spoke of their abuse with clarity and detail.” While they couldn’t recall certain timelines or locations, “the nature of the abuse was specific” and established a “clear pattern of behaviors and experiences.” (Read the full report [here](#).)

The victims, who were between 8 and 14 years old when they were molested, described Peterson-Davis

giving them back or stomach rubs that became sexual, the report states. He also bought them gifts and offered one-on-one attention to make them “feel special.” When Peterson-Davis was confronted with the allegations, he would deny any wrongdoing and complain he was being targeted in a “witch hunt.” He said the boys’ stories were “misunderstandings” and pointed to the fact he was a massage therapist. He claimed one of the victims was trying to extort money from him.

The report explains how the abuse had profound effects on the boys, who talked about “self-hatred,” “rage,” and “loss of trust in God.” One said he struggled through high school and became distanced from all his friends. Another said the molestation “destroyed” his mother who felt extreme guilt for leaving him alone with Peterson-Davis. A third victim said he contemplated suicide, but was inspired to speak out when he saw news reports about how Pennsylvania State University failed to stop football coach Jerry Sandusky from abusing children.

The report concludes with recommendations to the Atlanta Presbytery for stricter safeguards around responding to sex abuse allegations, including better reporting systems, tougher background checks, more training and counseling, and enhanced guidelines for public apologies.

Lyz Hoffman contributed to this report.



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