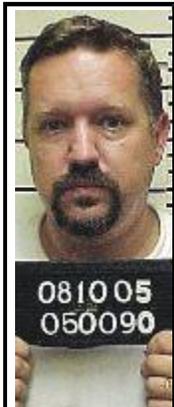


Pastor pleads guilty to sex abuse charges

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Plainville pastor Jeffrey D. Heberlein faces up to four years in prison after confessing to fondling and having sexual contact with a girl under the age of 16 when he lived in Greene County.

By Rodney Hart

Herald-Whig Staff Writer

The pastor of a Plainville church has pleaded guilty to aggravated criminal sexual abuse in Greene County and will be sentenced next month.

Jeffrey D. Heberlein, 43, pleaded guilty Sept. 22 to having sexual contact with a girl under the age of 16, three days before his trial was scheduled to begin in Carrollton. The plea came four days after a judge denied a motion to suppress a written statement made by Heberlein when he was arrested on Aug. 10, 2005.

In that statement, Heberlein confessed to fondling and having sexual contact on several occasions with a girl who lived next door. Greene County State's Attorney Matthew Goetten said the incidents occurred in 2003 and 2004, when the girl was 14 and 15.

Heberlein has been pastor of Akers Chapel Church, on Ill. 96 south of Plainville in southern Adams County, for about two years. Church elder Marvin Larimore said the congregation of about "20 to 30" people knew about the charge against Heberlein last year.

"He said it wasn't at all true," Larimore said. "He said he'd changed, and we think he's changed. Nobody has to worry about him."

Larimore said only two or three church members have left because of Heberlein's legal situation.

When contacted by telephone Tuesday, Heberlein confirmed he is still the pastor at Akers Chapel, but declined to comment on his guilty plea before hanging up.

Heberlein faces up to four years in prison when he is sentenced Nov. 13 by Judge Lois Bell. He also must register as a sexual offender for the Class 2 felony, and was ordered to undergo a sex offender assessment.

Heberlein was the pastor of Mount Gilead and Berdan Baptist churches in Greene County between 2001 and 2003. There are about 100 active members between the two churches, which shared Heberlein as a pastor.

A member of the Greene County churches who asked not to be identified said allegations of sexual improprieties arose in 2003 when explicit e-mails between Heberlein and an 18-year-old girl were discovered. The church member said Heberlein resigned after being confronted with evidence of having a sexual relationship with that girl.

"We didn't do a background check when we hired him," the church member said. "We're a small

congregation and we learned by our mistakes."

Authorities said the underage girl later came forward about her relationship with Heberlein after he left Greene County. He was arrested last August in Plainville by Carrollton Police Chief Mike Kiger on the charge of aggravated sexual abuse.

Kiger testified during a two-day motion hearing last month that Heberlein was transported to the Greene County Jail, where Heberlein asked to make oral and written confessions.

Heberlein wrote the girl came to his house "to see me and talk" before he fondled her. He also wrote about other encounters he had with the girl.

Heberlein asked the written statement not be allowed as evidence because he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and couldn't remember writing the confession. He also argued that he was not properly given his Miranda rights. Bell denied the motion.

Court records show that Heberlein formerly lived in Pike County, Ill., and is an Army veteran. Records also show he attended Central Christian College in Moberly, Mo.

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