

Sex-assault conviction of pastor tests church

Members struggle with crisis of trust

By CARY B. WILLIS
Staff Writer

Few people enjoy more trust than church pastors. And that explains why members of a small church in the South End are struggling with conflicting feelings over the conviction last week of their minister on sex charges in New Hampshire.

"It just tore the church apart," said Maye Simpson, 83, who has been attending Southside Church of the Nazarene for more than 40 years. "And some of us couldn't put up with it."

Simpson said she stopped attending the church nearly a year ago after learning of allegations that the Rev. Robert Paradis had sexually assaulted a girl in New Hampshire in 1981.

Simpson is not alone in thinking that if you can't trust your minister, whom can you trust?

As many as half the 148 people listed as members a year ago have stopped attending Sunday services, said Lowell Clyburn, the Church of the Nazarene's district superintendent. But other members have just as strongly stood by Paradis, including six who traveled last week to Keene, N.H., for his trial.

"We've had special prayer services, and we've backed our pastor," said Annetta Thrasher, who said she believes Paradis' claim that the woman making the allegations was not telling the truth.

"I haven't had anybody come up to me to say that they thought he was guilty," Thrasher said. "Evidently the jury came to a different conclusion."

Paradis, 42, was convicted of two counts of sexual assault. The victim, now 24, met Paradis when he was youth minister at her church in Massachusetts. The Keene Sentinel newspaper reported the victim told Paradis her father had been molesting her, and she moved in with Paradis' family in Keene, where he led a church for a few years. She said Paradis molested her after she moved into his home.

Paradis later left Keene for California, then transferred to Louisville



PHOTO BY STEVE HOOPER

The Rev. Robert Paradis, left, listened to closing remarks with his attorney Christopher Wells, last week in a New Hampshire court.

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in 1992. He agreed to be suspended from the pulpit last June, Clyburn said. A permanent replacement is being sought, he said.

Paradis faces 7½ to 15 years in prison; sentencing is set for May 11. He is in jail in Cheshire County, N.H., and could not be reached for comment. But according to the Sentinel, he denied being guilty even after being convicted March 21.

Elizabeth Stellas-Tippins, an educator who specializes in clergy misconduct, said sexual offenses involving ministers typically provoke strong reactions among their flock.

"They have one image and expe-

rience of this minister, and now new information has come to them, which is so totally opposite their experience of him that it's impossible for the brain to hold two conflicting ideas at the same time," she said. "You kind of go back and forth, or you've got to pick one."

Stellas-Tippins, a program specialist with the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, an interfaith group in Seattle, said the minister's job is "to protect those who are vulnerable, and he did the opposite of that: He harmed someone who is vulnerable. So their (members') trust has been broken."

Stellas-Tippins said members of such congregations eventually realize that they are angry "to find out that somebody they trusted wasn't trustworthy."

She said such congregations need education to learn how a minister can both do good deeds and have "this wounded, sinful side that does these things."

Jack Stone, who as general secretary is the highest-ranking officer in the Church of the Nazarene's national offices in Kansas City, Mo., said he would try to help the congregation "in any way we possibly could."

The Church of the Nazarene is a conservative, evangelical denomination with 1.1 million members and about 11,000 churches in 109 countries, about 60 percent of them in the United States, Stone said.

Clyburn said he will fill in as minister at the Evelyn Avenue church beginning Sunday and will try to mend members' hurt feelings.

"I know they've been through a long haul. I have great faith that we'll be able to move ahead positively."