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## Sexual abuse accusations hit prominent pastor

■ The allegations involve three teen-age girls in the North Portland parish of the Rev. Willie B. Smith

By JOHN SNELL  
of The Oregonian staff

A former president of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon has been accused of sexually abusing girls in his parish.

The assaults allegedly were committed by the Rev. Willie B. Smith, 64, pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church at 109 N. Skidmore St.

Smith is a past president and chairman of the board of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon and currently sits on its board of directors. He has been the pastor of the First AME Zion Church for five years.

Police said the sexual abuse allegations involve three victims, and the incidents took place between September 1990 and January 1993. Police also be-

lieve Smith spoke to a few members of his parish, allegedly to confide in them that he had a problem with abusing young girls. Detectives hope to interview parishioners and are seeking more information.

Smith was booked into the Justice Center jail and was released on bond Friday night. An arraignment was set for Monday. He was arrested Thursday and accused of 11 counts of first-degree sexual abuse — a felony — and one count of third-degree sexual abuse, a class A misdemeanor. A jail official, however, said Friday night that he was being held on a total of six counts, indicating that accusations against him may have been changed or dropped.

"This comes as a great shock to me," the Rev. Rodney Page, executive director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon,

said late Friday morning. "I know that people in that church must just be devastated."

A Methodist colleague, Pastor Phillip Nelson of Allen Temple C.M.E. Church, was stunned by the news.

"As far as I knew," Nelson said, "he was doing an exemplary job. He had a very high standing in the community."

Smith was arrested about 11 a.m. Thursday after he agreed to come to the detective division to talk about allegations that he'd fondled three girls.

Two of the alleged victims told police that Smith had cornered them in his church office and groped them. A third said that she was repeatedly abused by Smith for 16 months, beginning in September 1990.

At the time of the alleged incidents, the victims were 12, 13 and 17. Detective



SMITH

Sgt. Robert Walliker said that all three were now in a treatment program for victims of sexual abuse.

The parents of one of the victims took their child out of state after the alleged assaults and had to be persuaded by police to bring their daughter back to enroll in the treatment program, Walliker said.

"Our initial complaint was made to us by the Portland School Police," Walliker added. "When we were investigating that case, another couple of complaints came in by happenstance."

Calls to the First AME Zion Church

were fielded Friday by Smith's answering machine. His bishop in St. Louis, couldn't be reached for comment.

Page credited Smith with rebuilding the church, saying that he'd organized efforts to improve the building while increasing the congregation.

Smith took a public stance last year against Measure 9, the anti-gay initiative from the Oregon Citizens Alliance. Smith said that he personally condemned homosexuality as being "contrary to divine law and New Testament teachings" but opposed the measure.

Walliker emphasized that Smith was innocent unless proven guilty and added that he understood that many people would be surprised that such charges would be made against a prominent minister. "But we see this in any walk of life," he said.