

## Baptist pastor resigns amid abuse allegations

An independent Baptist pastor has resigned his church in Georgia after allegations about sexual abuse 18 years ago in Michigan resurfaced on the Internet.

Leaders at King's Way Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia, confirmed in a letter dated October 18 that Bill Wininger has resigned after more than 15 years as pastor. Another letter dated October 27 acknowledged that church leaders were aware of recent allegations and charges.

Wininger's troubles started when a woman who is now 25 years old claimed she had been abused by Wininger, stating that it began when she was three at North Sharon Baptist Church in Grass Lake, Michigan. A Facebook group titled Justice for the Victims of Bill Wininger went online October 23 and in the first week grew to 466 members.

"The beauty of the technological age we are in today is that perps cannot hide any longer," Julie Silvestrone, an Iowa resident who studied at Hyles-Anderson College, posted October 25. "We are forming an army that will not be silenced and powerful in-roads are being made behind the scenes."

Hyles-Anderson is an independent fundamentalist school operated by First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, whose former pastor, Jack Schaap, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in March for having sex with a member of the church when she was 16.

The Facebook page carries an online petition calling for a criminal investigation of Wininger. "This is where change begins," an entry reads. "It takes people standing together and collectively being a voice and shouting loud. Change needs to happen, a serial predator of women and children needs to be brought to justice."

The page also contains a testimonial by Bethany Foeller Leonard, Wininger's lead accuser, about what she claims happened to her and the lasting toll it took on her mental and spiritual health.

Police investigated the case when she

first came forward three years ago and no charges were filed, but the investigation was recently reopened after new information emerged concerning other possible victims, according to the *Douglas County Sentinel*.

Leonard says Wininger left her church when she was six, but most people either knew nothing about the allegations or didn't believe them. Church members wept and lamented losing a "wonderful pastor," and a few families even followed him to his new church in Georgia.

When she finally opened up about what happened after years of counseling, she says she discovered she was far from his only victim. The current pastor of North Sharon Baptist Church denied there was a cover-up, telling the *Sentinel* that church officials learned of the allegations two years ago and went

immediately to the Michigan State Police.

Recently a Southern Baptist leader sparked controversy with comments that there is no place in the church for whistleblowers.

"We don't take matters before unbelievers," Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary president Paige Patterson said in a chapel sermon October 15. "This also means that you don't take matters to the press. What goes on in the church of God doesn't go to the press."

Patterson didn't specify what kind of internal church matters he meant, but critics termed his blanket statement ill-advised and potentially dangerous given the Southern Baptist Convention's lack of safeguards for reporting and evaluating abuse allegations that are not prosecuted by police. —Bob Allen, ABP

## Fewer homeschool parents cite faith as main motive

WHEN JENNIFER Pedersen-Giles started to homeschool her son Westen six years ago, it was because he needed a more hands-on environment than what public schools could offer. Now the eighth-grader studies writing, music, art, geometry, literature and world religions from his home in Arizona.

Religion, in other words, had nothing to do with his mother's decision.

She's not alone. According to the federally funded National Center for Education Statistics, the share of parents who cited "religious or moral instruction" as their primary motivation for homeschooling has dropped from 36 percent in 2007 to just 16 percent during the 2011–2012 school year.

"You used to have to be a hero to homeschool," said John Edelson, founder and president of Time4Learning, a curriculum provider for homeschoolers. "You were really going against the mainstream. Your mother-in-law didn't understand it, the neighbors didn't understand it, police would stop you in the middle of the day and wonder what was going on."

As homeschooling slowly becomes more mainstream—3 percent of American students age 5–17 are homeschooled, up from 2.2 percent in 2003—most parents (25 percent) cited the environment of public schools, not religious belief, as the main reason behind their decision to homeschool.

Edelson said the number of homeschool families who do so for religious reasons has not decreased, but the percentage of those who list it as a first priority has dropped as other parents join the homeschooling community for different reasons.

"You go to any cocktail party, church, any group of people and you say, 'I'm in the homeschooling business,' and all these women will jump on it and say, 'Oh, we homeschooled,'" Edelson said.

Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, a nonprofit organization that conducts original research, said years of studies on home education led to its increasing acceptance.

"In the earlier days of the modern

homeschool movement, because homeschooling was such a tiny, tiny minority of the public, parents had to be very strongly committed to what they were doing,” Ray said.

Gretchen Buck, administrator of Global Village School, the customizable homeschooling program that Pedersen-Giles uses, said there is more demand for homeschooling as public schools struggle. Many parents do not like the emphasis on standardized tests; others remove their children because of bullying.

Others, like Pedersen-Giles, realize their children struggle when asked to sit at a desk for extended periods.

“By third grade, school was more about production levels with the onus being on the child to adapt to the classroom environment,” she said. “[Westen’s] individual needs were not being met. It would have taken so little for things to be different, but after exhaustive pleas to teachers, I decided that I would have to create my own change.”

This rise in mainstream homeschooling is reflected in curriculum needs, Buck said.

“A lot of people who contact us are looking for an alternative to the very many overtly Christian homeschooling programs that are out here, because that just does not fit in with their values,” Buck said. “They’re looking for secular homeschooling or just generally nonreligious.”

In the case of Pedersen-Giles, her family does not adhere to a particular religion. She often discusses world religions with her son and said he is free to choose his own beliefs.

Edelson said there are generally three types of homeschoolers: those who do so for religious reasons; the “free spirits” who oppose a regimented public school system; and the “accidental homeschoolers” who find their children do not thrive in a traditional school environment.

“Part of it is driven because they’re disappointed in the schools,” Edelson said. “If we had better schools, if the schools weren’t so confused and having trouble with testing and having trouble with budgets—that’s one of the things that’s fueling the homeschool movement.” —Katherine Burgess, RNS

## A rare holiday convergence

It happened last in 1888 and, according to one calculation, won’t happen again for another 77,798 years—the convergence of Thanksgiving and Hanukkah.

This year, November 28 is Thanksgiving *and* the first full day of the eight-day Jewish festival of lights, which begins at sundown the previous night.

For many Jewish Americans, this is not trivial but a once-in-an-eternity opportunity to celebrate two favorite holidays simultaneously, one quintessentially American, the other quintessentially Jewish.

Earlier this year, when the rarity of the synergy began to dawn on American Jews, they began concocting “Thanksgivukkah” mash-ups.

- Nine-year-old Asher Weintraub of Brooklyn, N.Y., invented a “menurky,” a turkey-shaped menorah — or Hanukkah candelabra—and has sold more than 1,500 of them.

- Jewish cooks have created recipes for everything from pumpkin latkes (Hanukkah’s signature potato pancake) to turkey brined in Manischewitz (the sweet kosher wine Jewish Americans love to make fun of but drink anyway).

- Rabbi David Paskin of Norwood, Massachusetts, cowrote “The Ballad of Thanksgivukkah,” which manages to rhyme “latkes” with “religious minorities.”

“It’s fun, and let me go on record as saying that ‘fun’ is a good thing,” Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the congregational arm of Reform Judaism in North America, said of the hybrid holiday.

Jacobs isn’t the only Jewish American to note that Hanukkah and Thanksgiving align not just in time, but thematically. They both celebrate religious liberty: the Pilgrims sought religious freedom in the New World and the ancient Jews triumphed over Greek oppressors who had banned the practice of Judaism.

“To me, that is such a beautiful and powerful linkage of the two holidays, and I hope we get to celebrate that as well as cranberries on our latkes,” Jacobs said.

Or, as Rabbi Tzvi Freeman recently wrote on the website Chabad.org:



Thanksgiving is “a narrative about an arduous journey to escape religious persecution for freedom in a new land, the establishment of a democratic charter and the sense of divine providence that carried those refugees through their plight.”

The miracle of Hanukkah is set in the 2nd century B.C., when a small band of Jews, the Maccabees, triumphed over the forces of King Antiochus IV.

As the Maccabees rededicated the desecrated temple in Jerusalem, a small quantity of oil, enough to last for only one day, miraculously burned for eight, which is why Jews light the candles on the menorah for eight nights.

The quirk of Thanksgivukkah is that the Hebrew calendar, which follows the sun and the moon, and the Gregorian calendar, where Thanksgiving sits on the fourth Thursday of November, has aligned this year so that the two holidays are on the same day for the first time since 1888, 25 years after President Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a holiday.

As for the long stretch before this will happen again, credit for the calculation goes to Jewish American physicist Jonathan Mizrahi, who explained that the Jewish and Gregorian calendars are drifting apart in such a way as to separate Thanksgiving and Hanukkah for more than 70 millennia. (Others who have also done the math note that the first *night* of Hanukkah—the holiday begins at sundown—will converge with Thanksgiving as early as 2070.)

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