Religious leaders not required to report child abuse, Arizona Supreme Court rules

LDS church named as defendant in original lawsuit

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COCHISE COUNTY, Arizona — The Arizona Supreme Court ruled unanimously Thursday that religious leaders are not required to report child abuse if they learn of it through confession or confidential disclosure. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was one of the defendants in the original lawsuit.

The lawsuit was filed in 2022 by three children of Paul Adams, who, along with his spouse Leizza Adams, was indicted in 2017 for child sex abuse after the Department of Homeland Security discovered video of Adams abusing his children that had been posted online. He would confess his abuse law enforcement, but then die by suicide prior to trial. Leizza Adams would go on to plead guilty and be sentenced to 30 months in prison.

Over the course of the criminal proceedings, it was discovered that Adams had confessed his abuse to leaders within the LDS church's Bisbee Ward, first to a bishop around 2011, and then in a formal disciplinary council meeting led by a different bishop who took over the ward in 2012. The second bishop would go on to excommunicate Adams from the church.

Both bishops were also named as defendants in the lawsuit. In the original complaint, the plaintiffs argued the bishops, and by extension the church, failed to report the abuse as is required under Arizona law. An investigation by the Associated Press revealed that the first bishop had called what was referred to as a "help line" within the church to for guidance, later telling law enforcement in 2017 that he was told to not contact police or child welfare officials.

The trial court ruled in favor of the church, arguing that the bishop's knowledge of Adams' abuse came from "confidential religious communications," placing it under what is referred to as the "clergy-penitent exception." This exempts members of the clergy from mandatory reporting if the decision is deemed to be "reasonable and necessary within the concept of the [Church's] religion."

The Arizona Court of Appeals would then vacate the ruling, stating that there were "genuine issues of material fact" as to whether Adams' disclosure of the abuse were truly confidential and whether or not church doctrine dictated non-reporting.

In the opinion published Thursday, Vice Chief Justice John R. Lopez IV cited the First Amendment's establishment clause, saying that it prohibits courts and juries from examining whether a clergy member properly applied religious doctrine when choosing not to report abuse. He further argues that courts do not have constitutional authority to interpret religious doctrine.

"Any further inquiry into whether Paul’s admissions qualify as confessions is explicitly doctrinal," Lopez writes. "Under the First Amendment, such inquiry is beyond the purview of the factfinder and,

thus, leaves no genuine issue of material fact regarding whether Paul’s admissions to [Bishop] qualify as “confessions.”

Although the ruling is in favor of the LDS church, Lopez says the decision doesn't mean churches are completely in the clear.

"Our decision “does not mean that religious institutions enjoy a general immunity from secular laws," Lopez writes. "If a court finds a religious institution submitted evidence procured through “fraud” or “collusion” for secular purposes, it will lose the Religion Clauses’ protection."

The LDS Church provided the following statement in response:

“*The abuse of a child or any person is a tragic betrayal of trust. The abuse at the center of this case was reprehensible, and the Church has always condemned it. The Church is deeply concerned for these children and for all who have suffered abuse. The Church devotes significant resources to preventing abuse, helping victims, and encouraging reporting through safeguarding efforts around the world. The Church has always been willing to help the victims in this case and that continues to be true. Arizona law also recognizes the confidential nature of religious confession. Today's decision affirms that these religious protections are to be respected alongside society's shared commitment to protect the vulnerable.”*