

Nazarene Church, University to Face Reforms After Settling Sexual Abuse Lawsuit

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Ryan Wonderly, a former Children's pastor at Bethany First Church of the Nazarene, is serving a 35 year sentence for molesting several children.



As a result of a lawsuit settlement between Wonderly's victims and Bethany First Church of the Nazarene and SNU, the Nazarene church decided that all their affiliations in the United States and Canada will now have to implement reform.

By Colleen Chen, NEWS 9

OKLAHOMA CITY -- A metro church and university have settled a lawsuit filed by victims of rape and molestation, and now the two institutions are facing reform.

The victims claimed Southern Nazarene University and Bethany First Church of the Nazarene allowed a known child predator around children. Former children's minister Ryan Wonderly was convicted and sentenced in 2005 for committing numerous sexual crimes against young girls.

Court documents filed in the lawsuit indicated years of concern about Wonderly's behavior and instances where witnesses saw him come out of a closet with a young girl. Reports also indicated a little girl said Wonderly "put ice down her pants and wouldn't stop when she asked him to." The victims in the lawsuit ranged in age from 4 to 12 at the time they were molested.

[Read complaints from church members about Wonderly's actions](#)

Victims said SNU and Bethany First Church of the Nazarene should never have allowed Wonderly near children. The lawsuit claims the church did not conduct a background check on Wonderly, and that church ministers allowed him to intern and hired him knowing that he was caught viewing child pornography while attending Southern Nazarene University.

As a result of a settlement with the victims, The Church of the Nazarene and all their affiliations in the United States and Canada will now have to implement the following reforms:

- 1) They must adopt and implement a zero tolerance policy for sexual misconduct involving children. This extends to seminaries and universities.
- 2) Any allegations or suspicions of abuse must be documented in writing and reported to the local church board, the senior pastor, the district superintendent, the national board of general superintendents, and law enforcement where state law demands it.
- 3) Adopt the policy that prevents the restoration of any minister who is convicted of or admits to sexual misconduct involving children.
- 4) Any individual applying for local or district licenses must submit the application to national headquarters where a crosscheck can be performed against a database of pastors who have surrendered their license or had it revoked due to sexual misconduct.
- 5) Set up a special committee on the prevention of sexual misconduct and protection of children in the church. The committee will retain the service of experts who can help develop educational materials.
- 6) Establish a director of the prevention of sexual misconduct who will administer and implement policies and education training.
- 7) A guest speaker will lecture on the effects of sexual abuse and the need for heightened awareness at either Bethany First Church of the Nazarene or SNU. The speech is to be taped and used as a training tool
- 8) All entities shall have a line item in the budget that shows money spent of education and prevention. Money will also go towards scholarships for children who have been abused or have suffered violence. The scholarship can also go towards students who pursue studies in child advocacy.

Jason Stephens is one of the attorneys representing the victims in the case.

"We are pleased with the settlement, but most pleased with the reforms. The families in this case wanted to make sure what happened to them will never happen again. These girls are the heroes in this story. They've been dealing with this for years in court. Now, they can finally start getting some closure," Stephens said.

SNU officials said in recent years they have already begun implementing changes like tighter Internet filters, additional background security checks, and specialized training for residential campus staff.

"In our university's 111 year history, this is the first time we have been involved in a legal case of this kind. It's been a painful process for everyone. Our prayer is for healing and closure for the children, families and our community," SNU President Loren Gresham said.

Representatives for The Church of the Nazarene, Bethany First Church of The Nazarene have not responded to interview requests at this time.

[See a list of Church of the Nazarene pastors accused of sexual misconduct](#)

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