

Potential lawsuit names former minister, United Church in sex-abuse claims

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Published: Sep 29, 2017 at 6:30 p.m.

Updated: Sep 30, 2017 at 5:38 a.m.

A St. John's lawyer representing a Newfoundland and Labrador woman will be in court Friday to seek permission to proceed with a Jane Doe sex-abuse case against a former minister and his one-time employer, the United Church of Canada.

The woman — who is seeking the Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador's permission to keep her name and small community from being identified in the proceedings — was not among the 11 children involved in criminal cases against Stephen James Collins, who was a minister and later doctor in various communities and was convicted in the 1980s.

The woman's lawyer, William Hiscock of Budden and Associates, said after she contacted the United Church about what she claims happened, she felt the only way to get a sense of justice and closure was to launch a civil action.

The United Church is named as a second defendant because it employed Collins, and ought to have properly screened and supervised him, as it owed a duty of care to children and youth who participated in church-organized activities, the Jane Doe application asserts.

The woman did not go to the police, but claims she has suffered years of anguish because of the sexual abuse she endured at Collins' hands on many occasions as a child between the ages of eight and 13. He was a minister in the community where she lived, and she attended Sunday school and youth choir, as well as youth events at his residence, the church manse, between about 1964-70.

"During these events she would be taken aside and molested in a variety of ways," Hiscock said.

"She hadn't felt capable of coming forward until very recent years. She had an event in her own life which triggered her feeling she had to deal with this in some way."

The accusations — not proven in court — have not yet been filed as a statement of claim. That is expected after the outcome of Friday's hearing on the Jane Doe application.

But it is alleged Collins fondled her genitals over and under her clothes and took pornographic pictures of her. It's also alleged she was forced to masturbate Collins and that he digitally penetrated her.

The application asserts that the defendants — Collins and the church — are liable for the physical, social, psychological and other problems the woman suffered because of the alleged abuse.

She says being identified would make her situation even worse.

"We do have to show medical evidence that suggests a person's well-being or health is at risk (in order to get a publication ban). However, in cases of sexual abuse and the media attention that they garner, it is very uncommon for the court to disallow a pseudonym application. They recognize for the vast majority of these people, they have dealt with very significant psychological impact," Hiscock said.

The offences for which Collins was criminally convicted involved young children ranging in age from seven to 11 over the period 1975-86. All but two of the children were female. The incidents consisted of the display and encouragement of nudity, photographing and displaying photographs of nude children, fondling, kissing, masturbation, oral sex and attempts at sexual intercourse with a female child.

Collins pleaded guilty to seven counts of sexual assault and four counts of indecent assault on the 11 children.

Hiscock said Collins' whereabouts are unknown. A last trace of him is in a newsletter in which a sibling referred to him as residing in Angola, where he was born to missionary parents in 1938.

At the time the woman preparing to launch the civil case was allegedly abused, Collins was a United Church minister in the province. In 1970, he went back to university and graduated from McMaster University in 1974 with a medical degree, according to a 1987 decision on his criminal case.

Collins was on staff at the hospital in Baie Verte for a time, studied tropical medicine in London, England, and did medical missionary work in Zaire for two years. He returned to the Baie Verte hospital in 1981, and in 1983 moved to a satellite clinic at La Scie.

During his time as a rural physician he maintained a role with the church, including with the church choir, and often entertained children in his home during overnight stays, individually or in groups, and took them on trips to other communities or camping.

In 1987, the Newfoundland Court of Appeal ruled Collins should serve two years in prison, followed by three years' probation during which he was to undergo treatment recommended by a psychiatrist.

The United Church did not respond to a request for comment.

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