

Sex abuse by minister led to suicide attempts: civil claim

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A statement of claim filed against a former minister and the United Church of Canada alleges he was a child sexual abuser years earlier than he admitted to when he was convicted in the 1980s.

The woman's name and community is protected by a Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador order.

In the 1960s, Stephen James Collins was a practising United Church minister in this province. The Jane Doe civil suit alleges that Collins' sex abuse of her not only ruined her childhood, but led to a life of physical and mental pain, an impaired ability to gain an education and establish financial well-being, substance abuse, humiliation, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and problems trusting other people and sustaining intimate relationships. She also claims to have attempted suicide because of the ordeal.

After leaving to attend medical school in Ontario, Collins returned to Newfoundland to practise medicine in Baie Verte and La Scie, where nearly a dozen victims eventually accused him of having sexually abused them as children.

After he was charged and his case was before the courts, Collins was diagnosed as a pedophile, but told a psychiatrist he had had no sexual contact with children until he went to Baie Verte in the early 1970s. That evidence is contained in a court transcript from July 1986.

However, in the statement of claim filed this week by William Hiscock of Budden and Associates, the woman makes claims that similar abuse happened to her in the 1960s when she participated in church activities such as choir and Sunday school led by Collins.

The woman's claims have not been proven in court and she was not involved in the 1980s criminal case against him.

But she claims she was sexually, physically and emotionally assaulted on many occasions by Collins during a three-year period starting when she was about eight, around 1965, and ending when she was about 13.

The woman claims Collins fondled her genitals over and under her clothes and that she was forced to fondle his genitals over his clothing and to masturbate him. She also alleges Collins penetrated her with his fingers and took pornographic photos of her.

She claims she was threatened, coerced and lied to by Collins in order to appear like she was consenting to the sex acts.

The offences allegedly took place in the church and the manse, where Collins lived.

The United Church is named as second respondent, as the statement of claims contends it failed to properly screen Collins or to properly supervise him and should have known there

was “criminal behaviour against children.”

It also alleges he church arranged his transfer from La Scie when complaints emerged. Collins was sent to Halifax to see a psychiatrist associated with the church, the statement of claim states.

It said the church failed to take action to preserve evidence of Collins’ abuse by encouraging him to destroy the photographs of nude and semi-nude children.

The offences for which Collins was criminally convicted involved children ranging in age from seven to 11 during the period 1975-86 in Baie Verte and La Scie. All but two of the children were girls.

The incidents consisted of displaying and encouraging nudity, photographing and displaying photographs of nude children, fondling, kissing, masturbation, oral sex and attempts at sexual intercourse with a female child.

In 1986, Collins pleaded guilty to seven counts of sexual assault and four counts of indecent assault.

On appeal in 1987, Collins was sentenced to two years in prison and three years’ probation, during which time he was to receive treatment.

He grew up in Africa after being born to church missionary parents, but completed post-secondary degrees in Canada. Prior to attending medical school in Ontario in 1970, he was a minister in Labrador.

His current address is unknown, though he is believed to be in Angola.

Collins’ name was stricken from the register by this province’s medical licensing board in 1987.

But a man with a similar name is listed as practising medicine at a hospital in Angola on the website of that country’s medical licensing organization.

St. John’s lawyer Bob Buckingham has already settled a Jane Doe case involving a woman who was among the children Collins was convicted of assaulting.

Another of Buckingham’s cases — involving a woman who lived on the Baie Verte Peninsula, but who was not among those involved in the conviction — is still before the courts.

In response to The Telegram, the United Church of Canada has said it cannot comment on a case before the courts, but the church is well aware of Collins’ 1980s convictions.

He was placed on the discontinued service list in 1986 and is therefore no longer a United Church minister.

The church has previously denied liability for Collins’ actions and maintains it does not tolerate and will seek to eradicate any behaviour by volunteers, clergy, lay ministers, employees and others that constitutes sexual abuse or child abuse.