

Pennsylvania pastor and church charged in mock raid, kidnapping

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c. 2012 Religion News Service HARRISBURG, Pa. (RNS) It was supposed to be a realistic lesson on the dangers missionaries sometimes face overseas.

But after a mother's complaint that her teen daughter was injured and terrorized during a mock terrorist kidnapping staged by the Glad Tidings Assembly of God Church in Lower Swatara, Pa. it might be up to a criminal jury to decide whether the church crossed the line.

Almost four months after the fake raid and complaint by the mother of a 14-year-old girl identified only as K.T., police on Friday (July 27) charged Youth Pastor Andrew Jordan and, in an unusual move, the church itself.

Jordan and the Glad Tidings church are charged with one count of false imprisonment and one count of simple assault.

While at least one legal expert said charging the church is novel, authorities said they felt they had to act to protect other children.

"You can't, in the name of religious liberty, engage in criminal activity, and that is what occurred here," said Dauphin County District Attorney Ed Marsico. "Just because you're a church doesn't mean you can hurt a kid. It was not a well-thought-out exercise; the church is lucky the incident wasn't worse."

The attorney representing the church and its youth pastor said the whole matter is overblown. Jordan was not in custody, and the church is free to continue normal operations.

Marsico said the false imprisonment charge carries with it a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. Due to Jordan's lack of criminal history, Marsico said the pastor might face probation if convicted. The church, if convicted, would face a fine, which

is generally the penalty for corporations, he said.

The charges stem from an incident in March, when Jordan wanted to teach the teenagers in a youth group about the dangers missionaries face in the world's trouble spots. Head pastor John Lanza approved the plan, according to court documents.

A presentment by a Dauphin County investigating grand jury describes what happened that evening:

"The lights in the basement were turned off ... male members of the congregation with their faces obscured entered the room with flashlights. The men flipped over the chairs and ordered the children to get on the ground.

"The masked men bound the children loosely behind the back using zip ties and placed bags over their heads. They then moved the children to a van parked outside the church and loaded the children into the open cargo area ... and [drove them to] the basement of the parsonage ... where a guard was holding an unloaded and disabled semi-automatic rifle. ...

"The men simulated the interrogation and torture of pastor Jordan. ... There was simulated blood on pastor Jordan's face."

The children were then driven to a bonfire on the church grounds and told it was a simulation, the presentment reads.

While some of the children realized the abduction was fake, the presentment says that K.T. did not. The girl was not a member of the church, but had attended four of the youth events, according to the court documents.

The complaint states she bruised her knees and cut her lip when she was forced to the ground. Included in the documents are numerous photographs showing the scrapes and bruises to the girl's knees and her damaged lip.

K.T. was also afraid of being sexually assaulted, based on some of the comments made by the masked men, according to the court documents.

"K.T. overheard the masked men indicate that they were going to make pastor Jordan's daughters their wives," the court documents said. "This put K.T. in fear of rape."

Christopher Marzzacco, the Harrisburg lawyer representing the girl and her family, said he thinks the charges against the church are justified.

"The church orchestrated this whole thing," he said. The family has not filed a civil lawsuit in the case, he said.

Marzzacco said K.T. still suffers psychological trauma from the incident and is receiving treatment. The court documents say the effects of the event were worsened by the memory of the kidnapping and murder of a friend several years earlier.

One other child testified that she was frightened during the staged event.

Greg Randall Lee, a professor of law at Widener Law School, said he has never heard of a church being charged in a crime. Even in the recent case of Monsignor William Lynn, who was sentenced to prison for failing to protect children from pedophile priests in the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Philadelphia, the charges were against the church leadership, not the church.

Lee said the church might mount a defense based on freedom of religion rights.

But William DeStefano, the lawyer representing the church and Jordan, said the charges are not warranted.

"I've never heard of a church being charged criminally," he said. "It's kind of an oddball thing."

While Glad Tidings has not staged a mock abduction since the March incident, DeStefano said such events are fairly common in Assembly of God churches, which emphasize missionary work. Previously, Glad Tidings performed a mock abduction about four years ago, he said.

According to court documents, parents were not notified beforehand and only one of the children had advance warning. During a church meeting, court documents said, someone suggested that Jordan should get parental consent forms before staging the mock abduction, but he never did so.

He said during the meeting he would look into that, but he wanted it to be a surprise, according to court documents.

But DeStefano said it was immediately clear to everyone at the time the event wasn't real.

"All the kids knew it was an exercise either before or within three minutes of it starting," he said. "The whole thing is being blown out of proportion by one of the kids' parents. None of the others even raised an eyebrow."

Lower Swatara Township Police Chief Richard Wiley disagreed.

"We knew early on that someone would probably be charged because of the magnitude of what occurred," he said. "The biggest problem I had with this incident is with the institution, why they would think this wouldn't be a problem."