

Slain pastor's wife convicted of voluntary manslaughter: Attention focused on pressures on ministers' wives

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In a case that focused national attention on the psychological pressures on wives of ministers, Mary Winkler, the wife of a slain Church of Christ pastor in Tennessee, was convicted April 19 of voluntary manslaughter. Winkler, 33, was charged in last year's slaying of Matthew Winkler, 31.

After hearing accusations that the pastor abused his wife, jurors in Selmer, Tennessee, spent more than seven hours deliberating. They ultimately rejected the more serious first-degree murder conviction that prosecutors had sought.

Winkler showed no emotion as the verdict was read. She will remain free on bond pending her sentencing May 18.

Church leaders from Fourth Street Church of Christ found Matthew Winkler shot dead in the church parsonage March 22, 2006. Mary Winkler was arrested the next day, after she had fled to Alabama in the family van with her three daughters.

Tony Rankin, who serves as a pastoral and family counselor for the Tennessee Baptist Convention, said pastoral spouses like Mary Winkler can endure many pressures unknown to parishioners. Rankin said he deals each month with more than two dozen instances of silently suffering spouses.

"My overwhelming response to this case is sheer sadness," Rankin said after the verdict. "Besides someone who has been killed, you've also got a pastor's wife who is obviously in excruciating mental distress. And you've got children involved as well. All those things make it really sad."

Lawyers on each side of the case presented a very different picture of the Winkler family. District Attorney Walter Freeland said Matthew Winkler was a loving father who died with 77 shotgun pellets in his back—a stunning number from a 12-gauge shotgun that had to be pumped before being shot.

Testimony from nine-year-old Patricia Winkler supported this claim. The child said she never saw her father mistreat her mother. She also visited her mother only once after Mary Winkler's release from jail because she didn't want to see her, she said.

Prosecutors also said Mary Winkler had overdrawn her bank account by \$5,000 as part of a check-kiting scheme and wanted to conceal from her husband the fact that she had been caught up in a swindle. Freeland said the couple's finances "were in shambles."

But defense attorney Steve Farese told jurors that Matthew Winkler physically, sexually and emotionally abused his wife. While on the witness stand, Mary Winkler said she suffered extreme criticism, physical attacks and sexual manipulation at the hands of her husband.

Farese described the marriage as "a living hell" in which Matthew Winkler would "destroy objects that [Mary] loved" and "isolate her from her family." She needed permission even to get her hair cut, Farese told jurors.

Mary Winkler has admitted to shooting her husband but said she intended only to hold him at gunpoint that night to force him to talk about their problems. Earlier, he allegedly held his hand over the nose and mouth of their one-year-old daughter when she wouldn't be quiet. *-Associated Baptist Press*