

Amish-Mennonite pastor convicted of abetting kidnapping

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) A Vermont jury found an Amish-Mennonite pastor guilty Tuesday (Aug. 14) of abetting an international kidnapping to keep a young girl from her lesbian parent.

Virginia pastor Kenneth Miller, of the Beachy Amish-Mennonite sect, helped Lisa Miller (no relation) flee the U.S. with her daughter Isabella, who's now 10. The pastor, who has become a hero among many religious conservatives who have followed the case, faces up to three years in prison.

Lisa Miller, who was part of a lesbian couple when Isabella was born, has since rejected homosexuality and declared herself a born-again Christian. She failed to live up to court orders that gave her former partner, Janet Jenkins, visitation rights with Isabella.

Kenneth Miller, prosecutors showed, helped arrange for Lisa Miller and her daughter to be driven to Canada and board a flight to Nicaragua in 2009, where his church runs a mission.

His lawyer argued that the pastor did not know he was flouting a custody ruling. Prosecutors, however, pointed out that the pastor took pains to hide some of his actions.

The Amish-Mennonites believe homosexuality is a sin. About 100 members of the sect sang "We Shall Overcome" outside the courthouse in Burlington where the pastor was convicted.

"We are of course disappointed," the pastor said Tuesday after the verdict was read, according to The New York Times. "But with the grace of God and by his help, we will bear the consequences."

Federal officials believe Lisa Miller and Isabella Miller-Jenkins are in Nicaragua, a country with which the U.S. has no extradition treaty.

Lisa Miller and Janet Jenkins entered into a civil union in Vermont in 2000; Lisa Miller gave birth to Isabella two years later after undergoing in vitro fertilization.

The custody battle over Isabella has made headlines since she was a toddler, when Lisa Miller moved from Vermont to Virginia, where a law bans the recognition of same-sex unions and marriages.

Even Virginia jurists have concluded, however, that federal anti-kidnapping statutes take precedence over the Virginia law and the federal Defense of Marriage Act. A Vermont judge indicated in 2009 that Jenkins would be awarded custody of Isabella if her former partner continued to defy visitation orders.

As the jury was deliberating Tuesday, Jenkins filed a lawsuit against Lisa Miller and Kenneth Miller, seeking unspecified monetary damages, according to The Associated Press.

No sentencing date for Kenneth Miller has been set.