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## Church liable in girls' abuse

**By Bob Young***Seattle Times staff reporter*

In a decision that could reverberate through clergy sexual-abuse cases everywhere, a King County Superior Court jury has awarded \$4.2 million to two sisters who were sexually abused for years by their stepfather, a Mormon priest.

The civil jury found The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as the Mormon church, liable for intentional misconduct and negligence and ordered the church to pay most of the award. The remainder of the award would be paid by the girls' abuser, Peter N. Taylor, who is no longer their stepfather or a priest.

"The size of the verdict is particularly newsworthy. I think the jury is making a statement," said Timothy Kosnoff, a lawyer for the girls who were abused in their Federal Way home during the 1990s.

Kosnoff said the verdict, handed down late Friday afternoon, was the first sexual-abuse decision against a church in Washington state. He said it could affect settlement values in abuse cases against the Catholic Church here and in other states.

James S. Rogers, a Seattle lawyer who has represented victims of alleged abuse by Catholic priests, agreed. The verdict shows that 12 jurors put a serious value on the damage done by sex abuse, Rogers said.

Settlements in several high-profile abuse cases involving Catholic clergy across the country have averaged less than \$1 million per victim. The Boston Archdiocese reached an \$85 million settlement with 552 victims in 2003. Last year the diocese of Orange, Calif., settled 90 abuser claims for \$100 million. The Archdiocese of Seattle has settled approximately 100 cases, and payment to each victim has averaged about \$100,000, according to Michael Patterson, a lawyer for the archdiocese.

Patterson argued that no sweeping conclusions should be drawn from Friday's verdict because every abuse claim is unique. Tom Frey, a lawyer who represented the Mormon church in the Federal Way case, agreed. "Obviously, all broken legs don't have the same value," Frey said.

Juror Nikki Easterbrooks said the crux of the case for the jury was this: Should church officials be allowed to treat a victim's abuse complaint as a confidential confession, or are they obliged to report it to authorities? "I think abuse happens way more frequently than we think, and it gets handled internally," Easterbrooks said.

A Mormon spokesman said the church would "aggressively pursue an appeal" in the Federal Way case. Spokesman Gordon Conger said he was shocked the jury found the church liable for damages. Conger said Taylor molested the girls in their home and did not use his church position to take advantage of his stepdaughters.

Conger maintained that the church's policy is to protect children, report abuse and excommunicate offenders.

But the jury believed the church acted improperly, Kosnoff said, based on the sisters' allegations that they were persistently abused by their then-stepfather.

The older sister, Jessica Cavalieri, now 24, said she first told her church bishop in 1994 that Taylor had started abusing her when she was 7. She said her bishop, the local congregation leader, met with her mother and Taylor. But the bishop did not tell her mother about the abuse, Cavalieri said. Instead, he encouraged the family to work out problems through worship, she said.

The girl was unaware her mother did not know of the abuse, and because her mother did not come to her aid, Cavalieri said, she felt ashamed and frightened to tell anyone else. She endured the abuse for five more years, while Taylor started abusing her younger sister, Ashley Cavalieri, according to court documents.

The Seattle Times does not name sexual-abuse victims without their permission. Both sisters consented in this case, partly because they want to help other victims.

In late 1998, Taylor told the girls' mother about the sexual abuse. The mother then started divorce proceedings against Taylor and contacted police. Taylor pleaded guilty to criminal charges of first-degree child molestation in 2001 and was sentenced to four years, three months in jail. Conger said the church "disfellowshipped" Taylor, which he likened to excommunication.

Meanwhile, the sisters sued the church. After a monthlong trial, the jury took slightly longer than a day to decide the case, returning an 11-1 verdict.

The sisters said Monday they felt relieved and vindicated by the verdict. Both are college students and say they're still haunted by the abuse. "It's always on my mind, especially when I look back at my life and how things could have been different," said Ashley Cavalieri.

Unlike her younger sister, Jessica Cavalieri remains a member of the Mormon church. She hopes her suit will help members with similar cases. "They don't know how to handle abuse victims and pedophiles," she said. "They're just completely naive."

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