

Accused of withholding abuse reports from congregation

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LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (BP)—Facing accusations its leaders withheld information about reports of sexual abuse, Pastor Steven Smith of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock issued a statement saying, “Nothing is more important than keeping our members and children safe.”

In recent days the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* has reported on the case of Patrick Stephen Miller, an intern at the church who later joined the staff as assistant director of children’s ministry.

Accusations from an elementary-age victim led to a charge of second-degree sexual assault against Miller, leading to a plea deal in January 2022 to misdemeanor harassment. Miller also received a one-year suspended sentence with 19 days credit for time served and was not required to register as a sex offender.

In July, Miller filed a motion to seal his court records. A motion in opposition was filed on behalf of his initial victim, as well as a second child who later came forward.

Attorney Joseph Gates—identified by the *Democrat-Gazette* as a Sunday School teacher at Immanuel with three young daughters—represents the two children in the opposing motion. He said both were in the third or fourth grade at the time Miller abused them.

Criticized for lack of transparency

Gates criticized Smith over a lack of transparency regarding the case,

saying the pastor did not inform the congregation when Miller was arrested, charged, convicted or sentenced.

Smith, who began as pastor at the church in January 2017, said Miller had been hired to assist with the children's ministry on May 19, 2014. A criminal background check at the time revealed no criminal convictions.

"Sometime over the next two years, he committed child sex abuse," Smith said. "No one in any church should have to suffer such abuse. It's a sin and a crime.

"His last day working for the church was Jan. 6, 2016. When he left, no church leader knew about his abuse."

Church leaders learned of the initial abuse accusation two months later from the victim's parents. A subsequent report from the church to authorities came "within minutes," Smith said.

"During the law enforcement investigation, church leaders did not publicly discuss the matter. There's a very real concern that doing so could have undermined or negatively affected the ability of prosecutors to make their case and obtain a conviction," he stated.

"Later, another family told us about allegations of abuse by this man. These allegations arose from the same time period—before anyone in our church knew about the abuse. Of course, we immediately reported those allegations. In all cases, public discussions of criminal matters can undermine the ability of the prosecution to bring an offender to justice."

'Wish we would have told you ...

sooner'

In a letter to deacons, ministers, finance and personnel teams and Sunday School leaders, Gates claimed the lack of disclosure prevented other potential victims from coming forward, the *Democrat-Gazette* reported.

According to court filings, Miller was responsible for teaching children when adults were gathered elsewhere in the church. During those Sunday and Wednesday evening services, a game of hide-and-seek with his class would place Miller in a darkened, locked closet with one of his students where he would "tickle, grope and molest the young adolescents," according to the court filing.

On Dec. 10, Smith asked guests at Immanuel to leave prior to holding a "family meeting" with church members to apologize for aspects of the church's handling of the case.

"I wish we would have told you about these crimes sooner," he said in a recording given to the *Democrat-Gazette* by church members, adding that a Caring Well team has been formed alongside a Caring Well coordinator.

"We can always do better, and we're working with national experts to create even more safeguards to protect the people in our church," Smith said in the statement to Baptist Press.