

Former Island Pond Church Teacher Gets Time Served in Sex Case

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GUILDHALL, Vt. — Molested as a child, a 23-year-old man wept in court Monday as he confronted the former church teacher who abused him when he was 11, telling him: "Don't you ever do it to anyone else."

John W. Thomas, 37, of Savoy, Mass., pleaded guilty to molesting two boys in the stockroom and basement of the Simon the Tanner shoe and clothing shop maintained by the Twelve Tribes Community Church.

He was given a 6-to-10-year sentence, all but 16 months suspended. But he has already served that time, and is expected to be released from prison soon and then to move to join family members in Wisconsin.

"John Thomas was my teacher. He was one person I really trusted," the young man, M.W., told the court. The Associated Press does not identify sex crime victims.

That trust was placed in Thomas by the adult members of the church, who later banished him, said the young man's father. "I would spank my son if he didn't listen to Mr. Thomas as his teacher."

The case was the latest round of trouble for a religious sect long troubled by allegations mistreatment of children.

A 1984 raid by Vermont State Police and social workers — on allegations of physical abuse of children — largely unraveled when a judge ruled that church members' rights had been violated. Other branches of the church have been accused of violating child labor laws in New York state and education laws in Germany by home-schooling children.

Monday's plea-change hearing in Vermont District Court for Essex County marked the near end of a case that has taken more than a decade to resolve. Another victim, who was 9 when he was molested by Thomas, also testified in court.

Thomas was a teacher in the church in the mid-1990s and lived at various times in Island Pond, Bellows Falls, Massachusetts and New York state.

A bid by Essex County State's Attorney Vincent Illuzzi to introduce "evidence of prior bad acts" — including alleged sex crimes by Thomas against children in Boston and Hyannis, Mass., and Coxsackie, N.Y. — was recently rejected by a Vermont judge.

The hearing resulted from plea talks in which Illuzzi agreed to drop charges that Thomas had engaged in oral sex with the boys in exchange for Thomas pleading guilty to two counts that he had masturbated in front of them.

Illuzzi said no forensic evidence remained from the sexual molestations, which occurred in the 1990s.

The plea was accepted because "I didn't want to take the risk that Mr. Thomas would remain an untreated sex offender because a jury might find him not guilty," Illuzzi said.

That happened when Thomas was tried on child sex abuse charges in Barnstable County, Mass.

While the two pending counts at Monday's hearing related only to the masturbation incidents, during his statement to the court, M.W. mentioned oral sex, and Judge Thomas Zonay threatened to reject the plea agreement unless Thomas admitted to engaging in it with M.W.

In a tense exchange, Thomas said "I never forced anyone" to have oral sex.

"Do you really believe that an 11-year-old boy can make that decision on his own?" Zonay replied.

Thomas ended up admitting to engaging in oral sex, though not in the context of the charges against him. That appeared to satisfy Zonay, but he left one hurdle remaining: He wanted assurances that Thomas, who could have been released Monday, would not be let free until he had a place to live.

In the end, the judge accepted the plea agreement, with the condition that the lawyers work with the state Corrections Department to determine what Thomas' near-term housing would be after being released.

Thomas' probation comes with a long list of strict conditions, barring his access to children, among other things.

"If you violate the terms and conditions of your probation and you come back before me," Zonay said, "you're going to face a long time in jail."