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Pastor turns out to be sex offender But many are willing to forgive

LODI - A resident near Ebenezer Congregational Church was looking at a list of registered sex offenders on the Internet recently when he saw a familiar face.

It belonged to the new pastor.

Neighborhood whispers and e-mails about Bill Mastro's past culminated Friday evening with a community meeting at the east Lodi church. The 48-year-old pastor talked openly to two dozen concerned residents about his history, which includes a conviction on two child-molestation charges 17 years ago in Redding.

"People were level-headed and were there to get his side of the story," said Ron Payne, a Lodi pastor who recommended Mastro to the Ebenezer church board, which hired him effective June 1. "(The neighbors) didn't know him, and what they knew was all the garbage they hear in the paper about pedophiles. Most people don't know it's possible to have a bad experience in your life and never go back to it."

Mastro declined to be interviewed Monday, saying news coverage would endanger him, his family and neighbors.

One of those neighbors, a mother of four children, said her brother and father went to Friday's meeting with concerns but returned reassured. The woman, who declined to identify herself, said she believes Mastro could have made a one-time mistake.

"We're all human, and we all make mistakes," the woman said. "He said he's changed his life, turning himself to God."

Richard Thornton, head of the Ebenezer church council, said Mastro made no attempt to hide his past when the church began looking for a pastor to replace Michael Malone, who was relocated to Pennsylvania on Dec. 2. That's what made his situation different from the molestation scandals that have plagued the Catholic Church both locally and nationally, Thornton said.

Thornton added that he initially brushed off Mastro because of the conviction and tried recruiting another pastor without success through the church's parent organization, the United Church of Christ.

"What pastor wants to come to a congregation when you have only 45 people?" said Thornton, a Lodi financial-services adviser. "They'd ask, 'How many people do you have in the congregation?' After I told them, I could hear it in their voices trying to figure out a way to hang up."

In the meantime, Mastro continued leading the Christian-based drug and alcohol counseling program set up by Payne's Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church. Thornton, having little success finding a pastor through traditional channels, re-established contact with Mastro.

They met four or five times before Thornton presented him to the church board for approval.

"It was hard for me to hire him," Thornton said, adding that the suspicious church neighbor is now satisfied Mastro is not a threat. "It comes from the fact that I was abused as a kid, and it took a long time for me just to talk to him. He accepted the Lord, and it has never happened again. And anytime that he goes into counseling or anything, the doors will be wide open. I don't see the risk."

The board, however, did not get approval for Mastro's hiring from United Church of Christ higher-ups, according to Jo Siders, head of the regional church association, based in Hayward.

"I have not been notified of anything at all," Siders said, surprised to hear that the Lodi church had a pastor. "Normally they would receive profiles from the UCC, and they would choose someone who is an ordained UCC pastor. They're operating on their own."

Thornton said Mastro may be a sex offender, but he's not a predator. Lodi police Detective Mike Kerngard said Mastro registers promptly each year, as required by the law. And Wesley B. Maram, who heads a sex-offender treatment program in Orange, said it's very possible Mastro is not a threat to children. His victim, a family member, was younger than 14.

The state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation said Mastro did not serve any time in state prison. Shasta County records were not available Monday.

"Most sex offenders, once they get sanctioned, that's the end of it," Maram said, adding that 30 percent of molesters were victims themselves as children. "(Family members) probably create the most damage, because they're in a position of trust, and the rate of recidivism by any measure is lower than any other group."

Maram said the church would be wise to establish safeguards so Mastro is not alone with children. And neighbor Chuck Sanguino, who did not attend Friday's meeting, was astonished to hear of the pastor's conviction.

"He's running a church?" Sanguino said. "How can that be?"

That's because, in Payne's words, "the evidence of a changed person is overwhelming.

"This guy does not deserve to have any more bad news about his life," Payne added. "He's a shining example, and I hope that other people learn that it is possible to recover from a sexual sin or any other sin."

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