

## **Pastor says he suffered abuse**

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By Gary Harki

Staff writer / The Charleston Gazette

A Cedar Grove pastor said Tuesday he was one of the boys whom another pastor is charged with sexually assaulting over a decade ago, and accused state Church of God leaders of ignoring reports of the abuse.

Mike Lewis, senior pastor of the New Life Center in Cedar Grove, released a statement Tuesday evening acknowledging he is the same Mike Lewis mentioned in the criminal complaint against Shrewsbury Church of God pastor Sandy Martin Cook.

“For thirteen years I have hidden this secret in the deepest part of my being, never to let it out,” Lewis said in his statement. “Over these past years I have shared this secret with no one. Not my wife, parents, family, or leaders.

“I assumed that my abuse had been limited to me alone and that no one else was suffering what I suffered. My assumptions were wrong.”

Cook, 48, of Belle, is accused of sexually assaulting at least three boys over a decade ago. The assaults happened when the boys were between the ages of 12 and 17, State Police Trooper E.B. McClung said Monday.

Cook is charged with three counts of sexual abuse by a person of trust and 44 counts of third-degree sexual assault. The alleged assaults occurred at his home or in his vehicle along U.S. 60.

In 1994, one of the boys’ parents found out about Cook’s alleged conduct and reported it to the church, according to the criminal complaint. A meeting was held at a church in Chesapeake, but the allegations were withdrawn and authorities were not notified, according to the complaint.

Lewis said other Church of God leaders knew about Cook’s abuses and covered them up.

“The realization of the fact that this person’s sexual abuses were brought to the attention of other local Church of God pastors, as well as the State Overseer of the Church of God, and that it was swept under a rug and not reported to the authorities is simply appalling,” he said.

“To think that the abuse I suffered and the victims that came after me should not have been, had the Church of God denomination followed the law and reported this first allegation in 1994. They failed to follow the law and I stand here today, with many other victims asking why.”

Church officials outside West Virginia were told about Cook’s arrest on Tuesday by state Administrative Bishop Wayne E. Wicker, said Scot Carter, director of communications for the Church of God’s international offices in Cleveland, Tenn.

“We were apprised of this, that the pastor was arrested and so based on the pending disposition of this criminal matter he has been placed on administrative leave ... until this case is resolved,” Carter said.

Carter said he did not know if police had contacted church officials concerning the matter. Any investigation by the church into Lewis' allegations would not occur until after Cook's criminal case is resolved, he said.

Wicker could not be reached late Tuesday.

Lewis said that State Police investigators contacted him four weeks ago, and that another victim had given them his name.

"I now know that I was not alone and I have a right & responsibility to speak up. I would have taken this secret to my grave, but when Investigators approached me and asked the question ... 'Are you also a victim', I could not lie," Lewis said in his statement. "The fact is, I am a victim of sexual abuse, suffered at the hands of this so called pastor who is in serious need of help.

He said he was abused beginning at the age of 13, and the abuse continued for four years.

"I was too afraid to speak up or speak out. I was told by this so called leader that these things must happen to me in order for God to use my life to make a difference," Lewis said. "As a young boy with no church background and not many possessions, I was suckered into this web of lies and deceit.

"As I matured I realized that his excuses for abuses were all trumped up lies and that my relationship with God was between me and God alone, and did not require a third person."

Multiple attempts to reach church employees and associate pastors of the Shrewsbury Church of God were unsuccessful Monday and Tuesday. Messages left on Cook's phone were not returned Tuesday.

The Shrewsbury Church of God was formed as an affiliate of the Cleveland, Tenn.-based Church of God in 1914.

Cook, who is listed as senior pastor on the Shrewsbury church's Web site, has worked for the church since 1988. He also worked as head of the cardiac catheterization lab at Charleston Area Medical Center Memorial Hospital.

Kanawha County Magistrate Joe Shelton set Cook's bond at \$150,000 Monday night. Cook was no longer listed as an inmate at South Central Regional Jail on Tuesday evening.

Lewis and his church have been in the news several times recently. Earlier this year, he led a failed effort that would have banned new bars within Cedar Grove town limits. In February, the New Life Center's main building burned to the ground; the case was ruled arson and is still under investigation.

Earlier this summer, the New Life Center put up a controversial billboard on U.S. 60 outside Rand that said, "Satan Hates the New Life Center in Cedar Grove."

Lewis closed his statement by giving praise to God for helping him through his difficulties as a teenager.

“The way I view this situation is simple — the hard part is over, meaning that the abuse is behind us,” Lewis said. “He can never touch us again, and it is our responsibility to make sure that he can never touch anyone else again either.”