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LAW CENTER

Mormon church loses sex abuse case

Tuesday, November 22, 2005; Posted: 5:17 p.m. EST (22:17 GMT)

SEATTLE, Washington (AP) -- The Mormon church has been ordered to pay \$4.2 million to two college-age sisters who say a bishop mishandled complaints of sexual abuse by their stepfather, a Mormon priest at the time.

A jury Friday found the church liable for misconduct and negligence in the case of Jessica Cavalieri, 24, and her younger sister, Ashley, 19.

The girls had been abused by their stepfather, Peter N. Taylor, at their home during the 1990s.

Taylor pleaded guilty to child molestation in 2001 was sentenced to more than four years in prison.

Jessica Cavalieri said in court documents that she told her congregational leader, Bishop Bruce Hatch, in 1994 that Taylor had been abusing her since she was 7.

But Hatch told Jessica's mother there was simply tension between Jessica and her stepfather, suggested they work it out through worship and never alerted civil authorities, according to the Cavalieris' lawyer, Timothy D. Kosnoff.

Under Washington state law, members of the clergy are not required to report sexual abuse, but Kosnoff argued that Hatch was acting as a social services counselor when the older sister confided in him.

The older sister said was ashamed and too scared to tell anyone else,

even when Taylor began abusing her younger sister.

Gordon Conger, a spokesman for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said the church will "aggressively pursue an appeal."

A lawyer for the church, Von G. Keetch, noted that the bishop testified he never had any confirmation of abuse.

"Our position was Bishop Hatch did not know," Keetch said.

Jessica Cavaliere said she hopes the case helps the church deal better with such situations.

"They don't know how to handle abuse victims and pedophiles," she said. "They're just completely naive."

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