

Amish beard-cutting trial attracts international attention

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c. 2012 Religion News Service CLEVELAND (RNS) The law of God will collide with the law of man this week in a crowded federal courtroom in Cleveland, where 16 Amish defendants -- 10 men with full beards, six women in white bonnets -- will stand trial on charges related to a series of beard- and hair-cutting attacks against fellow Amish men and women last year.

The case has attracted national and international attention, in part because of public curiosity about the normally reclusive and peaceful Amish community, and because of the peculiar nature of the alleged crimes.

Interest also has been heightened by the fact that the federal government rather than a local prosecutor brought the charges. The case is the first in Ohio to make use of a landmark 2009 federal law that expanded government powers to prosecute hate crimes.

Then there is the prospect of witnesses providing salacious testimony about an Amish bishop providing sexual counseling for married women while forcing other members of his flock to sleep in chicken coops.

Jury selection begins Monday (Aug. 27) and the trial is expected to run for three weeks before U.S. District Judge Dan Aaron Polster.

The defendants include an Amish bishop, 66-year-old Samuel Mullet Sr., and 15 of his followers, who broke away from the placid Holmes County Amish community 17 years ago and established a new clan of about 125 members near the hamlet of Bergholz in the verdant hills and valleys of Jefferson County.

Mullet's devoted followers revere him as a modern-day Moses who rules his flock with a righteous, iron fist, according to court documents and interviews with neighbors. The father of 18 children, he also is a multimillionaire who has received

more than \$2 million for oil fracking rights to his 800-acre farm.

In Mullet's world, the word of God provided the imprimatur for him and his followers to punish enemies as he saw fit. That included cutting their beards and hair -- a humiliation more dreaded in the Amish religion than being "beaten black-and-blue," one of the victims said.

"The beard for Amish men is a symbol of their adult manhood," said Donald Kraybill in an interview last year with National Public Radio. Kraybill is a professor at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania and an Amish expert who is scheduled to testify for the prosecution at the Mullet trial.

"So to cut their beard is an assault on not only their personal identity but also on their religious identity and their religious faith," Kraybill said.

In the eyes of the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office, Mullet and his followers are a band of renegades waging hate crime attacks motivated by cruelty and retaliation against their enemies. Cutting beards and head hair causes "disfigurement" -- an essential element of a hate crime, according to prosecutors.

But what federal prosecutors call hate crimes, punishable by life in prison, Mullet calls an exercise of his religious freedom. God's will allowed him to mete out punishment as he saw fit, he said, giving him the power to shame and punish people who ostracized the Bergholz clan and who defied his laws.

Mullet denies having ordered the beard-cutting attacks, "but I didn't tell them not to," he said according to an FBI affidavit quoting an Associated Press story.

"You have your laws on the road and the town -- if somebody doesn't obey them you punish the people," Mullet said in the affidavit. "But I'm not allowed to punish the church people? I just let them run over me? If every family would do just as they pleased, what kind of church would we have?"

Mullet's bishopric also gave him the authority to discipline church members who misbehaved by forcing them to sleep in a chicken coop for days on end, and the power to engage in sexual relations with married women to "cleanse them of the devil," according to an FBI affidavit.

Although Polster, the district judge, has banned prosecutors from calling the Bergholz clan a cult during the trial, the prosecutors have made it clear they believe

the word applies to Mullet's zealous followers. They cite the tremendous authority Mullet exerts over members of his Amish sect, and have included veiled references to David Koresh and Jim Jones in court papers.

"The government's greatest concern remains the defendant's ability, upon release, to retreat into his 800-acre spread, surrounded by his family members and devoted followers ... and resist law enforcement efforts to ensure his appearance at trial," Assistant U.S. Attorney Thomas Getz wrote.

"The evidence has demonstrated that this defendant and his followers have not embraced the traditional Amish principles of non-violence and forgiveness. The possibility of a violent encounter, this time with law enforcement, should not be readily dismissed," Getz wrote.

Those concerns were fueled by Mullet's own words after three of his sons were arrested for beard-cutting attacks last October. In a secretly recorded phone call from the Holmes County Jail, Lester Mullet told his father he was concerned his children might be taken from him.

"Samuel Mullet Sr. responded that somebody will 'get killed' before that happened," according to an FBI transcript of the conversation.

Mullet's lawyer scoffs at the prosecution's portrayal of his client.

"They're trying to create this perception he's something he's not," said defense attorney Edward Bryan. "He's not a wacky cult leader. He's a decent, hardworking, caring man."

But in 2005, eight families -- including one of Mullet's sons -- chose to break away and move to Amish enclaves in different counties rather than submit themselves to Mullet's strict and sometimes violent discipline.

Mullet responded by shunning, and later excommunicating, all members of the departed families from the church. After a conclave of 300 mainstream Amish church leaders met in Pennsylvania to address Mullet's practices, a seven-member committee investigated and overturned Mullet's excommunication orders.

That decision infuriated Mullet, and launched the beard- and hair-cutting attacks -- some of which were directed at members of the Amish investigation committee, according to an FBI affidavit.

Some of the victims were elderly. Several were wounded and bloodied with eight-inch horse mane-cutting shears, according to the affidavit. When one of the victims pleaded with the men and women not to cut his beard, he wondered how Amish Christians devoted to peace and brotherhood could wage such an attack on a fellow church member.

"We are not Christians," Johnny Mullet, one of Sam's sons, responded, according to the FBI.