

Episcopal court finds bishop guilty of hiding abuse by brother: Victim says Bennison walked in on encounters

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An Episcopal Church court has unanimously found Bishop Charles E. Bennison guilty of not responding appropriately to sexual abuse committed by his brother against a teenage girl more than three decades ago.

The 64-year-old Bennison, who has led the Philadelphia-based Diocese of Pennsylvania since 1998, was convicted June 26 by the nine-member panel of “conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy.”

The panel of five bishops, two other clergy and two laypeople will now decide the bishop’s punishment, which can range from admonishment to ousting him from the clergy.

As a married youth minister at Bennison’s parish in Upland, California, in the early 1970s, his 24-year-old brother, John Bennison, initiated a sexual relationship with a 14-year-old girl that continued for more than three years.

Charles Bennison walked in on two encounters between his brother and the girl in church offices and Sunday school rooms at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, the victim, now 50, testified in the four-day trial.

In 1975, Charles Bennison presented his brother for ordination to the priesthood. After sexual relationships with several other women, the younger Bennison renounced his orders, was reinstated, and finally renounced them again in 2006.

Six of the nine members of the Church Court for the Trial of a Bishop— a required two-thirds majority—also voted to convict Bennison for “suppressing” what he knew until the abuse became public in 2006.

In his defense, the bishop testified that he had not known about the abuse until a few years after it started, and when he confronted his brother, the younger Bennison denied the allegations.

Bennison, one of the church's most liberal bishops, has been barred from acting as bishop since last fall, when a church review committee presented the two-count indictment against him. The diocesan standing committee has been overseeing the diocese since Bennison's inhibition in November.

"We are proud of the Episcopal Church for holding Bishop Bennison accountable," said Lawrence White, the lead prosecuting attorney for the Episcopal Church, in a statement.

John McDonald, a spokesperson for Bennison's legal team, said, "We plan on appealing this decision and look forward to Bishop Bennison's exoneration." - *Religion News Service*