

Jury finds 16 Amish guilty in beard-cutting attacks

by [James F. McCarty](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

Amish bishop Samuel Mullet has been convicted of federal hate crimes and conspiracy for exhorting followers to forcibly shear the hair and beards of those who opposed his breakaway Ohio sect.

Mullet's three sons, his daughter and 11 other family members and followers from his ultra-strict Amish order 100 miles southeast of Cleveland also were convicted of conspiracy and hate crimes after a trial that attracted international attention.

The 66-year-old bishop could face life in prison for his crimes. U.S. District Judge Dan Aaron Polster scheduled sentencing hearings for January 24.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Bridget Brennan said federal sentencing guidelines recommend a minimum of 17 and a half years for the other 15 defendants given that their crimes involved violence and kidnapping. But defense attorneys said the judge has the discretion to sentence some of Mullet's followers to as little as time already served in jail.

A jury of seven men and five women announced the verdicts September 20 after deliberating for 37 hours over five days.

Defense attorney Edward Bryan, who represented Samuel Mullet during the three-week trial in U.S. District Court, said he was shocked by the jurors' decision to convict his client and will appeal.

"There was very little, in fact no evidence, connecting Sam Mullet to any of these matters," Bryan said. "The government was successful in convincing the jury that he had a Svengali-like influence over these people."

U.S. Attorney Steven Dettelbach said the shearing attacks warranted prosecution in federal court as hate crimes.

“The evidence was that they invaded their homes, physically attacked these people and sheared them almost like animals,” Dettelbach said during a news conference. “Our community and our nation must have zero tolerance for this type of religious intolerance. Religious-motivated violence will not be brushed aside and will not be tolerated.”

The case was the first in Ohio to make use of a landmark 2009 federal law that expanded government powers to prosecute hate crimes. Two weeks of testimony attracted widespread media attention, in part because of the unusual nature of the crimes and because of public curiosity about the historically reclusive and peaceful Amish society.

Federal prosecutors argued that Mullet, the religious and social leader of a breakaway settlement of 18 families in the Jefferson County farming community of Bergholz, considered himself a god and above the law.

Witnesses portrayed the bishop as a fire-and-brimstone preacher and iron-fisted autocrat who imposed strict, and often bizarre, discipline on his flock. He read and censored all incoming and outgoing mail, punished wrongdoers with spankings and confinement in chicken coops, and engaged in sexual relations with several of the young married women under the guise of marital counseling and absolution.

When members of neighboring Amish communities opposed him, prosecutors said, he unleashed a band of renegades who waged a “campaign of terror” that included the shearing attacks.

The five raids were carried out mostly at night, with the victims roused out of bed and their beards and hair chopped off with horse mane shears and battery-powered clippers. The attackers documented their roughshod barber work with a disposable camera.

The convictions hinged on prosecutors persuading jurors that the cutting of beards and hair rose above the level of a simple assault to that of a religiously motivated hate crime.

Defense lawyers did not call any witnesses. But they maintained that their clients acted out of love and compassion and sheared the hair and beards in an effort to compel the victims to return to a conservative Amish lifestyle.

Beards and long hair are sacred symbols of Amish followers' devotion to God, and to cut them is considered humiliating. Defense lawyers said they expect their clients will be able to keep their long beards during their stays in federal prison.

During the testimony, the courtroom gallery was usually filled with Amish observers, the men clad in denim and suspenders, the women in aprons and dresses. Supporters of the prosecution sat on one side of the aisle, supporters of the Bergholz clan on the other.

In a telephone interview, Nathan Miller, an Amish author from Ewart, Michigan, said the verdicts exposed an embarrassing aspect of Amish life atypical of the peaceful, plain folk. He said that Mullet had "without a doubt" established a cult, citing his exercising of power and obedience over his flock and his use of sexual exploitation to exert his control. —RNS