

# Lutherans settle in Texas sex abuse case: ELCA admitted no wrongdoing

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has reached a settlement with 14 people who filed civil charges against a former pastor in Texas who has been convicted of use of child pornography and sexual abuse of children.

Gerald P. Thomas Jr. was pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Marshall from 1997 until 2001 when he was charged with possession of child pornography and sentenced to five years in federal prison in 2002. A jury added 397 years to Thomas's imprisonment in a state trial last year in which he was convicted of multiple counts of sex crimes against children.

The civil suit in the case was partially settled April 12 when District Judge Bonnie Leggett in Marshall approved terms reached by the plaintiffs and the national office of the ELCA; Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio; a clergy candidacy committee in Michigan; and Thomas's former church.

"This lawsuit has been deeply troubling to all involved, and we acknowledge its seriousness," said John Brooks, an ELCA spokesman, in a statement April 12. "Prior to Thomas's arrest, the ELCA was unaware of the former pastor's reprehensible conduct toward the plaintiffs in the case. Nevertheless, the ELCA is deeply sorry that anyone was victimized by Gerald Thomas."

Brooks could not discuss particulars of the civil suit settlement, but he observed that allegations of inappropriate sexual contact with children by ELCA clergy are "very rare." Church policy requires ELCA bishops to seek an offending pastor's resignation if credible evidence supports such charges, Brooks said.

The terms of the settlement were not released, but the ELCA said at least part of the agreement is funded by insurance. "In reaching the settlement, the ELCA admitted to no wrongdoing by the church," the statement said.

A civil trial involving other defendants—the local Northern Texas–Northern Louisiana Synod, its former bishop and his assistant—was set to begin April 13.