

Crookston DAILY TIMES

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Former pastor sentenced to 90 days for embezzlement

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By Natalie J. Ostgaard, City Editor

Rev. Michael Kevin Eminger, 47, Oconto, Wis. and former pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Fisher, was sentenced Monday in Polk County District Court for embezzling nearly \$14,000 from the Fisher Chamber of Commerce, for which he served as the treasurer for five years. Eminger pleaded guilty Jan. 17 to two counts felony theft, with six other theft and theft by swindle charges dismissed.

Judge Jeff Remick stayed imposition of the sentence for 10 years and instead placed Eminger on supervised probation. In accordance with probation terms, he must serve 90 days in jail, with the option of serving the last 30 under electronic home monitoring. If suitable arrangements were made, he could serve the time in a facility closer to his current home. Otherwise, he will be confined to the Northwest Regional Corrections Center. He must begin serving his time by May 1.

He must also pay fines of \$122 on each count, perform 160 hours of community service, have no contact with his victims and is not to have a job where he's in charge of money. Other terms included making restitution, which he paid back in full Jan. 18, and writing a letter of apology, which he has done.

Eminger faced possible penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison and fines of \$10,000 to \$20,000 on each count.

According to the criminal complaint, Sue Meyer, president of the Fisher Chamber of Commerce, informed the Polk County Sheriff's Office in early October 2006 that the former treasurer had stolen more than \$13,000 from Chamber's checking account. This came to light when the Chamber received an overdraft notice from the bank, which prompted a review of the checking account over the last five years.

The review revealed numerous checks Eminger issued from the account, primarily written to himself, for unexplainable expenses totaling \$13,923.12. With an annual budget of around \$4,000, that amounts to nearly all the Chamber's funds accumulated during the three-and-a-half-year period Eminger allegedly pilfered public funds.

Meyer told Deputy Randy Sondrol that when board members confronted Eminger about the missing funds the day before, he made no excuses and apologized for putting them in such a position.

Eminger had served as pastor for Trinity and St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Euclid, both Missouri Synod denominations, for nearly a decade, since the spring of 1997. He also filled in at other area churches as needed, including Our Savior's Lutheran in Crookston, where he served as interim pastor several years ago. He resigned in November in light of the charges against him.

A spokesperson for the Minnesota North District of the Lutheran Church Missouri explained that Eminger is on restricted status with the LCMS and is currently not allowed to take a call to another congregation pending the outcome of the criminal case. While on restricted status, Eminger is also not supported financially by the LCMS and must find his own work outside the ministry.

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