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Rape allegations against former Pella pastor leave 'lifetime of hurt'

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Pella, Ia. -- Patrick Edouard, the former Pella pastor accused of raping three women in his church, was a dynamic preacher in a church and community where theology matters, the sermon is the crescendo of the worship service and the senior pastor is revered.

Had Edouard only engaged in affairs with women in the church, it would have been a devastating transgression against the women, their families and the congregation, said Clarence Hettinga, an elder and president of the council at Covenant Reformed Church

"That's a lifetime of hurt," Hettinga said.

But Edouard has been accused of far more in Marion County District Court.

He has been charged with forcing three different women from Covenant Reformed into sex acts in 2006, 2007 and 2008. He is also charged with three counts of sexual exploitation, for two of the alleged rapes and for a sexual relationship with a fourth woman in his congregation that lasted from May 2008 to June 2010. The exploitation charges are made under a state law that prohibits counselors, therapists, teachers and clergy from having sex with their patients and clients.

Preaching is central to the church and so, therefore, is the preacher, Hettinga said.

"It's why the pulpit is right in the middle," Hettinga said. "The Reformed and the Dutch traditions do hold him up to a fairly high position."

Edouard's sermons were broadcast on the radio, Hettinga said. The pastor was, until mid-December, thought to be well-liked and respected.

"That's why it's such a shock," said Hettinga, a plain-spoken man with a gray beard who lives west of Pella. "He was an excellent, powerful preacher."

Edouard, 41, is originally from Haiti but went to high school in New York City and graduated from Baruch College in 1995. He then studied at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Ind. He taught a Sunday night class to adults at a Presbyterian church in Valparaiso on the Westminster Confession of Faith, and led worship in churches throughout the Midwest.

He graduated from seminary in 1998 and immediately became pastor of Covenant Reformed Church in Toronto. The current pastor there could not be reached for comment. When Edouard and his family decided to move to Pella, four Covenant Reformed families drove the two days from Pella with a truck to help with the move.

In a Dutch Reformed church tradition that places a premium on rigorous doctrine, church governance and tightly-disciplined lives, Edouard chose to pastor one of the most rigorous. Covenant Reformed Church had split off from the First Christian Reformed Church in Pella in 1998.

Before it hired Edouard, the church required him to fill out a detailed questionnaire that asked him questions about his preaching style, whether he prepares by reading the text in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, and how many hours are needed to prepare a good sermon.

Edouard preached his last sermon in Pella on Dec. 19. The following week he was confronted by the church council with the allegation of sexual infidelity. He resigned on the spot, and was deposed as a pastor in the church's larger denomination. Not until later did criminal charges come up.

"Initially we didn't know the extent of it," Hettinga said. "We didn't know what happened, and we didn't dig for details."

Hettinga would not say what elders have told the congregation of about 650, but said "there was just sadness" in meetings after the news was announced. Hettinga said all the alleged victims and their families still attend the church.

Around the end of January someone in the congregation, whom Hettinga would not identify, asked the elders to approve a letter saying the elders had

investigated the matter and concluded what had happened was more than sexual infidelity, it was crime.

"We have concluded that Patrick Edouard's actions should not be referred to as adulterous affairs, but instead we believe that his actions are best characterized as clergy sexual abuse," the unsigned letter said.

Hettinga said Saturday the letter was not written or approved by the elders of the church. It was circulated anyway, however, and published on news websites after the Marion County attorney filed charges against Edouard this past week.

"That will now be discussed in the trial, and we'll let that happen there," Hettinga said. "It would be very arrogant to say I know what happened."

Edouard is scheduled to make his first court appearance on Friday.