

11-26-07 - Former colleague declines to endorse Fushek: Indicted Mesa priest starts new ministry
by Lawn Griffiths, East Valley Tribune (AZ)

The Praise and Worship Center in Mesa, started recently by indicted priest Dale Fushek, is getting no endorsement from his longtime friend, the Rev. Jack Spaulding of St. Timothy's Catholic Community in Mesa.

Spaulding told parishioners neither he nor the parish support the new ministry that Fushek is billing as a nondenominational ministry that can "complement" whatever anyone may be experiencing spiritually elsewhere.

Fushek was pastor at St. Timothy's from 1985 to late 2004 when he was put on administrative leave after allegations first surfaced of sexual misconduct with teens.

In November 2005, Fushek, who also had served as the vicar general for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix, was indicted on 10 misdemeanor counts of sexual improprieties with male teens during a 10-year period. Three counts were later dismissed.

He is specifically charged with one count of assault, five counts of contributing to the delinquency of a minor and one count of indecent exposure.

The priest awaits an Arizona Supreme Court decision on whether he should be granted a jury trial or the case should be left to a judge.

A court of appeals found that jury trials are reserved for "serious" offenses that are punishable by at least six months in jail, or offenses where jury trials have been historically assured.

Fushek has emphasized his case is serious because, if convicted, he could be required to register as a sex offender, a special burden for a religious leader.

On Oct. 30, the Supreme Court decided to consider Fushek's arguments. A court official said Monday the date to hear oral arguments will be set late this week.

In his remarks to St. Timothy's parish this past weekend, Spaulding acknowledged media reports of the Thanksgiving Day service at the Mesa Convention Center in which Fushek and former priest Mark Dippre led prayer and worship for about 550 people in its kickoff gathering.

"As his friend for over 30 years, and now as pastor of St. Tim's, I say, with sadness, that I cannot, and do not, support him in this, and that the parish cannot and does not support him on this." Spaulding was assigned to St. Timothy's after Fushek was put on administrative leave.

Spaulding asked the parish to pray for Fushek "as I do daily for a just resolution to the criminal charges against him." He called on the faithful to "continue to put the Holy Eucharist at the center of your lives."

"For us Catholics, Holy Mass is the ultimate form of praise and worship of God," he said. "As Catholic Christians, we follow Christ and the church He established."

The new praise center's Web site (praiseandworshipcenter.net) touts its next two services, both on Sundays — Dec. 23 and Jan. 6, the fourth Sunday of Advent and Feast Day of Epiphany, significant days in the Catholic and Christian calendars.

St. Timothy's has had a drop of registered families since Fushek's departure: 5,279 families in 2004 to 4,657 this year.

Fushek, 55, told the Tribune that he intends to resign as a Catholic priest, but diocesan spokesman Jim Dwyer said Monday he knows of no letter being sent so far to Bishop Thomas Olmsted. Fushek, who grew up in Phoenix and attended Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Scottsdale as a boy, was ordained as a priest in 1978.

Ken Babb of Scottsdale, spokesman for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, said Fushek should have held off any ministry "until it is all sorted out" in the courts. Babb, who was a victim of abuse by priests in the Diocese of Tucson, said Fushek "is choosing to do an end-around ... It is an absolutely selfish thing. It is all about him."

While the priest may be within the law to start a ministry, "it (is) absolutely inappropriate" and "very troubling," said Babb, adding that the support for Fushek comes from "complacent Catholics" who have no idea how endemic and widespread the abuse of victims had been.

Fushek founded the Life Teen program in 1985 and saw it grow to some 1,080 programs in 20 countries, involving 120,000 teens. He was actively involved in Valley visits of Pope John Paul II in 1987 and Mother Teresa in 1989, and was named vicar general in 2000 and a monsignor in 2002.

The Praise and Worship Center's co-founder, Dippre, was ordained a priest in 1992 and served as associate pastor at Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish in Tempe from 1992 to 1995 and as its pastor from 2000 to 2002.

He was also associate pastor under Fushek at St. Timothy's from 1995 to 2000. He resigned from the priesthood in 2002 and later married, according to diocesan records.

Fushek did not respond to phone or e-mail requests for comment.