

Max minister charged with theft

BY JAMES C. FALCON
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WASHBURN – A McLean County minister was charged by the McLean County Sheriff's Office Monday with Theft of Property, a Class B felony, after unauthorized spending of church funding was discovered following an audit of the finances at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Max.

According to an affidavit supplied by the Sheriff's Office, Rev. Erin Gullickson obtained assets "surreptitiously" through unauthorized control over church bank accounts for personal use.

Gullickson, who served as reverend at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Max and Concordia Lutheran Church in Benedict, "holds a position and title of a respected person of authority, whose responsibility is to guide the spiritual wellbeing of others," Detective Bradley Nielsen stated in the affidavit.

"(She) knowingly took unauthorized control over Our Savior Lutheran Church assets, namely CDs, with the intent to deprive the church of such assets for her personal worldly gain," Nielsen stated. "(She) took advantage of the congregation council's trust in her and lack of oversight, and in doing so was violating the Church Constitution and her own biblical teachings."

Nielsen met with Our Savior Lutheran Church treasurer Jake Jacobson and members of the church's congregational council in Max on Feb. 15, 2023. In the affidavit, Jacobson stated that the church roof was leaking water, damaging the building and the roof needed to be replaced. Jacobson said that he was told of the existence of Certificates of Deposit (CDs) totaling around \$40,000, but these could not be located. After performing an audit, Jacobson discovered that a bank account which was "not supposed to exist" was open in the church's name at Bremer Bank.

Bremer Bank had an office in Max, but after it closed – and Garrison State Bank (now TruCommunity Bank) moved into the same premises – the congregation council voted to move all assets to TruCommunity Bank. In the affidavit, then-church treasurer Laura Gray stated that Gullickson "had volunteered to transfer all the accounts." However, it appeared that only the church's main account was transferred; the church's Youth League account, as well as the CDs, were kept in an account at Bremer Bank.

"No one from the congregation council followed up on the account transfers assuming they were done," the affidavit noted. "It was at this time that (Gullickson) was in control of a surreptitious church bank account that the congregation council did not know existed."

On April 9, 2019, two CDs totaling \$40,304.15 held at Bremer Bank were liquidated and deposited into the Youth League account. While it is unknown how this was done without the signatures of the two

signers for the CDs, Nielsen surmised that he believes "it was just done without question, because Rev. Erin Gullickson is the Reverend of the church and no one questioned her authority to control church assets, even though the church constitution states Reverends are not to do so."

"What is clear is that (Gullickson) spent the \$40,304.15 within six months on personal items of a worldly nature," Nielsen stated.

For the past six years, starting June 1, 2016, Gullickson made purchases using a debit card issued for the Youth League bank account. According to bank documents, \$79,968.44 was spent on what Nielsen classified as "egregious expenditures."

"The vast majority of these expenditures were spent on eBay, PayPal and Amazon, and were for home decor and furniture, women's clothing, shoes, and jewelry, vacations and cash," Nielsen stated in the affidavit.

A breakdown of funds, outlined in the affidavit, show that funds were spent in a variety of ways: from \$86.74 in gas station convenience stores in 2018 to \$2,963.31 while on vacation in Italy and Rome.

In addition, unauthorized deposits were made in the Youth League account "from donations solicited by (Gullickson) for the Youth Group," Nielsen noted. "Offering in the form of checks and cash which were supposed to be deposited in the Our Savior Lutheran Church main account were split up and deposited in both accounts at the separate banks with (Gullickson's) name signed for endorsement."

On Feb. 14, 2023, when the investigation into the funds started and the account was frozen, there was "only \$570.10 in the account."

Gullickson was interviewed in three "non-custodial" interviews – meaning she wasn't under arrest – by Nielsen. The first, which took place on the evening of Feb. 15 at the church, Nielsen confronted Gullickson, who was "polite and calm." However, once she learned of the nature

behind his visit – "to get all of the church's financial property from her," including debit cards and checkbooks – she became "overwhelmed."

"When asked why she is so overwhelmed, (Gullickson) stated 'because its been one of my greatest fears that these accounts would be misused. I've been worried about this for years,'" Nielsen said in the affidavit.

Three days later, Nielsen and Lt. Justin Krohmer made an appointment to speak with Gullickson at her home. During the interview, Gullickson "was very nervous, fast moving, short of breath and could not focus," Nielsen noted.

When asked about Sunday offering collections, Gullickson said that they are deposited into TruCommunity bank account; however, one check that was placed in the Sunday offering plate was endorsed by Gullickson and deposited into the Youth League account – something which Gullickson excused as her "being disorganized" and "an accident," but Nielsen stated in the affidavit that driving 45 minutes to Minot to deposit a check into an account that was supposed to have been closed years ago was "not an accident."

On Feb. 27, Nielsen called Gullickson to set up an appointment at the Sheriff's Office, but she did not answer, and he left a message. Later that day, Nielsen was informed by States Attorney Ladd Erickson that Gullickson had obtained a lawyer. An hour later, Gullickson called Nielsen and the conversation was "an excited utterance by her and showed she felt guilty for what she had done but continued to make excuses for doing it."

Nielsen noted in the affidavit that he looked into whether or not Gullickson, as minister at Concordia Lutheran Church and as a board member at Camp of the Cross Ministries, had access to their respective assets; he found that she did not.

Gullickson is scheduled for an initial appearance on May 17.

Opinion

BETWEEN YOU & ME

Dear sirs

BY ALYSSA MEIER
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I was warned years ago that the hardest part of management is the turnover process.

As a large company, we see some routine comings and goings of staff members, especially as seasonal help heads out of state, back to school or otherwise out the door.

And while I have grown accustomed to our process of advertising, interviewing, rejecting and hiring staff, I understand at times why I was cautioned that the process would become frustrating.

When working to fill a sports reporting and photography position a few years back, I fielded a half dozen applications from candidates insisting they could cover local games from across the country. I advised I wasn't aware of a zoom lens that would do the job from Connecticut.

Seeing these out-of-state applications that seemed too good to be true mostly proved to be and I learned to not get my hopes up, especially in post-COVID conditions where so many applicants were insistent on only working from home.

The hunt has been difficult, but, to be fair, perhaps so am I.

I receive resumes every so often addressed "Dear sir." In the 21st century, it's a red flag, if for no other reason than having proof the applicant didn't bother to look at the woman whose contact name is listed with the job posting.

Still, I try to brush off the greeting when I see it pop up in application materials. Try to, I said. Succeed, I don't always.

One resume this year addressed "The gentlemen of the hiring committee" and ended with "looking forward to hearing from a male representative".

I kindly responded that we were unfortunately unable to evaluate the application as the hiring committee consists only of women and therefore has no man available to look over the candidate's materials as requested.

Still, between all of the grime that take place and the time it consumes, the hiring process is one I tend to enjoy.


It gives us opportunities to seek out passionate people who want to do great work. It lets us evaluate new options for a position, a department or an entire office and opens up discussion on potential improvements we can make.

Most of all, it allows me to hear questions from applicants who want to know about the company's operations, goals and philosophies. It provides an opportunity to garner perspectives from outside of our office and to hear ideas from seasoned professionals and bright young individuals alike.

It prompts me to take a look at what we're doing and where we're going -- and if we're on the right track.

Yes, the process is stressful and I am always relieved to complete it, but it's a necessary journey and one that allows us to reach new heights with every new hire coming on board.


Alas, that's just my opinion. You may want to confer with a gentlemen before you take my word for it.




Students of the Month

WASHBURN

Congratulations to our Cardinals Students of the Month for April, Matthew Moyes (High School) and Haylie Bentz (Junior High). April's theme was Lifelong Learner. Both display a growth mindset and are always curious to learn more!




Matthew Moyes
(High School)



Haylie Bentz
(Junior High)

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