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Lawsuit claiming harassment filed against KC diocese

by Joshua J. McElwee

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- A former employee of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese has filed a federal lawsuit claiming he was sexually harassed at work and then fired after making reports to superiors.

The lawsuit, filed yesterday in U.S. District Court by Larry Probst, alleges that Probst was subjected to a sexually hostile work environment because of unwanted sexual advances from another lay employee, inappropriate and offensive language in the office in which he worked, and inappropriate messages on diocesan computers. It seeks unspecified back pay and damages.

The diocesan spokesperson confirmed in an email that Probst had worked for the diocese on an intermittent basis from June 2005 until June 2011.

Along with four other positions, Probst's temporary position was eliminated at the end of the diocesan fiscal year, on June 30, 2011, solely for budgetary reasons, said the statement. At the same time, an existing full-time employee with six years of service to the diocese was assigned to offer support to four departments, including the Diocesan Archives.

According to the lawsuit, Probst was an employee in the diocesan archives office when he became the subject of unwanted sexual advances from a male coworker in the office.

The coworker, named in the lawsuit as Michael St. George, would use his diocesan computer in ways that were inappropriate and offensive to Probst, including leaving sexually explicit web email messages open on the screen.

According to yesterday's suit, Probst first reported his concerns about the coworker to the head of the archives office, diocesan priest Fr. Charles Michael Coleman in approximately the summer/fall of 2010. Coleman, the suit alleges, seemed only to be concerned that the email be deleted so that St. George

would not be fired.?

Following that report, the suit alleges Probst then reported his concerns through the spring of 2011 to five other diocesan officials and priests.

The suit alleges a meeting between Probst and the diocesan chancellor occurred in March of last year. It also alleges that Probst provided the chancellor with a "screen capture" image of an inappropriate email that Probst's co-worker had left open on his diocesan computer's screen.

Following an official report on his concerns, the suit alleges Probst was notified in May, 2011, that his position was to be eliminated "due to lack of funding," and his employment was officially terminated June 30.

It also alleges that Probst was then immediately replaced by another part-time employee, a female, who started work July 1.

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Last November, Probst spoke about his allegations against the diocese during a brief press conference outside the Kansas City chancery building.

Without giving any details of what he would later allege, Probst said then that he was "unwillingly subjected to a sexually hostile work environment by some co-workers and priests.?"

Probst's lawsuit, which was brought by the Randles, Mata, and Brown law firm, alleges sexual harassment, sex discrimination and retaliation and seeks relief under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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