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# Prosecutor: East Bay pastor convicted of child molestation flees to Mexico

By Sarah Ravani

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A Contra Costa County jury convicted a Martinez pastor of 23 counts of child sexual abuse days after he failed to show up at his trial and apparently fled to Mexico with his wife and children — jumping \$1.29 million in bail secured by relatives, prosecutors said Thursday.

Fernando Maldonado, 37, faces up to 34 years in state prison for crimes ranging from committing lewd acts upon a child to unlawful sexual intercourse and sodomy of a person under the age of 18.

A jury convicted him on all charges Wednesday after deliberating for 2½ hours. But the defendant was not present when the panel announced its decision.

A bench warrant was issued for him when he failed to show up for his trial on Monday. Maldonado was last spotted driving south on Interstate 5 near San Diego on Sunday, said Jordan Sanders, a Contra Costa County deputy district attorney.

“Based on this information, I am comfortable assuming he is driving to Mexico with his wife and children,” Sanders said.

Shortly after his arrest in April 2016, Maldonado was released on \$1.29 million bail

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Prosecutors said Maldonado had a sexual relationship between 2012 and 2016 with a young girl, beginning when she was 13 years old and while he was a minister at Morello Baptist Church in Martinez. The victim, whose name was not released, was a church parishioner, said Sanders.

Their relationship continued until the victim ended it in December 2014 when she was about 16 years old, Sanders said.

“At the time, he was married and had a newborn baby,” Sanders said, adding that Maldonado was also a minister at Grace Bible Church in Pleasant Hill.

The victim testified against Maldonado on Thursday and Friday, before he decided to flee, Sanders said.

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Sanders said that during the trial he played the jury a recorded phone call, in which the victim confronted Maldonado about the sex abuse.

Additionally, a criminalist testified that Maldonado's semen was found on a church couch, corroborating the victim's testimony that they had sex inside the church, Sanders said.

On Monday, the judge issued a no-bail bench warrant for Maldonado and the trial proceeded without him in the courtroom.

"Since the trial concluded and the jury returned a verdict, my office and the local police departments have diligently been researching his location," Sanders said. "We checked on his residence multiple times Monday afternoon and throughout the week with no results."

He said the search will continue. Maldonado is scheduled to be sentenced in February.

"If and when we locate him," Sanders said, "justice will be served and he will be sentenced."

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