

An Idaho sheriff's daunting battle to investigate when children of a faith-healing sect die

By NIGEL DUARA APR 18, 2017 | 3:00 AM | CALDWELL, IDAHO



Dan Sevy, a member of the Followers of Christ church, testifies in August before an Idaho legislative panel reviewing the state's faith-healing exemptions. (Betsy Z. Russell / Spokane Spokesman Review)

The coroner's van pulled into the driveway sometime after midnight, and for a moment — her dead daughter in her arms — LaTisha Shippy hated God.

"I had hate in my heart for him," Shippy said. "I questioned my faith, and why this was happening. You don't lose four children and not have some of that."

Canyon County Coroner Vicki DeGeus-Morris found Shippy in bed and the baby's body, cleaned and dressed, on a changing table in another room. "It was apparent that she had been dead for a while, as the skin was slipping off the entire torso of the baby," DeGeus-Morris wrote in a coroner's report.

The baby had been dead inside Shippy's womb for days, DeGeus-Morris concluded, and yet Shippy had sought no medical help when she'd felt the nearly full-term baby stop moving. She and her fellow Followers of Christ consider professional medicine an engine of the devil. Instead, she had prayed.

In most states, failing to seek medical care for a nearly 40-week-old fetus might be a crime. Idaho is one of at least four states that provide religious groups broad exemptions from criminal prosecution and civil liability for the deaths of children attributable to medical neglect.

In deep-red Idaho, where the right to be left alone trumps all ideologies, lawmakers have repeatedly rejected proposed changes to the law that would impose criminal or civil penalties for failing to seek medical care for children with life-threatening conditions.

But a growing resistance to Idaho's faith-healing statute is building here in the suburbs west of Boise, home to a group of Followers of Christ, a small Christian denomination that believes in faith healing and strict shunning of those who stray from the church's teachings.

Faced with three deaths linked to faith healing in the county over the last four months, Canyon County Sheriff Kieran Donahue has launched a campaign to change the law, and remove any religious exemptions for the legal obligation to seek medical care for children.



Canyon County Sheriff Kieran Donahue is fighting Idaho's religious exemptions on medical care for children. (Canyon County Sheriff's Office)

Donahue believes the law allows children to die unnecessarily, and painfully, in ways that the Followers of Christ may not medically understand. He has formed a unit in his department to investigate the death of every child connected to the group — and hopes his findings will prompt the coroner to conduct more complete death examinations of the children.

In Canyon County, children of church members have died from pneumonia, infection of the fetal membrane, failure to administer insulin for diabetes and other preventable causes, and critics say public officials have accepted the deaths too easily.

In the Shippy case, breaking with the custom of most American death investigations — especially those involving a child — DeGeus-Morris did not take the baby's body with her or call the sheriff.

"It's an atrocity," said Donahue, 54, who first investigated faith-healing deaths as a Canyon County deputy. "If it was cattle being treated like this, no medical care, in distress, if you saw that from the street, we'd have a search warrant and we'd be kicking down doors."

Donahue testified before a Senate committee in March, arguing that adults should be held criminally liable when they fail to seek medical help for seriously ailing children.

"I've heard we don't want to criminalize the parent. If the parent is criminal, we need to prosecute," he said. "It's an embarrassment to our state."

But Donahue may have been too optimistic about the Legislature's intentions.

"Do you think that bill is going to pass?" Majority Leader Bart Davis asked on the Senate floor during debate later that month. "It won't. Because this body is reluctant to punish people criminally for a firmly held religious belief."

Like previous attempts to change the legislation, the bill was killed on the Senate floor.

Legislators from the Canyon County area vigorously defend the Followers' right to their religious beliefs, and DeGeus-Morris appears to be conducting few investigations of the deaths of Followers' children. The Canyon County prosecutor, citing the exemptions granted religious groups, doesn't take potential cases of medical neglect if the family involved is a member of the Followers of Christ church.

Each year, on average, three children in Idaho die of causes for which they would have otherwise been hospitalized, according to a gubernatorial task force, and the child mortality rate among the Followers of Christ from 2002 to 2011 was 10 times that of the rest of Idaho.

Yet the church has found sympathetic ears in powerful quarters.

At a news conference in January, Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill said legislators want to recognize religious beliefs and help children. "Most of the people in this room believe that God can help heal," he said.

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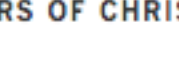
Dan Sevy's voice is low and measured, the twang of his career as a country music singer lying heavy on every vowel. He has made a powerful ally in the Legislature, and when he told a Senate subcommittee about his two sons' lungs filling with fluids as they slowly drowned in their own bodies, his voice never wavered.

"We happen to practice what you call faith healing," Sevy told committee members. "As far as adherence to any law, who do you better obey, God or man?"

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— DAN SEVY, MEMBER OF FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

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Sevy has become the public face of the Followers of Christ, in part because of his relationship to Idaho state Sen. Patti Anne Lodge, who represents Sevy's district. Sevy's band served as the musical entertainment for one of Lodge's fundraisers last year, and she has emerged as one of the strongest voices opposing changes to the faith-healing law. She is not a member of the church.



Idaho state Sen. Patti Anne Lodge has been a strong opponent to changes to the faith-healing law. (Otto Kitsinger / Associated Press)

"These are good people," Lodge said. "They have a right to live as the law allows them without interference, that is what our Constitution [grants] them."

On March 30, 2011, Sevy's 14-year-old son Rockwell was reported dead after having been ill for "about two weeks," according to DeGeus-Morris' report. He had been running a fever and experiencing difficulty breathing, the report said, and died in his mother's lap. Three years earlier, in 2008, DeGeus-Morris had issued the death certificate for Rockwell's older brother, Gabriel Joe, 17. The cause of death was pneumonia.

In both cases, she confirmed the deaths, noted a lack of outward signs of trauma and left the bodies to the family.

In most death investigations in the U.S., the coroner is responsible for the body and the police are responsible for the scene. Donahue has been critical of the Canyon County coroner's office for failing to call in his department in these cases — a policy that he said could result in a dangerous assumption about the nature of the death while also potentially corrupting the scene.

Without an autopsy or sign of violence listed in the coroner's report, Donahue has no legal right to look into the deaths. And on the rare occasion when he thinks he might have a case, Canyon County Prosecuting Attorney Bryan Taylor or his deputies inform Donahue that they cannot prosecute because of Idaho's religious shield law.

Taylor deferred questions to a county spokesman, who said Taylor follows Idaho law and is interested in protecting all of Idaho's children. DeGeus-Morris did not respond to questions and asked a reporter to leave her office.

According to Idaho law, coroners must conduct a death investigation in certain cases, such as stillborn children without a known disease, or for deaths unattended by a physician. But Idaho investigators are limited by the final clause in the statute making an exemption for faith healing: "Nothing in this section shall be construed to affect the tenets of any church or religious belief."

Edwin Sonnenberg, a retired coroner in nearby Ada County, said he tried, with limited success, to get Followers of Christ families to notify his office of stillbirths or deaths, especially of children.

Failure to do so could pose a risk to the community, especially if a person died of a communicable disease, he said.

"The coroner's responsibility is to protect the citizens of a county," Sonnenberg said. "If you're not sure why a child died, just because you're with a good family, doesn't mean you just wash your hands of it."

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— EDWIN SONNENBERG, RETIRED CORONER, ADA COUNTY

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Officers from the investigative unit Donahue formed say they are hampered by their inability to obtain search warrants or preserve potential crime scenes. "If the law was the other way around, it'd be a totally different situation," said Lt. Mike Armstrong, who heads the unit.

In nearly every instance involving the Followers of Christ, the scene of a child's death is corrupted, Donahue said. Bodies are moved, the scene is cleaned and witnesses to the death will not respond to

questions from police officers. Deputies may not be called to the scene for hours after the coroner responds.

"They'll just stare at you, not saying a word. And at that point, our crime scene is gone. All we have is a body," Donahue said. "We don't know whether they killed the kid, whether they starved the kid to death — we don't know."

Shippy and her husband have lost two other infants during childbirth, a girl and a boy. Another son died at 2 months old. In all, other three of their seven children are still alive. Such a grim litany is not uncommon for the Followers of Christ.

The latest in the Shippy family was the baby girl named Fern Lilly, who stopped moving inside her mother three days before her stillbirth on Nov. 27, 2014.

"Of course there was sorrow. Nobody wants to see their child die," Shippy said in an interview. "Then I felt peace and I felt comfort in the knowledge that the Lord had taken her."

"Where else would I rather her be than with God?"

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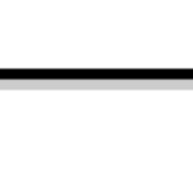
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Nigel Duara

CONTACT   

Nigel Duara covered the border for the Los Angeles Times, based in Tucson, until 2017. A Miami native, Duara was previously a reporter for the Associated Press in Portland, Ore. He is also a veteran of the American Middle West, with stints in Iowa City and Des Moines, Iowa. He graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism.