



BCPO News

Scott A. Coffina, Prosecutor



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October 30, 2020

Youth Pastor Charged with Online Sexual Exploitation of Young Males

Burlington County Prosecutor Scott Coffina announced that the youth pastor and music leader of a Hainesport church has been charged with coaxing underage boys on social media to send him nude pictures and videos, then using that material to blackmail his victims into performing sexual acts on themselves for his enjoyment.

Sean Higgins, 30, of the 300 block of Temple Boulevard in Palmyra, has been charged with a total of 28 crimes. He holds the position of youth pastor at Harbor Baptist Church, and also serves as a teacher at the Harbor Baptist Academy, a private K-12 school with an enrollment of approximately 75 students that is housed in the same facility.

Higgins is charged with six counts of Manufacturing Child Sexual Abuse Material (First Degree), one count of Aggravated Sexual Assault (First Degree), five counts of Distribution of Child Sex Abuse Material (Second Degree), one count of Sexual Assault (Second Degree), six counts of Possession of Child Sex Abuse Material (Third Degree), six counts of Endangering the Welfare of a Child (Third Degree), and one count each of Criminal Sexual Contact (Fourth Degree), Obstruction (Fourth Degree) and Contempt (Fourth Degree).

His six identified victims thus far range in age from 12 to 15, and reside in Alabama, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and South Dakota. The crimes for which he is presently charged do not involve physical contact with the victims, and do not involve any members of the church congregation or students at the school.

He was taken into custody yesterday at his residence. Investigators forced their way inside after Higgins refused to open the door. Search warrants were executed at his home as well as the church, which is located in the 2100 block of Marne Highway. Multiple electronic devices were seized.

Higgins was lodged in the Burlington County Jail in Mount Holly pending a detention hearing in Superior Court. The investigation is continuing and additional charges are anticipated.

"These charges underscore the importance of the responsibility of parents to monitor their children's internet activity, and also having those frank and uncomfortable conversations about the dangers of sharing naked photos or other embarrassing images of themselves," Prosecutor Coffina said. "Cyberspace can be scary, but vigilance and simple common sense are effective defenses against online predators."

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The investigation revealed that Higgins would adopt the persona of a teenage girl and utilize Snapchat and Instagram to begin a conversation with a juvenile male, introducing himself as Julie Miller. After establishing a rapport, he would suggest that they trade photos. Higgins would then send pictures of an unidentified female teenager. If he liked the pictures he received, he would suggest that nude photos be exchanged.

After sending nude photos of an unknown female, Higgins would often receive nude photos that the victims took of themselves in return. Immediately upon receiving those images, Higgins would take a screenshot of the victim's friends list that was visible on the forward-facing social media account. Higgins would send that screenshot back to the victim and threaten to send the nude photos he had just received to the list of the victim's friends unless the victim did exactly what Higgins demanded.

"When a boy would send a nude photo of himself, Higgins would instantly transform and warn the child, 'I've got you,' and threaten to circulate that photo if the child did not engage in additional sexual acts on camera for Higgins's sick gratification," Prosecutor Coffina said. "The desperation of these young boys who were put in this position by this predator is truly heartbreaking."

In most of the cases that were investigated, Higgins then demanded that his victims go into the bathroom at their residence and place the phone on the floor, or at an angle looking up, and would instruct the victims to masturbate or perform sexual acts on themselves. Higgins would record what was transpiring.

According to the videos made by Higgins that were obtained during the investigation, victims would often beg Higgins to be allowed to stop engaging in sexual conduct, but Higgins would demand that they complete his instructions, or face the consequences of having the recordings he was making of the abuse be sent to their list of friends.

The investigation began after a youth in Berks County, Pa., contacted Snapchat and reported that he sent nude photos of himself to an unknown female, who then had threatened to expose his nude photographs after they exchanged pictures. An underage male in Alabama also reported his communications with Higgins to law enforcement authorities.

The investigation is being conducted by the Burlington County Prosecutor's Office High-Tech Crimes Unit, with assistance from the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, Berks County (Pa.) District Attorney's Office, Delaware County (Pa.) District Attorney's Office, Cinnaminson Township Police Department, Minnehaha County (S.D.) Sheriff's Office, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, New Jersey State Police Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, Palmyra Borough Police Department, Shelby County (Ala.) Sheriff's Department, and U.S. Homeland Security Investigations – Cherry Hill.

Higgins is being prosecuted by Assistant Prosecutors Joseph Remy and Jennifer Weiler.

Anyone who believes their child has had inappropriate interaction on Snapchat or Instagram with someone going by the user name of Julie Miller, Julia Miller, or some variation of that name, is asked to call Burlington County Central Communications at 609-265-7113, or send an email to tips@co.burlington.nj.us.

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