

Ex-choir leader guilty in murder ; Man had worked in Geneva church; [West Final Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Full Text (379 words)

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A former Geneva church choir director accused of stabbing his ex-lover 22 times in 1999 was found guilty of murder Thursday by an Erie County, N.Y., jury.

Michael Pavone, 58, had last worked at St. Peter Catholic Church in Geneva and directed the church's Easter service in April. He was fired the next day when church officials learned he had surrendered to authorities in Buffalo, N.Y., in the death of a 46-year-old mentally disabled man.

Pavone will be sentenced for the murder on Feb. 18.

Erie County Deputy District Atty. Joseph Marusak characterized Pavone as a jilted lover in the October 1999 murder of Keith Sutherland, who was stabbed 22 times and left floating in a pond at a Buffalo nature preserve. The trial, which started Dec. 1, consisted of two weeks of testimony by more than 30 prosecution witnesses, Marusak said. Pavone did not take the stand in his own defense.

Pavone's younger brother, Joseph, of New York, said he is happy that "justice is served." Joseph said he was surprised that the jury took only five hours to deliberate, given that "there were no witnesses, no DNA and no weapon found."

Testimony from a male prostitute whose DNA was found at the scene helped convict Pavone. Marusak said DNA from a cigarette butt was identified as belonging to a man who was in jail on unrelated offenses last year. The man testified at the trial that a soaking wet Pavone came to his house late one night asking to help him steal a car, which was later identified as Sutherland's.

The two tried unsuccessfully to hot-wire the car, Marusak said. The car was found by police and identified as that of Sutherland, who had been reported missing by family members. Sutherland had recently moved back home after breaking off a romance with Pavone. Police wanted to question Pavone in connection with the murder, but he was hospitalized after attempting suicide, Marusak said.

Pavone recovered and left New York in 2000, without having any charges filed against him. According to Joseph Pavone, the longtime church musician took their 87-year-old mother's life savings with him, and has never spoken to the family again.

Pavone worked in churches in the Chicago area, most recently in St. Charles and Geneva.