

Murder suspect leaves trail of inconsistencies in suburbs

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Human fingers are multipurpose.

They can create miracles or cause misery.

The very same set of fingers can play beautiful music one moment and commit murder the next.

The skilled fingers of **Michael Pavone**, 58, did both, according to police.

On Easter, **Pavone** deftly used those fingers to play the organ and guided the choir at St. Peter's Church in Geneva.

The next day, those same fingertips were smeared with black ink and one by one rolled onto an arrest card by police in Buffalo, N.Y.

According to charges filed by Buffalo prosecutors, **Pavone's** talented hands had plunged a knife into his one-time lover. Not just once, but 22 times.

The murder occurred nearly five years ago while **Pavone** was a church choir director in Buffalo. From the beginning, Buffalo police said that their evidence made **Pavone** the one and only suspect.

Ordinarily, a murder in New York would go unnoticed around here. We have enough killings in Chicago and the suburbs. But **Michael Pavone** was brought to my attention in early 2001 by **Pavone's** own brother and the victim's sister.

The victim, 46-year old Keith Sutherland, was found floating in a nature preserve pond in October 1999. Sutherland was learning disabled, depressed and had a difficult time holding a job, according to his family members. **Pavone** took advantage of Sutherland emotionally and sexually, according to Sutherland's relatives. They claim **Pavone** became enraged when Sutherland eventually shunned him.

A year and a half into Buffalo's investigation of the vicious attack, **Pavone** moved to the Chicago area. That is when Sutherland's sister and **Pavone's** brother contacted me.

At the time, **Pavone** was working as music director at St. John of the Cross, a Roman Catholic parish in Western Springs.

When he was hired on there, parish officials knew nothing of his past. The pastor told me that they hadn't checked out **Pavone's** past in New York because he didn't list that as part of his work history on his job application.

Once St. John Church officials learned that **Pavone** was the prime suspect in a murder, he was terminated for falsifying his job application.

Shortly after **Pavone** was fired from his Western Springs job, I questioned him in the parking lot of the apartment building near Hinsdale where he lived.

Do you know what happened to Keith Sutherland, I asked.

"I'm aware of the situation. It's very sad, very sorrowful. I grieve for him," was **Pavone's** reply.

I asked **Pavone** about evidence that his car had been at the murder scene.

"I have no idea" about that, he said. "A month before, my car keys were stolen, and the garage was unlocked and the car was accessible."

Then when I pressed **Pavone** for specific information about what happened to his former boyfriend, he claimed not to know any details and said he was being framed by family members who were trying to obtain his late father's money.

"They have an agenda," **Pavone** said of his relatives, "and they're using means of harassment for their own ends. There is a spin being put on this that's not true. I don't have a record. I am innocent."

My interview with **Pavone** never made it onto Chicago television. While he was a suspect in a murder, he hadn't been charged. He was no longer working at a Chicago area church and the crime hadn't even occurred here. So it did not seem to be a legitimate local story. Some of my interview with **Pavone** was played on the ABC television station in Buffalo, where the Sutherland murder was a major, unsolved crime story.

Coincidentally last week, just after I asked a news researcher to check on **Pavone's** whereabouts came word that he had been charged. Police said that a jailhouse informant had provided the information needed to file murder charges against **Pavone**.

The day after **Pavone** was charged, St. Peter Catholic Church in Geneva fired him. "We're profoundly shocked and saddened and very stunned," church spokeswoman Rama Canney told the Daily Herald.

Canney maintained to the Daily Herald that "proper background checks were done."

Nevertheless, the Buffalo murder connection came to light only last month when the organist whom **Pavone** ousted looked him up on the Internet.

A St. Peter church spokeswoman said that when **Pavone** was asked about discrepancies in his background, he lied about the information.

But you have to wonder two things:

How could **Pavone** have been hired in the first place by a Catholic church in Geneva, a year after a Catholic church in Western Springs learned he might have been involved in a crime and fired him?

And, if churches can't decipher a murder suspect in their midst, how can they ever begin to weed out sex offenders?

- Chuck Goudie, whose column appears each Monday, is the chief investigative reporter at ABC7 News in Chicago. The views in this column are his own and not those of WLS-TV. He can be reached by e-mail at goudie@comcast.net.

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