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Choir leader charged in killing Man suspected in 1999
stabbing directed Easter Mass in Geneva

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The day after directing his **choir** through Easter Sunday Mass, Michael **Pavone** traveled from Geneva to Buffalo, N.Y., to face charges that he stabbed his lover to death in 1999.

The body of Keith Sutherland, 46, was found floating in a pond in a Buffalo nature preserve in October, three days after his family had reported him missing, authorities said. He had been stabbed more than 20 times.

"The number of stab wounds was plainly indicative of anger or passion, one or the other," Erie County, N.Y., District Attorney Frank Clark said. "It wasn't a passing encounter."

Pavone, 58, who at the time worked as a **choir** director in a Buffalo church, was the chief suspect from the beginning, Clark said, but investigators didn't have enough evidence to charge him until this week.

The upstate New York native left the area in 2001 and came to Illinois, working as a music director at a Western Springs church from January to June. In August 2003, **Pavone** was hired at St. Peter's Church in Geneva.

Within the past two weeks some misrepresentations about his employment history came to light, St. Peter's spokeswoman Rama Canney said. When confronted about those issues, he lied, Canney said.

The church fired **Pavone** on Tuesday, after learning of the charges, Canney said.

"We're profoundly shocked and saddened and very stunned," Canney said. "We're very stunned."

Pavone was charged with second-degree murder, criminal possession of a weapon and criminal mischief. If convicted he faces 25 years to life in prison.

Buffalo police detectives said **Pavone** turned himself in at the department in a prearranged deal worked out after a warrant was issued for his arrest.

He is being held without bond in the Erie County Holding Center in Buffalo, officials said.

Those familiar with **Pavone** at St. Peter offered a range of descriptions about him, but while the community at large may have been surprised, several involved with the **choir** were not.

Howard Clark, the former organist at St. Peter, had done an online search of **Pavone's** name about a month ago and come across a report from Buffalo Crime Stoppers that described the murder and the relationship between **Pavone** and Sutherland.

Clark contacted Crime Stoppers upon seeing the similarities between the **Pavone** he knew and the one in the story that was described by Sutherland's sister.

"We welcomed him into our family because he was very, very kind to Keith when he was going through his divorce and we were thankful to him," Donna Rae Sutherland, Keith's sister, said in the Crime Stoppers report.

Pavone and Sutherland, a retail store worker with a severe learning disability, eventually moved in together, officials said.

But then, Donna Rae Sutherland wrote, her brother, wanted to end the relationship and **Pavone** did "everything he could to get my brother back," even writing a love poem.

Days later, her brother was found dead at the forest preserve.

"**Pavone**, by his own admission and by our investigation, was the last person to be seen with Sutherland alive before his body was found," District Attorney Frank Clark said.

Anne Schlifke, a producer at the ABC affiliate in Buffalo that runs the local Crime Stoppers program, has followed the saga for five years.

"What really got people was that Sutherland was stabbed 22 times and then left in the nature preserve, which is a family-oriented area," Schlifke said.

Still, despite the public relationship between the two men, "it was a long road to get sufficient evidence," Frank Clark said.

At the time of Sutherland's death, **Pavone** was working as an organist and **choir** master at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church in Orchard Park, N.Y., a parish of about 2,500 members outside Buffalo.

The Rev. Lawrence Milby, the parish's pastor, said **Pavone** came to the church in 1998 and did not leave until late 2001, months after the crime he is now accused of committing occurred.

"He certainly didn't flee," Milby said.

Milby became pastor in 2002 and never met **Pavone**, but said church members don't recall anything out of the ordinary - before or after Sutherland's death.

"There was nothing unusual about the way he performed his duties," Milby said.

Milby said church and local residents were aware of the allegations made by one of Sutherland's family members but that it didn't cause a stir at the parish.

After leaving, **Pavone** worked at St. John of the Cross Catholic Church in West suburban Western Springs until June, 2001, said the church's pastor, the Rev. Richard Hynes.

A Chicago Archdiocese spokeswoman said Tuesday **Pavone** left Western Springs after church leaders became aware that he may have been involved in a crime.

In 2003, according to **choir** members of St. Peter Church in Geneva, the former **choir** director left and a search committee formed. After several months they hired **Pavone**.

"Proper background checks were done," Canney said.

From his start at the church in August 2003 until his final Mass on Easter Sunday, **Pavone** inspired a range of reactions from **choir** members.

"Everything was how important Michael was," said Howard Clark, the former organist at St. Peter.

Within weeks of taking over, **Pavone** had him fired, opting to perform on the organ himself, Howard Clark said. The departure of the longtime accompanist led to a shakeup within the **choir** that dropped its numbers from about 60 to 15, Howard Clark said.

"We either felt like we were in third grade or we were in a professorial relationship," **choir** member Berni Mayer said.

Still, she liked the man, calling him a talented musician and spiritual person who enjoyed the job.

"It is difficult to dislike the man if he is who he pretended to be," Mayer said. "My first reaction (to the charges) was shock and total disappointment."

Pavone's responsibilities as music director at St. Peter included directing the **choir**, an instrumental ensemble, the cantors and the children's **choir**.

On Sunday morning, church members said, **Pavone** appeared fine and thanked the **choir** for all its extra work leading up to the Easter holiday.

The **choir** normally meets on Tuesday nights, but practice, like normal, was canceled after Easter.

"He was truly himself," Mayer said. "He was happy. He was pleased with the way things went. He said, 'Enjoy your holiday and we'll see you all next week.' "

Donna Rae Sutherland, the murdered man's sister, could not be reached Tuesday. Schlifke, who runs the Buffalo Crime Stoppers program, said the woman is not talking to reporters because she will be a witness in the case.

"She's thrilled to see movement on the case and can't wait to see the outcome," Schlifke said.

Pavone is scheduled to appear in Erie County court today for a preliminary hearing, officials said.

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