

Greater Ministries Leaders Convicted Of Fraud

Church's officials found guilty in 'pyramid' scheme

A federal jury in March found five former officials of a Florida church guilty of conspiracy and fraud. Tampa-based Greater Ministries International (GMI) founder and president Gerald Payne was convicted on 19 counts of conspiracy, money laundering and wire fraud, the Associated Press reported.

Also convicted on conspiracy and mail fraud charges were Payne's wife, Betty; David Whitfield; Patrick Talbert and Edon "Don" Hall. James Chambers of Altamonte Springs, Fla., pleaded guilty by the time the trial began last January. Chambers also agreed to testify against other defendants.

All five defendants were taken into custody after the verdicts. Attorneys expect sentencing to be set by June.

GMI got into trouble when its Faith Promises program, which used Bible verses to entice people to double their money, failed to produce its promised massive returns, authorities said. An estimated 18,000 people from across the country invested almost \$500 million between 1996 and 1999.

Investigators said until the program collapsed, it was a classic Ponzi scheme—a fraud in which early investors are paid with money from newer investors.