

Megachurch Pastor Sentenced to Prison After Fully Repaying Fraud Victims

Pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell, 67, has been sentenced to six years in prison for the role he played in a multimillion-dollar investment fraud. The Houston, Texas-based former pastor was sentenced Wednesday by U.S. District Judge S. Maurice Hicks Jr. in Shreveport, Louisiana. He had pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud on March 11, 2020, nearly two years after the indictment.

As a pastor and spiritual leader, Caldwell was well known nationally. He served as a spiritual adviser for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

While senior pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church, Caldwell began a business partnership with Louisiana investment adviser Gregory Alan Smith, who sold Chinese heritage bonds he promised would yield generous dividends.

According to the Department of Justice, people under Caldwell's leadership invested in the scam after hearing Smith's fraudulent pitch. They were given a "participation agreement," stating that if the sale of the bonds failed within a certain timeframe, their money would be returned.

"They were instructed to wire funds to various bank accounts held by or controlled by Caldwell," the Justice Department said. "In total, in 2013 and 2014, approximately \$3.5 million was 'invested' in these bond deals."

Caldwell and his wife, Suzette, were the first members of the 15,500-member megachurch to buy into the scheme, according to a statement from the ministry, which refers to the pastors as the "first victims."

Once they became involved, other church members followed.

Along with the 6-year sentence, Caldwell was ordered to pay \$ million in restitution, pay a fine of \$125,000 and spend a year on "supervised release" after prison.

In court Wednesday, Caldwell expressed profound remorse and accepted full responsibility for his actions. The court acknowledged that he had already made full restitution to the victims, a process that began even before Caldwell's 2018 indictment.

The church continues to support Caldwell, who served as its senior pastor there for 38 years. In a statement, the ministry's leadership accepts the pastor's apology and speaks of forgiveness.

"Many victims were paid over and above the amount that they invested. Voluntary restitution is virtually unheard of and extremely rare in these kinds of cases," according to Floyd LeBlanc, chairman of The Windsor Village Church Family Personnel Committee. He goes on to encourage church members that the ministry will continue to serve the needs of its members and the community.

In November, Smith was sentenced to six years in prison and ordered to pay nearly \$3.6 million restitution and a \$100,000 fine.

The case was investigated by the FBI. Caldwell was ordered to report to the Bureau of Prisons on June 22, 2021. {eoa}