

Polygamous Church Leaders Indicted for Bizarre Crime

Two brothers of imprisoned Utah polygamist Warren Jeffs and nine other members of a breakaway sect of the Mormon Church were charged on Tuesday with diverting money from a government food assistance program for the poor, federal prosecutors said.

The charges were contained in a grand jury indictment unsealed in U.S. District Court in Salt Lake City on Tuesday as FBI agents and sheriff's deputies raided church-owned businesses and arrested leaders of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Utah-Arizona border towns and in South Dakota.

The church, a breakaway sect of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, informally known as the Mormon Church, preaches that polygamy leads to a favored place in heaven.

"This indictment is not about religion. This indictment is about fraud," U.S. Attorney John Huber said in a statement.

The indictment charges 11 defendants with one count each of conspiring to defraud the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly called food stamps, and with conspiring to commit money laundering.

Among those charged was 56-year-old church leader Lyle Jeffs, the brother of polygamist sect leader Warren Jeffs who is serving a life prison sentence for sexually assaulting two young girls at a religious compound in Texas.

Jeffs and another high-ranking official, John Wayman, were arrested on Tuesday in Salt Lake City. Another Jeffs sibling, Seth, was arrested in rural South Dakota, where he leads an FLDS congregation.

Prosecutors allege church leaders directed adherents starting around 2011 to funnel food bought with SNAP funds into an FLDS Storehouse to feed the broader church community.

In some cases, church leaders withdrew cash from food-stamp cards they took from congregants and used the money for bill-paying. Winford Barlow, among those indicted, spent \$30,236 for a 2012 Ford F-350 pickup truck, according to prosecutors, and Kimball Barlow signed a check for \$16,978 in paper products.

FLDS Church members in the Hildale, Utah and Colorado City, Arizona border communities receive millions of dollars in SNAP benefits per year, according to prosecutors who did not give a total value for the alleged fraud.

Six of the 11 people charged have been arrested so far. Those arrested are to appear on Wednesday in federal courts in Utah and South Dakota. Those convicted could face as much as 25 years in prison. {eo}

© 2016 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.