

Delaware pastor convicted in mortgage fraud

Bear church preyed on troubled homeowners

Written by SEAN O'SULLIVAN

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WILMINGTON -- A pastor accused of operating one of the largest mortgage rescue fraud operations ever uncovered in Delaware was convicted of two felony theft counts and three misdemeanors -- including falsifying business records and tax evasion -- by a Superior Court jury on Tuesday.

The jury acquitted Jamaar Manlove, co-pastor of the Vision Builders Christian Center in Bear, of six other counts including identity theft, and the panel failed to reach a conclusion on 13 other counts including the most serious charge of racketeering.

Manlove, 28, was accused of preying on nine people, most of whom were facing an imminent sheriff's sale, promising them he would get them cash from the sale of their homes, allow them to continue to live there as tenants, repair their credit and give them the opportunity to purchase their homes back.

Instead, according to prosecutors Greg Strong and Ian McConnel, Manlove would strip out the equity homeowners had built in their properties -- from \$10,000 to \$100,000 -- through fees at closing which were paid to either himself, his associates or entities he controlled.

The homeowners were then generally left with nothing and in several cases ended up on the street while Manlove and others made over \$300,000.

Strong said in closing arguments that money from the transactions -- Manlove's only income at the time -- went to support a lavish lifestyle including a \$600,000 house and a Mercedes.

Manlove's attorney, Peter N. Letang, countered that nothing criminal took place and if the fees his client collected were too high, then he should have been sued in civil court, not charged as a criminal. He conceded that Manlove made mistakes and didn't pay his taxes but said he was trying to move quickly and help people who were a day or two away from losing their homes and make some money for himself.

Manlove faces up to four years in prison at sentencing for the two felony theft convictions and up to a year in prison for each of the three misdemeanors.

Before Tuesday's verdict, two other co-defendants in the case saw charges against them dropped or dismissed.

Prosecutors dropped all criminal charges against Larry Manlove - Jamaar's uncle - before trial and charges against Manlove's wife and co-pastor of Vision Builders, Rhonda Manlove, were dismissed by Judge Fred. S. Silverman mid-trial at the conclusion of the prosecution's case.

After Tuesday's verdict, following a three-week long trial and three days of deliberation, neither the prosecutors nor Letang would comment citing the fact that 13 charges remain pending.

Silverman gave prosecutors until May 25 to inform him if the state will seek to retry Manlove.

Shortly after Rhonda Manlove was dismissed from the case, her attorney Peter Veith said Silverman's ruling was "a relief" but said the prosecution "should never have gotten this far."

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