

Agency founder resigns in scandal

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Ft. Lauderdale, FL—Ferdinand Mahfood, the founder and president of Food for the Poor has resigned amid reports of sexual and financial impropriety.

Mahfood turned over control of the 18-year old organization to his brother, Robin, saying that he suffers from a bipolar disorder. He had been placed on a six-month administrative leave of absence six weeks earlier.

His resignation follows a lawsuit by Rodney Taylor, the organization's former Director of Development who charged that Mahfood diverted the charity's funds to female employees with whom he had sex. He reportedly told federal investigators that the organization had covered up Mahfood's actions. FBI officials refused to confirm or deny that an investigation was under way.

In a statement, Mahfood told the agency's 200 employees, "I have been in love with the human race for the last 18 years. You should focus on that...and not on my friendship with any particular women that I am alleged to have had a friendship with. Unfortunately I have not recently successfully managed my illness, and some of my behaviors have been unacceptable. For these behaviors I apologize and ask your forgiveness."

Mahfood is reported to be receiving inpatient care at a medical facility in Connecticut.

Meanwhile, Food for the Poor officials say that its governing board invited an independent auditing firm to review its records, and had legal experts review the matter in order to evaluate Food For The Poor's internal investigation. Food For The Poor's president and senior staff reported that no funds from individual donors or foundations have been misused in any way. The independent auditors and legal experts have confirmed the organization's financial integrity.

In a press statement, the agency says, "The Evangelical Council For Financial Accountability (ECFA) and National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) have been fully apprised of the recent activity at Food For The Poor. ECFA reported that the organization is in compliance with its strict

standards. NRB President Brandt Gustavson and NRB Chairman Wayne Pederson said they will continue to encourage their radio station members to partner with Food For The Poor to build homes among the poor of Jamaica.

Taylor told the Broward County Sheriff's office that Mahfood was involved with two female employees and paid them through a fund that the organization had set up in Jamaica. Food for the Poor officials said that Taylor has been terminated because of poor job performance.

Charges of impropriety were first leveled in April, 1999 when one of the two female employees filed a sexual harassment complaint. An internal investigation failed to turn up evidence. However, this past August, the Jamaican fund and gifts to the women turned up in an audit. The two women and three family members of one of them were fired the following week.

Subsequently, all employees were asked to sign an agreement preventing them from discussing publicly anything that would be interpreted as being negative about the organization. Several employees resigned or were fired for refusing to sign the agreement. These included Taylor and the Protestant marketing director, Russ Russell.

The organization was founded by Mahfood originally to provide assistance to the impoverished population of his native Jamaica. His family operates a successful import-export business that shares facilities with the charity in Deerfield Beach, Florida. Mahfood, who experienced a conversion to an evangelical form of Catholicism nearly two decades ago, expanded the efforts throughout the Caribbean and to parts of Latin America. While the organization has deep Roman Catholic roots, it operates as an interdenominational Christian charity and solicits donations from both Protestant and Catholics.

The organization uses clergy to travel across the country soliciting donations from churches and church-based organizations. It is ranked as the 66th largest charity in the country, larger than UNICEF and CARE.

According to the agency's most recent Annual Report, it received over \$186 million dollars in cash, goods and service contributions in 1999, including over \$49 million

dollars in cash contributions and over \$127 million dollars in contributed goods.

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