

House of Yahweh may be breaking foodstamp law

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Kay Jordan wanted to save her soul, so she obediently gave money to the House of Yahweh.

When cash was short, "Yahweh" accepted her food stamps. Now she's of the Abilene sect but in deep trouble with the state of Mississippi - for food stamp fraud.

Jordan used the food stamps, she said, to pay one of the three tithes required by House of Yahweh founder Yisrayl Hawkins out of fear of eternal damnation.

"He said we had to pay that or we were in danger of going to hell," she said. Like other former members and elders of the sect, Jordan said House of Yahweh leaders regularly welcomed food stamps and even welfare payments as part of their complex tithe system.

That is hardly the intended use for such benefits, say state officials who oversee the federal program. It is illegal to use food stamps for anything other than the purchase of food, they say. Jordan claims the sect also exchanged food stamps for scrip that could be used to buy items at feasts, and also to pay workers who performed tasks at the compound near Eula.

If that's true, the House of Yahweh is breaking the law, said Don McWhorter, regional supervisor for the Texas Department of Human Services.

McWhorter could neither confirm nor deny that he is investigating alleged benefits abuse among sect members.

House of Yahweh leaders, including Yisrayl Hawkins, have not responded to repeated requests for interviews. Some members have offered blanket denials of wrongdoing but referred further questions to Hawkins.

One ex-follower, Anah Jeffries, whose husband was an elder before both he and she were ex-communicated, said Hawkins used to pay workers in the compound with food stamps before they were replaced with the Lone Star Card.

"The House of Yahweh doesn't teach taking food stamps - the man does," Jeffries said. "It is Yisrayl's personal advice to people."

Jeffries said she doubted that people who don't live in the compound are aware of what Hawkins is doing. She noted that among the three latest elders to be ordained into the sect, one is a lawyer and one is a military doctor.

"They are not stupid people," she said, and believes they would be surprised to learn of some of the things Hawkins advises poorer, less educated people to do.

'LIKE LITTLE ZOMBIES'

Like many others who've joined the House of Yahweh and then left, Kay Jordan said she and her husband with their five children were drawn to the sect because it seemed to fill an emptiness in their lives.

They were living in Tennessee when Yisrayl Hawkins came to Nashville to preach. Her husband, who worked at the General Motors Saturn plant, liked what he heard, and the Jordans began following the sect's teachings. They traveled to Abilene for feasts, which last almost a week three times each year.

Times were good for the Jordan family, but then her husband was laid off for refusing to work on Saturdays, the sect's holy day, and had trouble finding work. In 1991 they came to Clyde and lived in a one-bedroom house.

"We followed along like little zombies, I guess," Jordan said. "The more we'd go, the more brainwashed we became."

One of the teachings was that tithing to Yahweh was part of the path to salvation. The Jordans wanted to pay, and when the cash was short they paid in food stamps.

Hawkins did not teach from the pulpit that food stamps should be given, Jordan said, but his elders told people they could be accepted.

Receipts used when tithes were collected included three boxes: "cash," "check" and "other," she said. While "other" presumably could mean credit card or donated goods, Jordan said the message was clear: food stamps.

Jordan also used food stamps, she said, to obtain "Yahweh money" to spend at the Yahweh Store, actually an 18-wheel trailer set up during feasts and offering everything from Yahweh publications to Mogen David wine.

The Jordans later moved to Mississippi, and continued to travel to Abilene for feasts, depositing food stamps as part of their tithes.

Mississippi took notice, however. And while Jordan's husband was now working, the couple was under-reporting his income so they could stay on food stamps. They needed the money to live, she said, because so much was going to the House of Yahweh.

Other former members have made similar claims that they've given thousands of dollars to the sect. Jordan said she could not recall how much she and her family have given.

'SHED YOUR BLOOD'

Last September Jordan, who had moved back to Abilene, received word there was a warrant out for her arrest in Mississippi. Someone, she doesn't know who, had turned her in for the underreporting.

She traveled to Mississippi to take care of the matter. She entered into the equivalent of a deferred adjudication plea agreement, meaning the charge won't stick if she pays \$1,760 in restitution, plus court costs, a fine and a \$30-per-month administrative fee.

Jordan knew blaming the House of Yahweh was no defense.

"I knew they were going to catch me someday," she said.

Even today she admits that what she did was clearly wrong and that ultimately it's her responsibility, not the House of Yahweh's.

But she and others say they want the public informed about what is happening in the sect, despite concern for their personal safety. Once a person leaves the sect he or she "is no longer considered innocent blood, Jordan said. "They can shed your blood if they so desire."

The rift in the sect, ex-communicants said, developed over such matters as teaching of polygamy and, most recently, encouragement that followers change their last names to Hawkins. Well over 100 people have legally changed their names in past months.

Leaving was difficult, Jordan said, noting the sect follows the path of other cults that teach rules must be followed concerning every facet of their lives, down to the kind of toothpaste to be used.

But last Christmas Eve, in the Mississippi Baptist Church where she grew up, she made the final break.

"I went back to that little church and rededicated my life to Jesus Christ," she said.