

Evangelical figure leaves trail of fraud, critics say: Christian publisher Jason Christy

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When Christian publisher Jason Christy was tapped two years ago to lead the Christian Coalition, the group's leaders praised him for his ability "to inspire and encourage people of faith to action."

But Christy's business dealings—both before and after his one-month affiliation with the coalition—instead have inspired former customers and co-workers to file lawsuits charging Christy with defrauding their Christian businesses.

Christy, 36, who apparently had no previous public-policy experience, persuaded the Christian Coalition in 2005 to name him executive director of the once-prominent organization. But before the coalition's leaders officially turned over the reins of their national lobbying group, they learned of legal and financial problems besetting Christy.

Ex-associates and customers of Christy's business ventures—mostly Christian magazines—say he cheated them out of money and threatened them. At least 10 of them have filed lawsuits, and others have gotten court-issued restraining or protection orders against the Scottsdale, Arizona, entrepreneur.

Christy says all the allegations are false. He and his supporters say "enemies" spread lies about him because of soured business relationships. But critics say Christy is a scam artist preying on trusting Christians.

Christy now publishes the *Church Report*, supposedly a conservative, national print magazine and Web site. He has appeared as an analyst on CNN and spoken at megachurches like Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral. He hobnobs with some of the evangelical elite and still has relationships with leaders in highly respected positions.

But Christian publishers like Gary McCullough, director of the Christian Communication Network and a competitor of Christy's, accuse him of running an "ongoing scheme that has defrauded many Christians."

McCullough says Christy uses his Web site to prompt Christian churches and organizations to buy ads for the magazine but then prints only "a few hundred copies" and mails them "as if they are part of a much larger distribution." Then, after the ministry has spent thousands of dollars and begins to ask for tear sheets or copies of the magazine, Christy balks, McCullough said.

"Each month Christy would apologize and give an excuse or wonder himself why I had not received copies of the magazine with my ad," McCullough said. "This was all an elaborate con. The *Church Report* was never printed with my ads—because it was never printed."

Christy apparently continues to sell ads and collect payment, claiming a circulation of 30,000, even though there apparently has been no print version of the magazine published in more than a year.

In a July 30 interview, Christy called the accusations "ludicrous" and said McCullough is trying to defame him.

He claimed that McCullough and others hold a grudge against him because he represents competition in the market of Christian publishing. A contingent of people in Christian media harbor a strong dislike for him, leading to false accusations, Christy said.

More than accusations, lawsuits have been won against Christy in at least three states—Wisconsin, Virginia and Arizona. Most plaintiffs were awarded damages in the thousands of dollars, with the largest sum totaling more than \$125,000.

They include successful suits by Texas-based Church Loans and Investments Trust; Wisconsin-based St. Croix Press Inc.; Wisconsin-based Consistent Computer Bargains Inc.; Virginia-based Katalyst Solutions, LLC; Aris J. Gallios and Associates, a law firm in Phoenix; Linder Publishing Inc. in Scottsdale; Arizona-based Realty Executives; Power Trade Media in Phoenix; and Ersland Touch Landscape in Phoenix.

McCullough, who has not sued, said he is surprised that Christy remains in business.

Christy's Web site was the source for a recent list of the "50 Most Influential Churches" in the country. According to Christy, the list was provided by John Vaughn of Church Growth Today, a Missouri-based consulting firm. Vaughn did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Editors at the *Christian Post* and Associated Baptist Press published news stories about the list on their Web sites, then pulled the stories upon being alerted to concerns about Christy. The *Post* said editors received information "from a credible source challenging the legitimacy and integrity of the *Church Report*."

An earlier issue of the *Church Report* claimed to rank the top 50 church business administrators. But only two were even known to the 3,000-member professional group that credentials church and denominational administrators.

"We raised questions with Jason about what his criterion was for those selections," said Phill Martin, deputy chief executive officer of the National Association of Church Business Administration, "but we never received any explanation."

Christy is not without his supporters. When he was hired as national executive director for the Christian Coalition in 2005, coalition president Roberta Combs described Christy as someone "with a solid understanding of America's Christian community." But coalition representatives were mum on July 31 about Christy; an unnamed spokesperson would only say that the job offer was withdrawn before Christy was officially hired.

The day before, Christy said that he refused the 2005 job offer because he couldn't run the coalition and continue operating his other business ventures simultaneously. That was the same year he declared bankruptcy. -*Hannah Elliott, Associated Baptist Press*