

Church denies misusing funds

Evangelical pastors blame bad bookkeeping for loss of charity status

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STAFF REPORTER

The leaders of an evangelical church stripped of its charity licence deny they went on a spending spree at donors' expense.

Pastors Peter and Peggy Rigo apologized yesterday for shoddy bookkeeping they say led to federal auditors concluding that they had used church money to pay for trips to Hawaii and elsewhere; Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana items; and personal expenses including gym memberships.

In a statement, the leaders of the Dominion Christian Centre of Canada in Hamilton say they will improve record keeping and will try and be reinstated as a charity.



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Peter Rigo and wife Peggy are pastors in controversial church.

"Funds from donations were properly used. Church trips and vacations were not paid by the church, but were paid by the members," the statement said, adding that the pastors have worked for free for the last two years.

The Rigos had previously raised the same defence when questioned by auditors about the expenses, but the audit concluded anyway that church money had been used.

"The church is going through a difficult time and everyone is sacrificing as they should," the pastors said in the statement.

In a brief conversation with the *Star*, Peggy said no further comment would be made. "You can read whatever you want to read on our website," she said.

On Tuesday, the federal charity regulator, part of the Canada Revenue Agency, revoked the church's charitable licence and released a scathing audit criticizing the group for misusing donor money, falsifying charitable receipts related to land deals, and using charity assets to fund for-profit businesses in "non-charitable ways." They are no longer allowed to issue tax receipts for donations, and will have to pay property and other taxes.

The audit shows the government has been after the charity to explain its activities for at least two years.

In their rebuttal yesterday, the Rigos state they have been working co-operatively with the regulator since 2000. "However, through misadventure, we have seen errors occur in which we are working hard to correct to comply with the (Canada Revenue Agency's) requirements," the statement reads.

The Rigos started the church in 2000 after time at churches in New England. The church owns several properties in Hamilton, where church members live, and neighbours say numerous upscale renovations have been done.

Some families whose adult children have joined the church have labelled it a "cult," something the Rigos deny strongly. Three members of one family (mother, father and a sibling) are facing criminal charges after a church member complained she was kidnapped by her family and forcibly confined for 10 days in an attempt to deprogram her. The trial is set for October.

In their statement, the pastors say they have no involvement in the events leading to those charges. As to their abilities as leaders of the church, they say they are "licenced Evangelical Ministers, and are reviewed, and are accountable." The statement does not go into detail on which body has licenced them.

The pastors say the church is having a positive impact in Hamilton and that church leaders always comply with the laws of Canada, "even though at times we see the law as being harsh and arbitrary."

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