

Hail To St. Markus

Godly Cleric or Slick Con Man?

Editor's Note: Faith Christian Family Church has applied to build a Charter School for 1,080 students on Panama City Beach. In the interests of protecting our children, this article is the first in a series of monthly articles, where we take a look at the church and its questionable business dealings.

**By John Caylor
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My Grandmother was a sweet little, white headed, hunchback woman who suffered a miserable life from arthritis that gave her a crooked spine.

Nanny was deep into Christianity and believed that one day she would awake in heaven, to walk upright without the physical pain and suffering she endured in the flesh.

Sunday mornings she'd be up at 5 a.m. and by 7, she was dressed in her best, as she headed out the

door to church. There she sought spiritual comfort and hope that somehow, life would be kinder to her and the suffering would cease.

She was 85 when that great caravan called death pulled up to her doorstep and announced her visit complete. As I sat there in those last moments, holding her disfigured little hands, tears streamed uncontrollably from my eyes, I witnessed her departure, without trembling and fear, out into the great unknown.

Nanny left with a smile on her face, apparently she went to the Promised Land that those of us here, who live on the edge of life, hope to see one day.

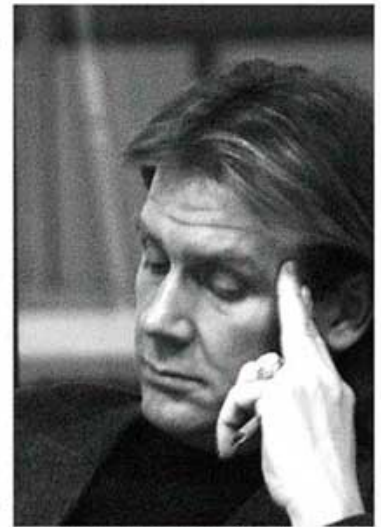
As I took her around to visit different churches every now and then, on the way back home she'd comment "that preachers are a special lot, some were called, some were sent and some just bundled up and went."

One of the first Bible lessons I learned from her was about how Jesus took a whip and drove moneychangers from the Temple of God.

I never did quite understand the story until two years ago, when several wounded souls asked that I investigate the business dealings of their former pastors, Markus and Scarlett Bishop and the nationwide network of questionable television preachers with whom they are affiliated.

Faith Christian Family Church has plans to open a Charter School for 1,080 students on Panama City Beach in the near future, therefore we felt publication of our findings to be appropriate at this time.

The church, now controlled exclusively by Markus Bishop, appears to be flush with cash and has built an 18,000 square foot parsonage, in the armed guard, gated and exclusive community of "The Preserve", on



**Panama City-Bay County
Airport Board member
Markus Bishop**

Panama City Beach, where lot prices range to one million dollars.

The mansion is estimated to be worth in excess of \$4 million. The Bishop's have yet to move into the home that is adorned with stained glass, mahogany doors, marble floors, a large swimming pool, tennis court and security cameras.

The *Insider* aerial photographs of the mansion show it to be almost complete. Construction of the mansion had been on hold for a period of time due to a payment dispute between the Bishops and former inner circle member, Vince Ferris of Ferris Construction.

According to Bay County Court records, the Bishops deeded the land to the church and refused to pay Vince Ferris who quit the church and placed a lien on the property. The Bishops countered by having their attorney, Bill R. Hutto, to file a counter suit against Ferris which caused him to lose much of his investment to attorneys fees. Ferris has told us at the *Insider* that he fears Bishop and his associates.

According to Mack Webb, Bay County deputy Property Appraiser. "There aren't any three or four million dollar church parsonages in Bay County." He indicated that Faith Christian had applied for a tax exemption on the mansion and the Appraiser's office was going to deny the exemption and send Markus and Scarlett the bill.



High Flying Preacher Owns LearJet , holds Master Lease on PC Airport for \$459 mo.

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Board members smell a rat!

Hail Markus from page 6

Scarlett's mother, Karen Keith Stephenson of Birmingham, Alabama, who reportedly invested \$1.6 million to incorporate the church in the late 80's, told the **Insider** that her daughter was in divorce proceedings with Markus and didn't want to comment on our story.

Markus Bishop, the shadowy religious figure, is also a board member of the Panama City-Bay County Airport Authority.

At the December 18th, 2002, Airport Authority meeting, Bishop sought to have me arrested and escorted from the building for questioning his Church's business dealings at the Airport, where they hold a Master lease to the year 2019, on 37,500 square feet of prime airport property for \$459 per month.

The airport lease was signed on June 15, 1999, Board chairman Don Crisp, in defense of the low lease rate, stated, "we didn't know what the price of land on 23rd street would be worth today, in 1999."

But the **Insider's** research has revealed that Faith Christian built a hangar on the property which is located next to James Finch's hangar, and then sold it to Sowell Aviation for \$400,000 under a sublease agreement in March 2002, netting the church an undetermined monthly income.

Sowell Aviation has refused to disclose monthly lease payment figures to Faith Christian, although Sowell has two known subleases under their sublease, with one being in excess of \$68,000 annually.

According to our sources, Bishop originally had plans to park four Learjet's and a 98-passenger jet in the hangar; the other aircraft belonged to associate pastors of Faith Christian Church.

When the **Insider** questioned Airport Authority members about these business dealings, Chairman Don Crisp stated "that the Authority didn't involve itself with the dealings of private business; it operates the Airport and makes the facilities available to private firms."



Mike Jones didn't like Edison's problems.

We note that, due to a shortage of current airport space, Mr. Crisp and Authority members are pushing ahead with plans to build a new \$300 million airport on St. Joe-Arvida property north of Panama City, where Bay County taxpayers are likely to pick up the tab.

The Bishop's have involved themselves in multiple business transactions that have enriched the church, which they own and control. One of the newer business ventures appears to be the establishment of a Beaches Charter School.

Sources close to the church tell us that Markus Bishop intends to get control of tax dollars and federal grant money to build and run the school. Bishop has aligned himself in a partnership with Edison Schools, which has been fined by the Securities and Exchange Commission for lying to their investors and falsifying financial records.

Prior to the January 15th Bay County School Board meeting on Bishop's proposal, church member Dave Martinelli made arrangements by telephone and fax with the school board for Faith Christian's proposal to be heard. Martinelli has told us at **Insider**, that he is a close personal friend and financial advisor to Markus Bishop.

The **Insider** has learned that Martinelli, who lives in a million dollar home on Magnolia Beach Drive on Panama City Beach, is a convicted felon whose criminal record dates back to 1974 when he was charged with Illegal Importation by United States Marshalls at Pensacola, Florida.

In 1991, he pleaded no contest to a charge of Grand Theft in Leon County, Florida and was given five years probation.

In Bay County and elsewhere Martinelli's business dealings have been called into question when in August 2000; prosecutor Pam Smoak allowed him to plead nolo contendere to a Bay County charge of Grand Theft.

In a separate proceeding arising from the same case, prosecutor Smoak cut him another deal and he plead guilty to charges of soliciting an undercover police officer to unlawfully beat two Texas attorneys so severely that they would be incapacitated and unable to attend depositions in a civil case.

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Rich O'Neil, with Edison Schools confers with "Nervous and nail biting", Markus Bishop.



Board member, Donna Allen, aggressively questioned and defeated Beaches Charter School proposal.

Markus tells Allen "You have an enemy!"

It's About Money..



Faith Christian Family's Beaches Charter School board members

In both Bay County cases Martinelli received concurrent 5 years probation and 300 hours of community service amounting to a slap on the wrist considering his prior criminal record. Several former church members we interviewed, fear Bishop and his associates out of concern for their lives and safety of their families.

After the School Board meeting, Markus Bishop approached board member Donna Allen, and stated to her "you have an enemy." Allen, who represents the Beaches area, successfully defeated the church's local application for the Beaches Charter School.

Church member Hal Cowen stated after the meeting, "the church would take their case to the State of Florida for approval, in which event the new school could be built without local school board approval."

The **Insider** has given the Bishops every opportunity to respond to our questions about their secretive church and its questionable business dealings and they have not done so.

In response, John Burt, the church's Communications Director, by telephone has threatened to sue and implied they would close us down and



Member Corine Harris...Don't You hurt My Preacher!

run us out of town if we printed a story without their permission.

We ask that you our reader not hold us to be too prejudicial, as we are forced to mix facts with our own perceptions to tell this story in 3 monthly installments.

Markus Bishop is a tall, blonde-haired, rock star looking figure, who flies on his Learjet from one part of the world to the next spouting to a poor and middle income audience, Bishops gospel, "that Jesus was all about money."

He makes references to the books in the Christian Bible and plays on verses and twists them to imply that men who follow the ways would flourish financially, if they make the Bishop family rich first.

Membership in Faith Christian is closed and only by approved application after four lengthy indoctrination classes.

The **Insider** was able to secretly secure audio tapes of the indoctrination process after we visited a Sunday

morning service months ago and here's what we found.

The church on first appearances, is a happy place where everyone is in harmony shouting and singing non-stop, to the tunes of a big musical band for the first half hour, followed by 30 minutes of constant prayer, member recognitions, stand-ups, applause and drum beating that gives way to big buckets filled with dollars and sealed envelopes being passed through the aisles.

But then you notice the heavy security, the large number of big guys walking up and down the aisles, with secret service type ear-phones and microphones, they are whispering into their suit cuffs. "Why so much security?" I asked the teenage boy in front of me.

His doesn't reply, he just gets up out of his seat, proceeds to the back of the auditorium and hails a security agent, whispers in his ear and outstretches his arm and points in my direction as they both look me squarely in the eye.

The couple behind me is arguing with one another, what will the pastor do if he finds out they didn't contribute the required 10% this week? The man tells his wife, "Just write the check, after all, pastor Bishop has assured us, God will make it good before it hits the bank!"

In a few moments a young black man, dressed in loose denim gang attire, plucks down next to me in a row of empty seats. Curious as to why he so closely invaded my space, I introduce myself and quiz him.

He says his name is Alonzo, and he's visiting from the sister church of pastor Creflo Dollar, in College Park, Georgia, where he lives. Getting him to turn slightly as I whisper to him, I get a glimpse of an earphone and a little mike in the cuff of his right sleeve.

It's show time, as Markus jumps to the stage and invokes 30 minutes of prayer and forgiveness for those who didn't give God his due tithes today. With heads bowed, the congregation slumps in and then one by one several take to the aisles and head down to the pulpit

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Hail to St. Markus from page 9 where they quietly place \$50 and \$100 bills at the foot of the altar, slipping away back to their seats.

It was like a well cast Shakespearian play, with a cast of polished actors who perform for the newcomers. There's the guy dressed like a well-manicured business executive, he reaches the altar stands briefly and writes a check, returning to his seat to play with his stock market PDA. There's a young man on crutches in the center aisle; he is struggling to return back to his seat.

Out of the right corner of my eye, at the altar I see what appears to be a forty's looking, time-worn streetwalker, a repented sinner, that I've seen before walking up and down 15th street. This is her third trip down; maybe she believes she can't give enough until she gives all she has, to remove the scars of a life gone wrong?

I pull my pocket video camera, a little spy gizmo that works in the dark, from my suit coat in an attempt to get a shot. The young black man next to me whispers in his sleeve and within seconds a security man taps me on the shoulder and motions me to come with him, all eyes are fixated upon me and stares turn to frowns as we walk to the rear of the auditorium.

At the rear of the auditorium, two security agents and an associate pastor escort me to a rear hallway where they shut the door and demand that I surrender the pocket video camera.

I explain to them that I am totally deaf, wear a hearing aid and need to record the sermon. The associate pastor says that he'll get me a copy on cassette tape after the sermon, but I must not use my recorder again during the service, otherwise I must leave.

Well enough, I am escorted back down to a new seat on the front row and positioned next to Corine and A.D. Harris, who are directors on paper for the church's proposed Beaches Charter School.

Corine Harris is a likeable old soul, who engages me in whispering conversation, until I let her know I wear a hearing aid. She turns the back of a program over and starts writing to me as Markus talks about money, money and Jesus.

Mansion at the Preserve



Faith Christian Parsonage - House of God or Palatial Mansion?

Harris is adorned in large diamonds and jewels; I comment how pretty they are and notice a large shiny rock on her husband's hand, which she says is 4 or 5 carats. Harris and her husband, A.D. Harris, are in the trusted inner circle of Faith Christian and that's why the dramatic display of diamonds.

According to one former member, the inner circle, "the cast and actors", were all well dressed and adorned with diamonds and would hold their glittering hands high, while singing and praying.

The intended effect was to con potential new members, "marks", into believing that if they joined Faith Christian and became totally submissive cult members, they too would prosper.

I asked Corine Harris, if the preacher's wife Scarlet, who is an associate pastor, is going to join Markus and preach today, and she ignores my question. But, insists that after the service she wants to introduce me to her pastor.

Markus and Scarlet Bishop were a minister and wife tag team until he had her removed as an officer of the church, according to corporate records filed with the Florida Division of Corporations on January 8, 2003.

According to Scarlett's Mother, the woman who fronted the seed money

for Faith Christian Church, the couple is in Florida divorce court and Scarlett has been instructed by her lawyers not to comment.

She stated, "that Markus was trying to hide all his assets and those of the church."

We at the **Insider** believe that a money fight and control of the church is in process.

One thing for sure, everyone in Scarlett's family is trying to distance themselves from Markus. Could it be due to pending criminal investigations or indictments? Are they attempting to do damage control and limit their own personal liability?

The Bishops are like a Jim and Tammy Baker, Barbie doll set; the perfect Christian couple to their audiences for many years. Apparently, this may have been part of a show effort to extract a larger percentage of their member's incomes, to support their own uncontrollable lust and need for money.

The Serpent Pit

The **Insider's** investigation has lead us to believe that the Bishop's have placed themselves deeply into the lives of their members where they learned of damming family secrets

and old emotional wounds which they re-opened and used to perpetrate fraud upon some of those unsuspecting members.

Allan Cory and his wife attended Faith Christian in the 80's when they resided at Grayton Beach in South Walton County. Faith Sexton was another member of Bishop's church who later resided at Grayton Beach.

Allan Cory and his wife have never met Faith Sexton, although their paths were destined to entangle through Allan's estranged mother, Martha Cory, who owned a great deal of valuable Grayton Beach land, worth well over a million dollars.

According to the Corys and other area residents, "Martha Cory was a manipulative controlling woman who consulted a Pensacola psychic on a weekly basis and she claimed to hear voices from God and talk to the dead in mirrors. She was a religious nut basket case, who at one time offered to deed her land to Jim and Tammy Baker of the PTL network, only to be turned down by PTL executives who questioned her sanity."

Martha Cory, in an effort to control her son and his wife, tried to take the couple's baby daughter an only child, away from them, by filing false child abuse charges.

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Bishop asks Sexton to Stay Away!



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To make matters worse the charges were filed in Houston County, Alabama where the couple worked as counselors for the United Methodist Children's Home.

The plot didn't work, because the charges were transferred to Walton County, Florida, where Martha Cory was placed in the unique position of recanting the false allegations and her acts alienated Allan Cory and wife from Martha.

In December 1982, on the advice of her psychic and in an apparent effort to evade property taxes she could not pay, Martha put a sign "Covenant House" in the yard of a home she owned next door and then hired Panama City attorney Bill R. Hutto to set up a not for profit corporation called Trinity Retreat, Inc.

In June 1983 Martha Cory willed her estate to Trinity, to which she was the sole officer and proprietor. Apparently several years later Martha added her banker, Stephen R. Hannah as an officer to the corporation.

According to Allen Cory and court records in the case of Faith Sexton vs. Markus Bishop and Faith Christian Church, Trinity Retreat was supposed to be a facility that would house and shelter abused women and children.

Apparently, Trinity Retreat never did anything to accomplish its intended purpose and had its state charter revoked and later re-instated. But, months prior to Martha Cory's death, she did take in Faith Sexton who showed up unannounced at her front door one afternoon. Prior to that meeting Martha Cory had never met Sexton, the stranger at her front door.

Sexton and another woman took up residence with Martha Cory for a short period of time, before Cory asked them to leave and Sexton left the area for central Florida.

Allan Cory was in the process of closing the probate of his mother's estate and dissolving the sham corporation transferring deeds to his mother's valuable land to himself and his sister, the only rightful heirs of Martha's estate.

On the date the property was to be transferred and the estate closed, Faith Sexton and her attorney filed papers with the Florida Secretary of State, naming Sexton as the President and sole director of Trinity Retreat.

According to our legal sources, any John or Mary Doe could have filed papers stating that they were an officer of Trinity, making themselves instant heirs to Martha Cory's estate.

Allan Cory and his sister were devastated and wiped out financially when they lost the big legal bucks battle with Sexton. Sexton who was in a trance like state, afterward remarked, "God told her to deed the estate to Markus Bishop, her preacher whom she had blind faith in. Preacher Bishop was going to help her fulfill Martha Cory's dream"

According to Sexton, Bishop promised her that she would be able to live on the property and work at the new Trinity Retreat. But, in an apparent web of lies and deceit, the Bishops directed their corporate attorney, Charles Isler III, to dispose of the valuable beach property and evict Sexton.

Charles Isler is the corporate attorney of record for Faith Christian Church. According to the **Insiders** confidential sources, in 1989 Bay County Court records, book 1243, page 691, Charles Isler acted as a go between for James

Finch and issued a large loan to then County Commission Chairman Mike Nelson, who was in serious financial trouble. Nelson lost his Buick dealership in Panama City and wrote a bad check to the State Department of sales tax Revenue for \$60,000.

When questioned about the transaction, Isler recently stated "That he doesn't think he has ever represented James Finch and can't recall ever doing so."

CONTINUED Next Month, "The Serpent Pit", will expose questionable business deals by the Bishops and Faith Christian Church.



Faith Sexton

Bishop



FAITH CHRISTIAN FAMILY CHURCH

March 21, 1997

CERTIFIED MAIL

Ms. Faith Sexton
Route 2 Box 6880
Santa Rosa Beach, Florida 32459

Dear Faith:

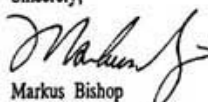
I am sorry that such a great deal of distrust has arisen between us over your Aunt Martha's vision for a recovery and treatment center.

It seems to me that the difference between our two visions for carrying out your Aunt Martha's vision is between a large scale recovery center and a small scale recovery center. I intend to develop a large treatment center to benefit a large number of people. To do this, the church must sell the property Trinity Retreat deeded to the church.

I am willing to try and do both visions: large and small scale. However, to do this, I must take possession of the home on the property in which you have resided for the past eighteen months as the church's guest. Please move from the home by March 31, 1997, so that the church may begin the long process of obtaining zoning variances (if possible) and remodeling of the home in order to establish a treatment and recovery center on a small scale.

Please do not force the church to take legal action to enforce its rights to possession of the home. Again, I am very sorry to see such distrust arise between us when we both clearly want to see Martha Cory's vision fulfilled. Due to the strained relationship that has arisen between us, and your obvious distrust of me and the church, I feel it would be best if you did not come to the church for now.

Sincerely,


Markus Bishop
Senior Pastor