

Televangelist Paul Crouch Attempts to Keep Accuser Quiet

A former worker at TBN threatened to disclose an alleged 1996 homosexual encounter.

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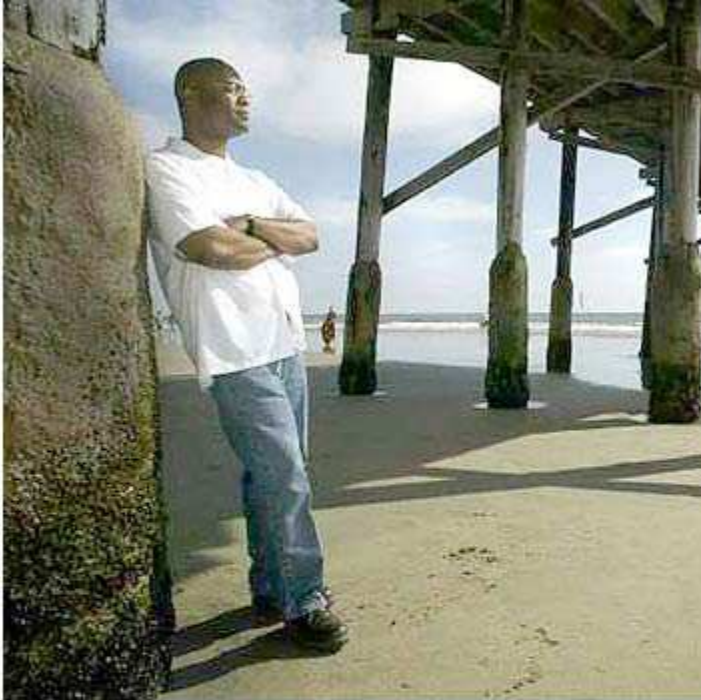
Trinity Foundation furnished substantial investigative data for this story.

By William Lobdell
Times Staff Writer

Televangelist Paul Crouch, founder of the world's largest Christian broadcasting network, has waged a fierce legal battle to prevent a former employee from publicizing allegations



DEFENSE: Lawyers for Paul Crouch, pictured in 1988, said publication of the allegation would violate a secret settlement.
(Mark Boster / LAT)



ALLEGATION: Enoch Lonnie Ford went to work for the ministry after meeting Paul Crouch at a TBN-affiliated drug treatment center, where Ford sought treatment in 1991. His manuscript alleges a 1996 sexual encounter with Crouch at a TBN-owned cabin.
(Mark Boster / LAT)

that he and Crouch had a sexual encounter eight years ago.

Crouch, 70, is the president of Trinity Broadcasting Network, based in Orange County, whose Christian programming reaches millions of viewers around the world via satellite, cable and broadcast stations.

The source of the allegations against him is Enoch Lonnie Ford, who met Crouch at a TBN-affiliated drug treatment center in 1991 and later went to work for the ministry.

After Ford threatened to sue TBN in 1998, claiming that he had been unjustly fired, Crouch reached a \$425,000 settlement with him. In return, Ford agreed, among other things, not to discuss his claim about a sexual encounter with the TV preacher.

But in the last year, Ford has threatened to go public with his story, prompting a flurry of legal maneuvers — conducted in closed court hearings, sealed pleadings and private arbitration.

In court papers, Crouch has denied the allegations, and ministry officials have described Ford — who has a history of drug problems and has served time for a sex offense — as a liar and an extortionist.

At stake are the public image of one of the world's most successful televangelists and,

potentially, the fortunes of the broadcasting empire that Crouch and his wife, Jan, built over the last 31 years.

TBN and Crouch went on the legal offensive after they learned that Ford had written a book manuscript that included an account of the alleged sexual encounter.

In a dramatic flourish, Ford had appeared at a TBN broadcast studio in Costa Mesa, minutes before the start of a "Praise-a-thon" fundraiser, and, without comment, handed Crouch a copy of the manuscript

Ford's lawyer later told ministry officials that they could keep the work out of public view by buying the rights. After some discussion, he suggested that \$10 million might be a reasonable price.

While negotiations continued, Crouch sued to enforce the 1998 secrecy agreement and obtained a restraining order barring Ford from seeking a publisher for his book.

Orange County Superior Court Judge John M. Watson also granted Crouch's request to conduct the case in secret, sealing all documents and expunging any mention of the suit from public court records.

Both sides eventually agreed to let a private arbitrator decide the matter. In June, the arbitrator ruled that Ford could not publish the manuscript without violating the 1998 settlement — an act that could subject him to monetary damages.

This account of the controversy is drawn from interviews with friends of Ford's, unsealed court records, correspondence among TBN lawyers and a copy of the arbitrator's confidential ruling. The arbitrator's decision contains details about the 1998 settlement and Ford's manuscript — both of which are under seal.

Records and interviews show that even as they battled to keep Ford's story from leaking, TBN lawyers worried that details would eventually come out.

"I am absolutely amazed that Lonnie hasn't gone to Penthouse or Dianne [sic] Sawyer with his manuscript, notwithstanding the [judge's] injunction," TBN attorney Dennis G. Brewer Sr. wrote in a March letter to the network's other lawyers.

In a subsequent letter, in May, Brewer mentioned the anguish that Ford's accusations had caused Crouch's youngest son, Matt, when he learned of them in 1998.

Brewer wrote that the younger Crouch had told his then-law partner, David Middlebrook: "I am devastated; I am confronted with having to face the fact that my father is a homosexual."

Middlebrook and Matt Crouch have denied that there was such a conversation.

Millions of Viewers

Paul and Jan Crouch started TBN in 1973, using a rented studio in Santa Ana. Over the next three decades, they built a worldwide broadcasting network by buying TV stations and negotiating deals with cable systems and satellite companies.

Today, TBN's 24-hour-a-day menu of sermons, faith healing, inspirational movies and other Christian fare reaches millions of viewers from Spain to the Solomon Islands.

Paul Crouch is the driving entrepreneurial force behind the network and one of its most popular on-air personalities. He and Jan, his wife of 46 years, have cultivated a folksy on-screen image as a devoted couple.

TBN officials have long been concerned about how Ford's allegations could affect the network, which relies heavily on donations from viewers. Officials said they were particularly worried about possible comparisons to the scandal that brought down televangelist Jim Bakker in 1987.

Bakker resigned from his PTL Ministries in 1987 after admitting to paying a secretary \$265,000 in ministry funds to be silent about an earlier affair. Bakker later went to prison for bilking donors.

TBN officials said they were careful not to pay Ford with ministry funds in 1998. They declined to say whether the money came from an insurer, Crouch personally or some other source.

Ford, 41, said he could not discuss his manuscript or his allegations against Crouch but he did provide basic facts about his background and his time at TBN.

Ford, whose father and grandfather were ministers, grew up in Fairfax County, Va., moved to California in 1989 and worked in a string of jobs that included jewelry salesman, produce clerk and gas station attendant. For years, he struggled to kick a cocaine habit.

In 1991, he checked into a Christian drug treatment program in Colleyville, Texas, on a TBN-owned ranch. It was there that Ford met Crouch. In 1992 the network hired him to work on a phone bank in Orange County. Ford said he also ran errands for the Crouches and drove Paul Crouch to appointments.

Ford repeatedly ran into trouble with the law, but TBN stood behind him. In 1994, he pleaded no contest in San Bernardino County to having sex with a 17-year-old boy and served six months in jail, according to court records. TBN took him back after his release.

In 1995, he pleaded guilty in Orange County to possession of cocaine and served about 30 days in County Jail. Again, TBN took him back.

Lake Arrowhead Cabin

The alleged sexual encounter between Ford and Crouch occurred in the fall of 1996, according to Sandi Mahlow, a Tustin housewife who met Ford in a Fullerton church 10 years ago and became a close friend.

Mahlow, 50, who helped Ford write his manuscript, said he broke down in tears after returning from a weekend spent alone with Crouch at a TBN-owned cabin near Lake Arrowhead. Mahlow said Ford told her that he and Crouch had engaged in sexual acts.

"Lonnie had a lot of bad traits; one thing he isn't, and that's a liar," Mahlow said. She said she helped Ford with his manuscript for no pay, as a favor to a friend, and has no financial interest in the book.

After the alleged encounter, Ford continued to work at TBN. For a time, he lived rent-free in an apartment at the network's Tustin headquarters, according to Mahlow and another friend of Ford's, Diane Benson, who met him at an Anaheim church 14 years ago.

A third friend of Ford's said that in October 1996, about the time of the alleged Arrowhead encounter, ministry officials gave her a \$12,000 check to pay back money Ford owed her. The woman spoke on condition that she not be named, saying she feared retaliation.

TBN officials acknowledged that the ministry paid some of Ford's debts. They said the network commonly extends such generosity to employees in financial trouble.

Within weeks of the Arrowhead trip, Ford tested positive for drug use and was arrested for violating terms of his probation. While Ford awaited sentencing, the ministry again came to his support, urging the judge not to impose more prison time.

Ford "has continuously shown a very positive attitude regarding whatever we have asked him to do," wrote Ruth M. Brown, Paul Crouch's sister and TBN's director of personnel. "He carried out his duties cheerfully and always tries to do more than asked."

The judge sent Ford to the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco, a drug treatment facility in the state prison system.

In August 1997, Jay Jones, TBN's director of telephone ministry, wrote prison officials that Ford would have a job with the network after he got out, despite his "extended leave of absence."

But Ford said that after he was released in February 1998, he was told he no longer had a position at TBN.

"There comes a point in time when you have to say, 'Enough is enough,' " said John Casoria, a TBN lawyer who is a nephew of the Crouches.

Ford responded with his threat to sue. The settlement followed.

Despite TBN's efforts to keep Ford's charges secret, they surfaced in an unrelated 1998 lawsuit. A former bodyguard for TBN personality Benny Hinn testified in a deposition that during a European bus tour that year, Hinn had told a group of associates about "a sexual relationship that Paul Crouch had with his chauffeur."

The witness, Mario C. Licciardello, quoted Hinn as saying: "Paul's defense was that he was drunk."

Hinn and six others mentioned by Licciardello, who died in 2000, told The Times that Hinn never made such remarks. However, Rick Jones, a retired police officer and ordained minister who worked for Hinn, said he heard Hinn talk about Crouch's alleged homosexual relationship on that bus.

Jones said he was disgusted by the talk and "got up and walked away. I didn't want to hear gossip."

Asking \$10 Million

Meanwhile, Ford began to have second thoughts about keeping silent. Last year, with Mahlow's help, he wrote his manuscript, titled "Arrowhead."

Friends said Ford wanted to expose what he viewed as Crouch's hypocrisy. They said he also needed money and hoped to earn some by selling the manuscript. It's unclear how Ford spent his 1998 settlement, but today he leads a modest existence, living in a room of a Lake Forest home and working as a mortgage salesman.

Ministry officials learned of the book in April 2003, when Ford walked onto the set of TBN's Costa Mesa broadcast studio and handed a copy of the manuscript to Crouch.

Ford's attorney, Eugene Zech, said that Brewer, the TBN lawyer, called him the next business day. In court papers, Zech said that Brewer asked "if Ford might be willing to accept \$1 million in exchange for the manuscript."

Zech said in the court filing that he suggested \$10 million.

When the parties went to arbitration, Crouch's lawyers argued that publication would violate the 1998 settlement and cause irreparable damage to Crouch's reputation. Ford's lawyers argued that the secrecy agreement was overly broad and violated his free-speech rights.

Arbitrator Robert J. Neill ruled that Ford's right to make his allegations public "was sold to [Crouch] for \$425,000." Ford "bargained away his right to speak on certain matters and now suggests that his right to free speech trumps that bargain.... [His] right to

discuss these matters was bought and paid for. He relinquished that right."

Paul Crouch Jr., a TBN executive and the televangelist's oldest son, said that despite the favorable ruling, he wished his father had never entered into the settlement with Ford.

Crouch said advisors persuaded his father that it would be cheaper to settle than to litigate. He said TBN was particularly anxious to avoid negative publicity because the ministry was celebrating its 25th anniversary that year.

"In hindsight, we should have fought Lonnie tooth and nail," the son said in an interview. "We should have drawn the battle lines right there."