

PRESS RELEASE

Self-Described Pastor Indicted for Sex Trafficking and Forced Labor, and Charged with His Wife for Conspiracy to Commit Forced Labor

Saturday, May 10, 2025

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, District of New Jersey

NEWARK, N.J. – An Essex County man who claimed to be a pastor of a church in Orange, New Jersey was indicted on April 25, 2025, for sex trafficking, forced labor, and, along with his wife, conspiring to commit forced labor, U.S. Attorney Alina Habba and Assistant Attorney General Harmeet K. Dhillon of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division announced today.

The indictment, which was unsealed on May 7, 2025, charges Treva Edwards, 60, and Christine Edwards, 63, with conspiracy to commit forced labor. It also charges Treva Edwards with sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion and forced labor. Both defendants were arrested on May 7, 2025 and made their initial appearances on May 8, 2025 and were arraigned before U.S. Magistrate Judge André M. Espinosa and were detained.

“These charges are an example of my office’s tireless commitment to combatting human trafficking in our community. If you engage in human trafficking, we will find you, and we will prosecute you. We are committed to working alongside our partners to ensure that those who target the most vulnerable are brought to justice.”

- U.S. Attorney Alina Habba

“The Department of Justice will not tolerate the exploitation of vulnerable individuals under the guise of faith or community,” said Assistant Attorney General Harmeet K. Dhillon of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division. “This Civil Rights Division is

committed to holding accountable those who abuse positions of trust to manipulate and control others for personal gain. These charges reflect our unwavering focus on protecting victims and prosecuting those who commit forced labor and sex trafficking."

"Treva and Christine Edwards turned a source of hope into a tool of fear by allegedly exploiting religious faith to manipulate victims and expose them to sexual violence and forced labor conditions," said Special Agent in Charge Ricky J. Patel of HSI Newark Division. "Seeking justice for human trafficking victims in cases like this is of utmost importance to HSI Newark. Anyone who may believe they are a victim of trafficking can be assured our investigations are victim-centered and that we will continue to relentlessly pursue justice for anyone's freedom that has been held ransom."

"An important part of the mission of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General is to investigate allegations of labor trafficking involving the use of coercion or force," said Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Northeast Region. "We will continue to work with our law enforcement partners to investigate these types of allegations."

According to the indictment and statements made in court:

Defendants Treva Edwards and Christine Edwards were the founders and pastors of a church they named "Jesus is Lord by the Holy Ghost," which they operated out of a multi-unit apartment building in Orange, New Jersey, and where they conspired to coax and coerce vulnerable victims to work with no pay.

Between 2011 and 2020, the defendants identified and recruited victims who were facing struggles in their personal lives, including financial and familial struggles, to join the church and live and worship at the church building. Treva Edwards told the victims that he was a prophet who could communicate directly with God and that disobeying him would result in spiritual retribution from God, as well as physical, emotional, and financial harm.

The defendants preached to the victims that it was God's will for them to work, and that members had to perform labor to serve God. The defendants secured labor contracts to provide manual labor in and around Orange, New Jersey, and the defendants dispatched the victims to perform the contracted labor. The defendants did not pay wages to the victims for their work and kept the money earned from their labor.

The defendants convinced the victims that they would lose favor with God if they did not perform labor. Treva Edwards spread fear among the victims through verbal and emotional abuse and threats of reputational harm, homelessness, hunger, spiritual

retribution, punishments, and more hard labor to gain their obedience and compel them to perform unpaid labor. The defendants instituted and enforced strict rules about when and whether the victims could eat or sleep, when and for how long they were to pray and work, and whether they could speak to non-members or leave the church building. The defendants isolated the victims, monitored their communications and whereabouts, and by convincing them that non-members were evil or possessed by the devil. The defendants deprived the victims of sleep, typically fed them only once a day after they completed their work.

According to the allegations in the indictment, Treva Edwards controlled and subjected one victim to repeated physical and sexual assaults, impregnated her, and instructed her to get an abortion.

The charge of sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion against Treva Edwards carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 15 years in prison and a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. The forced labor charge against Treva Edwards carries a maximum sentence of twenty years or life imprisonment if the government proves at trial that the violation included aggravated sexual abuse. The conspiracy to commit forced labor charge against both defendants carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

U.S. Attorney Alina Habba and Assistant Attorney General Harmeet K. Dhillon of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division credited special agents of Homeland Security Investigations Newark, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Ricky J. Patel and special agents of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Northeast Region, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Jonathan Mellone, with the investigation leading to this indictment.

This investigation was conducted as part of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey's Human Trafficking Task Force, which was formed in 2025. The Task Force brings together federal and state agencies to collaborate and dedicate resources to combat human trafficking and prosecute human trafficking offenders who endanger the safety of the community. The Human Trafficking Task Force is composed of the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General, and the Internal Revenue Service.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Trevor Chenoweth and Susan Millenky, and Trial Attorney Francisco Zornosa of the Civil Rights Division's Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit.

HSI is asking anyone with information about the defendants to contact the HSI Human Trafficking Hotline at (866) 347-2423 (option 2), and reference Edwards or Jesus is Lord Church, or to email hsinewarkhumantrafficking@hsi.dhs.gov. If you or someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, please call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at (888) 373-7888.

The charges and allegations contained in the indictment are merely accusations, and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty.

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Defense counsel:

Treva Edwards: Michael Thomas, Esq., AFPD

Christine Edwards: F.R. "Chip" Dunne, III, Esq., Hoboken, NJ

[edwards.indictment.pdf](#)

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