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News

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MB leader charged, withdraws from international role

After being charged for alleged solicitation of prostitution in January 2019 in Fresno, Calif., a Mennonite Brethren leader resigned from a conference leadership position and withdrew from another.

Gary Wall, who served since 2002 as district minister of Pacific District Conference of the U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, initially pleaded no contest but said in December he would change his plea to not guilty.

He had accepted the role of U.S. national director with the International Community of Mennonite Brethren, to begin in 2020.

ICOMB executive director Rudi Plett told *MWR* the organization was not aware of the situation when it announced in May that Wall was joining ICOMB.

"We have tried to be open, but wise, supportive and caring for all involved people and institutions in this process," he said.

Fresno County court records indicate Wall was formally charged on April 22 with agreeing to engage in prostitution, a misdemeanor, on Jan. 23. Local media reports from the time stated 19 people were arrested or detained that day at a Fresno massage parlor during an operation in which people were detained for soliciting an undercover officer for sex acts in exchange for money.

On May 21, Pacific District announced Wall was resigning as district minister in order to work for the International Community of Mennonite Brethren beginning in 2020. He concluded that role July 2. A severance package ran through the end of the year.

In a report by the MB magazine *Christian Leader* on May 29, Wall said: "The decision to respond affirmatively to the invitation to join the ICOMB team is a work of God's Spirit as I have wrestled with the implications of what has become a clear call to leave my ministry in the PDC. . . . Transitions such as this present an opportunity for fresh leadership vision."

Pacific District moderator Pat Coyle announced Wall's decision in a letter to PDC pastors.

"I will miss his friendship but know the Lord has wonderful plans for him in his new role in the greater MB world," wrote Coyle, senior pastor at Shafter (Calif.) Mennonite Brethren Church, at the time.

About three months later, on Aug. 26 in county court, Wall pleaded no contest to the charge.

In a December statement, Wall stated, "I have never been arrested. Based upon the plea agreement, in May 2020 the prosecutor will allow me to withdraw my no contest plea and enter a plea of not guilty. The judge will then grant the prosecutor's motion to dismiss the case. Because the case is pending until the next hearing, I have been advised not to discuss the facts of the case at this time."

Withdrawal from ICOMB

On Nov. 5, ICOMB announced Wall had withdrawn from plans to serve with that organization.

"It is with disappointment that we communicate that Gary Wall has for personal reasons withdrawn his availability to become a USMB-based advocate and resource development partner for the International Community of Mennonite Brethren," stated ICOMB executive director Rudi Plett and the ICOMB Executive in November. "In light of this, we wish Gary God's favor in the next season of his life journey and encourage you to do the same."

Neither organization mentioned Wall's charge or plea in public statements.

When contacted by *MWR*, Coyle said Wall's conclusion of service with Pacific District was a private personnel matter. He would not comment on when PDC learned of the alleged January incident, if people should know about the charge and Wall's plea or if Pacific District shared that information with ICOMB. "As a district we appreciate his 17 years of service, and that's all we're acknowledging at this time," he said.

The original article that appeared in the Dec. 9 MWR *print edition stated Wall was arrested last January. Law enforcement officials have neither confirmed nor denied Wall was arrested. Efforts to reach Wall through PDC and USMB leaders were unsuccessful until Dec. 27. This article has been updated based on available legal records and Wall's December statement.*

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