

Online scammers steal \$793K from N.C. church

ELKIN, N.C. (The Biblical Recorder) – A North Carolina congregation's plans to move into a new worship center this spring have been put on hold after cyber criminals stole more than \$793,000 from the church in an online scam.

Elkin Valley Church in Elkin broke ground on a new sanctuary last September, but about half of the funds that had been raised by the church and earmarked for the project were stolen by scammers through a fraudulent email.

"What took more than seven years to save, somebody wiped out in just a few minutes," said Johnny Blevins, who has served as Elkin Valley's senior pastor since 1996. The church was founded in 1884 and is located in northwest North Carolina.

In early November, Blevins said the church received an email from Landmark Construction, the company overseeing the project, that included an invoice. Blevins said the church received a second email immediately after the first one that included payment instructions.

However, the second email – and the one through which the church submitted payment – was fraudulent. Church officials didn't discover that they had been the victims of a scam until about a week later when the construction company followed up to inquire about the payment, Blevins said.

"It was cloned to look like our builder's email," Blevins said. "We had been in communication with our builders through email and so forth, so it happened during the normal course of things. You just don't think it can happen to you."

Blevins said the church reported the incident to local police, the state Bureau of Investigation, and the FBI. He said the

FBI investigation is ongoing.

The church has also hired a cyber analyst to investigate how the breach occurred, as well as an attorney who specializes in cyber crimes to help them attempt to recover the stolen funds.

Church leaders informed the congregation of the incident during a special called meeting in November. Blevins said the response from the congregation has been “amazingly good.”

“It’s kind of like a grief situation,” Blevins said. “You go through the shock, the sadness, and the anger, and we’ve been through all of that but as people of faith, we’ll trust God through this and keep moving.”

Elkin Valley’s new sanctuary was originally scheduled to be completed in time to hold services this May. Blevins said the church plans to move forward with construction on a revised timeline as funds permit. He said he anticipates construction to resume in February.

As news of the incident has slowly spread beyond the church and into the community, Blevins said individuals have reached out wanting to help. Local and regional media outlets reported on the incident earlier this week.

“The general response of the community has been good,” Blevins said. “They’ve been really supportive and willing to step in and help. We’ve seen people do that. We’ve received checks from people who said they heard about this and wanted to help.”

The church has established a Go Fund Me page for those interested in making a contribution to help replace the stolen funds. As of noon on Jan. 27, more than 25 donors had contributed more than \$3,700 toward the effort.

Officials with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina said they planned to make a \$10,000 donation directly to the

church. Blevins called the state convention's contribution "overwhelming," and said he has been encouraged by all of the responses and support the congregation has received thus far.

"It's just overwhelming," Blevins said. "It's so encouraging. It tells us we're not in this alone. Words can't express how grateful we are, and how encouraging and affirming this is. This will help our people see that with the convention, we're all in this together. We are a team."