

Vicar sentenced for conducting sham marriages

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LONDON -- A Church of England vicar has been sentenced to 4 1/2 years in prison for conducting hundreds of bogus weddings and illegally pocketing more than 30,000 pounds (\$48,000) in fees.

The Rev. Brian Shipsides was convicted and sentenced Tuesday for carrying out a "meticulously planned and orchestrated" immigration fraud over a 2 1/2 period at All Saints Church in east London.

Authorities said the vicar conducted the fake marriages of non-Europeans, mostly Nigerians, to European partners to try to obtain immigration rights to stay in Britain.

Shipsides' conviction comes about 18 months after a similar marriage fraud case, in which another Anglican vicar, the Rev. Alex Brown, was sentenced to four years for conducting 360 sham weddings in southern England.

Shipsides was tried and convicted at the Inner London Crown Court, where Judge Peter Grobel described his actions as "a disgraceful abuse of your calling as an ordained minister of the church."

"There really is no mitigation in respect of this type of offending," Grobel added.

Authorities said Shipsides pocketed 30,264 pounds (\$48,220) for conducting nearly 250 fake wedding ceremonies -- money they said rightfully belonged to the diocese or local parish.

The vicar, who had served in the parish for 13 years, also gained publicity 11 years ago, when he officiated at the marriage of what the Guinness Book of Records described as the world's tallest couple.

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