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Mailbox ministry

Direct-market evangelist brings in millions

lawyer says it all goes back into his mission

Author: Howard Swindle, Tim Wyatt; Staff Writers of The Dallas Morning News; Copyright 1996, The Dallas Morning News

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BEL AIR, Calif. - Somewhere along the road to one of America's most exclusive addresses, the Rev. James Eugene Ewing, son of a sharecropper, found a way to trade his canvas revival tent for a stucco mansion.

The resolutely reclusive Gene Ewing is among the least-known millionaire preachers in America. But neighbors Marlo Thomas and Eddie Murphy won't find Mr. Ewing preaching in church on Sunday mornings or on national television.

As head of Church By Mail and Church and Bible Study in the Home By Mail, the erstwhile Texas tent preacher is "God's Ghostwriter" - an oft-used consultant to many of the nation's best-known evangelists. And with a mailing list of more than 1 million names, a computerized demographics system and a penchant for the trinket-driven sales pitch, he presides over a high-tech evangelical empire that has become a model for his better-known colleagues.

"Every home has a mailbox . . .," Mr. Ewing has written of his unique ministry. "God has shown us how to go into the privacy of homes and preach the word through our letter sermons."

In 1992, according to federal tax records, Mr. Ewing's nonprofit Church and Bible Study in the Home by Mail took in \$6 million in donations. A breakdown of those expenses showed that 40 percent went to manage the charity, and 60 percent went to "program services." Those services, however, included bulk mail production expenses with only \$25,700 spent on aid to the poor, "crusades" or donations to other charities - less than half a penny per dollar donated.

"This is no Elmer Gantry kind of preacher," said Tulsa, Okla., attorney J.C. Joyce, referring to novelist Sinclair Lewis' fictional, scheming salesman-turned-evangelist. Mr. Joyce said the mailings are, in effect, Mr. Ewing's evangelical message, and the money he collects simply pays the bills.

"All the money he gets he puts back into his ministry, and it's never enough," Mr. Joyce said. "Reverend Ewing doesn't own anything, not even a piece of ground."

Leased surroundings

Records in Texas, California and Oklahoma reveal no property holdings in Mr. Ewing's name. According to tax records, the preacher's leased estate went for \$13,430 per month five years ago. Other records show a leased collection of classic cars that included Ferraris, Rolls Royces and a Stutz Bearcat.

Through Mr. Joyce, who represents a half-dozen of the nation's best-known evangelists, Mr. Ewing declined a request for an interview.

In the inner circle of mass media evangelists, Mr. Ewing is known for his marketing savvy. He specializes in creative, direct-mail campaigns that use computer-generated letters and vivid graphics designed to represent a personal appeal.

Each mailing is constructed around a creative "hook" which often includes trinkets - from "faith shower caps" and "anointed coin wrappers" to green yarn "faith cards" and brown paper "prayer sheets." The campaigns are usually aimed at healing conditions that range from poverty to prostate cancer.

"Ewing's letters are masterpieces of the con man's art, containing homespun homilies, fractured grammar and twisted scriptural interpretations that promise divine intervention in return for . . . contributions," said Ole Anthony, president of the nonprofit Trinity Foundation and an avowed critic of mass-market evangelists.

On an average day, according to Mr. Anthony's group, hundreds of envelopes pour into the Ewing ministries' lock box at the main post office in Tulsa. Within hours, the checks and cash inside are extracted and deposited in his ministries' accounts in a Tulsa bank. The daily tally is faxed to Mr. Ewing's secluded California mansion, 1,400 miles away.

Successful method

An October 1993 memorandum from the Rev. Ray McElrath, a Ewing aide, to Mr. Joyce shows how effective the campaigns can be. The memo notes that a new computer program netted \$2,411,184 in income from 615,426 letters.

"We have averaged \$26,640 per day for the first 12 days this month," Mr. McElrath wrote. "Church in the home really does work today, just like it did in the Bible days."

According to the memo, a computer software program identifies and isolates demographic blocs that respond best to Mr. Ewing's direct-mail appeal.

Those contributors, according to an analysis by The Dallas Morning News, come from some of the most poverty-stricken zip codes in the nation.

"The size of each special area is about 2 to 4 city blocks," Mr. McElrath wrote, "and thank God there are 10's of thousands of them across the nation."

So effective are the Ewing campaigns, according to admirers and critics, that he contracts their use to other, better-known evangelists.

The News obtained copies of direct-mail solicitations, all of which contain virtually identical language, but which are "signed" by different evangelists including Robert Tilton, Rex Humbard, Frederick Eikerenkoetter (better known as "Rev. Ike"), Don Stewart and W.V. Grant Jr. Based on the dates that they were received, the letters apparently first appeared under Mr. Ewing's signature.

Two former members of Oral Roberts' staff credit Mr. Ewing with saving the Roberts ministry from financial ruin in 1968. Mr. Ewing, then an obscure tent-preacher based in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, created the so-called "Prayer Tower" campaign in which Mr. Roberts told followers he would spend three days reading their prayer requests, praying over them, and corresponding with them from his Prayer Tower.

According to former Roberts aide Wayne Robinson, Mr. Ewing wrote the bulk-mail letter that Mr. Roberts sent from the Prayer Tower.

"The first Monday after the appeal was made, there were more than 150,000 letters that were taken over on two-wheelers up to the Prayer Tower," said Mr. Robinson, who now pastors a Unitarian church in Minneapolis. In that one year, according to Mr. Robinson, Oral Roberts' contributions went from \$6 million to \$12.3 million.

"Gene had {an} intuitive savvy about direct mail that none of your giant agencies would have," said Mr. Robinson, noting Mr. Ewing's ability to appeal to specific groups.

"That was basically his peers," he said. "That would be those who hadn't graduated from high school, old people, lonely people, people on the outside, those who weren't being reached by the mainstream churches. And he was extraordinary {at} communicating with African-Americans."

Nor was the campaign Mr. Ewing's last for Mr. Roberts. Another former Roberts associate, who asked not to be identified, said that in 1979, he paid \$900,000 to Mr. Ewing, which represented Mr. Ewing's share of one month's direct-mail proceeds.

A spokesman for the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association said the organization would not comment.

'He is brilliant'

"I can tell you this," said Dr. Billy James Hargis, a controversial evangelist and outspoken conservative who became widely known in the '70s, "this Gene Ewing is the greatest fund-raiser in America."

"He is brilliant," said Dr. Hargis, who said he paid Mr. Ewing \$35,000 to draft a campaign for him 30 years ago. "He has no education, his English is atrocious, but he is absolutely brilliant."

If in recent years Mr. Ewing has recast himself as a reclusive writer of home sermons, some would say it's because he stumbled hard when he did seek the spotlight of mass-market religion.

Records show that Mr. Ewing was born in 1933 to a sharecropper family in Kaufman County. In 1958, he created Camp Meeting Revivals Inc., only a year after he was honorably discharged from the U.S. Air Force. While in the service he moonlighted as tent evangelist, according to his writings, using a 30-by -40-foot tent he erected on the outskirts of San Antonio.

The first headquarters for his civilian ministry was a house in East Fort Worth where longtime residents recall the trucks that hauled his tents throughout the Southwest. In the mid-60s, they said, he expanded the house into a makeshift orphanage that was home to a half-dozen children.

When the Fort Worth site burned, Mr. Ewing moved his operations east. In February 1971, another fire gutted Mr. Ewing's Church of Compassion in Oak Cliff.

Undaunted, Mr. Ewing resurrected his church five months later as the Cathedral of Compassion when he moved the ministry across the Trinity River to a stately building that previously housed the Lovers Lane Methodist Church. He announced his new church in a double-page ad in Dallas newspapers and with guest appearances by cowboy singing star Tex Ritter, former heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis and nationally known gospel groups.

This was a time of rapid expansion for the Ewing Ministries. From his 30th floor offices in One Main Place, Mr. Ewing boasted not only the Lovers Lane church, but sister churches in Anaheim, Calif., and San Diego and a piece of property at the famous Los Angeles intersection of Hollywood and Vine where he said he was planning to build yet another Cathedral of Compassion.

That Mr. Ewing would feel comfortable in Hollywood came as no surprise to those familiar with the former tent preacher's flair for the dramatic.

A lawyer who once represented Mr. Ewing recalled joining the evangelist's entourage on a crusade in Detroit. The lawyer, who asked not to be identified, said he was greeted at the airport by Mr. McElrath. The Ewing aide was wearing a black suit with a clerical collar and was accompanied by a woman who was "very, very skimpily clad," the lawyer said.

The next night at a sold-out Cobo Hall, the lawyer said, Mr. Ewing preached in a bright orange suit on "getting right with God before you die."

"It was rocking, maybe 10- or 15,000 people," he said. ". . . All of a sudden this dirge began, all the lights went off and at the back, here came all these guys bringing a real casket. Leading the group was McElrath with this clerical collar and Bible."

With the casket placed center-stage and Mr. Ewing preaching salvation, the lawyer said, the lid of the casket creaked open.

"Out steps the floozy from the night before. She's got this angel's outfit on and this Halloween halo on her head.

"People were screeching and fainting," he said. "It was astounding."

To those with a closer view of the ministry, however, there were signs of trouble beneath the prosperous veneer.

The lawyer who attended the Detroit crusade recalled a California trip to christen the "Ship of Compassion," a converted, 147-foot pleasure craft Mr. Ewing said was to become a hospital ship offering free medical services to the Caribbean poor.

Singer Lou Rawls entertained patrons on the weather deck. Joe Louis mingled with the crowd. Bored after a while, the lawyer said, he took an impromptu tour of the ship.

"All the equipment was really primitive looking" he said. "I went into the wheelhouse and I saw this big, red sheet of paper on the window. . . . I looked at this thing, and it was a seizure notice from the IRS."

A short time later, the ship was sold. Two former employees of the Ewing ministry said the ship may have made one mercy mission. The lawyer said he does not know the outcome of the problem with the IRS.

Apparently, Mr. Ewing made his move to California permanent in 1973 - leasing a house in Beverly Hills across the street from singer Pat Boone. At the same time, he began converting his ministry from bricks and mortar to bulk mail.

In 1974, the Los Angeles Times reported his lease-purchase of the renowned Warren's Theater, formerly the Pantages, in the heart of downtown L.A. The building - which became one of his Cathedrals of Compassion - quickly became a prop for his bulk-mail campaigns.

Asking his direct-mail patrons to give \$5 each to upholster a chair in the deteriorating, but grand, old movie theater, Mr. Ewing wrote: "I don't just talk our business with everyone, but I feel I can with you. . . . I've got to pay \$3,800 a month on this new Cathedral plus everything else I'm doing for our Lord."

Unpaid debts

According to records in Dallas, the sense of alarm was well-founded. Those records reveal thousands of dollars in unpaid debts, many of them in the name of his old ministry - Camp Meetings Revivals Inc.

Ewing abandoned the Lovers Lane location in less than a year, and its owners won a \$54,000 court judgment for the broken lease. The United Methodist Church of Anaheim won a \$14,485 judgment for the preacher's default on a promissory note. Services at the church near San Diego were "discontinued," and the cathedral at Hollywood and Vine never became more than an artist's rendering.

The IRS filed a lien against the Church of Compassion in April 1973, claiming \$76,775 in back taxes.

In October 1971, North Carolina's attorney general complained to the news media that Mr. Ewing was soliciting without a license. He said Raleigh residents had been deluged with direct mail asking a \$4-per-month contribution to the Cathedral of Compassion called "God's gold book plan." However, no action was taken

against the ministry.

Two years later, the church, having paid off the earlier IRS lien, was assessed another \$62,772 in back taxes by the IRS. Records also show that Mr. Ewing's church deeded its Fort Worth property to Mr. Joyce's law firm for \$86,000 in legal services.

Services at the downtown Los Angeles theater, according to press accounts, lasted only a year. Yet The Los Angeles Times reported that 1972 income tax returns for the Church of Compassion showed \$950,000 in salaries and more than \$900,000 in postage, printing and mail processing.

With no churches, tents or radio and TV programs to generate income by the late 1970's, Mr. Ewing apparently redefined his ministry, taking it on a low-key course that would rely exclusively on his consistently strongest suit - mail solicitation.

"You can drop 50 million pieces of mail, and there will be no publicity," said Mr. Robinson, the former Oral Roberts aide. "It just goes to one individual at a time, it isn't a mass media in the sense of visibility. It certainly is mass media in the sense of numbers."

In November 1978, Mr. Ewing incorporated Church By Mail Inc. in Oklahoma, with Mr. Joyce's address in Tulsa as his headquarters. A year later, Mr. Ewing and Mr. McElrath created Twentieth Century Advertising, a company owned by the two ministers that purportedly directed the printing and distribution for Church By Mail.

In 1980, according to tax records, Mr. Ewing petitioned the IRS for tax-exempt status for his mail-order ministry, but the IRS refused.

Records in the Washington tax court showed that Church By Mail collected \$7.2 million in 1985 and contributed \$628 to charity.

The ministry paid the Ewing-owned advertising agency \$3.1 million and showed debts to the agency for another \$2.3 million, according to tax records.

Those records also show that the mail ministry and the advertising company paid Mr. Ewing \$345,379 and Mr. McElrath \$341,635 in salaries.

"{C}ompensation paid to Reverends Ewing and McElrath is manifestly excessive," the tax court ruled.

The tax court ruled that Church By Mail - which had no congregation, no chapel, no regular services and no program of training or instruction - was not, for tax purposes, a church. An appeals court upheld the tax court, and the U.S. Supreme Court refused in 1989 to hear the case.

Already organized was Mr. Ewing's Church and Bible Study in the Home By Mail. Apparently never challenged by the IRS, the newer ministry continues today as a tax-exemption organization that handles the bulk of Mr. Ewing's direct-mail contributions.

It is the character of that mail, however, that most bothers Mr. Ewing's critics.

Richard Gaylord Briley, an author and religious fund-raiser in North Conway, N.H., says Mr. Ewing's mail-order appeals "on the fringe."

"I cannot call . . . what Ewing's doing on his own behalf, Christian," Mr. Briley said.

"Out of all the millions he himself has raised for his own interest," Mr. Briley said, "I would challenge you to find 5 percent that ever went to godly works."

"Ewing's version of Christianity is so marginal as to be believable only to the most desperate and isolated individuals," said Mr. Anthony, the Trinity Foundation president. "His letters frequently include instructions to open them when alone, to not talk with anyone about them and to resist the devil's suggestions that they not be answered."

In a 1965 edition of his own Revival Crusades magazine, the preacher said his own belief in oddly-rendered miracles came when he received a "message in the unknown tongue" that helped cure his father's alcoholism.

The preternatural message directed Mr. Ewing's wife to cut her apron into pieces for "prayer cloths," one of which he was to send to his mother. His mother, according to the minister, put the prayer cloth in his father's shoe as he slept. "To make a long, beautiful and exciting story short, my father never drank another drop from that day forward."

Widow's lament

Remanther Spencer, a Tyler widow, said she had no luck with Mr. Ewing's promises of miracles.

Mrs. Spencer said she began receiving mail from Mr. Ewing shortly after her husband died four years ago. She took up the reverend's offer of prayer, sending him what she could spare out of her Social Security check.

"At that time, I was very ill," she said. "I was taking too much medication for my nerves, I had high blood pressure, muscle spasms, and so that's what I was praying for."

Mr. Ewing responded with steady appeals for more money in letters accompanied by a variety of prayer cloths, miracle car keys and stories of others' healings.

"It didn't help me any. That's why I quit sending him anything," Mrs. Spencer said. "I was hoping I was gonna get healed through his prayers."

Mrs. Spencer soon found out that it was much harder to get off Mr. Ewing's mailing list than it was to get on it. She said she has asked her pastor and the state attorney general's office to help get her removed from Mr. Ewing's direct-mail list.

Still, the letters continue, but she has stopped opening them. She says they serve only as a reminder of money lost to a man she's never met .

"Can you fix it where he'll quit writing me?" she asked

Caption:

PHOTO(S): 1. The Rev. Gene Ewing ... shown in a photo used in an ad, has written that "... God has shown us how to go into the privacy of homes and preach the word through our letter sermons. (2. DMN: Irwin Thompson) Ole Anthony, president of the nonprofit Trinity Foundation and an avowed critic of mass-market evangelists, holds a paper towel that he says the Rev. gene Ewing designed to look like a \$1,000 bill. CHART(S): (DMN) Excerpts From Gene Ewing's Writing

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