



Don't blow your nose in the Faith Handkerchief (center) or any of the church's other mailings.

credit

Saint Matthew's Churches, Inc.

CRAIG MALISOW | MARCH 22, 2007 | 4:00AM

There is a big difference between kneeling down

And bending over...

-- Frank Zappa

Behold the Faith Check. It is written on the Bank of Heaven. Bank President: God, the Father; Vice President: Jesus, the Son; Secretary and Treasurer: The Holy Ghost.

Written instructions: Place the Faith Check in your wallet and keep it there until the blessing unfolds. Whisper the name of Jesus three times as you write your name on the back of the check. Send it to a Tulsa PO box along with your prayer request.

Unwritten instructions: Scrape up whatever cash is on hand and send it to some dude in Beverly Hills. Have a smoke, 'cause you've just been screwed.

For nearly 50 years, Kaufman native James Eugene Ewing has been the reigning "seed faith king," high priest of a direct-mail empire that critics say preys on the poor and vulnerable. After undergoing myriad name changes, it is known today as Saint Matthew's Churches, Inc.

In addition to the Faith Check, Ewing's empire has stuffed mailboxes with Faith Shower Caps, Faith Handkerchiefs and Covenant Napkins. According to financial records uncovered in investigations by *The Dallas Morning News* and the *Tulsa World*, the mail blasts net Ewing and his associates millions -- tax-free -- annually. The *Dallas Morning News*'s investigation also uncovered an internal memo indicating that Saint Matthew's used a sophisticated software program to target some of the poorest ZIP codes in the country. ("The size of each special area is about two to four city blocks," the memo states, "and thank God there are tens of thousands of them across the nation.")

The corporation is headquartered in the Tulsa office of attorney J.C. Joyce, who has represented Oral Roberts and disgraced Dallas televangelist Robert Tilton. However, the organization did not have a brick-and-mortar church until 2004, when it purchased the former Memorial Baptist Church on 9101 Airline Drive, near Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston.

This church doesn't receive any of the prayer requests and donations from the mail blasts. Those go to Joyce's office, where the donations are shucked from the envelopes. According to a 2005 civil suit filed in a California federal court, the prayer requests are forwarded to a warehouse in Chatsworth, California, the porn capital of the world.

Their final destination, according to the suit, is an incinerator.

Memorial Baptist Church stood at 9101 Airline Drive for 78 years.

In the last few years, as the neighborhood became predominantly Hispanic, the church saw its membership dwindle, according to Senior Pastor Cliff Mayton. The ministry just didn't have the resources to serve the community, so they put the building up for sale. Mayton was approached by Joyce, a charming man with a friendly country accent, and was impressed by what Joyce said Saint Matthew's could bring to the area.

Services are only in Spanish. Today, according to Joyce, Sunday worship regularly draws 1,000 members. Getting to the church is no problem -- calling it is. The phone number provides only a recorded message, which, before it concludes, says English services are coming soon.

When asked for a working contact number by the *Houston Press*, Joyce said he wasn't used to receiving such a "strange call."

"Churches aren't in the business of contacts and telephones and calls," he said.

"Churches are in the business of preaching and praying."

"The church is open all the time," he said. "Just go out there and any of the priests will be glad to talk to you." He added that five or six priests were on duty all the time. But when the *Press* heeded his advice, a church receptionist said all the priests had gone to lunch and referred all inquiries to Joyce.

Joyce has proven to be a good attorney for the organization. After a years-long battle for tax-exempt status, the organization finally reached a stipulation agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice in 2000 granting that status. Critics are still scratching their heads over that one, as the Fifth and Ninth circuit courts had denied tax exemption years earlier, citing board members' "excessive" salaries, which ran in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The courts also pointed out that Ewing's private printing and advertising businesses were paying for the mail blasts and ultimately recouping some of the donations. In 1999, the last year the organization made its financial records available, the group brought in \$26 million.

It was an ingenious set-up by Ewing, a junior-high dropout born to a sharecropping family in Kaufman in 1933. After a stint in the Air Force, Ewing conducted tent revivals and ultimately developed a knack for "seed faith" mailings. He put on stadium shows where assistants brought a casket on stage and brought a "corpse" (often a scantily-clad female corpse) back from the dead. In the late 1960s, Oral Roberts credited Ewing for reviving his foundering ministry by writing copy for Roberts's own direct-mail campaign. Ewing soon became the go-to man for other preachers, earning the nickname "God's Ghostwriter" from the Dallas-based religious watchdog group the Trinity Foundation.

"Ewing is like a little kid trying to act like an adult," says Pete Evans of Trinity. "He's seen a number of different preachers in different denominations, and he's borrowed little crumbs of religion from each of them in order to justify his sleazy mail-order business by calling it a church."

Citing the potential for quotes like the one above, Joyce said he would not make Ewing available for an interview. According to its Web site, the organization perceives those who accuse Ewing as a con artist as "atheists; communists; drug dealers; criminals; the lunatic fringes of society; those who hate the United States, God and Christianity and those who hate us because we are gospel missionaries."

One of these alleged drug-dealing pinko heathens is a former employee named Valerija Kachavos, who is suing Saint Matthew's (as well as Ewing and Joyce individually) under the federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act.

According to the suit, Kachavos was a computer programmer for Saint Matthew's who began to question her employer's integrity after allegedly seeing the prayer requests hauled to an incineration company. Kachavos claims she was ultimately fired for asking too many questions.

While critics like the Trinity Foundation have accused Saint Matthew's of being a scam for decades, Kachavos's suit may be the broadest legal action taken against the organization.

The suit does not mention the church building on Airline Drive.

However, it does mention other so-called religious organizations Ewing has incorporated in the past. Perhaps the most telling is Reverend Ewing's Evangelistic Ministries.

Otherwise known as REEM.

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