

Watchdog group claims prayer rug preys on elderly

Tulsa church deemed sleazy

May 31, 2006 | By Joann Klimkiewicz, Tribune Newspapers: The Hartford Courant

The envelope comes addressed "To a Friend" and with the promise that "the letter you write today could change your tomorrow." And it could soon make its way to a mailbox near you.

Inside the envelope, said to be from St. Matthew's Churches in Oklahoma, is an oversize sheet of paper bearing a lavender image of an eyes-closed Jesus. Identified as a prayer rug, it asks the recipient to kneel on the paper, meditate on a blessing -- and then notice whether Jesus' eyes appear to have opened. (This seems less a matter of divine intervention than a skillfully rendered optical illusion.)

Appears harmless



requests so the church can pass the rug's good fortune on to the next needy soul.

Not so fast, cautions Ole Anthony, founder of the Trinity Foundation, a Dallas non-profit watchdog working to expose religious scams.

St. Matthew's Churches is led by James Eugene Ewing, a one-time traveling preacher of the tent-revival variety, says Anthony, whose organization gained national attention after helping ABC's "Primetime" expose televangelist Robert Tilton as a fraud. Anthony says Tilton and Ewing were collaborators.

"We've been following [Ewing] since '91," he says. That was when the group went by the name Church by Mail. "They just keep changing their name to keep ahead of anyone who's looking into them. They're one of the sleaziest. And one of the longest lasting."

Ewing's non-profit organization was the subject of an investigation by the Tulsa World in 2003. The newspaper called it a "direct-mail empire" that "brings millions of dollars flowing into a Tulsa post office box." The investigation detailed Ewing's luxurious lifestyle, his fondness for fancy cars and tracked him to a Beverly Hills address.

It reported that the group changed its name shortly after the Internal Revenue Service denied Church by Mail tax-exempt status in 1992 after concluding its fundraising was solely for the benefit of Ewing and his partner, Ray McElrath.

On the case since 2000

The Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance has been looking into the new group's practices since at least 2000. Bennett Weiner, head of the alliance, said he's working on an updated report, corresponding with the church to get new information to determine if its practices meet bureau standards.

He said the alliance began reporting on the church in response to public complaints. Some simply wanted off the mailing lists; others objected to the letter's contents. And some complained they never received the financial or spiritual blessing the mailings promised.

Representatives of St. Matthew's Churches could not be reached for comment. There is no phone listing for the organization, whose address is a post office box.

A secretary in the office of J.C. Joyce, the Tulsa attorney who has represented the organization for years, said he was unavailable for comment.

Anthony says St. Matthew's Churches preys on the vulnerable, using U.S. Census data to target senior citizens and low-income people with mailings containing the prayer rug or similarly "blessed" tokens. They claim the tokens will bring financial, physical and spiritual blessings.

They urge recipients to use them privately. And to create the illusion that recipients are "chosen," they direct them to different parts of a neighborhood at a time, he says.

Pounded for money

Anthony's Trinity Foundation reports that of the 1 million mailings sent per month, about 8.6 percent are filled out and returned.

And that's when the flurry of mailings begins and residents get "pounded for money," says Anthony.

"They know exactly what they're doing. Their whole claim is, 'We're just trying to reach them with the gospel.' They don't even know what the gospel is. They're just con men with a collar," says Anthony, whose foundation has ministered to the poor and homeless since the 1970s. ("We got

ADVERTISEMENT

into this because so many . . . were giving their money to these [religious scams], betting on the heavenly lottery," he says.)

Anthony characterizes these schemes as "the most vile form of religious pornography, because it preys on the desperate and the weak and the ill."

Weiner, of the Wise Giving Alliance, recommends caution with any solicitation. He says to check out any organization asking for money by contacting a local Better Business Bureau or visiting the alliance's Web site, www.Give.org.

If a charity is not listed, a caller can request the alliance begin a report on one.