

From Fenton to fortune in the name of God

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Joyce Meyer says God has made her rich.

Everything she has came from Him: the \$10 million corporate jet, her husband's \$107,000 silver-gray Mercedes sedan, her \$2 million home and houses worth another \$2 million for her four children — all blessings, she says, straight from the hand of God.

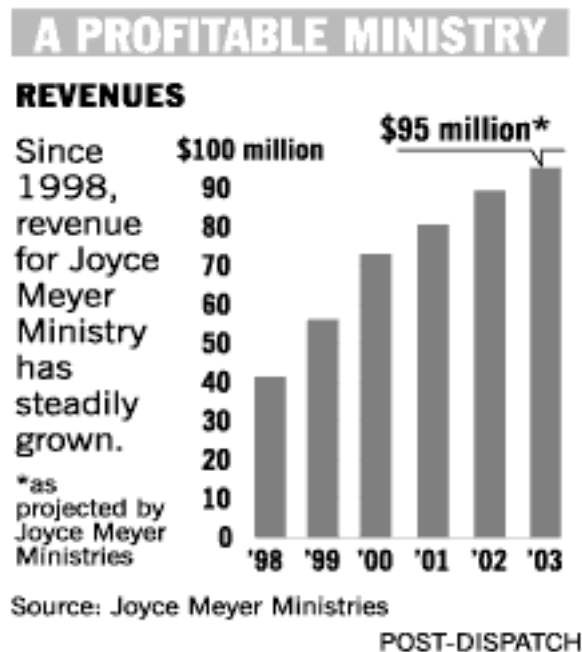
It's been an amazing run, nothing short of a miracle, says Meyer, a one-time bookkeeper who heads one of the world's largest television ministries. Her Life in the Word organization expects to take in \$95 million this year.

Just look around, she told reporters last month from behind her desk on the third floor of the ministry's corporate offices in Jefferson County.

"Here I am, an ex-housewife from Fenton, with a 12th-grade education," she said. "How could anybody look at this and see anything other than God?"

In many ways, Joyce Meyer is an American Cinderella.

Describing herself as sexually abused as a girl and neglected and abandoned as a young wife, Meyer has remade herself into one of the nation's best-known and best-paid TV preachers. She has taken her "prosperity through faith" message to millions.



"If you stay in your faith, you are going to get paid," Meyer told an audience in Detroit in September. "I'm living now in my reward."

Meyer, 60 and a grandmother, runs the ministry with her husband, Dave, and the couple's four children. All of the family, including the children's spouses, draw paychecks from the ministry.

But the way Meyer spends her ministry's money on herself and her family may violate federal law, legal and tax experts say. That law bars leaders of non-profits -- religious groups and other charities -- from privately benefiting from the tax-free money they raise.

Last month, Wall Watchers, a watchdog group that monitors the finances of large Christian groups, called on the Internal Revenue Service to investigate Meyer and six other TV preachers to find out whether their tax-exempt status should be revoked.

Meyer and her lawyer say she scrupulously abides by all federal laws.

Meyer's rise to prominence followed years of struggle. But by 1998, Charisma & Christian Life magazine was calling her "America's most popular woman minister."

Last year, Meyer was the keynote speaker at the Christian Coalition's Road to Victory tour, a gathering of some of the nation's most influential politically conservative leaders.

And today, her TV shows, regional conferences and fund raising from her Web site bring an average \$8 million a month to her ministry. Of that, the ministry says it spends about 10 percent — \$880,000 a month — on charitable works around the globe.

Her star has risen so high and so fast that it amazes even Meyer.

"Dave and I feel almost like, 'Can this really be us?'" she said. "We feel like we're the most blessed and honored people on the face of the Earth."

"Every nation, every city"

Meyer's ministry stretches around the globe.

From a 15-minute St. Louis-area radio show in 1983, it has spread to virtually every corner of the civilized world, largely through the reach of satellite and cable transmissions and the Internet.

In the United States, her "Life in the Word" TV show airs on local channels in 43 states, from Pembina, N.D., and Crowley, La., to Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles and St. Louis.

Meyer has become a household name in areas of Canada, Mexico, South America, Europe, Africa, Australia — about 70 countries in all, according to her ministry's magazine.

She says the ministry gets 15,000 letters a month from India alone.

In September, an Arabic language translation of her program began airing six times a day on the Life Channel network in the Middle East. Meyer hopes to use the network to bring the message of Christianity to 31 Islamic nations.

"You've got to keep in mind that nobody's ever done this," Meyer said. "When a Western woman shows up in Western clothes, preaching the gospel of Jesus in the Arabic language, it's going to be rather interesting."

Meyer and her husband say the ministry has the potential to reach 2.5 billion people every weekday.

Despite the ministry's far-flung success, the couple say they still have work to do.

"Every time we feel like we've reached our peak, God opens more doors," Dave Meyer says.

The couple's recent slogan, printed on posters in the ministry's headquarters and on banners at its conferences, sets out an ambitious goal for the future: "Every nation, every city, every day."

Devoted followers and dogged critics

Meyer's hard-edged, often self-effacing preaching has won her legions of

followers, many of them women who see her as part minister, part trusted friend.

"She's so down-to-earth," bus driver Eva McLemore, 43, said at one of Meyer's recent conferences in Atlanta. "She makes you feel like she's your sister, that she can totally relate to you and understand you with no condemnation, no judgment."

Her style also has prompted criticism from those who paint Meyer as a get-rich-quick carnival barker focused on one thing: how to get the most money from the most people in the shortest time.

Ole Anthony, head of the Dallas-based religious watchdog Trinity Foundation, says, "She is in the typical genre of the TV evangelists who have become wealthy on the backs of the poorest people they are supposedly ministering to."

Besides being a charismatic speaker, Meyer is the author of more than 50 books on a variety of topics, from self-help books on dieting and marriage to deeper, more philosophical themes.

Two of her most recent books, "Knowing God Intimately" and "How to Hear From God," deal with building a faith-based relationship with God.

She also sells audiotapes and videotapes, enough to fill several pages in the ministry's product catalog.

Meyer makes no excuses for hawking her books and tapes and for relentlessly pleading for donations on her Web site, on her TV show and at her conferences.

"They don't let me on that television for free," she said at the Atlanta conference. "The gospel is free, but the pipeline that carries it is not."

A penchant for nice things

Meyer is fond of nice things and is willing to spend for them. From an \$11,000 French clock in the ministry's Fenton headquarters to a \$105,000 Crownline boat docked behind her vacation home at Lake of the Ozarks, it's clear her tastes run more to Perrier than to tap water.

"You can be a businessman here in St. Louis, and people think the more you have, the more wonderful it is," Meyer said in an interview. "But if you're a preacher, then all of a sudden it becomes a problem.

"The Bible says, 'Give and it shall be given unto you.' "

The ministry's headquarters is a three-story jewel of red brick and emerald-color glass that, from the outside, has the look and feel of a luxury resort hotel.

Built two years ago for \$20 million, the building and grounds are postcard perfect, from manicured flower beds and walkways to a five-story lighted cross.

The driveway to the office complex is lined on both sides with the flags of dozens of nations reached by the ministry. A large bronze sculpture of the Earth sits atop an open Bible near the parking lot. Just outside the main entrance, a sculpture of an American eagle landing on a tree branch stands near a man-made waterfall.

A message in gold letters greets employees and visitors over the front entryway: "Look what the Lord Has Done."

About 510 people work there. It's an office much like that of any other business, where clerks open mail, accountants count money, editors tweak Meyer's videos, technicians copy tapes, and warehouse workers send out the tons of Meyer's tapes and books to paying customers. The only sign of a church inside is a chapel, but the public is kept out. Only employees worship there.

The building is decorated with religious paintings and sculptures, and quality furniture. Much of it, Meyer says, she selected herself.

A Jefferson County assessor's list offers a glimpse into the value of many of the items: a \$19,000 pair of Dresden vases, six French crystal vases bought for \$18,500, an \$8,000 Dresden porcelain depicting the Nativity, two \$5,800 curio cabinets, a \$5,700 porcelain of the Crucifixion, a pair of German porcelain vases bought for \$5,200.

The decor includes a \$30,000 malachite round table, a \$23,000 marble-

topped antique commode, a \$14,000 custom office bookcase, a \$7,000 Stations of the Cross in Dresden porcelain, a \$6,300 eagle sculpture on a pedestal, another eagle made of silver bought for \$5,000, and numerous paintings purchased for \$1,000 to \$4,000 each.

Inside Meyer's private office suite sit a conference table and 18 chairs bought for \$49,000. The woodwork in the offices of Meyer and her husband cost the ministry \$44,000.

In all, assessor's records of the ministry's personal property show that nearly \$5.7 million worth of furniture, artwork, glassware, and the latest equipment and machinery fill the 158,000-square-foot building.

As of this summer, the ministry also owned a fleet of vehicles with an estimated value of \$440,000. The Jefferson County assessor has been trying to get the complex and its contents added to the tax rolls but has failed.

Stylish sports cars and a plane

Meyer drives the ministry's 2002 Lexus SC sports car with a retractable top, valued at \$53,000. Her son Dan, 25, drives the ministry's 2001 Lexus sedan, with a value of \$46,000. Meyer's husband drives his Mercedes-Benz S55 AMG sedan.

"My husband just likes cars," Meyer said.

The Meyers keep the ministry's Canadair CL-600 Challenger jet, which Joyce Meyer says is worth \$10 million, at Spirit of St. Louis Airport in Chesterfield. The ministry employs two full-time pilots to fly the Meyers to conferences around the world.

Meyer calls the plane a "lifesaver" for her and her family. "It enabled us, at our age, to travel literally all over the world and preach the gospel" with better security than that offered on commercial flights, she said.

Security is important to Meyer, who says she has received death threats. She has a division of the ministry dedicated to her safety. Her officers wear pistols; they guard the headquarters' front gate, keeping out anyone but employees and invited guests.

The ministry bought a \$145,000 house where the security chief lives rent-free to keep him close to the ministry's headquarters.

The family compound

The ministry has also bought homes for other key employees.

Since 1999, the ministry has spent at least \$4 million on five homes for Meyer and her four children near Interstate 270 and Gravois Road, St. Louis County records show.

Meyer's house, the largest of the five, is a 10,000-square-foot Cape Cod style estate home with a guest house and a garage that can be independently heated and cooled and can hold up to eight cars. The three-acre property has a large fountain, a gazebo, a private putting green, a pool and a poolhouse where the ministry recently added a \$10,000 bathroom.

The ministry pays for utilities, maintenance and landscaping costs at all five homes. It also pays for renovations. The Meyers ordered major rehab work at the ministry's expense right after the ministry bought three of the homes.

For example, the ministry bought one home, leveled it and then built a new home on the site to the specifications of Meyer's daughter Sandra and her husband, county records show.

Even the property taxes, \$15,629 this year, are paid by the ministry.

Meyer called the homes a "good investment" for the ministry and said the ministry bears the cost of upkeep and maintenance because the family is too busy to take care of such tasks.

"It's just too hard to keep up with something like that when you travel as much as we do," Meyer said.

She said that federal tax law allows ministries to buy parsonages for their employees, so the arrangement does not violate any prohibitions against personal benefit.

Meyer also said the decision to cluster the families together was a way to build a buffer to better ensure privacy and security.

"We put good people all around us," she said. "Obviously, if I was trying to hide anything or thought I was doing anything wrong, I wouldn't live on the corner of Gravois and 270."

The irrevocable trust

Meyer says she expects the best, from where she lives to how she looks.

Much of her clothing is custom-tailored at an upscale West County dress shop. At her conferences, she usually wears flashy jewelry. She sports an impressive diamond ring that she said she got from one of her followers.

Meyer has a private hairdresser. And, a few years ago, Meyer told her employees she was getting a face-lift.

Not everything is paid directly by the ministry.

Last year, the Meyers bought a \$500,000 atrium ranch lakefront home in Porto Cima, a private-quarters club at Lake of the Ozarks. A few weeks later, they bought two watercrafts similar to Jet Skis and a \$105,000 Crownline boat painted red, white and blue that they named the Patriot.

In 2000, the Meyers also bought her parents a \$130,000 home just a few minutes from where the Meyers live.

The Meyers have put the Mercedes, the lake house, the boat and her parents' home into an irrevocable trust, an arrangement that tax experts say would help protect them from any financial problems at the ministry.

Meyer says she should not have to defend how she spends the ministry's money.

"We teach and preach and believe biblically that God wants to bless people who serve Him," Meyer said. "So there's no need for us to apologize for being blessed."

Meyer's "trusted" board:



For the most part, Meyer can spend the ministry's money any way she sees fit because her board of directors is handpicked. It consists of Meyer, her husband and all four of her children — all paid workers — as well as six of Meyer's closest friends. (Ministry officials said that daughter Laura Holtzmann has now resigned; state records still list her on the board.)

"Our family is a huge help to us," Meyer said. "We couldn't do this if we didn't have somebody we trusted."

Board members Roxane and Paul Schermann are such close friends that for more than a decade they lived in the Meyers' home. The ministry employed both of them as high-level managers and in 2001 bought them a \$334,000 home. Roxane Schermann no longer works at the ministry; her husband continues as a paid division manager. The Schermanns bought the house at the same price from the ministry in January.

Delanie Trusty, the ministry's certified public accountant, also serves as the ministry board's secretary.

The board decides how the ministry's money is spent. The salaries of Meyer and her family are set by those board members who are not family members

and are not employed by the ministry, Meyer's lawyer said. The arrangement meets IRS regulations, the lawyer said.

"We certainly wouldn't have enemies and people we don't know" on the board, Meyer said. "That wouldn't make any sense. Anybody who has a board is going to have people in favor of you."

Meyer and her ministry refuse to tell how much the ministry pays Meyer, her husband, her children and her children's spouses.

"I don't make any more than I'm worth," Meyer said. "We're definitely within IRS guidelines."

Such an overlap between top administrators and board members concerns the IRS because "the opportunity to manipulate and control the organization is easier to accomplish," said Bruce Philipson of St. Paul, Minn., the IRS group manager of tax-exempt organizations for this region.

The followers stay loyal

Meyer's followers don't seem to care how much of her ministry's money Meyer spends on herself. In interviews with some of her followers at her conference in Atlanta in August, all said they believe that Meyer helps them and that she deserves the wealth.

William Parton, 32, an Atlanta policeman, said people should not care what Meyer does with the money.

"I think if they believe they are doing what God has called them to do, and they have a following, and people enjoy listening to them, even if it's just for entertainment value, just like sports athletes, they deserve to live however their means dictate," he said.

Michael Scott Horton, who teaches religious theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, Calif., said attitudes such as Parton's are exactly what evangelists like Meyer bank on.

"These poor people want to believe that they have that kind of faith," Horton said, "that they're going to risk it all on the say-so of this supposed man of God standing up in front of them."

None of her critics seems to rile Meyer. She says her material success is a reflection of her commitment to God.

As she puts it: "The whole Bible really has one message: 'Obey me and do what I tell you to do, and you'll be blessed.'"