



STATEMENT DT030

Special Report: Tilton's Tottering TV Empire

Only months ago Robert Tilton, "Pastor to America," was a rising star in the crowded constellation of prosperity-preaching televangelists. His bustling Word of Faith Family Church in a Dallas suburb boasted 8,000 members and local real estate appraised at over \$40 million.

Tilton's *Success-N-Life* TV show ranked twelfth in the national Arbitron ratings for syndicated religious television programs, viewed by an estimated 199,000 households — and his cable audience was larger still. Televangelist watcher Ole Anthony calls him "the biggest TV preacher ever." At his peak Tilton reportedly bought more than 5,000 hours of air time per month in all 235 U.S. markets and maintained a staff of over 800, many just to answer phones and take names and addresses 24 hours a day.

Most impressive of all was the way "Pastor Bob" made the cash roll in. Using preposterous scriptural pretexts, Tilton bullied and cajoled his followers into making "vows of faith" (typically \$1,000) to get their miracle — even if they didn't have the money. "Oh, I know you probably don't have a thousand dollars, but vow it." (In a 1990 interview he admitted drawing inspiration for his approach from TV real-estate pitchman Dave Del Dotto's "infomercials.") In the process Tilton built a mailing list of several million current and potential donors, pulling in around 10,000 letters each business day and between \$65 - \$100 million a year, tax-free.

According to ABC's *Prime Time Live*, "Although the ministry is a corporation, Tilton personally has access to all its wealth, almost as if it were a sole proprietorship." The minister and his wife, Marte, reportedly earn over \$1 million per year. But Tilton's downfall may have been set in motion last year when members of Ole Anthony's Trinity Foundation, a nonprofit watchdog group in Dallas, began sifting through trash from the dumpsters at Tilton's Tulsa bank, data processing firm, and lawyer's offices. Together with investigators from ABC, they made 14 garbage runs between August and October 1991, unearthing mounds of sensitive and compromising documents about the evangelist's finances and methods. Pastor Bob mails vast quantities of gimmicky miracle doodads (e.g., coins, cloths, cardboard angels, rocks, vials of sand, tubes of oil, water from the River Jordan) to the people on his mailing list, urging them to send the items back for his personal attention. But, according to Anthony, Tilton almost never touches the stuff; in fact, the majority of the prayer requests that Tilton promises followers he'll personally and individually touch and pray over are routed first to a bank, then to a mail processing facility, and finally to a recycling center — without the evangelist ever seeing them — *to be turned into toilet paper*.

And that, says Anthony, is basis for mail fraud. All told, four federal agencies and two state agencies are actively investigating Tilton. The Texas state attorney general has been hot on Tilton's trail since December, seeking incriminating documents and jousting with the evangelist in the courts. To make matters worse, by mid-July Tilton was facing at least nine civil suits with claims totaling roughly \$500 million. One was filed by the widow of Tilton supporter Tom Crowley, who was still receiving the minister's fundraising appeals five months after her husband's death. One such letter said: "God spoke to me this morning specifically about you, Tom, and He's going to heal you." Crowley had paid Tilton a \$100 "vow of faith" in the hopes of recovering. His wife is seeking \$40 million in damages. According to Anthony, Tilton's lawyers especially fear the filing of a racketeering suit under civil RICO statutes.

The media are still hot on Tilton's trail. On July 9, *PrimeTime Live* broadcast a damaging update on the minister, and the show's producers plan at least one new program on Tilton and televangelism in coming months. (Another network has an investigation in the works.) On July 12, in the first in what promises to be a punishing series of investigative articles the *Dallas Morning News* disclosed irregularities in Tilton's attempts to acquire or control a television station, raising serious questions about the "lease agreement" under which Tilton & Co. purchased virtually all available air time on Dallas's Channel 55, dubbed the "Power

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Channel.” According to FCC officials, “The arrangement. . .raises the question of whether Mr. Tilton has, in effect, acquired control of the Dallas broadcast property without having undergone the proper licensing scrutiny.”

Since the initial *Prime Time* report in November 1991, Tilton’s church has lost at least 1,000 members. Ministry income has dropped by a third. And much of Tilton’s audience is tuning him out: Ratings for February 1992 showed *Success-N-Life* finishing last in Arbitron’s list of the nation’s top 20 syndicated religious TV broadcasts (a plunge of nearly 39 percent) and falling to 25th place in Nielsen’s list of top devotional programs.