

Meyer received millions, records show

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TV evangelist Joyce Meyer and her family have received millions in salary and benefits from her worldwide ministry in recent years, according to newly released records.

The documents, obtained by the Post-Dispatch under Missouri's Open Records laws, provide the first public look at how the worldwide broadcasting and publishing empire has compensated Meyer and her family.

They paint a picture of a minister and her family who have reaped large financial rewards from the ministry they created and control. Over 20 years, Joyce Meyer Ministries of Fenton has grown to a \$90 million-a-year empire with TV and radio programs that reach millions of people in about 70 countries.

Among the details included in the financial statements, board minutes and other documents Meyer provided to the assessor of Jefferson County in a dispute over the tax-exempt status of its headquarters property:

The ministry's board of trustees, which is headed by Joyce Meyer, agreed to pay her a \$900,000 annual salary in 2002 and 2003.

The board agreed to give her husband, Dave Meyer, the board's vice president, an annual salary of \$450,000 in each of those same two years.

The board agreed to provide the couple with free personal use of a corporate jet and luxury cars, a \$2 million home where all bills are paid by the ministry and a separate \$50,000-a-year housing allowance.

The ministry paid \$1.475 million to buy three houses for the three Meyer children.

The board authorized Joyce and Dave Meyer to control a \$790,000 fund to be used at their discretion for bonuses to "executive management."

The job duties of seven employees of the ministry include sorting gifts "personally received" for Joyce and David Meyer, including cash and jewelry.

Meyer, a former bookkeeper who has built one of the world's largest television ministries, has faced criticism from watchdog groups and the Jefferson County assessor in recent years.

Federal law bars founders of tax-exempt religious organizations from reaping huge personal benefits from their ministries. Salaries of religious leaders must be reasonable, meaning they must fall in line with those of other religious leaders in the area, according to the law.

Joyce and Dave Meyer declined through a spokesman to be interviewed for this article. Ministry spokesman Mark Sutherland scheduled a news conference at the Fenton headquarters Friday after the Post-Dispatch posed questions regarding the Meyer family members' salaries and perks. He said Meyer was holding a three-day religious event in Hershey, Pa.

Sutherland noted that Meyer has never denied getting a hefty salary.

"We believe that the Bible teaches that if you give, you will be blessed," Sutherland said. "She's been saying it from the stage for years."

Sutherland said a Post-Dispatch investigation in late 2003 that raised questions about the ministry's spending prompted Meyer to take a reduced annual salary beginning last year. He said she currently receives \$250,000 in taxable income.

The ministry still provides the Meyers with free use of the home, the cars, the plane and an \$80,000 annual retirement contribution, he said.

Meyer also receives a portion of the \$3 million a year in royalties earned from books and tapes sold at bookstores, Sutherland said. He declined to provide a specific figure. Previously, that money had gone to the ministry, he said.

Sutherland said that Meyer provided more in royalties to the ministry over the years than she and her husband had received in salaries and benefits. Meyer has 70 books in print, including one on the New York Times bestseller list.

Critics say that Meyer should not personally be receiving royalties because workers paid by the ministry help to produce the books and tapes.

Setting salaries, perks

Copies of minutes from ministry board meetings in 2001 and 2002 indicate that Joyce and Dave Meyer participated in board meetings where their salaries and perks were approved. Minutes also show that three of the children, who are also board members, sat in on votes when the board approved the purchase of homes for them.

Sutherland said Friday that neither Joyce Meyer nor her husband nor the children ever voted as board members at those meetings. He said such votes are barred by a 1996 federal law.

The minutes prepared by the board's secretary describe the family members as attending and that the votes were unanimous. They do not reflect that anyone abstained from a vote.

Sutherland said Friday that he could not explain the apparent discrepancy.

In recent years, the ministry's board has ranged in size from eight to 11 members - Joyce and Dave Meyer, two or three of their children, personal friends and pastors.

Sutherland said that an "independent compensation board" within that group sets the Meyers' salaries. No family members are part of the compensation committee, he said.

The full board meets once a year to act on the committee's salary recommendations, he said. "Dave and Joyce are not even in the board meeting when their salary is voted on," Sutherland said.

All four of Joyce and Dave Meyer's children have been paid salaries by the ministry as have their spouses.

According to tax records for 2003, the ministry paid one son, David Meyer, \$101,076; another son, Daniel Meyer, \$49,453 and daughter Laura Holtzmann, who works part time, \$14,250. In 2001, another daughter, Sandra McCollom, was paid \$50,203.

The ministry also paid son David Meyer a \$10,000-a-year housing allowance in 2002 and 2003, even though he lived in the ministry home free of charge, records show.

Sutherland on Friday declined to provide the current salaries of the Meyer children.

The Post-Dispatch reported last month that the ministry has put up for sale the homes lived in by daughter McCollom and her family and by David Meyer and his family. McCollom's is selling for \$1.3 million and David Meyer's for \$1.25 million. Both adjoin the property where Joyce Meyer lives near Interstate 270 and Gravois Road in south St. Louis County.

Fighting over taxes

Joyce Meyer Ministries has been battling Jefferson County Assessor Randy Holman for several years to keep its \$30 million headquarters and its contents off the tax rolls.

Holman has maintained that the ministry's property does not qualify to be tax exempt.

Under the law, a religious organization can be tax exempt only if its property is used for the public good and only if public church services are held regularly at the site, Holman said. Meyer's headquarters has no public services; its chapel is used only by the 600 employees who produce and sell tapes and books, broadcast Meyer's television program and collect money for the ministries.

Holman contends that the ministry is a business - the business of selling Joyce Meyer.

The ministry's headquarters is on Highway 30 near Fenton. If the headquarters were removed from the tax rolls, local governments, schools and other agencies would lose \$761,741 this year alone. The ministry says it has separately donated additional money to schools and other agencies.

Joyce Meyer Ministries has paid its taxes under protest and is appealing Jefferson County's actions. The Missouri Tax Commission is expected to hold a hearing in the coming months.

The ministry's appeal meant it had to provide the assessor with otherwise private records - minutes of board meetings, income statements, organizational charts and employee job descriptions. Once the assessor had them, they became public under Missouri law.

Holman argues that the Meyer family is personally profiting from the ministry. The law states that exempt religious property "cannot be held for private or corporate profit," he said.

Bolstering his case, Holman said, is Joyce Meyer's decision last year to begin getting royalties from the sales of her books and tapes produced by the ministry.

Holman says that because Meyer's employees help to write, proofread, edit, record, advertise and distribute the books, tapes and television program, and because Meyer is now taking the royalties from their sales, the law bars the ministry from being tax exempt.

At least 37 workers at the ministry have job duties that include writing or editing, job descriptions produced by the ministry show. Nearly 90 workers reproduce and distribute Meyer's products.

"She's using the ministry for her own private gain," Holman said. "That's the position we're taking."

Records filed with the assessor also show that collecting money and gifts is a major part of the work at the headquarters. Dozens of workers count the money streaming in each day. And seven ministry workers spend at least part of their time keeping track of the personal gifts that go through the ministry to Joyce and Dave Meyer, according to their job descriptions.

On Friday, Sutherland denied that Meyer accepts any gifts without having them independently appraised and paying the ministry for them.

Sutherland also disputed Holman's stance on the ministry's tax status.

"We feel that since the federal and state governments have told us that we're tax-exempt that the local government should honor that," he said. "No one should pay taxes they are not required to pay."

A watchdog group called WallWatchers previously has asked the Internal Revenue Service to investigate the Meyer family's use of ministry money. IRS officials have declined to say whether they are doing so.

Sutherland said Friday that the ministry has "not been contacted by the IRS, nor do we feel there is a reason for them to contact us."

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