

Schemes leave parish officials feeling empty

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Roger Simmons learned the hard way to trust his gut feelings.

Simmons, owner of Simmons Auto Boutique in Canandaigua, learned his lesson after being contacted by a representative of Bingo Program Publications. The salesman said his firm was preparing a program to be distributed at bingo games operated by St. Mary's Parish.

The caller asked Simmons to buy an ad in the program, and told him that some of the money would go to St. Mary's. As part of the deal, St. Mary's would also receive a year's supply of programs for free.

A parishioner at St. Mary's, Simmons knew that the parish had given the company permission to prepare the program. He also was aware that other parishes, such as St. Rita's in Webster, had been involved with Bingo Program Publications.

Simmons had strong reservations about the arrangement. He thought the amount of money the parish would receive — \$250 every six months — was too small.

Nevertheless, he decided to buy an ad. "I did it to support the church, the school," Simmons explained. "They came highly recommended — that was the only reason I got into it."

But Simmons and the 40 other advertisers who purchased space in the program fell victim to what was at least a poor business venture or, at worst, a scam. No program was produced, and the parish received no money. Meanwhile, the bingo-program company made approximately \$8,000 from sales to Canandaigua advertisers.

Those Canandaigua advertisers were not the only ones to lose money to Bingo Program Publications. According to the New York State Attorney General's office, the

same company promised but never produced bingo programs for Annunciation, St. Andrew's, Church of the Good Shepherd, St. Theodore's and St. Philip Neri parishes in Rochester, and the Knights of Columbus council in Victor.

Collectively, advertisers who purchased space in these never-produced programs are out more than \$50,000. Meanwhile, the man behind the bingo programs, identified by the attorney general's office as John Scafetta, left the Rochester area in May. No one in the attorney general's office has heard from him since.

The question of legality aside, the bingo program contributed to a sum of more than \$450 million lost nationwide since 1985 by religious individuals and organizations that invested in dubious enterprises, according to a study released in August, 1989, by the North American Securities Administrators Association and the Council of Better Business Bureaus.

Techniques for soliciting such investments vary widely, ranging from door-to-door requests for donations to elaborate operations with offices, telephone-answering services and post office boxes. Some of these operations manage to remain inside the boundaries of the law.

An ostensibly charitable organization, for example, may spend some donations on its stated purpose, but use the bulk of the money collected for expenses, salaries and benefits for the organization's staff.

One of the most common legal schemes affecting local parishes is the office-supply scam; according to Jack Trickey, director of the diocesan Department of Financial Services.

In this operation, a representative of an office-supply company calls a parish and explains that the company is overstocked or going out of business, and is selling brand-name items at below cost.

If the parish places an order, the items will arrive — but they will not be the brand-name products the customer expected. Because the substitute is often of inferior quality, the discount price turns out not to be a real bargain.

A similar scam involves the parish or organization receiving what appears to be an invoice. The victim pays the amount without carefully reading the fine print, which would reveal that the supposed invoice is actually a letter soliciting funds.

In both cases, Trickey said, the individual or company behind the swindle is careful not to break any law, and thus cannot be prosecuted.

"When we become aware of them, we'll send a notice out to pastors and parish administrators describing the scam (and) ad-

vising them to be aware," Trickey said. "That's about the extent we can do."

Other schemes, however, are clearly fraudulent. Con artists, claiming to be visitors to the area who have been robbed or to have lost all their money, commonly call parishes asking for \$500-\$600 to get home. A series of such calls have been reported in New England and in the New York archdiocese in recent months, Trickey said.

As recently as Oct. 4, the diocesan Office of Personnel warned priests of a man who had been contacting churches in the Rochester area, asking for money to go to a funeral in Boston.

When solicitors approach parish staffs or individuals, they frequently link themselves with the Catholic Church in some way.

Scafetta first appeared at St. Rita's in Webster approximately two years ago, claiming to be a former parishioner then living in California. He met with the parish's director of bingo, Ray Zimmer, and described the bingo-program plan, saying that many churches in California worked with him.

"It seemed like a good deal," Zimmer said. In fact, the parish did receive 11,000 copies of the program and \$250 in cash.

Zimmer said Scafetta then contacted other parishes and used St. Rita's as a reference, circulating a letter signed by the parish's pastor, Father John Reif. Zimmer said several parishes called him for references on Scafetta, and he told them that the program had worked.

Unfortunately, according to New York Attorney General Wade Eaton, the programs produced by Scafetta's company were illegal from the start. State law prohibits making money from bingo other than profits derived from the game itself, he said, noting that state law also prohibits all advertising of bingo except for listing the time and place of games.

Eaton said his office became involved in the Scafetta case after receiving advertisers' complaints that programs were not being produced as promised. Scafetta claimed he had been unable to supply the programs because state officials had told him to stop producing them.

"It looked to us (like) he was taking a lot of money from a lot of people and not producing the programs long before he was told to stop producing them," Eaton said.

Eaton said Scafetta signed an agreement with the attorney general's office to refund the money with interest, but then left town before doing so. "Our intention at this point is to keep our eye out for him, and if he comes back, get a judgment against

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Photo Illustration by Linda Dow Hayes

Priest-imposters and others seeking money frequently turn to churches and the elderly for donations.

ANNUAL CATHOLIC
Thanks Giving
APPEAL

Thanks Giving Appeal 1989

"Matthew's Letter"

(telling the story of the Diocese of Roch.)

On Cable

Monday, Oct 23, 7:30 p.m.

Greater Rochester Cablevision, Ch. 35 (Rochester)

Wed., Oct. 18; Thurs., Oct. 26; Fri., Oct. 27, 6:45 p.m.

Auburn Cablevision, Ch. 6

Friday, Oct. 20, 7 p.m.

Finger Lakes Cable, Ch. 12 (TNN)

Mon., Tues., & Thurs., Oct. 16, 17 & 19

Paragone Cable, Local Ch. 4 (Elmira Area)



St. Jude Thaddeus

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NOVENA
to
St. Jude
October 20 - 28

St. Jude's Church
4100 Lyell Road
Rochester, New York 14606

Mass and Novena Prayers each morning at 9:00 a.m. and each evening at 7:30 p.m. All are invited by Father John J. Steger, Pastor, to attend and pray to the Patron of Hopeless Cases and Impossible Causes.

CONDUCTING THE NOVENA

Rev. Bonaventure Stefan, OFM Cap.
Anointing of the Sick, Monday, October 23rd during both services. Main Celebrant of the Mass of Solemn Closing on the Feast of St. Jude, October 28th will be Bishop Dennis W. Hickey. Followed by a Coffee Hour in the Parish Hall.