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**QUEENS “PASTORS” CHARGED WITH SCAMMING IMMIGRANTS
OUT OF \$500,000 BY CLAIMING TO BE ABLE TO GET THEM
U.S. VISAS AND LEGAL STATUS**

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown announced today that two men who operate a storefront church in Corona are charged with defrauding at least seventy Queens immigrants – primarily from the Ecuadorian community – of more than \$500,000 by promising to help them expedite various immigration related matters – including getting them U.S. Visas and permanent immigration status. The sister of one of the men has also been charged with participating in the scheme.

District Attorney Brown said, “The defendants are accused of being con men who preyed upon the faithful of their church to unscrupulously exploit individuals new to this country – and who were in need of assistance – to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars from them. Ironically, in the end, it was prosecutors who did God’s work and brought their alleged scheme to a halt.”

District Attorney Brown said the investigation is ongoing and if anyone believes they may have been victimized by these defendants to please contact his Economic Crimes Bureau at 718-286-6673.

The District Attorney identified the defendants as Gregorio Gonzalez, 56, of 119 New Street in Mamaroneck, New York; his sister, Maria Gonzalez, 52, of 55-08 97th Place in Corona; and Gerardo Bello, 21, also of 119 New Street in Mamaroneck. Gregorio Gonzalez and Bello are each charged with second-degree grand larceny, second-degree criminal possession of stolen property and first-degree scheme to defraud. Maria Gonzalez is charged with second- and third-degree grand larceny and second- and third-degree criminal possession of stolen property. If convicted, the defendants each face up to 15 years in prison.

District Attorney Brown said that, according to the charges, the three defendants met with the victims at various Queens locations – including their church, Iglesia Pentecostal Roca de Salvacion Eterna, located at 98-14 41st Avenue in Corona and Maria Gonzalez’s apartment – between April 1, 2008, and October 31, 2008. They are accused of promising them U.S. Visas and permanent immigration status for various fees – usually ranging from \$6,000 to \$10,000, in the form of cash or personal checks.

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The District Attorney said that four search warrants were executed at various Queens locations – including the residence of defendant Maria Gonzalez on March 23, 2009. Among the alleged items recovered was \$75,000 in cash and a list of approximately 100 individuals – many of whom had complained to the District Attorney’s Office.

Gregorio Gonzalez and Bello are expected to be arraigned this afternoon in Queens Criminal Court in Kew Gardens. Maria Gonzalez was arraigned last month on two criminal complaints. In each case, bail was set at \$5,000. Her next court date is May 12, 2009.

District Attorney Brown said that an investigation was initiated last month when victims contacted his office, as well as the NYPD’s 110th Precinct Detective Squad.

The investigation was conducted by Detectives Jerome D. Pugh and Richard A. Lewis, of the District Attorney’s Detective Bureau, under the supervision of Lieutenant Robert Burke and Sergeant John Kenna, and under the overall supervision of Lawrence J. Festa, Chief Investigator, and Albert D. Velardi, Deputy Chief Investigator, along with Paralegal Ericka Loperena and Consumer Fraud Representative Michael Albanesi, of the District Attorney’s Economic and Environmental Crimes Bureau.

Assistant District Attorney Nathalie Bell, of the District Attorney’s Economic and Environmental Crimes Bureau is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Gregory C. Pavlides, Bureau Chief, and Christina Hanophy, Deputy Bureau Chief, and the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Linda M. Cantoni.

It should be noted that criminal complaints are merely accusations and that defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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Note to Editor: An e-version of this press release is posted on QDA website at www.queensda.org.