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Southern District of New York*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
JANUARY 27, 2010**

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**PONZI SCHEMER CONVICTED IN MANHATTAN FEDERAL COURT
FOR TARGETING MEMBERS OF FOUR CHURCHES
IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS AND THE BRONX**

PREET BHARARA, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced that BRYANT ISMAIL RODRIGUEZ, a/k/a Bryant Rodriguez, a/k/a Rubin Rodriguez, a/k/a Salvador Rodriguez, a/k/a Robert Rodriguez, a/k/a Ishmael Rodriguez, was convicted yesterday of one count of mail fraud and one count of wire fraud after a six-day jury trial before United States District Judge NAOMI REICE BUCHWALD. The charges arose from RODRIGUEZ's scheme to defraud members of El Camino Church in Washington Heights, members of three other churches, and the relatives and friends of those church members of more than \$1 million.

According to documents filed in this case and the evidence presented at trial in Manhattan federal court:

Beginning in approximately mid-2007, RODRIGUEZ, a member of El Camino Church in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, told members of that church, another church in Manhattan, New York and two churches in Bronx, New York that he was involved with an electronics distribution company named Communication and Electronics Group, Inc. ("C&E"). RODRIGUEZ represented that C&E purchased electronics merchandise from major consumer electronics manufacturers and sold it to a number of large consumer electronics retailers -- such as Costco, BJ's Warehouse Club, PC Richard & Son, Circuit City, and Target -- at markups of more than 300 percent.

RODRIGUEZ offered church members opportunities to invest in C&E, promising returns of between 30 to 40 percent every month, additional cash bonuses, and even the opportunity to purchase homes in the Dominican Republic and New York City with their investment earnings.

Several members did invest and receive initial purported returns on their investments, after which they, or friends and family of theirs, invested additional money with RODRIGUEZ. In truth and in fact, however, C&E did not have any contracts with the electronics retailers RODRIGUEZ named, and RODRIGUEZ did not make payments to investors in the amounts promised. In fact, C&E was a shell company created by RODRIGUEZ, which never sold a single item to any major retailer and never purchased from any electronics manufacturer. Instead, RODRIGUEZ purchased hundreds of thousands of dollars of electronics using his personal membership at a local BJ's Warehouse Club, and gave away, or resold at a discount, some of those items to church members in order to lull them into believing that C&E had legitimate connections with electronics manufacturers. RODRIGUEZ spent the investors' money on hotel stays, trips, car rentals and other personal expenses. Together, over 200 people invested more than \$1 million in RODRIGUEZ's scheme.

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RODRIGUEZ, 45, of Ozone Park, Queens, is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge BUCHWALD on May 26, 2010, at 2:15 p.m. At sentencing, RODRIGUEZ faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000, or twice the gross gain or loss from the offense, on each of the two counts of which he was convicted.

U.S. Attorney BHARARA stated: "Bryant Rodriguez preyed on the faith of his fellow church members, twisting the fellowship of places of worship into a network of fraud. A jury of his peers has now held him accountable for his crimes. We will continue, along with our partner the United States Postal Inspection Service, to pursue Ponzi schemers and others who victimize honest people by stealing their hard-earned money."

Mr. BHARARA praised the work of the United States Postal Inspection Service in the investigation of this case. He also thanked BJ's Warehouse Club and the other electronics retailers for their cooperation with the investigation.

This prosecution is being handled by the Office's Complex Frauds Unit. Assistant United States Attorneys SARAH LAI and JOSEPH FACCIPONTI are in charge of the prosecution.

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