African Initiated Christianity in Eastern Europe: Church of the “Embassy of God” in Ukraine

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The crucial events of Christian history have often taken place through obscure people.
—Andrew F. Walls, The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History

Changing paradigms in Christian mission challenge standard definitions of African Initiated Churches as “churches established by Africans in Africa for Africans.” This essay revisits the older definitions in light of the ministry of Nigerian-born Pastor Sunday Adelaja, founder of a new type of African Christian initiative in eastern Europe. He is head of The Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations, a neo-Pentecostal church in Kiev, Ukraine. The significance of this new type of ministry is understood against the backdrop of the “mission in reverse” theory. Unlike the majority of African Initiated Churches in the diaspora, God’s Embassy is not predominantly African in membership. More than 90 percent of its 20,000 adult members in the Ukraine are indigenous Europeans. This fact has turned Pastor Adelaja into a religious icon in the country. During my visit to Kiev in May 2004, my first information on God’s Embassy came from a taxi driver. He knew about, and highly respected, Pastor Sunday; “he is doing great work in our country,” he told me.

“So what do you think about this church?” I asked. “Well, I don’t go [to] church myself, but looking at the many Ukrainians in it, it certainly must be something good, that [an] African pastor has become more popular than the politicians.”

Pastor Sunday Adelaja

Nigerian-born Pastor Adelaja relocated from Russia to the Ukraine a little over a decade ago. He was born again in Nigeria at nineteen years of age in 1986. Six months later he obtained a scholarship to study journalism at the Belarus State University in Minsk, during which period he also led the African Christian Students’ Fellowship in what was then the Soviet Union. He ruled out returning to Nigeria after studies because of the “unstable nature of the situation at home.”

Pastor Sunday speaks fluent Russian and preaches mainly in that language. He started the church because, as he notes, “God gave me a specific word in 1993,” namely, “I will use people from the former Soviet Union to gather the end-time harvest . . . before the coming of my Son.” He states in one of his over thirty popular Christian books, “Though I am a foreigner, God has given me the ability to go and minister beyond race, culture, and denominational barriers.” The name of the church was chosen to reflect this understanding of Christian mission: “The Church is the representative of God on the earth—His ‘Embassy.’ Therefore, we—children of God—are the citizens of His Divine Kingdom and not citizens of this world! The Blessed Kingdom of God [is] a place of destruction of curses. At the head of every kingdom is a king. Our King is Jesus Christ! He is the Lord of all nations; . . . Jesus Christ is the Savior for everyone, irrespective of his age, color of skin, nationality and social status.”

In the view of Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako, the self-definition of the new Pentecostal churches as “international” organizations points to “some specifically Christian dimensions of the African participation in globalization that may escape secular-minded observers.” For, by their own assertion, they are international churches because God has called them into a global missionary task. “We now know why God created Africa,” is how Pastor Vladimir Gargar, a Ukrainian pastor of God’s Embassy, summarized the meaning of Pastor Adelaja in their midst: “God created Africa to open our eyes to his salvation.”

“Taking New Territories”: The March for Life

“Ukraine is choosing Jesus”; “There is a way out, and it is Jesus”; “Jesus is the answer to AIDS”; “Jesus is the answer to narcotics”;

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“God is blessing Ukraine”; “Choosing Jesus will protect Ukraine from AIDS.” These were a few of the proclamations made in May 2004 during the annual March for Life organized by God’s Embassy in Kiev. Jesus marches are symbolic reenactments of the biblical march around Jericho (Joshua 6). The church believes that as believers march, territories are conquered, just as the walls of Jericho fell when the Israelites under Joshua marched around them. Its modern-day prototypes are meant to pull down what evangelical Christians refer to as territorial strongholds, that is, invisible “walls” of social vices in communities perceived to be instigated by evil powers.

During the colorful Jesus march, participants carried banners from at least thirty nations around the world, signifying the countries in which God’s Embassy has branches. According to Bishop Bilonozhko Anatoliy of God’s Embassy, their church has a mission to eastern Europe: “We want our Christianity to transform medicine, military, politics, sports, education, even entertainment in Ukraine. The March for Life is the beginning of a reformation in the land; this March for Life has demonstrated the power of God; the march is breaking down the walls of division among the churches, and in our society.”

When Pastor Adelaja took the microphone to bring the curtain down on the March for Life, his vision to influence and change Ukrainian society was evident in his prayer: “Let your grace come,” he prayed, “and let your Spirit come. Let your power come, Lord. Let this nation seek your face; let doors be open; we need your power so that people may come into your kingdom.” In addition to whatever spiritual achievements may have been accomplished, the color, pomp, and size of the crowd forces the society, including those watching the proceedings on TV, to take notice of this new revival movement. Pastor Sunday Adelaja’s success symbolically reverses the “traditional” direction of mission, proving that God indeed uses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

God’s Embassy: A Paradigm Shift

Gerrie ter Haar has done extensive work on African migrant churches in modern western Europe. The initiative of God’s Embassy is a concrete instance of the conviction among African Christians that “God has given them a unique opportunity to spread the good news among those who have gone astray.” Ter Haar identifies two features that are common to the lives of the immigrant churches in question. First, “their members are mostly immigrants”; second, “they are mostly black.” These two factors, according to ter Haar, are “social facts with important consequences for the religious life of the believers.”

But God’s Embassy presents a negative instance of current trends regarding African immigrant churches. How does one explain the existence of a church initiated by an African in eastern Europe, but with 90 percent of the membership indigenous to western Europe? The founder, as in the case of many of such churches in western Europe, is an African immigrant, but God’s Embassy is not paradigmatic of African diaspora churches.

Discussions of African migrant influence in the diaspora therefore need to distinguish between “African churches,” such as classical Pentecostal and historic mission denominations established by Africans as extensions of similar churches back home, and “African-led” or “African-initiated” churches, which Gerrie ter Haar identifies as “African international churches” on account of their global outlook. Against the backdrop of developments in eastern Europe, however, we also need to distinguish between African-led churches that are predominantly African in membership, and African-led churches like God’s Embassy that are founded by Africans but that are not necessarily African in membership. The “mission in reverse” idea thus invites fresh consideration of the causal explanations previously employed to interpret what God may be doing, not so much with individual African churches, but rather with African Christianity, especially in its independent, nondenominational charismatic streams in the diaspora. Without dismissing the network theories often used to explain the phenomenon of African immigrant churches, which highlight the social and religious support that they provide for their members, the racial composition of membership in God’s Embassy suggests that African initiatives in religion in the northern continents may be more complex than previously thought.

Mission as “Greater Works”

We have identified “influence” and “change” as the basis of the mission that God’s Embassy has set itself. Based on the work of Kenneth S. Latourette, Andrew Walls reconsiders the history of Christian expansion in terms of the “influence of Christ.” The influence of Christ is seen in the “greater works” of those who follow his footsteps in mission (see John 14:12). Three major influences are identified in the work of Latourette: first, the spread of Christian profession in particular areas, which Walls recasts as the church test; second, the number and strength of new movements owing their origin to Christ, which he recasts as the kingdom test; and third, the effect of Christianity on humankind as a whole, recast as the gospel test.

What has made God’s Embassy in the Ukraine the talking point in terms of Christian mission is the identifiable community of people in a supposedly atheistic environment testifying to the influence of Christ upon their church as a community of the Holy Spirit. With a sense of what the church as a community of believers stands for, Pastor Adelaja gives voice to the church test when he writes that “God wants everyone to actively participate in the life of the church, so that his greatness, might, and glory could be manifested through us.” The second, the kingdom test, relates to the demonstration through the group, that is, the church, of the transformative power of God. In the words of Walls, “The kingdom is declared when demons are cast out by the finger of God. The kingdom of God has drawn near in the presence of Christ with his acts of mercy and power.” The kingdom of God comes with power, and when it does, the dark night of sin and all that detracts from human wholeness are chased away so that God’s image in people may be restored. The image of the Gadarene demoniac after his encounter with Christ, found by witnesses to be “sitting there, clothed and in his right mind” (Mark 5:15), is one that may be invoked here to explain what the coming of the kingdom upon people is like.
It is instructive that the ministry of the Embassy of God includes former narcotic addicts and prostitutes who are now turned around for Jesus after encountering his power. Kingdom signs like these, Walls further notes, mark the new innovative movements that reflect true Christian expansion “because, like the kingdom, they sprout and stir up, they produce a more radical Christian discipleship.” The signs of the kingdom are everywhere, as political authority and the society in general acknowledge the transforming influence of the Embassy of God on Ukrainian society.

The Embassy of God has established itself as a movement of “reformation, renewal, and revival.” When I asked Pastor Adelaja to summarize his vision in one word, he told me: “God has called us to effect another reformation.” The final test is the gospel test, which relates to the difference that the resurrection of Christ makes in the here and now. Out of the chaos that followed the Communist era, the Embassy of God sees itself as an instrument of newness in the land of Ukraine. The motivational messages of Pastor Adelaja help to bring the message of the resurrection as newness to a people looking for hope after “death.”

### Conclusion: Christ to the Nations

It is inconceivable that Jesus, without the use of microphones, could have spoken to a crowd of more than a few thousand in his day. For an African Christian missionary to draw into a single church more than 20,000 eastern Europeans at the turn of the twenty-first century is a phenomenon that may well be interpreted best in the light of the promise of Jesus that those who listen to him and follow obediently will do “greater works.” The renewal of Christianity through African initiatives suggests that in the midst of the political turbulence and other socioeconomic problems bedeviling the Continent, the revival of a Christian presence in the northern continents may turn out to be one of the areas in which Africa might make some of its greatest contributions to the global village in the new millennium.

### Notes

3. Throughout, quotations are from conversations and interviews from my 2004 visit to Ukraine.
5. Quotations are from the church’s Eighth Anniversary Brochure, p. 5.
8. Eighth Anniversary Brochure, p. 27.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., pp. 15, 19.