

European Church Fuses Faith, Politics

Ukraine-based pastor Sunday Adelaja says the church should help change cultures, politics and economics

Two years after encouraging its members to join in the “Orange Revolution” that overturned the results of Ukraine’s presidential election, Europe’s largest church has taken a higher political profile.

Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of All Nations now has more than 30 church members who serve in parliament and other branches of government—including Kiev Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky—according to its pastor, Sunday Adelaja. The Nigerian-born charismatic believes churches worldwide mistakenly focus so much attention on getting people to heaven that they overlook the need to change cultures, politics and economics.

“The church has isolated itself from the world it was supposed to affect and the world it came to save. If we don’t do anything as a church that is big enough to make a difference, posterity will not forgive us,” said Adelaja, whose church has a weekly attendance of up to 10,000 at its main campus and an initiative that has started 550 other churches.

“I feel it is the direct responsibility of the church to campaign for a good government and good governors. [We should] raise up godly leaders from within the church.”

Also known as God’s Embassy, the church has attracted considerable media attention because of its high-profile pastor, whose television program reaches a potential audience of 8 million. In recent months Adelaja has been profiled in such newspapers as The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.

God's Embassy also has made a name for itself with its social programs. Among its outreaches are feeding 1,000 people a week and helping more than 3,000 kick drug addiction at its rehabilitation center.

However, it was the congregation's participation in widespread protests during 2004—which toppled Viktor Yanukovych from the presidency—that generated nationwide attention. The Orange Revolution took its name from the color of the protestors' clothing, flags and banner.

Although they succeeded in forcing a second election that installed Viktor Yushchenko as president, international media reports have noted that reforms promised in the former Soviet state have come slowly. Ironically, Yanukovych's party captured the largest bloc of votes in parliamentary elections held last March, leading to his nomination in July as prime minister.

Adelaja isn't discouraged by either situation, saying reforms always take time. Despite widespread complaints about conditions, Ukraine has seen a 9 percent to 12 percent growth in its economy in the last three years, the pastor said. And Adelaja called Yanukovych's political rebirth the best compromise in a complex political situation and one he believes will keep the nation from splintering into factions.

"Nothing is lost in the sense that this prime minister is going to be submitted to the president," Adelaja said. "We're not going back on Western values of freedom of speech. It's a blessing in disguise."

He acknowledges that many Protestant pastors don't share his views, such as leaders of the Baptist Union, who are "very

angry” with him. Yet when various church leaders encounter bureaucratic problems, they often quietly ask God’s Embassy for help, Adelaja said.

Still, the situation remains delicate, according to other observers in Kiev. Gary Kellner, a missionary in Ukraine since 1999, said the debate among religious leaders over political engagement is far from over. “It’s potentially the most divisive issue for the church in the next decade,” said Kellner, president of the U.S. board of the International Center for Christian Leadership.

“The danger in the Ukraine is if the church claims too great a role for itself, it could inspire a counter-reaction from the Orthodox Church. The church has more to worry about from the Orthodox than the communists.”

However, charismatic pastor Henry Madava of Victory Church said he is more concerned about backlash from politicians than from the leading mainline church, which he sees as fractured by infighting. He said some politicians are angry with churches because of the way they conducted themselves in recent elections.

“Every time you go against one side you make yourself an enemy of the other side,” said Madava, a Zimbabwe native whose church attracts 7,000 to Sunday services. “We as pastors may be leaders, but if you become neutral and just preach the gospel, when [politicians] want to hear the gospel they’ll come to you.”

Though he doesn’t criticize Adelaja, Madava won’t tie politics too closely to Victory’s identity. His church counts a number

of political leaders among its membership, but Madava said he never permits them to use the church to advance their agendas.

He sees another danger in emphasizing politics, which he said many Ukranian churches consider to be a promising growth method. Madava thinks it could foster a generation that is dependent on help from the government instead of God.

“We end up with people who do not believe God as such but expect someone politically to come in and help,” Madava said. “We want the faith of believers to be in the Bible and in the power of God.”

In September Adelaja was to travel to New York to participate in the Clinton Global Initiative. The invitation-only event convenes diverse leaders to discuss solutions to global problems such as poverty, climate change, public health and religious conflict.

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