

London Megachurch Faces Land Seizure

Kingsway International Christian Centre sits on 9.5 acres of land to be developed for the 2012 Olympics

A prominent London megachurch is fighting attempts by local authorities to seize its site for development plans related to the 2012 Olympic Games.

Matthew Ashimolowo, pastor of 12,000-member Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) in Hackney, said his church offered to build a \$57 million basketball arena and allow it to be used for free if the complex and the land would be returned at the close of the Olympics.

Officials with the London Development Agency (LDA), which is overseeing land seizures for the Olympic Park, have neither accepted nor rejected KICC's offer, but they have said the church would receive the market value for its land.

"We continue to be in dialogue with the church regarding its move as we are trying to be as helpful as possible to them," an LDA spokesman said. "It isn't just because of the Olympics that KICC [has] to move. ... The church would have to move anyway as they do not have planning permission for the current building. We are, however, in discussions with the church about relocation. We want to be helpful and have been trying to assist them."

KICC spokeswoman Charlotte Coker said the church has been trying for several years to get permission to continue religious activities on the site and to build offices, a hotel

and a sports arena. Their request was denied in 2003, and that decision was upheld on appeal in 2004. At that time Hackney Council officials gave KICC until November 2006 to relocate.

Ashimolowo said KICC is facing “spiritual warfare in the extreme.”

“Christians around the world need to snap out of the thought that Europe is a Christian continent,” Ashimolowo said. “It is now post-Christian, and persecution is happening in ever-increasing frequency. Britain carries the same spirit.”

Ashimolowo said the current dispute is part of an ongoing attempt to hinder KICC’s work. “The local authority has now deliberately canceled the bus route in front of our church so people will struggle to get to church on a Sunday,” he said.

“They are also now wheel-clamping cars of people attending our three Sunday services in the surrounding roads to KICC on Sundays, which they didn’t do previously. Mosques not far from us are not experiencing the same thing, so we know what this is all about.”

Ashimolowo said has KICC cooperated with the LDA in trying to find an alternative home. But he said the four sites the church was shown were inappropriate or would not be available in time. The church researched another 21 locations to no avail. Since then, Ashimolowo said, the LDA has been dragging its feet, and he will not allow his congregation to be left homeless.

Ashimolowo believes KICC could help London offset a reported \$1.7 billion funding gap between committed funds for the

Olympics and its real cost.

“Apart from Los Angeles, every place that has hosted the Olympics has been in deficit,” Ashimolowo said. “We want to help ensure that doesn’t happen here in London. All we have asked is to be part of the Olympic legacy by building a basketball stadium, which is needed for the Olympics. The reaction we are getting does not make sense, but we know the reasoning behind it. As our church grows there is a reaction in the spiritual.”

Ashimolowo, a former Muslim from Nigeria, founded KICC in 1992 with 200 adults and 100 children. Today the predominantly black congregation is considered the fastest-growing church in Europe and oversees a network of 22 churches around England, plus two independent branches in Africa. For the last 14 years, the church has hosted an International Gathering of Champions conference that has included speakers such as T.D. Jakes, Eddie Long and Joyce Meyer, and has drawn thousands of attendees from around the globe.

KICC leads community development work including outreaches to prostitutes, drug addicts and the homeless; after-school programs; literacy classes and food distribution. Ashimolowo hopes his church can be at the center of outreach to the athletes, officials, media and spectators who visit London for the Games.

KICC is one of roughly 300 landowners and businesses whose properties the LDA has earmarked for the Olympic Park. Commercial property experts estimate that industrial land is currently worth between \$2.4 million and \$2.6 million per acre, making the church’s site worth up to \$23.5 million.

KICC leaders said the church is not anticipating a legal battle or an appeal to European authorities. Ashimolowo said the Olympic basketball stadium project is under official consideration, and he is hopeful that there will be an amicable resolution.

“We continue to use every method possible to lobby,” Ashimolowo said. “KICC has a rapidly developing set of strategies for dealing with various possible ‘next steps’ and outcomes, and at present these strategies are predominantly positive and related to achieving a new permanent home without having to move out of Hackney.

“We are also building an international network of friends who can advise and help KICC to achieve our goals,” he added. “We are soliciting the prayers of the body of Christ. The Bible says in Isaiah 59:19 that ‘when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him.’ Let’s hope against all hope for a solution.”

Janet Sebastian in London