

Rodney Howard-Browne Hits Airwaves With New Satellite Venture

A new facility in Tampa, Fla., also enables the evangelist to renew plans to expand his Bible training institute

On a recent Friday night in Daytona Beach, Fla., restaurants along coastal highway A1A were crowded. A visit to a Friday's eatery by a local Christian reporter produced seats for four only in a smoking section near the bar. Each table was equipped with TV sets linked to cable TV.

A quick channel surf slipped by movies, news and sports, until it hit on a strange sight beaming out to diners: There on the screen was Rodney Howard-Browne, South African trumpeter of the Pentecostal doctrine and missionary to America—preaching at the new location of his church, The River At Tampa Bay.

As a waitress asked for food orders, she stared at the screen to see Howard-Browne hurling his arms toward a front-row crowd of congregants. "Fire!" he shouted, and about 10 people fell out of their chairs and hit the carpet, "slain" in the Holy Spirit.

The burly evangelist wandered to another front-row section—the layout of the church's new location at a car outlet creates church in the round. "Be filled!" he shouted, and another seven or eight people dropped out of their chairs to the carpet.

The waitress was transfixed by what she saw—writing down food orders but not lifting an eye from view of the TV screen.

“This,” she acknowledged, “can’t be American Movie Classics!”

She, of course, was right. What “this” was is what Howard-Browne referred to as “radical Christian television” during a recent interview at his new facility in Tampa, Fla. The broadcasts represent a major shift in his missions strategy to reach the United States with the Pentecostal message and the gospel.

“Why must people think that power is only displayed in Harry Potter,” he noted. “We’ve got the power of the Holy Ghost to share. Let them see what God will do—right on their television screens.”

After starting the church in December 1996, Howard-Browne continued to crisscross the United States holding weeknight services before flying back to Tampa to lead his own Sunday services. Now he says he’ll slow down his travel schedule to stay home and expand his church and to develop a world-reaching satellite broadcasting web for his sometimes wildly charismatic services.

He also said he wants to focus more on developing laborers for the gospel in The River Bible Institute—the Bible school of his Revival Ministries International lead organization.

“We used to have the church, the Bible school and RMI offices located in three separate locations in Tampa. Now we have them all under one roof,” Howard-Browne said. “We’ll be able to grow very fast now on this 83-acre site. For one—we’ll be able to build classroom facilities by renovating existing buildings on the land, and one day we hope to build dormitories here for our students, many who come from around the world.”

The institute just graduated its first Inuit—Adina Duffy from Coral Harbor in the Canadian Arctic. Soon the school will host its first aboriginal students from the outback in Australia. Branches of the school are located in Norway, Sweden and England. One Tampa graduate started The River At Istanbul church in Turkey, an Islamic state.

“It is one of the largest churches in the nation after just two years,” Howard-Browne said. “Adonica [Howard-Browne’s wife] and I preached a crusade there.”

Guest speakers at the school include a who’s who list of teachers—R.T. Kendall, Dick Mills, Mylon LeFevre, Reinhard Bonnke, Roy Hicks, Norville Hayes, Ralph Hauke of Norway, Tim Hall of Australia and others. The school has graduated some 700 students since starting in 1997, and students can earn bachelor’s degrees in theology by their third year. The school is fully accredited, said Christian Jahnsen, dean.

“We haven’t really advertised the school,” Howard-Browne said. “It’s been low-key. We’ve averaged about 150 students per year. But with these new facilities, we now have the room to grow.”

Howard-Browne has mostly avoided television since he started the Tampa church, but he began airing some TV programs in October. Now broadcasts of services can be seen across the world in as many as 300 million homes via satellite networks Angel 2, La Familia, CTN, Daystar and Miracle Net in Asia.

“We have a stack of e-mails from all over the world from just five nights of broadcasts done,” Howard-Browne said during a January event at the church. “This week I have ministered to

more people than at any other time of my ministry through this technology. We feel it is time to put the power of God on the night hours when the infomercials, psychics and psychic channels are most active and the people can't sleep because of their problems."

Billy Bruce in Tampa, Fla.