

Sunday Adelaja Marks 15 Years in Ministry Despite Controversy

✖ **April 20, 2009** – Prominent Ukraine pastor Sunday Adelaja marked 15 years in ministry this month, drawing thousands to his Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God in Kiev for a three-day celebration that ended April 5. But despite the show of support, the charismatic minister remains at the center of controversy over his alleged involvement in a business that government officials claim defrauded investors of \$100 million – a charge Adelaja says is politically motivated.

Last month, the Ministry of Interior Affairs formally accused the Nigeria-born pastor of being complicit in the dealings of King's Capital, an investment company co-founded by a member of Adelaja's church. The business promised returns as high as 60 percent, but in November stopped paying dividends to investors, most of whom were members of the church, also known as God's Embassy.

Adelaja said the investigation, which is expected to go to court soon, will ultimately prove his innocence. "I believe that the investigation and court trials will help prove me as an honored and respectful man," Adelaja said, "and to defend my name."

Adelaja has repeatedly denied any involvement in King's Capital, and in an open letter sent to government leaders in December, the company's founders supported his claim. Aleksandr Bandurchenko and Aleksandr Safonov said neither Adelaja nor Kiev Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky, who attends God's Embassy, had "direct or indirect participation in the managing

or activity of the business.”

They added that neither man received any income “of material or non-material values” from King’s Capital, which they said was unable to pay dividends because of the global financial crisis.

But after launching an investigation in January, the Interior Ministry accused Adelaja of embezzling funds “in very large amounts via fraud,” a crime under Part 4, Article 190 of Ukraine’s Criminal Code. The charge carries a maximum sentence of 12 years in prison. According to a statement from the Interior Ministry, Adelaja has been asked not to leave the country.

In a lengthy response posted at his ministry’s Web site, Adelaja said the accusation is politically motivated. He said Interior Affairs Minister Yuriy Lutsenko wants to undermine God’s Embassy because of its support for Chernovetsky, who beat out Lutsenko in the mayoral election.

“They call me the power behind the mayor and his political party,” stated Adelaja, whose congregation is one of the largest in Ukraine. “This negative publicity with King’s Capital actually started with this minister.”

Last month, Chernovetsky came to his pastor’s defense, saying Adelaja “brings freedom to Ukraine,” according to the Religious Information Service of Ukraine. He said each of the 7 million people who have attended God’s Embassy is grateful “that today they have the chance to live in a spiritual, pure and sincere world together with God.”

“As long as I breathe, I will defend all-black, Japanese, Chinese, and anyone who brings peace and harmony to Ukraine,” the mayor said.

Apostle Ulysses Tuff, pastor of The Way, the Truth and the

Life Christian Center, Inc. in Decatur, Ga., and overseer of God's Embassy, said Ukrainian leaders have long tried to stunt the church's growth, partly because of racist attitudes.

"This last episode is just a continuation of [attempts] to distort and destroy [Adelaja's character] in the minds of people," said Tuff, who attended the church's anniversary event this month. "If they can assassinate his character they're hoping they can eventually shift people from wanting to come [to the church]. But what's interesting is more people began to come out of curiosity."

Speculation about Adelaja's involvement with King's Capital grew after reports surfaced that he was part of GS Microfinance Bank Limited in Lagos, Nigeria. Some claimed Adelaja put funds from King's Capital into the bank and planned to leave the country.

GS Microfinance CEO Segun Adaju said Adelaja did not finance the bank, which he said provides small loans to impoverished Nigerians, but lent his name to help it gain credibility and more prominent supporters. "Our expectation is that Pastor Sunday will bring his goodwill, wealth of experience and contact internationally to bear on the network of the bank through such organizations as United Nations, World Bank, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Grameen Bank and Professor Muhammad Yunus," Adaju wrote in a December statement.

But several Christians in the nation say the controversy surrounding Adelaja's involvement with King's Capital is not simply a matter of politics. In December, former employee Ivanna Schwartz, a one-time God's Embassy member, issued a statement claiming Adelaja was involved in managing King's Capital. She said he admitted to business leaders that King's Capital was functioning as a Ponzi scheme, a system that uses later investments to pay earlier investors, and hired two consultants to prevent the company from failing.

Adelaja called Schwartz's claims ridiculous and said he planned to sue her for defaming him. He said he met with King's Capital managers to address personnel problems but denied playing a leadership role. He accused Schwartz of devising the payout system King's Capital used and said she earned a 30 percent profit from the investments-allegations Schwartz said are untrue.

Schwartz's testimony was one of several accounts a group of Ukrainian bishops said they considered before issuing a statement in December saying they "radically dissociate" themselves from Adelaja, whom they called "the inspirer and the spiritual patron" of King's Capital.

"He was the spiritual leader, and he advertised this business," said Pentecostal Bishop Mikhail Panocho, head of the All-Ukrainian Church Union of Evangelical Faith Christians and a signer of the December statement. "He told all churches in the Ukraine, if you want to be rich, invest money ... in King's Capital. He was the spiritual leader for this idea, but he doesn't have any signature for any paper."

The bishops' statement came nearly two weeks after the senior church leaders met with Adelaja to discuss the impact the King's Capital controversy was having on the broader evangelical community. They said they denounced Adelaja to dissociate the evangelical community from the controversy swirling around God's Embassy and to protect church members who sought their help and counsel.

Tuff said the Ukraine bishops were out of order in denouncing Adelaja and should wait until the investigation is complete to pass judgment. "My recommendation to the bishops is that if the authorities are investigating, they should let the authorities investigate it," Tuff said. "A person should not be charged with anything until facts have been proven."

In their statement, the Ukraine church leaders, who together

represent roughly 3,000 churches, also called on Adelaja to publicly repent for encouraging his congregation to invest in the business. But the pastor said he has nothing to repent of, claiming he did not endorse King's Capital but encouraged church members to avoid high-yield investments that are not insured.

Audio and video circulating online show Adelaja allowing King's Capital investors to give testimonies from the pulpit and explaining ways church members could refinance their homes for investment purposes. Adelaja said the talks were not an endorsement of King's Capital but part of his ongoing teaching on financial stewardship.

However, Sergei Shidlovsky, leader of the Seeking God movement and a former member of God's Embassy, said he attended many meetings during which Adelaja called on people to invest in King's Capital.

"I personally sat in the room when he explained to everyone how important it is to take the credit out of the house or apartment and invest precisely in this company," said Shidlovsky, who invested 1,000 euros himself and encouraged his mother to sell her apartment in Belarus and invest the profit. "I became a contributor of King's Capital only by trust in Sunday Adelaja and his calls to invest in this company."

Adelaja claims Shidlovsky has been on a campaign to discredit him because he was disciplined while a member at God's Embassy. But Shidlovsky said he submitted to Adelaja's discipline while serving as a leader in the church and left God's Embassy with the pastor's blessing. "I did all the requirements which Pastor Sunday gave me," Shidlovsky said through an interpreter. "After one year, they said, 'We will let you serve in the church.' But I said, 'No, I'm going out to start my own ministry.' And they said, 'We bless you.'"

Although prominent God's Embassy pastors have left the ministry, including longtime church leader Sofia Zhukotanska, Adelaja said the church continues to grow. Anniversary participants said the crowd of mostly international visitors was as large as in past years, though the figures could not be confirmed.

Despite the scandal, Adelaja's visibility remains high. His church's healing ministry was featured in *Time* magazine in a Feb. 23 article titled "How the World Heals." And on Saturday, Adelaja is to receive the Azusa Street Mission and Historical Society's William J. Seymour Azusa Street Award, which was given previously to Church of God in Christ Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake.

Adelaja also is being honored by the Ijebu Professional Excellence Promotion Body, which recognizes accomplished members of Nigeria's Ijebu people. Adelaja was born in a small village near Ijebu-Ode, Ogun state, Nigeria.