

T.B. Joshua Divides Western Christians

While some charismatics insist the Nigerian healer is from God, others say he is a cult leader

Mystical Nigerian faith healer T.B. Joshua has bestowed many titles on himself, including “prophet” and “God’s Voice in the Synagogue.” Known for his supposed ability to heal cancer and AIDS, Joshua also is the general overseer of The Synagogue Church of All Nations in Lagos.

Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria have bestowed other choice titles on Joshua, including charlatan and occultist. Since Joshua, 39, began attracting foreign visitors to his healing services in the mid-1990s, local pastors have repeatedly warned that he is a false prophet who fakes healings or performs them by demonic power.

The controversy is headed for a showdown now that a Colorado woman who visited Joshua’s religious compound in April accused him of holding her there against her will. She is worried that Joshua is another Jim Jones and that The Synagogue may become another cult tragedy.

“Is T.B. Joshua a false prophet? Yes,” Rebekah Rae Kiser told one Nigerian newspaper. A member of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., Kiser went to Nigeria with a group of Christian friends after hearing that miracles were performed at Joshua’s church. She told Charisma that Synagogue staff members would not let her leave the compound when she wanted, and they held her airline tickets and passport for seven hours despite her protests.

Kiser said she was “terrified” during her visit, and she described his disciples as “zombies, with vacant looks on their faces.” She also watched Joshua wave his arms over people to heal them. “I saw powerful miracles, but they were not of God. He is not of God,” Kiser added.

Kiser is one of thousands of charismatics from the United States, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Europe who have made pilgrimages to Joshua’s compound. Prominent church leaders, including New Zealand minister Bill Subritzky, are among those who say they believe Joshua has a remarkable healing gift.

“My father has found a powerful increase in the anointing” since he visited Joshua’s meetings, said John Subritzky, who went to Nigeria with his father in February. “Those in our group who received prayer were healed. We did not discern anything that was not of God in Joshua’s ministry,” John Subritzky added.

Joshua’s own testimony raises questions, however. In his magazine, God’s Voice in the Synagogue, he claims that his birth was prophesied 100 years ago by Balogun Okoorun, a farmer-prophet from Arigidi. Joshua says he is the man Okoorun predicted would unite all races on earth. He also claims his mother carried him in her womb for 15 months.

“Here is a man who says he was born again in his mother’s womb,” said Anselm Madubuko, pastor of 12,000-member Revival Assembly Church in Lagos. “Nobody knows his pastor. Nobody knows his former church, and then he shows up as a prophet and begins to work ‘miracles.’”

Madubuko is upset that Western church leaders don't care that the Nigerian church has labeled the man a false prophet. Miracles alone, Madubuko added, "are not proof of who is of God and who is not of God."

The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), headed by Bishop Mike Okonkwo, issued a recent statement warning that Joshua's organization is a cult. Okonkwo calls Joshua an "infiltrator" who has "modernized cultism by injecting the name of Jesus Christ" into his message.

"If Joshua is for real," added Lagos minister Ladi Thompson, "then the lady with the spirit of divination in Acts 16 was wrongly accused by Paul."

Christians who defend Joshua say he uses the name of Jesus when he performs what he calls "spirit prayer" for pilgrims who come to his meetings with a variety of ailments. Testimonies of healings are videotaped, and copies of the tapes have been widely distributed around the world, thus attracting more visitors.

Joshua's methods of healing are unorthodox, to say the least. Many of his church members have testified that the prophet appeared to them in their homes or offices after they had worn or hung pieces of paper on which he had scribbled illegible letters.

In testimonies published in his magazine, people give credit to Joshua—as well as Jesus—for miracles. One man said he was delivered of bestiality after Joshua asked him to touch two women while standing in front of the audience.

Joshua also asks people to walk around nude in his meetings to prove that they have been healed of diseases. His magazine, which features numerous photographs of the prophet, also includes before-and-after photos of people exposing their breasts or genitals.

Kiser claims that while at Joshua's compound, she was urged to watch testimonial videos that showed people masturbating. She also said the prophet used profanity during prayers.

In an e-mailed response, Joshua said his miracles speak for themselves. "I am not the healer. Jesus is. The people who have received healing from God are old enough to explain for themselves. When you come to our church you will meet thousands of them," Joshua stated.

Chris Okotie, pastor of Household Church of God in Lagos, is the only Nigerian pastor who has confronted Joshua publicly. Okotie also told Nigerian police that they should monitor his activities. "I told [the police] that Joshua is a security risk to this country," Okotie said.

After her visit to The Synagogue, Kiser said she complained to the U.S. Embassy in Lagos and was told that officials planned to issue a warning.

-Jackson Ekwugum in Lagos, Nigeria