

The Unlikely Ambassador

Just a few years ago a young Nigerian immigrant planted a church in the former Soviet republic of Ukraine. Today Sunday Adelaja's Embassy of God is the largest church in Europe.

Beautifully sculptured cathedrals dot the landscape of Kiev, Ukraine, reminding visitors that this Eastern European nation has been a hub of Orthodox Christianity for centuries. But these days the largest church in Ukraine is an independent charismatic congregation that meets in a dilapidated warehouse on the east bank of the Dnieper River.

Inside Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations, also known as God's Embassy, worshipers sing Western choruses translated into Russian and punctuate their praise with occasional shouts of "Alleluia" and "Praise God."

Just 16 years ago, a service like this would have been restricted under the nation's communist leadership. But after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, a once underground evangelical community began to raise its head. Today observers say Kiev is at the center of a spiritual awakening that may spread across Europe.

At the forefront of this revival is the unlikely ambassador of God's Embassy, a Nigerian native named Sunday Adelaja, who started the church in 1994 with seven people in a two-bedroom apartment. It now has 25,000 members who meet in 40 locations across Kiev.

According to Adelaja, more than 2 million people have accepted Christ since the church was founded, and 620 congregations have been planted in 22 nations, including the Netherlands,

Germany, India, Russia and the United States.

God's Embassy is "a church of the end times that goes outside the four walls, carrying the kingdom of God into different areas of society," says member Lika Roman, the reigning Miss Ukraine.

And although Ukraine is predominantly white, Adelaja's ethnicity "makes no difference," says Vasiliy Onopenko, a member of God's Embassy and chairman of Ukraine's Supreme Court. "It doesn't matter that he is not from Ukraine. The only thing that is important is that we both believe in Christ, that we both feel His covering, that we both feel His mercy and grace."

In a nation still recovering from its oppressive past, Adelaja, 40, preaches a gospel of freedom and empowerment, and is intent on seeing Christian values influence every sector of society—from politics to entertainment to education. "The Great Commission is not what many of us have understood it to be," the pastor says. "We think of it as evangelism—going out and bringing people into the church—but that's not what the Bible says. God wants us to go out and draw people to Him."

Adelaja is determined to spread the "good news" by whatever means available to him. He has written more than 60 books, hosts national TV and radio programs, and travels extensively throughout Europe and the United States. In recent years Adelaja and God's Embassy have been featured in international media such as the Wall Street Journal, the Associated Press and the BBC for their influence on Ukrainian politics.

But in the early days of his ministry, Adelaja could barely

find two people who would listen to a black man preach a gospel once forbidden in the Soviet Union. "When I first arrived, people would ask to see my tail because they thought black people had tails," he says. "They would throw bananas at me and would tell me to go back to Africa."

After complaining to God about the racial injustices, Adelaja discovered what proved to be key in evangelizing Ukraine. "God told me my problem wasn't race. He said I had a problem with outcast people," Adelaja says. "He told me: 'You think ministry is about pulpit, promotion and advertisements. It's not. It's about people.'"

When he developed a compassion for addicts, alcoholics and outcast people, the church began to grow. He says the church's increasing size and influence are signs that God is drawing people to Himself in an unprecedented way. "When I first arrived in Kiev, I would ride around on the city bus crying out in prayer for people in this city," Adelaja says. "I would ask Him for one thing: 'God, let Your Spirit come.'"

'Born to Be Brilliant'

Born in the remote village of Idomila in Ogun State, Nigeria, Adelaja was raised in a Christian home by his grandmother. But instead of walking out his faith, Adelaja says he was a mean-spirited little boy who was angry with his grandmother for being too poor and sick to provide for him.

Rachel Adelaja reared her four children as a single mother and took in other village youth, including her grandson Sunday, who had been abandoned by his mother. Although poor, the family survived, often receiving financial help from Rachel's

son, who was a college professor.

But in 1972, tragedy struck. Two of her children died in separate car accidents within a month of each other, and in May of the following year a third child fell sick and died, though the illness was minor.

Each death seemed to have a rational cause, but villagers published rumors in the local newspaper that the siblings died as a result of a curse, accusing the family of being involved in witchcraft.

After burying three of her four children in less than a year, Rachel slipped into a coma and was hospitalized, leaving 6-year-old Sunday to fend for himself. He still bears deep scars on his legs from the six years he spent toiling in the bush of Nigeria, trying to earn a living. During that time, Adelaja says he was extremely bitter and once set his grandmother's clothes on fire in a fit of anger.

It wasn't until Rachel died of cancer when Adelaja was 15 that he began to realize how much his grandmother sacrificed for him. "It hit me—she loved me so much, but I was wicked to her," Adelaja says. "People would tell her to give up on me, but she wouldn't do it."

That loss also marked a turning point. A mediocre student at the time, Adelaja says a letter from his brother convinced him to change his attitude and work hard in school. "He told me I was born to be brilliant," Adelaja says. "I could not believe it. He said I could be at the top of my class."

Taking the words to heart, the once self-destructive teenager

became salutatorian of his high school class in 1986 and received a full scholarship to study journalism in the Soviet Union.

Six months before attending Belarusian State University, 19-year-old Adelaja made a decision that he says transformed his life forever. "I accepted Jesus while watching a televangelist preach the gospel from John 10:10," he remembers. "It felt like 220 kilograms of weight had been lifted from me."

Adelaja is convinced the hardships he endured in his youth gave him the stamina to withstand the persecution he would later encounter. He describes his early years in "old Russia" as "dark" and "dull" because people living in the former Soviet Union were forbidden to make personal and political choices.

"To read the Bible I had to go to the toilet and hide, and to pray I had to hide myself underneath a blanket and pretend I was asleep," he recalls.

As a member of the growing underground church, Adelaja endured constant harassment from the KGB, he says. And when his roommate reported him for hanging a portrait of Jesus on a wall, university officials raided his dorm room.

"The chief communist leader for the university told me I had to remove the portrait of Jesus," Adelaja says. "I felt such a deep pain ... but I could hear God whisper to me: 'Don't fight. Don't resist them. Your destiny is at hand here; My calling for you is at hand.'"

He says the persecution he faced that day seemed prophetic in

light of a dream he'd had the same year. "I had been praying at night for two weeks when Jesus came and took me to my future," Adelaja says. "I began to see myself in my 30s, and I was preaching to white people.

"I saw myself preaching on a stage with great men of God, then Jesus took the microphone from one of the most famous preachers on earth and gave it to me."

Influencing Nations

When the underground church began to emerge after the Soviet Union dissolved, Adelaja founded Word of Faith Bible Church in Kiev with his wife, Bose, a fellow Nigerian who studied engineering in Russia. He put his journalism degree to good use and launched a TV ministry and placed ads in the local newspaper, hoping to draw people to the church. But his marketing efforts yielded few congregants.

Although the nation was free of communist rule, most Ukrainians continued to believe they shouldn't deviate from established norms, Adelaja says. But a turning point came for Word of Faith when the young pastor met a woman who was desperate for change.

Natasha Potopaeva, who introduced herself to Adelaja as "Natasha Alcoholic," had been drinking for years when she cried out to God one night for help. Although she began to experience some peace, she says she still didn't know Jesus. Then one day she turned on the TV and saw Adelaja inviting viewers to a Bible study.

"The Bible study became like food to me," Potopaeva says. "I

received Jesus into my heart, and I was overfilled with joy. I knew I had to help other people find the joy and peace I had.”

Potopaeva introduced Adelaja to drug addicts, alcoholics and others who were on the outskirts of society. “God told me to take off my tie, roll up my sleeves and go where preachers don’t go,” Adelaja says. “God would speak supernaturally to the addicts, and their lives began to change. Within a year, 1,000 people had joined the church.”

That’s when he renamed the church God’s Embassy, so it would be viewed as a place where people from all walks of life could find help. In 1994 Potopaeva founded Love Rehabilitation Center as an outreach of the church. It has since planted 3,000 centers throughout Ukraine and in other countries.

When Sergey Diordiev, 26, arrived at the center he had been a drug addict for six years and had served a year in prison for drug trafficking. “The Holy Spirit changed me,” says Diordiev, who now works for the center. “I was angry and hateful, and I never had friends, but here I have fellowship with other people.”

Bose Adelaja, who serves alongside her husband as co-pastor of God’s Embassy’s central church in Kiev, says both men and women should be trained to reach the world with the gospel. She is also lead pastor of another God’s Embassy congregation in Kiev and represents a growing number of female leaders in the church. “God is calling women not only in Ukraine, but in the U.S. and other countries to plant churches, pastor churches, evangelize the lost and train others for ministry,” she says.

Orthodox Christianity remains the dominant religion in Ukraine, but prominent leaders such as Kiev Mayor Leonid Chernovetsky and other politicians have gravitated to the charismatic God's Embassy. In 1994, the church opened Stephania Soup Kitchen after Chernovetsky donated a building to the church. To date, more than 2 million people have received hot meals, as well as social, medical and rehabilitative services at Stephania.

"Pastor Sunday and God's Embassy are highly respected in Kiev," Chernovetsky says. "If we are to be certain of our ability to transform this world into a better place, and to love every person ... we need those who can ... give us godly insight."

Through its Joshua Institute Bible school, God's Embassy has sent out 1,500 graduates to plant churches, open orphanages, run for political office and impact other arenas in need of the gospel. And the church's prison ministry is reaching out to a growing population of ex-offenders and inmates in Ukraine.

Elena Misoshnyk, 35, was serving a 12-year sentence for murder with no possibility of parole when she learned of God's Embassy's prison outreach and accepted Christ. "God started sending people to me who were on drugs and HIV-positive, and when they would ... touch me, they would get healed," says Misoshnyk, who served nearly seven years of her sentence before she was unexpectedly released under the provisions of a new law.

In recent years, God's Embassy has captured the world's attention for challenging government policies that restricted democracy and religious freedom. In 2003, a church-led protest

caused city leaders to rescind their previous decision to deny the church an extension on its property lease.

The following year church members joined with voters from across Ukraine to protest a presidential election many considered fraudulent. The demonstration, which came to be known as the Orange Revolution, eventually led to a runoff election and victory for West-leaning opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko.

As a result of his church's influence, Adelaja has discussed political issues with former Israeli Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu. Last year he participated in the Clinton Global Initiative, an invitation-only event that convened diverse leaders to discuss solutions to global problems such as poverty, climate change and religious conflict. In August he addressed the United Nations.

Adelaja's office wall is decorated with photos of him pictured with world leaders, including former President Bill Clinton and former Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright. "Pastor Sunday has played a major role in the international world," says Henry Madava, a Zimbabwe native who pastors the 6,000-member Victory Church in Kiev. "[Ukrainian] politicians see the pureness Christians bring."

Adelaja says God's love for people cannot be confined to one country. For that reason, he has planted churches and a Bible school in in the U.S., and recently launched ChurchShift, an initiative designed to teach American pastors how to affect change in the culture by altering the way they think. He says wealth and prosperity often distract Christians from pursuing the true purpose of ministry.

“Sometimes my minister friends in America tell me ... they’re believing in faith for a thousand more members, a new car, a television show and so on,” Adelaja writes in his book, ChurchShift (Charisma House), which is scheduled to release in February. “When Christians change the goal of the church, and make it a place of conservation and escape rather than equipping and sending, we are working against the Great Commission. We are hoarding kingdom resources, namely people and their gifts.”

Adelaja says his church isn’t seeking to be defined by its political activism or its size; it just wants to see people set free. “The reward for seeking God is influence over a sphere of society so people can be rescued from the horrors of sin and evil,” Adelaja says. “Anybody who walks in obedience to God has the right to ask for nations to be restored and given into His hands. That’s what we do here at God’s Embassy.”

Valerie G. Lowe is the associate editor of Charisma. She traveled to Kiev, Ukraine, in April to file this report. Sunday Adelaja will address the Synergize Pastor’s Conference in Atlanta January 29-31. For more information, log on at [www.charisma.com](#). To read an excerpt from Sunday Adelaja’s forthcoming book ChurchShift, log on at [www.churchshift.com](#)

God and the Orange Revolution

The prayer of Christians have shaped Ukrainian politics.

It was the toughest decision Sunday Adelaja had made as pastor of Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations in

Kiev, Ukraine.

After enduring government persecution for years, Adelaja believed God was calling him and his congregation to take a stand and protest City Hall. Local politicians had accused God's Embassy, as the church is commonly known, of being a cult and a threat to Kiev's national identity. As a result, the church's request for an extension of its rental lease had been denied.

It was 2003, more than a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, but civil disobedience could still bring imprisonment or violent retaliation from the police. "In my mind it was not only foolish, it was dangerous," Adelaja says.

The pastor had always believed the church should submit to the government because it carries a God-ordained authority. But Adelaja says God showed him that he was wrong. "He took me through the book of Acts and showed me that civil disobedience can be righteous when you are fighting unrighteousness," he writes in his book ChurchShift, noting that the disciples broke the law when it prohibited them from preaching.

After spending time in prayer and consulting 12 of the ministry's key leaders, Adelaja mobilized 3,000 members to march on City Hall. "God told me the people are the power and to use that power to protest the government's decision," Adelaja writes.

As a result of the church's action, then-Mayor Oleksandr Omelchenko extended the church's rental agreement and gave God's Embassy \$5 million in free property. Not only had the ministry prevailed without incident, the protest established

God's Embassy as a change agent in Ukraine.

Sofia Zhukotanska, a lead pastor at God's Embassy and a respected figure in Ukrainian politics, says God is raising up a new generation of people to lead in all areas of government. "The church should be strong and influential in all systems of the Ukraine," Zhukotanska told Charisma. "It will have the Word for all Ukrainians."

Adelaja says the church's willingness to protest the government in 2003 gave Ukrainian residents the courage to demonstrate the following year against a flawed election during which Russia-backed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich allegedly used intimidation and electoral fraud to win the presidency over opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko. The massive protest, dubbed the Orange Revolution, resulted in a runoff election and victory for West-leaning Yushchenko.

"Under God's direction we had been used to change the mind-set of an entire country," Adelaja writes. "I believe that the protest and prayers by our church and other churches led to the most important change in Ukraine in centuries."

Political, economic and social challenges remain. But the pastor believes Christians are called to civic action. "God taught us that in order to transform a nation, we would have to leave the four walls of the church," Adelaja says. "This is what the Great Commission is truly about."