Let the Multitudes Come

An unprecedented crowd of 6 million people gathered in Lagos, Nigeria, for a Reinhard Bonnke crusade in November. The evangelist believes that this move of the Holy Spirit will sweep the entire African continent.

A curl of gray smoke smudges the beauty of a moonlit African sky, and a million voices cheer in delight. A sea of upraised palms waves in celebration as the smoke drifts across the front of the stage where a caftaned singer declares, “Jesus power!”

The vast crowd’s happiness can be traced to the source of the smoke: a large metal drum in which lie smoldering ashes of a mini-mountain of occult fetishes. The good-luck charms and amulets have been cut from hundreds of wrists and waists and consigned to the flames as people who once relied on them for protection and prosperity are consumed by a greater fire.

“Some people like their Christianity like ice cream—nice but cold,” Reinhard Bonnke had roared earlier in the day as he explained the baptism of the Holy Spirit to some 80,000 pastors and lay workers who had filled the national stadium in Lagos, Nigeria. “But we love it nice and hot because the God who answers with fire, He is warm!”

Now in the oppressive heat of an equatorial evening, Bonnke is

leading a million-plus crowd to cry out for their own “miniature power station.” Only the collar of the German evangelist’s shirt is still its original blue, the rest having been darkened by sweat from an hour’s pacing and passionate preaching.

“You don’t come and beg for the gift,” he booms. “You come and collect the promise!” The rumble of countless new tongues fills the evening air.

Later, voices are raised again as Bonnke prays for the sick. He names a brain tumor, throat cancer, goiters and blindness.

“Somebody is being healed of [an injury caused by a bullet wound]. That muscle that didn’t work is now working perfectly.” Paralysis, heart disease, typhoid, asthma, eczema—“Be healed in the name of Jesus!” Bonnke shouts.

From far out in the crowd to the right of the platform, something moves through the sea of hands. A wheelchair is being carried aloft, its occupant walking slowly, but surely.

Ik Efe joins those who give their testimony on the stage. He lifts a trouser leg to show the bullet hole left by an armed robber a year ago. As Bonnke had prayed, “I felt some veins in

my leg start moving," the 26-year-old says. He jumps beside Bonnke to show his restored movement and throws his walking stick down before walking off the platform unaided.

On another night of the crusade, Patricia Uwaezuoke arrives in a wheelchair. Stricken with cancer while visiting friends in the United States, she had been told that doctors could do nothing for her. Daughter Gloria Chukwuka had heard about the Bonnke meetings and had arranged an immediate flight home for her mother.

On her second visit to the crusade, 68-year-old Uwaezuoke walks slowly, but independently, across the stage. "I'm very excited," her daughter says. "I believed that God could heal her. He hadn't written her off. She has not reached the biblical age, and I believe that God will not let her die yet."

The New York medical records Chukwuka brandishes are checked by Rodney Thompson, a Spirit-filled family practitioner from Pensacola, Florida, who teaches part time at the Brownsville Revival School of Ministry.

"I'm used to seeing people fall under the power of the Holy Spirit and large crowds and the glory of God falling," he comments, "but to see it on such a massive scale is overwhelming. It's like everything that has happened in the

Brownsville Revival in the last 5-1/2 years multiplied several times over and pressed into one week.”

A Destiny for Nigeria

Known as “the Billy Graham of Africa,” Bonnke has drawn large crowds to his Christ for all Nations (CFaN) crusades all over Africa for more than 20 years. Salvations, healings, deliverance and the Holy Spirit falling on crowds are commonplace, but this November crusade sees such manifestations on an unprecedented scale. The final evening of the six-day event draws a record-breaking 1.6 million people—according to a conservative estimate—with a total attendance of almost 6 million.

“I’m thrilled, overwhelmed,” says a raspy-voiced Bonnke prior to the final meeting of the Great Millennium Crusade. “I see prophecy fulfilled, and I thank God for a mighty harvest of souls. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit didn’t

let me sleep all night. Every time I closed my eyes, I could hear that roar and feel that flow of the glory of the Lord. It was absolutely marvelous.”

National church leaders believe that of CfaN's book of Acts-like episode is just part of a wider, pivotal move of God on the continent. They see visits by other leaders such as Myles Munroe and T.D. Jakes during this same season as a sign that God is stirring Nigeria for a key role among other African nations. It is said that the country's recent 40th anniversary of independence marks the end of Nigeria's years of "wandering in the wilderness" and that it is time for her to enter the promised land.

The visible signs are mixed. Though the country is hugely rich in mineral resources, much of the population lives in grinding poverty. Armed robberies are commonplace, and corruption is rampant. Nigeria is known as the fraud capital of the world, where international travelers are advised not to use credit cards, even at the top hotels. Bonnke's team has to

use different colored collection bags each night to ensure the offering is

not misappropriated.

One night of the event Bonnke is impressed by God to pray specifically for the poor. "I have come to know that poverty can be as painful as sickness, and if Jesus came to heal the sick, He also came to those who suffer under the curse of poverty," he says. "I am not an analyst. I am not an economist. I can't give you a job, and I can't give you money. But I do believe that God answers prayer in the name of Jesus!"

At some 110-million strong, Nigeria is not only the most populous nation in Africa but also one of the most internally divided. There are 200 dialects, long-running tensions between the three main tribal groups and simmering conflict between Christians and Muslims. Arenas of both family background and faith have seen bloody clashes and violent deaths during recent months.

But years of hated military dictatorship ended in 1999 with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a born-again Christian. Believers say he has not yet achieved as much as they had hoped in the way of reforms, but they recognize he is

facing a political and religious tinderbox.

“It’s always a bit stormy in the beginning,” says Archbishop Abraham Oyeniran, president of the United Gospel Churches Association of Nigeria, representing 500 denominations. “But our hope will begin to rejoice very soon. What our government used to do with armed robbers was execute them by firing squad. But what we have discovered is that the syndicate behind armed robbery is demonic. It’s evil.

“No policeman can kill or destroy these demons they are against. That’s why each time they kill them it still increases more. The only power that can destroy these demon spirits is the power of the gospel.”

Such talk does not raise the kind of eyebrows here that it does in the West. Steeped in years of superstition and tribal lore, Nigerians do not need to be convinced about the reality and power of the supernatural. For many, witchcraft and folk religion seem to offer the only hope amid poverty and violence. Therefore Bonnke invites participants to publicly burn their fetishes at his meetings to show their allegiance to the one true God.

“If people become Christians and don’t surrender these things, it means they still have a covenant with the devil,” says Ghanaian John Darku, CfaN’s West Africa director. “That has to be broken.” Darku presides over the nightly fetish burnings, telling the crowds: “The power of the gospel is sufficient to protect you from any enemy.”

The ready acceptance of the reality of the supernatural is why Bonnke’s praying for people to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit is so critical, too, says Bishop Lawrence Osaglie, president of the Lagos chapter of the Pentecostal Christian Fellowship of Nigeria. “It’s crucial that the power of the Holy Spirit must be demonstrated here because there is so much desire to see the supernatural in the lives of the Nigerians because of their horrid situations. People are just looking for help from all over the believer can’t afford not to demonstrate the power of the Holy Ghost as evidence that God is working in him.”

Scholastica Joseph attends the morning conference for church

leaders, looking for “the same anointing that [Bonnke] has.” She visits local marketplaces to preach and hungers for “God to make me to be like him.”

The crowd is too big for Bonnke to do what CfaN staffers privately call his “spot welding”—standing on a chair and laying hands on the top of everyone as they pass by, as he has done for hours at a time—but he prays generally for all. He emphasizes this is not just a “bless-me” time.

“The flame is not just given for us to be happy-clappy, but that so like Peter we also can stand up and as we preach the gospel, people get saved, and the sick get healed, and demons will be cast out, and bondages and curses will be

broken.”

Bonnke’s face is plastered on billboards across the city, his convoy surrounded by a crush of people as he leaves the venue, all anxious for a glimpse or a personal touch. But Bonnke makes it clear he is not passing on “his” anointing.

“I love you very much, but not that much!” he laughs. “If you want to receive Reinhard Bonnke’s anointing, you want to become a copy of Bonnke. And that would be awful. Since when does God use copies? Our God is not a manufacturer; He is a creator.”

Redeeming a Continent

A lot has changed since Bonnke's early days as a missionary in Lesotho 30 years ago, where he labored for seven years but saw very few converts. "I was so frustrated because people didn't want to get saved," he tells people.

Then over a succession of nights he had a vision of "a blood-washed Africa" that propelled him into mass evangelism. He booked a stadium in Botswana for his first crusade event. Only about 100 people

turned out for the first meeting, but several were healed. Word spread, and by the end of the event Bonnke was preaching to a capacity crowd.

During the 1980s Bonnke made it into The Guinness Book of World Records for having the largest tent in the world, in which he held his expanding crusades. But even with room for more than 30,000 it soon had to be abandoned, as the meetings outgrew its capacity.

In Lagos people have walked for hours across the city to be at his services. They pour into the site hours before the meetings begin. Pata Frank arrives at the crusade ground at 9 a.m. every day to claim a frontline spot. “I will never forget this time because God has changed many things in my life,” she says. “I will tell my children.”

Two thousand churches across Lagos have united to help stage the crusade. They have trained 200,000 counselors and provided 25,000 ushers and security staff. Others work through the night to process and sort into 52 geographical zones follow-up cards that are hand-carried to local churches. The response cards were inserted in the 6 million booklets shipped in for the event.

Although they have planned and prepared for a huge turnout, CfaN staffers are still staggered by the attendance. “It [blows] our minds,” says Peter van den Berg, Bonnke’s Zimbabwean lieutenant of more than 20 years. “We are not excited by numbers [because] every single person is a soul that Jesus died for and has value. But having said that, we welcome large numbers because that’s more individuals for whom Jesus died. For us the real measure of a crusade is not the numbers that attend, but how many end in churches and in the kingdom of God.”

For Bonnke the harvest is, in part, payback time. The Lagos crusade is the fifth he has held in Nigeria since being allowed to return to the country after a nine-year ban. Bonnke was blacklisted in 1990 after a planned crusade in the Muslim

north provoked deadly riots. CfaN workers had to flee the country. “I told the devil that I demanded an increase of 900 percent because he kept me out for nine years,” he says now.

A half dozen more crusades in other parts of the country are due to follow Lagos, although Bonnke will avoid Islamic areas. “I promised the president,” he says. “Just for the Muslims to hear my name gets them believe God will use others to [reach that part of the country].”

Local leaders say as an outsider with a proven love for Africa, Bonnke has been able to unite churches that tend to be competitive. “Reinhard Bonnke is a man who is loved and appreciated for his hard work, his sincerity and transparency,” says Lawrence Osaglie. “He is a man who is trusted.”

Says Bonnke: “I am very much interested in Nigeria’s well-being. I would say, ‘As Nigeria, so goes Africa.’ Nigeria has great saints and great sinners, but we preach the gospel to them. As Nigeria constitutes a large part of Africa, it is one thing for me to go to all these small nations; but I feel much more work needs to be done here.”

Andy Butcher is the editor of Charisma News Service. He traveled to Nigeria in November to file this report.