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HEADLINE: AP Enterprise: Boom in African Christianity spills over to America

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On the 25th floor of a luxury office tower, a church most people have never heard of is planning to save America.

Its leaders believe Jesus has sent them to spread a difficult truth in the United States: Demonic forces are corrupting society and only spiritual warfare can stop them.

Call it the message.

The messenger comes from Nigeria.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God was founded in Lagos by men and women who were once the target of missionary work themselves. Now their church is one of the most aggressive evangelizers to emerge from the recent advance of Christianity across Africa, and their offices in the high-tech corridor of greater Dallas reflect the group's bold, entrepreneurial approach.

The Redeemed Church is part of a boom in African churches establishing American outposts. **Jacob Olupona**, a professor at the University of California, Davis, who compiles data on African congregations in this country, has found hundreds of examples in cities large and small.

"Anyone who writes about Christianity in America in the 21st century," Olupona said, "will have to write about African churches."

At the core of the shift are pastors from Nigeria. Over the last century, Christians in the West African nation have swelled from a tiny minority to nearly half the population, and its pastors have shown an exceptional talent for winning new believers abroad.

In the United States, the Redeemed Church is ahead of them all.

The church has opened more than 200 parishes in just over a decade, from Chicago and Atlanta to Washington and New York, and is training Americans of all races to help them reach beyond the African immigrant community. One of their largest congregations, Victory Temple in Bowie, Md., claims 2,000 members.

Fifty miles north of Dallas, the church is building a multimillion-dollar national headquarters and conference complex on more than 600 acres of farm land in rural Floyd, Texas. The site is modeled on the denomination's massive campground outside Lagos and is expected to draw thousands of followers for marathon prayer meetings that are the hallmark of its worship style.

At the center of their North American push is a for-profit, satellite TV network, launched in December from Dallas under the name Dove Media, which broadcasts sermons from the church's world leader Pastor Enoch Adeboye, between reruns of "The Dick Van Dyke Show" and "Bonanza." Dove hopes to attract viewers throughout the continent who would not normally watch Christian TV.

"We didn't bring this church to the United States to be another Nigerian church," said Ajibike Akinkoye, chief executive of Dove Media, in an interview in his Irving office. "We are afraid with the way things are going in the world and in America allowing people to do what they like, creating their own religion and philosophy those people are going to pay for it. We don't want that to happen."

The United States, with its ever-expanding megachurches, influential evangelists and deep religiosity, seems an unlikely mission ground. But the Redeemed Church believes Christianity here has become a lifestyle, not a transforming way of life, and they feel obliged to rescue the people who brought them the faith in the first place.

"There is a vibrancy in Africa," Akinkoye said. "We are offering that gift back to America."

Other Nigerian pastors are following close behind.

Sunday Adelaja, who founded the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations in Kiev, Ukraine in 1994, has built the congregation into a 30,000-member megachurch with 15 offshoots in this country. He plans to open 250 U.S. congregations within a decade.

Jonathan Owhe, who became a pastor after emigrating to New York, started Christ the Rock World Restoration Church in 1995 in Brooklyn, then branched out to Tennessee and Georgia then overseas to Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and other countries.

"It's globalization happening to the church," said the Rev. Ted Haggard, president of the U.S. National Association of Evangelicals. He so admires the success of African pastors that he modeled the main sanctuary of his Colorado Springs church on a Nigerian megachurch. "What happened to Ford and Chevy and GE 20 years ago is now in full swing in the church."

The Redeemed Church began in 1952 in Lagos and has now eclipsed the many other nondenominational Nigerian churches in its size and global reach.

It opened its first U.S. congregation in 1992, when Adeboye prayed in a Detroit living room with a Nigerian engineer who was working for Ford. Churches in Tallahassee, Fla., and Dallas soon opened, and many more followed. About 7,000 people attended the church's national meeting in New York's Madison Square Garden last year.

The group's pastors in this country have doctorates, degrees in management or engineering, and

extensive experience in the business world though they generally have far less religious training than clergy from mainline denominations. To keep trust with churchgoers, they have hired an accountant as a national watchdog over how parishes handle tithes.

Ministers are building their congregations by making every worshipper a worker, teaching classes for children, holding events for singles even cleaning. At one U.S. parish, the pastor has given the title "Holy Police Commissioner" to the churchgoer who manages the parking lot.

"They are amazingly sophisticated," said Elias Bongmba, a religion professor at Rice University in Houston. "They know how to organize."

Still, however effective they are at administration, Redeemed Church leaders know their future here depends heavily on something harder to control: their public image. With their mandate to save all peoples, they worry they'll be dismissed as a "foreign" church.

John Garner, a native Texan who sold the church the first parcel of land for its Floyd headquarters, said local residents have been asking him "about that cult coming in." Garner, who is white and previously belonged to a Baptist congregation, is now a member of the church, and his wife, Marti, is an assistant pastor who leads a new congregation on the site.

"People don't understand what's going on," said John Garner, standing in the first new building on the property a sleek conference center for 1,000 people rising incongruously amid grain silos and barren fields. "People don't realize they're Christians just like them."

Yet, even as newcomers, Redeemed Church pastors are already carrying an American burden.

U.S. churches remain largely segregated by race and the Nigerian church fears being drawn into those divisions. Many of their parish Web sites and fliers feature photos of whites and Hispanics, along with blacks, even though the church right now is overwhelmingly African.

"They are going out and bringing people in, and the way they treat people will keep bringing people in," said Katie Bendorf, a 26-year-old mother of three who was one of the few whites at a recent service at Jesus House, a major Redeemed Church parish in Chicago.

A music minister invited Bendorf to attend last December and she now plays violin with the church band. "Everyone knew my name by the second time I came," she said.

In fact, American Christians looking beyond ethnic differences will find something familiar. The Redeemed Church is Pentecostal a movement that began 100 years ago at a downtown Los Angeles revival and is now the fastest-growing wing of Christianity worldwide.

Pentecostals/charismatics are biblical conservatives known for ecstatic, spirit-filled worship, speaking in tongues and a belief in miracles and supernatural battles with evil. Missionaries and evangelists from the United States and elsewhere spread the movement in Africa throughout the 20th century.

The connection is clear at Jesus House in Chicago, where Sunday services fit squarely within the mainstream of American Christianity.

The carpeted sanctuary, with its recessed lighting and 600 deeply cushioned chairs, looked the part of a well-funded megachurch. TV monitors installed along the ceiling broadcast the service to the back of the room. Except for one song in an upbeat Nigerian style, the music was standard Christian gospel. And

Pastor Bayo Adewole, who chose preservation of the family as the day's theme, distributed literature from James Dobson of Focus on the Family.

For years, U.S. and African churches have carried on a steady cultural exchange, as Americans became fascinated with the spectacular growth of African congregations and African pastors looked to U.S. evangelists for recognition and support.

Haggard goes to Africa about twice a year and has a close relationship with Adelaja in Kiev. Bishop T.D. Jakes, the prominent Dallas megachurch pastor, and the Rev. Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Driven Life," regularly visit Africa. Redeemed Church leaders are advising all their U.S. parishes to consult Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Church."

"There is an immense move of American pastors going over there and forming church relationships," said Tony Carnes, head of the Research Institute for New Americans, who studies African churches in the New York area. "These pastors in Africa have already read American writing. They have a common vocabulary."

The Redeemed Church is counting on it. As soon as their Dallas TV studio is completed, they'll invite American pastors to preach on the air. Bleachers are being built to bring in a local audience. If the TV venture succeeds, they plan a companion Spanish-language network. Their Internet radio station is already broadcasting from the Irving office. And Akinkoye, the network chief executive, is preparing for Dove Media to produce its own movies in America, just like the church does in Nigeria.

All of this is in service to the goal their international leader, Adeboye, has set for the church: "At least one member of the church in every household in the whole world."

"A society that will not embrace the Holy Spirit of God is encouraging satanic influences," Akinkoye said. "We are not introducing Jesus Christ to America, but this society has become a post-Christian society and that is a dangerous thing."

On the Net:

Redeemed Christian Church of God, North America: <http://www.rccgna.org/>

Dove Media Group, North America: <http://www.dovemediagroup.com/home.html>

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