

Expecting miracles: The prosperity gospel in Africa

by [Paul Gifford](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

Though virtually all forms of Christianity in Africa are experiencing explosive growth, the churches growing most spectacularly are the ones that are Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal or “Pentecostal-like.” After 23 years of visiting African churches, I would venture another generalization: the growing Pentecostal churches have one thing in common—a focus on achieving success. Discussing African Pentecostalism without discussing its emphasis on success is like discussing computers without mentioning software.

In this form of Christianity, a believer is successful; if not, something is very wrong. This emphasis can be seen in the names of the churches: Victory Bible Church, Jesus Breakthrough Assembly, Triumphant Christian Centre. The titles and themes of conventions, crusades and conferences repeat this emphasis: “Living a Life of Abundance,” “Taking Your Territories,” “Stepping into Greatness.” For all these churches, size and expansion are tangible signs of success—which is why the terms *Global*, *World* or *International* appear in so many of their titles.

The success which these churches see as the right of a Christian covers all areas. God will meet you, in the standard phrase, “at the point of your need.” In practice, however, success refers primarily to financial prosperity. This prosperity can be understood in a minimal way, as in the case of the preacher who said, “Prosperity is not the same for everyone. . . . A bicycle for one who walks, that is prosperity.” It is far more common, however, to hear preachers say something like: “God desires to bless you beyond your wildest dreams and wildest expectations.”

The theme of success emerges in a variety of ways. The first way is by an emphasis on motivation. Drive and determination, churchgoers are told, will lead to success (this is almost the classic “success through a positive mental attitude” approach). It is your own fault if you are not successful and rich: “Anything you want to become you can become; the only thing stopping you is you.”

The message of determination is often focused on entrepreneurship; you must develop a thriving business. I know several churches where at least once in every

service worshipers are called on to turn to their neighbors to ask: “Have you started your own business yet?” Entrepreneurs are held up as models.

I remember listening to a sermon broadcast in Ghana. My wife, who heard the sermon with me, observed at the end: “Did you notice that Jesus wasn’t mentioned in that sermon, but Bill Gates was twice?” I hadn’t noticed, because in this sector of Christianity that omission is unremarkable.

The theme of success emerges also in an explicit preaching of a prosperity gospel according to which God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share in Christ’s victory over sin, sickness and poverty—blessings which can be obtained by a confession of faith. This gospel is invariably linked with ideas of “seed faith,” or with the biblical image of “sowing and reaping.” Tithes and offerings become instruments of prosperity.

Success and prosperity come increasingly through the “anointing” of the “Man of God” (less frequently the “Woman of God”). Pastors (the word *prophet* is increasingly applied) can change the lives of their followers. Their power is related to a particular understanding of the Bible as a record of covenants, promises, pledges and commitments between God and his chosen. These are not past covenants. The Bible is a contemporary document. The Bible offers God’s covenant and commitment to *me*, and to me *now*.

Says pastor Wilfred Lai of Mombasa: “The Bible is God’s Word; the Word of God is Covenant. God sealed it with his blood. If God says you are blessed, you are blessed, and there’s nothing the devil can do about it.” The words of the Bible have a performative or declarative use: the prophet declares the promises given in the Bible to be fulfilled in your life—you have the blessings of Abraham, the power of Joseph, the authority of Moses, the sovereignty of David, the exploits of Elijah, and increasingly the revival and restoration of Israel itself.

The exilic and postexilic prophecies of restoration (like Isaiah 60) are privileged texts in African Pentecostalism. This kind of Christianity often focuses on how the prophets can drive out the demons that impede individual progress. Exorcism often plays a prominent role in ministry.

A less prominent but still significant theme of the success gospel is that God will offer miraculous provision through others: “When God wants to bless you, he puts somebody close to you who cares about your life and needs”—just as when Jesus

entered the world the wise men came bearing gifts. This theme was evident at a revival I attended a few months ago titled “Unleashing the Princes,” a reference to Psalm 68:31. The latter part of the psalm tells of princes bringing gifts: “Because of thy temple at Jerusalem shall kings bring presents unto thee” (v. 29).

These different emphases on success can be combined in different ways, and some can be emphasized more than others. (Many churches focus only on breaking demonic obstacles, for example.) This stream of Christianity is also constantly mutating, so the mixture of themes is always changing (the stress on the “Man of God” is the most recent development).

Among the large churches promoting the prosperity gospel is the Nigerian multinational Living Faith Church Worldwide Inc., better known as Winners Chapel, founded in Lagos by David Oyedepo in 1983. Winners has over 400 branches in Nigeria and can be found in 40 African countries. It boasts that its facility in Lagos, which seats 50,400, is the biggest church auditorium in the world. In Nairobi the church is constructing what it claims will be the biggest church in East and Central Africa. Wherever Winners congregations meet, the leading pastors tend to be Nigerians, all fiercely loyal to Oyedepo.

Winners exemplifies the emphasis on success. Last year Oyedepo made this pledge to all church members: “In 2006, everything that shall make your laughter complete and total shall be added unto you. The desires of everyone’s heart shall be delivered. Every trial shall be turned to testimonies. Every struggle shall be turned to miracles. Every form of barrenness shall be turned to fruitfulness. Every frustration shall be turned to celebration. Every humiliation shall be turned into honor. Every shame shall be turned to glory. And every curse shall be turned into blessings.”

Oyedepo’s “prophetic focus” for 2007 is “From Glory to Glory” (a reference to 2 Corinthians 3:18). Preachers invoking this theme will declare (in a good example of the performative use of scripture):

Our God is an ever forward-leading God. God said to Moses, “Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward” (Exod. 14:15). God also speaking in another verse of scripture said, “I am the Lord, I change not” (Mal. 3:6). . . . God is saying about his family, “Arise ye and depart for this is not your rest” (Mic. 2:10). God is also saying to us, “You have gone around this

mountain long enough” (Deut. 2:3). This implies it’s time to reach out to the next level of exploits and consequently the next level of glory. . . . God is saying in 2007 I am bringing you out of every shame and reproach into realms of glory you had never thought possible in your lifetime. That for your shame you shall have double. That it shall be a year of supernatural restoration of his glory in all areas of our lives. Yea, it shall happen suddenly like most supernatural acts of God in scripture. It shall come like a dream of the night. . . . God is saying to all of us in the Winners family that the year 2007 is a year of going forward. That we shall be moving from whatever level we are now to the next. That it shall be your year of restoration of color. That it shall be your year of restoration of beauty. That it shall be your year of restoration of dignity. That it shall be your year of restoration of glory. . . . You are emerging more than a conqueror in all areas of your life this year. The news of your triumphs shall hit the headlines in the course of the year 2007. Therefore arise and shine for your light has finally come.

Though the success promised at Winners embraces all areas of life, material success is paramount. Perhaps this is to be expected in light of Oyedepo’s account of his calling by God. His experience is obviously modeled on God’s call to Moses, but whereas Moses was commanded, “Go and set my people free,” Oyedepo was told, “Make my people rich.”

At Winners the testimonies are almost all about material success—scholarships, jobs, cars and promotions. The Winners rhetoric insists that the breakthrough will occur “now,” “during this service,” “this week,” “this month” or “this year.” Every month promises some new advance, every year brings its particular blessing.

The Winners message is merely a heightened, more relentless expression of a theology that is widespread in Africa’s new churches. This theology has also taken hold among more traditional churches. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a Nigerian multinational that claims to be the fastest-growing church in the world (though in Africa, at least, it has been trumped by Winners), was founded by Josiah Akindayomi in 1952. His successor and the current leader, Enoch Adeboye, transformed it in the early 1980s from a struggling holiness, even world-denying, tribal church into the flourishing prosperity multinational it is today.

All these churches shape motivation. They stress that success is your right and inheritance; it's what you should expect and can demand. The emphasis is on individual self-esteem, ambition, confidence. Sometimes a racial element enters into the message: you can succeed like whites; being African does not mean subservience and poverty.

Such encouragement undoubtedly has positive effects. A person who believes that victory is his or her right may show enormous persistence and determination and may overcome difficulties that would defeat others. In this respect, Pentecostalism is clearly a vehicle of modernity (with Bill Gates as the model, how could it be otherwise?). Yet these same churches may also stress miraculous provision, putting the emphasis on divine, not human, agency. Which of these strands is the more determinative might well depend on the individual situation.

These Pentecostal churches also foster the accumulation of material resources. The "seed faith" idea has been the motor that has powered the entire religious explosion. After all, the institutional growth has had to be paid for. An entire new class of religious professionals has arisen, and the buildings, programs, vehicles, musical instruments and sound systems do not come cheap in Africa's economically straitened circumstances. The aggressive, theologically driven quest for funds is the salient characteristic of many of these churches.

Adeboye of RCCG speaks of "Twelve keys [for] unlocking the doors of prosperity," and it is no accident that key No. 4 is "Giving," No. 5 is "Sowing" and No. 6 is "The Principle of the First Fruits." This theology has proved extremely effective for gifted religious entrepreneurs. Some of their fund-raising is as unsubtle as similar efforts are in North America, and there are just as many abuses. But to focus on these problems would be to miss the dynamism of the entire movement, which is fueled precisely by a focus on material expansion.

Prosperity Pentecostalism tends to give enormous status to the pastor. Many of the churches are not really communities or fellowships at all. Some began that way but have become associations of clients of a particular "Man of God." Leaders who were originally called "Brother" (more rarely "Sister") became "Bishop" or "Archbishop" (I've heard one leader in Ghana referred to as the "Megabishop"). The notion of Men of God as prophets has brought this trajectory to a new height: prophets are persons of a totally different order from their congregations and have special gifts. To quote Wilfred Lai again: "I am your Moses. God has sent me to deliver you from everything

that has been binding you.”

Again, Oyedepo is a good example. Because of his status he is totally unchallengeable: “The moment you doubt prophetic utterances, you are damned,” he has claimed. “When you go against the prophet it is actually God you are rising up against.” The otherness of these figures can be trumpeted quite unashamedly. The church can come to revolve around the leader’s prophetic declarations or “prophetic word.” Worshipers are increasingly inclined to attribute their blessings not so much to God as to the Man of God, or to God through the anointing of his servant.

What are we to make of this phenomenon? One’s judgment is likely to be tied to one’s understanding of the African context. The continent obviously has been shaped by colonialism, the cold-war rivalry of the superpowers, the world trade system and a huge burden of debt. But in my view the most significant fact about Africa is the dysfunctional political culture that permits an unaccountable elite to appropriate wealth and power at the expense of the people.

The gospel of success does little to challenge this dysfunctional political structure. For one thing, many preachers openly claim that the political-economic system simply doesn’t matter, because a born-again Christian will prosper under any political or economic regime. For a child of God, normal principles of politics or economics don’t apply. I’ve heard a Winners pastor in Ghana even tell his congregation to stop complaining about the collapse of the currency: “Even if the cedi [comes to be worth] 10,000 to the dollar, even if you have to carry sackfuls of it, it doesn’t affect you. Why? Because where it comes from [namely God’s plenty] never runs out.” Indeed, the movement exemplifies the “Big Man” disease that is the curse of Africa. The cars and houses of pastors (acquired through a theology of tithing and seed faith) are purchased at the expense of the people they are theoretically serving, just as the politicians’ wealth is gained through “service” of their constituents.

In August 2000, in the same month that the president of Nigeria’s senate was impeached for, among other things, having 32 official vehicles, the Winners weekly newspaper carried an article about Oyedepo’s acquisition of a private jet. One might argue that the church leader and his jet, far from illustrating God’s faithfulness to his chosen, are just the Nigerian Big Man syndrome transposed onto a Christian perspective. And Africa’s new religious superstars merge easily with and into Africa’s

political elite. In Zambia, Nigeria and Kenya, prominent pastors have used their celebrity status to vie for the presidency.

In years of visiting Winners churches I've never experienced anything but the celebration of success and prosperity. Even the church's characteristic foot-washing ceremony is not so much a reenactment of Jesus' self-emptying act of service as it is a ritualizing of Joshua 14:9: "Whatsoever your feet tread upon shall be given unto you for a possession." This ritual, performed by the Man of God, becomes one more assurance of material success.

Even the central ritual of Christianity, the Eucharist, is interpreted to fit this message of abundance, success and prosperity. Oyedepo links communion to Zechariah 9:11-12: "By the blood of thy covenant . . . I declare that I will render double unto thee."

At a communion service in September 2006, a Winners pastor in Nairobi explained the Eucharist as "a mystery to swallow every misfortune in your life. . . . Let it eradicate all sickness and affliction." The congregation was reminded that "mediocrity is a sickness" and was assured that "if your business is sick, it can be healed." Immediately after receiving communion, everyone received it a second time as an immunization: "Jesus was never sick once. By this second communion you will never be sick again. . . . Go and sack all your doctors. Tell your doctors, 'I will not come to your clinic again.' You will not contribute to buy their houses and cars; you will buy your own houses and cars."

The success motif fits very well with Africa's traditional religious imagination of fertility, abundance and wholeness. Amid poverty and marginalization, prosperity Pentecostalism is a thoroughly contextualized Christianity that directly addresses pressing needs. But the way it is expressed is heavily influenced by North Americans like Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, John Avanzini, Creflo Dollar, T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen and Mike Murdock. This influence is often acknowledged. Oyedepo claims that the Lord has told him that Hagin's "baton has been passed" to him, and he claims that he received Copeland's anointing by sleeping in a bed once slept in by Copeland. Adeboye was a regular attender of Hagin's annual conventions beginning in 1979—some years before he re-created the RCCG.

In Ghana I once heard the Nigerian Matthew Ashimolowo tell a congregation that if they had ever heard a sermon on sowing (and thereby reaping), it had probably originated with Murdock. Jakes drew over a million to each of his three events in

Nairobi's Uhuru Park in 2005, where his message was entirely about motivation. Jakes has countless imitators among Kenya's new pastors (he is also a fine exponent of the declarative use of scripture). Christian broadcast media are increasingly a feature in African countries, and these air a fair proportion of North American programs sharing these emphases. It is almost impossible for Africa's Pentecostal pastors to be unaware of their U.S. prototypes.

How can the theology of success be maintained in the face of circumstances in which so many obviously don't, indeed cannot, prosper? At a Winners church in Nairobi on New Year's Day 2007, worshipers were urged to buy Winners bumper stickers for their cars and other stickers for house windows, and to prophesy over the stickers every day in order to get a car in the year ahead. "If you want to own ten cars, buy ten stickers, and prophesy over them every day." But it seems obvious that most of the people who attend that church on the edge of Kibera, Africa's biggest slum, will not own one car, much less ten, by the end of 2007. What will the faithful think then?

There is a genuine tension here. The previous night, at the New Year's Eve service, the pastor tried to address the tension. He said that everyone should rejoice at the end of 2006, because at least they were alive to celebrate the new year: "One thing I know: Jesus has been faithful to you. Go to Langata cemetery if you are doubtful. Forget about the job [or] contract you didn't get, the money you wanted but didn't get. He makes all things beautiful in his time."

The pastor then told the story of a woman he knew who missed her flight, only to learn later that the plane was the one that crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11. What we might be tempted to see as a setback might not be one when viewed from a longer perspective. "Whether things are working or not, give thanks."

But that message is far from the one normally heard at Winners. The rest of the year, preachers speak of the biblical promises for now and of progress that is testable every month. The tension remains unresolved, and is probably at least part of the reason for members' frequent migration between the various churches.

The significant thing about the movement is the hope engendered, the vision imparted, the sense of destiny awakened. A relentless message of assurance is the distinguishing feature of these Pentecostal churches, a message delivered with eloquence and flair by enormously gifted and articulate preachers, often supported by superb soloists and choirs. To be told that you matter, that you belong at the top,

that you will have what you desire, must provide incentives in circumstances in which it is all too easy to give up. A sufficient number must succeed for the movement not to be discredited. Whatever the tensions and inconsistencies, these churches are clearly developing a winning formula.