

Pentecostal Christianity is a top Nigerian export

by [Ryan Lenora Brown](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* The roads that wind north from Lagos, Nigeria, toward the headquarters of the Winners' Chapel megachurch are lined with businesses such as Amazing Grace Hair Salon, No King But God Driving School, and My God Is Able Furniture Makers. And wedged between these businesses are the churches themselves, hundreds of them, in sweltering tin shacks or rooms above a gas station, in the parking lot of half-finished shopping malls or perched on stilts atop Lagos's viscous lagoon.

Canaanland, the Winners' Chapel headquarters, spreads across 10,500 acres. It includes not only the 50,000-seat Faith Tabernacle but a company town complete with schools and a university, a bottled-water processing plant, restaurants, shops, and residential neighborhoods. Every weekend, busloads of Nigerians wearing vividly patterned tailor-made suits and dresses pour through its gates for the Sunday service.

"The next two months will be the greatest two months of your life to date," David Oyedepo, the church's leader, told the crowd at Faith Tabernacle on a recent Sunday morning. His voice carries through the packed chapel and out to an overflow area, where thousands of additional worshipers sit on plastic chairs, fanning themselves. "Your struggle has finally come to an end!"

Few countries illustrate the changing dynamics of religion in the Global South in recent decades—and its international evangelistic efforts—better than Nigeria. Today, there are only six countries worldwide that have more Christians than Nigeria's nearly 100 million.

And some 1.2 million Nigerians currently live abroad, according to the United Nations. (Some put the figure as high as 17 million.) Over the past three decades, Nigerian Pentecostal megachurches have sprung up from the shantytowns of Sierra Leone to the strip malls of Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Britain's fastest-growing church is the Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Nigerians founded four of that country's ten largest churches. In Kiev, Ukraine, a

city awash in onion-domed Orthodox cathedrals, the largest Sunday service—with about 5,000 people attending—is conducted by Sunday Adelaja, founder of the Pentecostal Embassy of God church and a Nigerian.

“Traditionally churches came from the Western world, but now we are returning the kingdom back to them,” said Tope Olukole, a spokesman for Winners’ Chapel, which is also known as the Living Faith Church Worldwide. “With science, with modernization, the West has lost its debt to Christ, but in Africa the faith is still strong.”

Although Nigerians have left an imprint on most of the world’s major Christian denominations—one-quarter of the globe’s Anglicans live in Nigeria, for instance—their most exported version of the faith is Pentecostal.

With no central authority, Pentecostalism indeed seems ideally suited to a country like Nigeria, a place steeped in entrepreneurship after decades of unreliable government.

Social and economic changes have seized the country—and the African continent—over the past half-century. Among the most important pieces of the puzzle is the growth of cities. On the eve of Nigeria’s independence from Britain in 1960, Lagos, the largest city, had a population of a quarter million. Today, 20 million people live there, with 6,000 new migrants arriving daily.

That’s where churches come in, said Maria Frahm-Arp, a lecturer at the University of Johannesburg who studies Pentecostal churches in Africa. Churches provide community to migrants, and in countries like Nigeria they are often a far more reliable safety net than government-provided social services, she said.

“Megachurches often offer a great deal of social teachings—how to make it in the world—that are practically valuable to migrants,” she said. “And beyond that people are often using church networks to access jobs and build social ties in new places.”

But if churches seem to spring up like dandelions in the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja, the country’s evangelists are also looking further afield. Winners’ Chapel, for instance, claims membership on five continents, and the Redeemed Christian Church of God—Nigeria’s largest Pentecostal church—has adherents in more than 100 countries. RCCG says its goal is to build a church within a five-minute walk or drive of every person on earth.

That migration of people is highly visible in cities like Johannesburg, where a stadium service led by RCCG's leader, Enoch Adeboye, can draw thousands of worshipers. (Adeboye once described RCCG as "made in heaven, assembled in Nigeria, exported to the world.")

In a Colorado Springs strip mall, RCCG's Living Faith Sanctuary sits between a bargain housewares shop and a marijuana dispensary. On one Sunday, about 70 worshipers gathered for a sermon by Michael Lipede, who shares the national origin of more than half of his congregants.

"You can't separate faith from culture, so in a way churches are always going to be cultural centers," said Charles, a Nigerian engineer who recently moved to Colorado (he gave only his first name). When he arrived in the U.S., one of the first things Charles did was find a Nigerian church—RCCG.

The churches are making inroads into their communities as well. At Living Faith Sanctuary, about a quarter of the worshipers are locals. Charles noted that "almost everyone" who visits the church's small food pantry for assistance is "a white person from here."

"The church has an obligation to be an open house of worship above all else," he said.

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