



People are sing and praise during the 'singles summit' held at Prayer City.



People praise the lord during the 'singles summit' held at Prayer City. — AFP photos

Nigerians head to church to find earthly love



People sing and dance during the praise session at the 'singles summit' held at Prayer City.



A man jumps during a praise session at the 'singles summit' held at Prayer City.



People praise the lord during the 'singles summit' held at Prayer City.

Thousands of people began to arrive at the Nigerian megachurch just after dawn on a cool morning, looking for love and hot tips on how to avoid "dating devils". The "singles summit" is one of several offered by hugely popular Pentecostal churches in the west African nation, where marriage is a cornerstone of society to which most people aspire. With the relentless hustle and bustle of city life, and challenging economic conditions in a period of recession, there's often little time to seek out love. But the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries aims to change all that at its vast Prayer City complex, opposite an amusement park off the Lagos to Ibadan expressway.

Its Gen218 program-named after the Bible verse in Genesis where God says "It is not good that the man should be alone" before making Eve-promises to teach participants tricks for picking the right partner and avoiding pitfalls. The lucky ones may actually find a boyfriend or girlfriend. Michelle Michaels, a 37-year-old public servant in a brown striped dress, was among the crowds at the summit one Saturday in February. "Obviously I'm a single, not married, searching and all that," she told AFP. "But it's more about getting it right," she added, turning serious. "Marriage can be a disaster. The rate of divorce is very high nowadays and I don't want to be part of it."

'Aggressive prayer'

With an astonishing maximum capacity of more than 200,000 people, Prayer City bills itself as a "24 hours a day, 7 days a week, non-stop" venue facilitating "aggressive prayer". By 8:30 am the singles summit was well under way, with a dapper singer in a suit and red tie belting out majestic soft rock ballads that were more Coldplay than Kumbaya. Half an hour later, there was dancing in the aisles. By 10:00 am, many were crying. Some were sprawled motionless and face down on the floor in apparent rapture. The summit appeared to be reaching a climax but in fact hadn't even started: superstar pastor Daniel Kolawole Olukoya's appearance was still four hours away.

A range of churches offer singles summits but the substance is more or less the same. It includes frank advice about the realities of



A singer leads the praise session during the 'singles summit' held at Prayer City.

married life, while divine guidelines are prescribed such as abstaining from sex until marriage, and there's a lot of praise. Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of the Kingsway International Christian Centre held his own event earlier last month, teaching from his bestselling book "Don't Date Devils". On a different note, husband and wife team Bisi and Yomi Adewale, from the Family Booster Ministry, host singles events on the theme "12 Relationships You Must Avoid At All Cost".

"The singles are not only going there to hook future sanctified partners but also to acquire the spiritual endowments and secular skills on how to become future rich husbands and wives," said Nimi Wariboko, a professor at Boston University's theology school who studies Pentecostalism. "The summits are also places of pleasure, spaces where one can intensely party in the name of worship and experience huge emotional release without guilt. "It's a bundled service package directed at a segment of Nigerians eager to cross over from one stage of life into another."

Traditional to modern

While the church may appear conservative in some ways, specifying that women must cover their hair on religious premises, for example, it's liberal in others. The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries condemns forced marriage, child marriage, polygamy and inherited marriages, which see a widow passed on to another family member and are still common in Nigeria. In this way, the church helps guide young professionals as they adapt their traditional customs to modern life. "There has been an evolution from arranged marriage to marrying for love, and of course a shared love of Jesus Christ is a way of legitimizing a choice of who to marry," said Daniel J. Smith, an anthropology professor at Brown University in the United States.

That said, Olukoya still emphasizes patience, since hasty vows can result in an unhappy marriage to what he calls a "baby husband"-someone who "loves his mother more than the wife"-or an "acidic wife"-a woman whom, "when she talks, you feel like committing suicide". "Being a single isn't a bad thing," said Oluboyede Oluwatosin, a thoughtful 31-year-old technician attending his first singles summit. "It's good to be married but you don't just jump into marriage, there is some training you need. If you jump into marriage, you will surely jump out." — AFP