

Proclaiming prosperity

At a [charismatic](#) meeting in north London, Pastor Dollar spread the word that poverty was a demon whose back could be broken
[Andrew Brown](#)
[guardian.co.uk](#),
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Date _____ Giving No. _____ Title _____

Name _____ Offering _____

Address _____ Get Understanding Television _____

Post Code _____ Building Fund _____

Others _____

I am giving by ☐ Cash ☐ Cheque ☐ Credit Card Total Amount £ _____

CREDIT/DEBIT CARD GIVING DETAILS - PLEASE DEBIT MY

☐ VISA ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ OTHERS _____

CARD NO. _____ START DATE _____ EXPIRY DATE _____

ISSUE NO. (SWITCH AND SOLD ONLY) _____ SIGNATURE _____

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☐ I WANT EL SHADDAI INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CENTRE TO TREAT ALL DONATIONS I HAVE MADE SINCE 8TH APRIL 2008, AND ALL DONATIONS I MAKE FROM THE DATE OF THIS DECLARATION UNTIL I NOTIFY YOU OTHERWISE, AS GIFT AID DONATIONS.

☐ PLEASE TREAT THE ENCLOSED DONATIONS A GIFT AID TO EL SHADDAI INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CENTRE

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"Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the fruits of all thine increase" Proverbs 3:9

EL SHADDAI INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CENTRE

A donation form from the El-Shaddai International Christian Centre Photograph: [Andrew Brown/guardian.co.uk](#)

I got to the show an hour early and the queue was already three or four hundred people long, neatly arranged within crash barriers outside the Golders Green Hippodrome, an arena that seats 700. The crowd was 80-90% black; about 30% male, largely silent, cheerful and polite. Many held notebooks as well as Bibles. They had come to hear the preachers who tell them that giving to God, or to his anointed prophets, will make them rich and healthy, as if by magic. The star attraction, Kenneth Copeland, [raises \\$100m a year](#) by doing this; this evening's preacher, Creflo Dollar, [is being sued](#) by a former associate who claims that his inspirational text messages alone bring in \$50m a year. So don't scoff and say it never works.

Both men are under investigation by a Senate committee in the US.

This was the fourth show of the day, and they had been running at least three shows, every day, all week. At the door, we were not handed hymnbooks or bibles, but envelopes for our offering: naturally cash, cheques and credit cards were accepted, along with gift aid, and we could give not only an "offering", but also a "tithe", something for "Get Understanding Television", and the "Building Fund" – as well as "Others". Alongside came a merchandising catalogue with an offer of a box set of this week's shows for £22 on CD or £52 on DVD and 39 audio CDs by various preachers – useful titles here included "Overcoming a critical spirit".

Audience recording was forbidden.

By the time I reached the front of the queue the ground floor was full and so was the first balcony; I have problems with heights, and problems with mass hysteria, too, so I elected to watch the whole thing in the parish hall across the road where an overspill of about another hundred people watched it all projected live onto a big screen. Here, too, the audience was very largely black but next to me a thin white woman in late middle age spread open a Bible on her knees, the pages marked up in pencil and green and yellow highlighter as well. In the row in front a woman rubbed a golden credit card against the donation envelope while she waited for the preaching to begin.

"How long does this go on for?" I asked my neighbour – "Oooh, I think it's Creflo tonight. He can speak for two hours sometimes!" she replied. I scribbled in my notebook "Marks of weakness, marks of woe."

First there was music, to get us all in the mood: elephantine exhortation to the Holy Spirit in 4/4 time and a warm-up act, a short white preacher in a natty jacket and expensive-looking jeans bouncing on the balls of his feet as he talked about the blessings to come: it seems that not even Jesus can make white boys dance. He broke into a sort of sung liturgy, parts of it in tongues; the music acquired a whooshing, and unearthly overtone; all through the room spread hands were rising in the pentecostal gesture; the warm-up, who had spoken with a Bradford accent was now singing in American: "Lord, you're awesome".

And then it was time for the support act, Ramsom Mumba, whose El-Shaddai ministries were hosting the stars. "I really believe there is no way to quantify what has happened in the world of the spirit this week", he said; "I'm telling you tonight that there's going to be a gusher in the

Holy Ghost – amen, amen, amen, amen."

All around the enthusiasm grew more hysterical. It was worse than an Apple keynote. But it was much closer to Apple than to Christianity. The central teaching of the "Prosperity Gospel" is that the world of want, and of suffering, where we actually live, is less real and less powerful than the world of make-believe, or what they call the spirit world. Positive thinking can overcome everything: this happens first in the spirit world, and then appears in the believers' lives.

Of course, put like that, it sounds ridiculous. But I think the outrageousness of the nonsense is part of its appeal. Copeland, for example, proclaimed with the utmost gravity that God had told him that very afternoon that "It will grow now with great expediency, and that is the compacting."

Dollar listened to this with a monumental stillness, and at the end leaped into the air with his arms spread like a jack-in-the-box. His timing is wonderful. He could have a great career in standup, if he ever needed the money; and after 45 minutes or an hour's preaching, he had the audience exactly where he wanted. "The doctor's got no cure for what he says I have, but I'm blessed! I'm empowered to prosper!"

"I want you to say with me, 'I am prosperous. I am healthy, I am rich!'" And they all did.

"Somebody shout out 'Undisputed Calm!'" and the hall roared "undisputed calm".

Poverty, he said, is an evil spirit. "There's a reason why people hold tight to their money – it's the demon of poverty. We're going to break that demon's back tonight."

The way to do so, of course, was to give him more money.

So how to explain that many people gave him money and never ended up rich at all, or even healthy? "There are many people who give", he said "but who don't enjoy the blessings of God. They're giving, but they have not made God their only source ... *Cursed be the man that trusteth in man.*"

Then he got to Jesus's teachings on wealth. Jesus, after all, said – at least in [Matthew's gospel, in the King James Version](#), "That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

Providentially, there is another version of the story available, in [Mark](#), where Jesus also says "How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!"; and this was the version that Pastor Dollar quoted, because of course trusting riches is entirely different to having them. Who could doubt that Pastor Dollar was close to heaven? His sincerity filled the arena.

I looked at my neighbour's Bible, now open to Jeremiah 17. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

I made my excuses and left; as I walked down the road, one of the ushers approached me, full of solicitude. "Did you", he asked, "receive a blessing?"

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/aug/21/prosperity-gospel-religion-christianity>