

Mark Pinsky

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Scores lose jobs as Holy Land undergoes extreme makeover:

The new owners preach the prosperity gospel while boosting park attendance

By Mark I. Pinsky,
Orlando Sentinel Staff Writer

Paul and Jan Crouch, founders of the world's largest Christian media empire, walk a little slower these days. But that hasn't slowed down the whirlwind transformation of their newest acquisition: Orlando's Holy Land Experience theme park.

When their Trinity Broadcasting Network purchased Holy Land for \$37 million in June, longtime employees and supporters hoped the takeover would usher in a new era of financial stability for the park. However, once the first family of old-school American televangelism settled in, they began reshaping it.

More than 50 employees—or a quarter of the work force—were fired or laid off. Scores of trees buffering the re-creation of first-century Jerusalem from I-4 traffic were cut down. The cavelike interior of the biblically themed Oasis Café was painted purple. Furnishings left behind by the previous owners were dumped, and then replaced by opulent and expensive new pieces.

Such staff reductions are common in corporate takeovers, and religious organizations are no exception, said Trinity's attorney, Colby May. (Paul and Jan Crouch declined interview requests from the Orlando Sentinel.)

But for many of the longtime Holy Land workers let go since Trinity took the reins, the Crouches have been more like a wrecking crew. Paul, Jan and their management team have acted like "a cross between the Sopranos and the Beverly Hillbillies," said Keith Wright, Holy Land's former security chief.

A gospel of prosperity

Since Holy Land passed into the control of the Crouches, it also has undergone a theological shift—from its founder's Baptist roots to a branch of Pentecostal Protestantism.

The Crouches are proponents of what is known as the "prosperity gospel." It is based on the precept of "sacrificial giving by faith," which encourages followers to donate to their financial limits—and in some cases beyond—believing the contribution will miraculously multiply.

While Baptists, such as Holy Land's founder, the Rev. Marvin Rosenthal, do not subscribe to the prosperity gospel, the doctrine has worked for Trinity and the Crouches.

They drive luxury cars, occupy 30 houses across the country and fly on a 19-seat corporate turbojet—all owned by Trinity.

Trinity Broadcasting Network took in more than \$194 million in 2005, mostly from on-air telethons, and spent more than \$129 million, according to documents filed with the Internal Revenue Service. Today, the network's net assets are estimated at more than \$1 billion. Paul Crouch, Sr.'s compensation in 2005 was \$419,500; Jan's was \$361,000. That puts the couple among the highest-paid chief executives of religious nonprofits, according to the Chronicle of Philanthropy.

And since the hand-over, the Crouches and their associates say the park is in better financial health.

"Trinity has not only dramatically increased the number of visitors—by more than 30 percent—it has also reduced operating costs by over 20 percent, without a loss of service," said May, the attorney. "Bottom line, things are working better, and many more people are enjoying Holy Land.

"For better or worse, change is part of life."

But some recently fired and laid-off employees said in their view the changes at Holy Land have been for the worse. They claim that nearly 100 employees were cut from the payroll. All security, landscaping and custodial services were outsourced as well.

"It was a very tense atmosphere," said Bonni Lepic, 27, of Orlando, who worked at the park for five years before leaving last month. "If you said something that was taken the wrong way, you were gone the next day."

A bit of razzle-dazzle

If anyone can turn Holy Land around, it may be Trinity and the Crouches, who are no strangers to show business razzle-dazzle.

The network's headquarters in Costa Mesa, Calif., include a replica of the Via Dolorosa, a street in old Jerusalem believed to be the path Jesus walked to his crucifixion. Their studio in Dallas is a replica of the White House.

In their inaugural broadcast from Holy Land, the couple introduced the park to Trinity Broadcasting Network's audience. Taping their signature Praise the Lord talk and variety show, 69-year-old Jan was resplendent beneath her blond coif. Frequent tears during her 10-minute appearance caused mascara to run down her cheeks.

"Holy Land Experience is our latest and most recent miracle," said Paul Crouch, 73. "And we love you with all of our hearts."

Such emotional appeals put the spotlight directly on Holy Land.

"We are going to use the marketing power of Trinity to bring individuals not only to our park, but to Orlando as a whole," Paul Crouch Jr. said earlier this month.

This is not the first time Trinity has taken over a financially ailing entertainment venue.

In 1995, the network purchased the estate of the late country music artist Conway Twitty outside of Nashville. Trinity paid \$2.75 million for Twitty City, and spent an additional \$10 million turning the spread into a Christian-music entertainment park called Trinity Music City USA. That venture appears to be thriving, according to news reports.

Supporters display their loyalty

Blessed with a virtually unshakable base of loyal supporters, members of the Crouch family have been quintessential survivors, weathering numerous scandals and personal crises in the past three decades.

Trinity and its founders have been the subject of more than a dozen journalistic investigations focusing on their lavish personal lifestyle. None has slowed the network's growth.

"Within conservative media ministries, criticism from outsiders often is seen as a badge of honor that validates a ministry's righteousness," said Quentin Schultze, author of *Christianity and the Mass Media in America*.

During the televangelism scandals of the 1980s, Paul and Jan Crouch often were confused with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, with whom they were once partners in a ministry called "Praise the Lord." In fact, the two young couples came to an acrimonious parting of the ways.

Immediate and extended Crouch family members control the boards of all Trinity network entities, including Holy Land. The board arrangement made Trinity ineligible to join the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, a Christian self-regulating group.

Because it has been less than forthcoming about reporting its financial dealings, Trinity was downgraded from a "C" to an "F" this year by the Christian watchdog organization ministrywatch.com.

But that hasn't shaken their fans and followers.

"The people who watch Trinity are emotionally tied to the Crouches, and they cannot see the reality of the situation," said Rusty Leonard, founder of ministrywatch.com. "We admire their faith, but we are alarmed at their lack of discernment."

Sentinel researcher Susan Thompson assisted with this report.

Aug. 13, 2007

Priests' troubled pasts led here

By Mark I. Pinsky
Orlando Sentinel

A defrocked priest described in a Philadelphia grand-jury report as a man of "unrelenting depravity" for his sexual abuse of children lives in Central Florida.

He can reside here without registering as a sex offender because the statute of limitations ran out and he was never charged criminally.

Nicholas Cudemo, a former Philadelphia priest who is now 70, was described by a clergy superior as "one of the sickest people I ever knew" in a 2005 Philadelphia grand-jury report on clergy sex abuse. He has owned a house in southwest Orange County since 1989 but is not currently ministering here, Cudemo said this month.

The grand-jury probe—a three-year investigation that did not result in indictments—found that Cudemo's dozen documented victims included an 11-year-old girl he raped and took to have an abortion when she was a teenager. Cudemo also was accused of molesting a fifth-grade girl in the confessional and facilitating a gang rape with other priests.

The report said Cudemo—and dozens of other priests—could not be criminally charged because the statute of limitations had run out. "Unfortunately, the law currently stands in the way of justice for the victims of childhood sexual abuse," it said.

Another defrocked Philadelphia priest accused of molesting seven boys while on a trip to Walt Disney World in the 1980s stirred concern in an Orange County community where he owned a home from 1993 to 1999. As recently as 2006, Stanley Gana, now 64, spent nine months in Orlando with a longtime friend who was unaware of the grand jury's findings.

Gana's ties to Florida emerged in June, in a deposition connected to a civil suit against the Diocese of Orlando.

Over time, the U.S. church has paid an estimated \$2 billion to settle clergy-abuse litigation. Since 1968 when the Diocese of Orlando was formed, more than a dozen priests have been accused of sexually abusing minors, and the diocese has paid at least \$5 million to victims.

Orlando Bishop Thomas Wenski said in a written statement: "The Diocese of Orlando cooperates fully with law enforcement to aggressively safeguard vulnerable populations when presented with any allegation of abuse."

Some within the Catholic Church maintain that not enough has been done to protect the public from abusive priests.

"When they're not charged criminally, there's no way to get them on a sex-offenders list or registry," said the Rev. Tom Doyle, a Catholic priest and co-author of *Sex, Priests, and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2,000-Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse*. "What you're dealing with here is an issue of public safety and the safety of children."

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea, author of *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church*, suggests the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops create a registry that lists, by diocese, the estimated 700 priests who have been removed from ministry after charges of sexual abuse or impropriety, and include their last-known addresses.

"A lot of them are getting retirement checks, so the church should know where they are," said Frawley-O'Dea, a Charlotte, N.C., psychologist and trauma specialist.

Bishop Gerald Gettelfinger, of Evansville, Ind., suggested just such a registry at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Dallas in 2002. But the proposal went nowhere.

A long history

Both Cudemo and Gana have a long history in Central Florida.

Cudemo began bringing girls and young women to Florida for extended vacations in the late 1970s, according to the grand-jury report.

An accumulation of sexual-misconduct accusations and at least one civil suit, alleging that he sexually abused a young female relative, prompted Philadelphia church officials to remove him from active ministry in the early 1990s. In 1994, the priest asked the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to reinstate him so he could minister in Central Florida, where he was spending more time.

In early 1995, the archdiocese turned him down, "at least until the resolution of civil litigation."

The civil litigation was dropped because the statute of limitations had run out, according to the grand-jury report. Cudemo was briefly reinstated but within months new abuse charges were made, and he was forced into retirement in June 1996.

With a certificate of "good standing" from the Philadelphia archdiocese, Cudemo was free to act as any retired priest in Florida. On Feb. 12, 1999, Cudemo wrote the vicar of priests in the Diocese of Orlando, requesting permission to minister here.

The Diocese of Orlando said it has no record or recollection of Cudemo's request, but, according to the Philadelphia grand-jury report, church officials here "had been reluctant to allow the priest to minister in that diocese."

In response, Cudemo wrote: "Father, there is something that puzzles me. I have served for 21/2 years since being reinstated and continue to service in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia (and in some cases in the very area where my accusers reside) . . ."

Cudemo was ultimately defrocked in March 2005, six months before the grand jury's findings were released.

Reached by telephone this month, Cudemo said he is not currently engaged in ministry and spends most of his time caring for two aged relatives. "That's all I have to say," he said.

Accumulation of charges

Gana, according to a Pennsylvania grand-jury report, raped and "sexually abused countless boys in a succession of Philadelphia Archdiocese parishes" starting in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s.

After an accumulation of charges and several transfers to unsuspecting parishes, Gana began treatment Feb. 4, 1996, at a church-affiliated, sexual-abuse facility in Toronto. A month later, Gana walked away from the facility, took a taxi to the airport and flew to Orlando, according to the grand-jury report.

Within two weeks of his arrival here, Sister Lucy Vazquez, then serving as chancellor of the Orlando Diocese, heard that Gana's presence in a west Orange County neighborhood was raising concerns, documents in the grand-jury report show. His neighbors on Calathea Drive called their priest, the Rev. Andrew O'Reilly, to report that a visiting priest from Philadelphia was living with a group of older teenage boys and young men.

On March 16, Vazquez called Monsignor Michael McCulken of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, according to a memo McCulken wrote at the time, which was included in the grand-jury transcript.

"Sister Lucy noted that the diocese had recently experienced some cases of sexual abuse that were highly publicized and they were sensitive about such issues. They do not want any adverse publicity," McCulken's memo said.

McCulken told Vazquez that Gana had resigned from his parish, gone to the hospital and then left the hospital without permission. However, McCulken's memo did not say whether he informed Vazquez of the charges of sexual abuse made against Gana.

Vazquez denied any memory of the incident during a sworn deposition in an unrelated case. She said there were no files or documents at the diocese that would clarify the issue.

"I do not remember this call," she said in the June deposition in Orlando. "But we would always, if there was a credible allegation of child sexual abuse, we would report it to law enforcement . . ."

Bishop Wenski said in the situation involving Stanley Gana in 1996, "we had no knowledge of an allegation of any wrongdoing or sexual misconduct." He added there was nothing more the diocese could have done.

The Orange County Sheriff's Office has no record of any complaints or calls regarding Gana or his address in 1996.

Gana eventually was removed from active ministry in 2002, after the highly publicized Boston sex-abuse scandal. Under pressure in 2005, he agreed to live "a supervised life of prayer and penance" in Philadelphia.

Gana acknowledged to diocesan officials that he had paid a financial settlement to at least one of his victims, according to the report.

After his removal from the active priesthood, Gana returned to Central Florida. From November 2005 through July 2006, he stayed with a longtime friend, Judith Seaman, who lives on the edge of Pine Hills, in unincorporated Orange County. During that time he was officially defrocked.

Seaman said she knew nothing about the charges against Gana, and was shocked to hear them.

"There's no way I've seen any of that stuff," said Seaman, 66. "Absolutely none."

May 6, 2007

From storefronts to sanctuaries

Strip-shop churches are incubators for diverse new congregations.

By Mark I. Pinsky
Orlando Sentinel

Weekday afternoons, the glass doors are locked tightly along a row of storefronts lining a strip shopping center on Silver Star Road. The only clues that this may be the most intense concentration of Christian congregations in Central Florida are a few church buses and vans parked at the ready in the otherwise deserted lot.

But Sunday mornings are different. The small, retail spaces at the Devon Shield Shopping Center in the Pine Hills area are packed with fervent worshippers and the parking lot is overflowing. The storefronts ring with prayers and hymns in English, Spanish, French and Haitian Creole, as well as sermons in English delivered with Caribbean and West African accents.

The tinny amplification systems and stifling acoustics in the boxy sanctuaries cannot muffle the enthusiasm of those inside. Along the row, the music pours forth—pianos, organs, keyboards, guitars, trumpets, maracas, and drums.

"Everyone there is down to earth," says Charles Coleman, Jr., 36, of Apopka, a member of New Life Christian Center. "You feel the love. For us to be such a small church, we are very active and supportive of each other. I love the way they deliver the teaching in such a way that they explain the Bible to you in layman's terms."

At the opposite end of the strip center, at Iglesia de Cristo Mi-El, where most of the members are from Central America, Richard Parada, 42, who drives in several times a week from Haines City, feels the same warmth.

"The reason I worship in this congregation is because I feel I have a connection with God," he says. "It's a joyful time."

A haven for start-ups

Storefront churches are incubators for new congregations, especially for African-Americans, Hispanics and immigrants.

"The storefront church was part of the migratory pattern of African-Americans moving from the rural South to Northern urban areas, starting after the Civil War," says the Rev. William Turner of Duke University Divinity School. "As the South has urbanized you see some of the same historical pattern."

The congregations' goal is to get started at the lowest financial cost. Members are frequently newcomers to the area, and the pastors usually hold down regular jobs during the week.

At strip centers in less affluent areas, one or two churches may be scattered among restaurants, furniture stores and nail salons. At the Devon Shield center, near the intersection of Silver Star and Hiwassee roads, most of the units are rented by churches. The floors of the sanctuaries are carpeted, with rows of padded chairs rather than pews. Those congregations that share the same unit divide the prime Sunday hours and alternate weeknights.

Storefront churches tend to have "more Pentecostal, charismatic types of pastors," says the Rev. Edgardo Colon-Emeric of Duke Divinity School. In this country, Latin American immigrants often want to experiment with religion, "with no social consequence from their hometown, where the Catholic Church is dominant," says Colon-Emeric, who has founded two Hispanic congregations in Durham, N.C.

Because the pastor at a storefront often has a day job, Colon-Emeric says, "there is a lower overhead, a cost differential that allows for storefront pastors to have a head start into moving into their own facility."

Indeed, inside the Devon Shield space housing Koinonia Ministries of Central Florida, there is a fragile metal easel with photos of the four-acre site on Gilliam Road where the congregation's new sanctuary is under construction.

"Before you know it, we'll be in the door," says the Rev. James C. Monroe.

Bishop A. L. Helligar, another leader of Koinonia, notes that the Rev. Zachary Tims' New Destiny Christian Center, now an Apopka megachurch, got its start in just such a modest storefront.

Convenience is key

At Devon Shield, six of the 13 congregations save even more money by sharing three storefronts, staggering services. A Haitian food store featuring goat meat and plantains, a barbershop and a day care center are the center's only non-religious tenants.

There are a number of advantages to a storefront location, says the Rev. Mark Koffi, of the Solid Rock Temple of Faith, a Devon Shield congregation of about 50 Haitian immigrants that worships in French and Creole during the week, and in English on Sunday mornings.

"Most of the people live in Pine Hills and don't have to drive too far for a worship service," says Koffi, a native of the West African nation of Ivory Coast. "We still have some empty pews, and that space allows us to evangelize."

The congregation provides counseling and outreach to its members, and is planning a local outreach to the hungry and homeless, Koffi said, as well as supporting a mission in Haiti.

Not all storefront churches are independent, shoestring operations. The Catholic Diocese of Orlando operates St. Faustina Catholic Church in southern Lake County near the Four Corners area.

Since Christmas, the parish has been meeting in what had been Homer's Barbecue Restaurant on U.S. Highway 27. At the height of the winter tourist season, between 1,400 and 1,500 people worship in the converted sanctuary during the weekend.

"It's very warm, very much like an extended family," says Pat Brown, a volunteer and Mass captain. "Volunteers got it all cleaned up and painted. If you walked in the door you'd think it was a very holy place, like a chapel or a cathedral."

At some point, the parish hopes to build a church on 40 nearby acres purchased by the diocese.

But in the end, whether the worshipping place is a storefront, a restaurant or a gloriously appointed sanctuary, it's the spirit that counts.

"It's my family," Gustavo Rocho, 38, says of his fellow worshippers at Iglesia de Cristo de Mi-El at the Devon Shield center. "There's always the presence of God that allows us to be transported closer to him, and feel like we are in a safe haven."

July 2, 2007

The new breed on the right

The Rev. Joel Hunter seems emblematic of a kinder, gentler generation of evangelical leaders.

By Mark I. Pinsky
Orlando Sentinel

The abortion question had to be asked. In a broadcast where the leading Democratic presidential candidates talked about faith, the preachers and CNN producers agreed, it was arguably the single most important issue to America's evangelical voters.

So the Rev. Joel Hunter, pastor of the Longwood congregation at Northland Church and a strong opponent of abortion, volunteered. He acknowledged Hillary Clinton's pro-choice position but asked whether she could envision any common ground with an anti-abortion community that seeks to reduce the number of abortions "to zero."

Clinton leapt at the opportunity to give her standard response that abortion should be "safe, legal and rare. And, by rare, I mean rare."

The nondenominational minister passed up the opportunity to attack a favorite evangelical target—and instead, reached out to an opponent.

"Our focus on arguments and opponents is not working," said Hunter, 59, "and it prevents even incremental progress."

It was vintage Joel Hunter. And that's what made him the natural choice to ask such a tough question on national television. In the past 18 months, he has become emblematic of a new generation of evangelical leaders: younger mega-church pastors putting a kinder, gentler face on a conservative religious movement known for strident and sometimes divisive rhetoric.

Since the death of the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Hunter has become a face in this emerging cohort. He has been cited in front-page articles in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, in op-ed columns in the *Los Angeles Times*, and he has been interviewed by National Public Radio, BBC programs, CNN and ABC's *Nightline*.

Hunter's provocative book—*Right Wing, Wrong Bird: Why the Tactics of the Religious Right Won't Fly With Most Conservative Christians*, which was published by the church—has been picked up by a commercial publisher and will be rereleased next year.

But it will have a different title: *A New Kind of Conservative*.

"Hunter exemplifies the New Guard of American evangelical leaders," said Jeff Sheler, author of *Believers: A Journey of Evangelical America*. "This is a group of successful pastors, mostly, who are more centrist and less partisan than the Old Guard of the Religious Right, and who present a more winsome and moderate face of evangelical Christianity."

A wider range of issues

In Hunter's church, there is no fire and brimstone.

Instead, the message and the presentation are the same: clear, practical, reasonable, upbeat and Bible-based. Hunter's success in the Sunbelt is an anomaly in some ways. He is a funny, folksy Midwesterner in a congregation that is largely Southern. A Hoosier, he is a storyteller as much as a preacher, often using self-deprecating anecdotes.

"I don't want to bore myself," said Hunter, a compact, energetic man with a reflexive, sometimes impish smile. He reads widely and deeply, including publications such as *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs*.

Hunter and others in this new breed of church leaders want to push the evangelical agenda beyond the traditional opposition to abortion, gay marriage and stem-cell research. They endorse those positions but also want to be involved in the national dialogue about immigration, global warming, AIDS, war and peace, the genocide in Darfur, human trafficking and concern for the poor. Hunter also opposes the death penalty.

And, he does not want the Republican Party to take for granted the evangelical vote.

In the 2008 campaign, the conservative Christian vote will be a "jump ball," Hunter said, especially if the choice in the voting booth is between faith and competence. "If it's not possible to have both, you go for competence every time."

Experts disagree whether mega-church pastors such as Hunter, T.D. Jakes and Rick Warren are leading their flocks or simply understanding that many worshippers now appreciate a more toned-down approach.

"Clearly Rick Warren and Joel Hunter are trying to put a new public face on American evangelicalism," said Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Washington, D.C.-based Ethics and Public Policy Center. "That is, a faith that isn't predictably knee-jerk right wing, that wants to look at a wider range of issues."

The Rev. Jim Wallis, of the liberal Sojourners community, said the pastors are responding to "dramatic changes in the evangelical world, especially in the younger generation."

And that generation, more than others, cares about the environment, global warming and matters of war and peace.

Until recently, the national evangelical leadership included those who denied the scientific consensus that global warming exists. They rejected the notion that climate change is primarily a result of human activity and feared that significant remedies would cost too many jobs.

Hunter and his allies reject these notions and have adopted the term "Creation Care" as an evangelical euphemism for environmentalism. "We're approaching it with a biblical agenda rather than a political agenda," he said. "The church should be about replenishing as much as repenting."

This should have been obvious, said the Rev. Fred Morris, former executive director of the Florida Council of Churches, who has long urged Hunter to become involved in environmental issues.

"Anyone who professes to believe in a Creator God has a moral and spiritual obligation to care for and defend God's Creation," Morris said. "I think he is going to get into hotter and hotter water with his evangelical colleagues, but he is willing to do that, because he knows it is a crucial issue."

Making waves

If Hunter ends up in hot water, it won't be the first time.

His most public misstep came in 2006, when he accepted an invitation to lead the Christian Coalition. It soon became apparent that it was a mismatch; the organization built by Pat Robertson was not willing to move toward a broader political agenda.

"The whole thing was a mystery," said Cromartie, of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, "that they asked him, and that he accepted."

In any event, Hunter said, the experience was, for him, "a clear signal that there has to be a new voice for the evangelical community."

Toward that end, Hunter works tirelessly in his church community.

In a typical week, he teaches a nighttime class on Creation Care, meets with a visiting Turkish minister who has been beaten for his beliefs, then swoops into Florida Hospital South to see two ailing parishioners.

His schedule is punctuated by frequent visits across the parking lot to Northland's new 3,200-seat, state-of-the-art sanctuary, which will be dedicated in August. The hall will enable Hunter to move out of the converted skating rink where he now leads worship and reduce the number of weekend services from seven to five.

Those in the 7,000-member congregation seem supportive of their pastor's higher profile.

"It wasn't until we listened to Joel Hunter preaching that we were drawn back into the church," said Marie Carling, 57, of Sanford. "I heard him addressing social needs. He was speaking as a leader of the church about working together with government, with civic organizations."

Still, Hunter acknowledges that not everyone is pleased with his emergence.

"There is some push-back on issues," he said, "from a very small but emotional percentage of the congregation."

And Hunter is not blinded by his growing prominence.

"It could all go away tomorrow, and I wouldn't miss it," he said. "Things are only seductive if you're not satisfied with what you have. I'm satisfied with my church, with my family and with my life. The rest is kind of icing."

Nov. 25, 2007

Piety in partyland

A young Hasidic rabbi plies his faith in the Caribbean playground of Cancún.

By Mark I. Pinsky
Orlando Sentinel

CANCÚN, Mexico—When Orlando businessman Eytan Tayer visits this glitzy Caribbean resort two or three times a year, he sometimes feels he has left his Judaism behind.

"I was always looking for something," he says—a place to observe the Sabbath, or to find kosher food.

No more. The next time Tayer, 37, heads for the Yucatán to check on his clothing stores, he'll have the benefit of a resident rabbi. Mendel Druk, a young emissary of the Hasidic sect known as Chabad-Lubavitch, and his wife, Rachel, have set up shop in the Mexican playground.

It would be hard to find a more incongruous posting for a pious rabbi than Cancún. Druk's Brooklyn, N.Y.-based community is the Jewish version of evangelicals, except that their mission field is focused on wayward, traveling and scattered Jews.

In addition to traditional congregations such as those in Maitland, Daytona Beach and South Orlando, the Lubavitchers literally troll the world for Jews who are separated from their faith.

Tech-savvy but rooted in the 18th century, the bearded rabbis dress like the Amish and—when the spirit moves them—pray with the fervor of Pentecostals. The Hasidim are Judaism's original men in black.

"Our dress code doesn't exactly fit into Cancún," Druk admits.

He wears Chabad's distinctive dark slacks, white shirt and black, broad-brimmed fedora, which he says serves as both a neon sign and a magnet for other Jews. But in deference to the climate, Druk eschews a tie and buttoned collar, as well as the sect's dark wool, serge or gabardine suit jackets.

Chabad emissaries require "a doctorate degree in dedication and devotion," says Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, head of the organization's educational arm, with a chuckle. "This applies to the men and women equally."

For the Druks, the match with Cancún was an arranged marriage, much like their own. After a preliminary site visit, Kotlarsky says, "They were immediately drawn to the people there, as were community members to them. Both sides wanted it; it was a natural fit."

Kotlarsky oversees the 4,000 Chabad families worldwide.

"The entire process is elective; no one is ever told to go anywhere," he says. "The very process that a couple goes through—looking for the right place, pairing with a community looking for its best match, ensures that the right couples are posted to the most appropriate destinations and that they have the inner strength to contend with the unique challenges they know they will face."

Despite the resort environment, Druk is no beach-combing, barefoot rabbi. He doesn't try to dispense advice and spiritual counseling amid barely dressed sun worshipers.

"We have to be careful to make our honest judgment not to compromise our Torah standards," he says. "Believe me—they don't want me on the beach."

For the same reason, Druk prefers to do his spiritual cruising near the hotel check-in counter, rather than around the pool.

"I go to the lobby," he says. "A fool I'm not."

'Tourists find you'

With their only advertising a Web site (jewishcancun.com) and word of mouth, the Druks' condo and ad hoc worship center at the foot of Cancún's hotel zone is already drawing wandering Jews.

"Tourists find you whenever they need you," says Rachel, 23.

From 15 people the first week they arrived last fall, their free, Friday evening meals and services now draw two to three times that many, requiring an imminent move to a new, larger location. Vacationing students often hear about the center and just walk up and knock on the door. Some weeks, Rachel bakes 40 loaves of challah bread for Sabbath guests.

"The only kosher bakery is in this house," says Mendel, 25, proudly. "We're partners in this endeavor."

And their ministry is not confined to Cancún, where they provide pastoral care, sometimes on an emergency basis. Both the rabbi and his wife give classes and conduct services for small communities of Jews on Isla Mujeres, Cozumel and in Playa del Carmen.

Druk, who is still learning Spanish, admits that in many ways he is a kind of gefilte fish out of water in this promised land of pleasure seekers. But the Detroit native—and veteran of relief efforts in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and in Southeast Asia after the 2002 tsunami—is undaunted.

One of the challenges is finding food his family can eat, products that adhere to Judaism's dietary laws. But even here, God seems to work in mysterious ways.

Big box food retailers in Cancún City—where the Druks shop for kosher packaged food, including salami and hot dogs from Mexico City—are also a productive mission field.

"Costco is a good place to meet Jews," Mendel says.

The couple has helped, sometimes on short notice, at weddings, bar mitzvahs and anniversary celebrations at hotels. Once, in addition to her challahs, Rachel baked a large cake for the festivities. At another, they loaned the group their Torah scroll.

Last fall, when he rented a meeting room at the Cancún Hilton, Druk prepared for 150 worshippers for the Jewish High Holidays. More than 500 showed up, requiring him to rent a second hall, with an overflow in the corridors.

"You'd never expect Cancún would be a destination for experiencing Rosh Hashana," he says.

Hanukkah, Judaism's eight-day Festival of Lights, arrives early this year—at sundown Dec. 4—and finishes well before the Christmas tourist rush. But for any visitors wishing to observe the holiday while vacationing in the Yucatán, including those on cruise ships, Druk will have 500 celebration kits—candles, lightweight menorahs and blessing booklets.

For the holiday, Druk also plans to raise the Jewish profile by lighting a large, metal menorah in one of the tonier shopping centers in the hotel zone. And, he has built a wooden menorah to mount atop his car for the holiday.

Return visits

At home in Central Florida, Tayer sometimes attends services at Chabad of South Orlando, an outreach center near Universal Studios Orlando that also welcomes Jewish tourists.

When he travels for business in places like Miami and Las Vegas, he seeks out Chabad centers.

And now, when he returns to Cancún, Tayer will have another place to worship. He has promised Druk he will start visiting the Chabad center and predicts many others will, too: "If people know about the center, they will go there."