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Ala. commune head has new project despite past

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By **JAY REEVES**
Associated Press

Published: Friday, April 9, 2010 9:33 AM MST

EMELLE, Ala. — Pentecostal preacher Luke Edwards is the shepherd of a forlorn flock: For years his disciples have traveled the nation begging amid allegations of abuse and ruinous mismanagement.

Five youngsters have died in fires at his west Alabama commune, the Holyland, where parents and youngsters are separated for weeks at a time. The state has described the education provided at the commune's church-based school as substandard; Edwards' one-time followers tell of beatings and sexual misconduct by male elders.

Edwards, 84, has outlasted all the criticism and troubles, and an Associated Press review found he is involved in a new multimillion-dollar plan that could bring even more young people into his fold — a prospect that worries one-time followers now living on their own.

Edwards preaches self-sufficiency, yet former members say his disciples bring in thousands of dollars daily panhandling outside stores in the name of abused children. Those under his care get free rent yet little of the money. If they leave, they depart virtually penniless.

Now he is part of a project to build a residential school for troubled high-schoolers on hundreds of acres of cow pasture and forest in Sumter County just east of the Mississippi line. The goal is to bring prison-bound youth from churches and cities all over the nation to Edwards' corner of west Alabama.

Edwards is among the founders of Greentown-USA, envisioned as a sprawling complex that is supposed to open in 2012. Plans include a private school with dormitories, a gym, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a recording studio, laboratories and a chapel for worship.

Edwards, who is black, advocates black economic empowerment and self-help. Yet food stamps provided the seed money for his operation in the mid-'70s, and disenchanted believers tell of working like slaves in run-down businesses controlled by Edwards, only to leave with nothing.

The group's history has not deterred Donald R. Evans Sr., an 82-year-old military retiree from Cedar Hill, Texas, who envisioned Greentown-USA and is leading the project.

Evans said Edwards is donating 800 acres of land but will have no other involvement, a role that Edwards' critics doubt.

"He just dropped it on my shoulders," said Evans, who has been involved in prison ministries for years.

Evans said he heard of Edwards' work and stopped in for a visit seven or eight years ago. He toured a



Dave Martin/Associated Press (1997), Luke Edwards, 84, is part of a project to build a residential school in Alabama for troubled high schoolers on what is now hundreds of acres of cow pasture and forest in Sumter County, just east of the Mississippi line. The goal is to bring prison-bound youth from churches and cities all over the nation to Edwards' corner of west Alabama.

neighborhood consisting of a church and nearly two dozen brick homes built by Edwards in the Greene County town of Eutaw, where many of his followers live rent-free. Conditions there are better than at the Holyland, located in another county.

Evans was impressed with what he saw, so a friendship began.

The Web site of Edwards' main organization, Reach Inc., confirms his involvement with Greentown-USA. But, over a two-month period, neither Edwards nor top aides responded to messages from The Associated Press seeking comment about the project.

Evans said he has no reason to doubt Edwards' promises, although no deeds have been signed over officially transferring 800 acres to Greentown-USA. Still, Evans plans by 2012 to be taking in troubled teens referred by churches and groups working with at-risk youth. He trusts Edwards, even if others are doubters.

Kelissa Bass can't imagine anything worse than youngsters moving to an operation that has anything to do with Luke Edwards. She spent 13 years at Edwards' commune and is still in counseling years later.

Bass says she fought off three rape attempts by men who worked under Edwards and remembers watching boys walk out of closed rooms with their backsides bloodied from beatings.

She can't forget the day in 1998 four preschoolers died in a fire that gutted the crowded dormitory where they lived away from their parents. Years before that, a 2-year-old girl died in a blaze at the Holyland.

"From my memories concerning sexual, mental and physical abuses and even what I know about the deaths that happened there, I'm not sure if my stories would be helpful in him receiving any monies," said Bass, 42, who runs a hair salon in Ypsilanti, Mich. Many of Edwards' former followers have settled in the area, where some of his relatives also live.

Bass is among a group of former Holyland residents who have posted their personal stories on two new Facebook pages that include allegations of slave-like labor, beatings, rapes and incest at the Holyland. Each page includes dozens of former residents as members.

One of the pages — created as a way for one-time residents to share their experiences under Edwards' wings — includes warnings and jokes about the idea of a "new Holyland," Greentown.

Among those worried about the project is Brenda Garris, a daughter of Edwards who has been among his most vocal critics for years. She doesn't believe that Edwards would give away land for Greentown-USA without a plan to be in charge.

"My daddy won't be involved with anything he can't control completely," Garris said.

Evans doesn't yet know how much his plans will cost, and he acknowledges the economy isn't helping. Still, he says, surveying, preliminary engineering work and site planning already are under way; his Web site includes a sketch of a gleaming, modern campus.

"It's absolutely in the millions," he said.

Evans is raising funds through churches and an Internet site, and Edwards is known for raising vast sums with his panhandling operation, called "The Route."

Largely through storefront begging by members who travel the nation in vans, Edwards' organization amassed assets that were worth more than \$10 million a decade ago. The group's holdings included three motels, a truck stop, several stores, a meat packing plant, thousands of acres of land and homes.

Records reviewed by AP show much of that empire is under new ownership, however, after financial problems including property abandonment and unpaid taxes. Still, companies controlled by Edwards' followers control about 1,050 acres in Sumter County, more than enough land for Greentown-USA.

Evans says he has read news stories about Edwards' practices and some of his group's questionable dealings, but he trusts the old preacher to give him deeds for the land.

Still, he is working with an attorney, just in case problems crop up.

"I am going into this with my eyes wide open," said Evans.

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