

In New York, Gospel Resounds in African Tongues

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Every Sunday, in more than 100 churches across New York City, pastors preach the Gospel in languages like Ibo, Twi and Ga. Conga drums drive songs of praise. Swaths of kente cloth cover bodies swaying in the pews.

An explosion of African immigrant churches in the past 15 years has helped reshape religious worship in the city. The surge is creating oases of Christian faith for newcomers from Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, Ethiopia and other countries and fueling an evangelical movement along the province of Latinos and African-Americans.

"They're having an impact beyond the African church," said Tony Carnes, a sociologist of religion and a co-editor of "New York Glory: Religions in the City."

"The African churches are bringing new vitality and new ways of doing things to African-American and other churches," he added.

As membership increases, the churches are growing more visible in their neighborhoods. "People walk in and find community—friendly, African hospitality," Mr. Carnes said. "And second, there's this big emphasis on spiritual power in their services." As African churches attract increasing numbers of white worshipers, they can serve as a bridge between races, he added.

In some cases, churches founded by white missionaries during the colonial conquest of 19th-century Africa are sending their own missionaries here. Many of the churches have close ties to denominations back home and use the same hymnals and prayer books. They import pastors or send them home to the mother church for training.

The movement in the United States has been lightly chronicled, but it is now drawing the interest of scholars of religion. Mark Gornik, a Presbyterian minister, is writing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh on New York's African churches.

"Africans are taking their faith to Africans," he said, adding that in the city alone, he has counted at least 110 African immigrant congregations that have sprouted since the late 1980's.

They have names like the Apostolic Church of Ghana, Deeper Life Bible Church (Nigeria), Emmanuel Worship

Center International (Ethiopian) and the Lighthouse Church of Ghana.

"What's happening in African churches is largely at the beginning," Mr. Gornik said. "They're very responsive to human needs. It is a home away from home for people."

That is exactly how Daniel Berkoh, 53, a member of the Church of the Pentecost in the Williamsbridge section of the Bronx, sees it. "It's like being among my people," he said during a Palm Sunday service. "It makes me feel as if I'm back home in Ghana. If I go to any of the other churches, I won't see this."

Denominations have been multiplying. For example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a global Pentecostal movement based in Nigeria, came to New York in 1995 and now has 14 branches in the city, said the Rev. Nimi Wariboko, the pastor of a congregation in Brooklyn.

African churches can serve as a bridge between races.

The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, its roots planted by Swiss missionaries 175 years ago, has two outposts in the Bronx, one in Harlem and one in Brooklyn. The Celestial Church of Christ, founded in Benin but with a largely Nigerian membership, lists 12 New York City branches on its Web site.

Dozens of other independent congregations have popped up because individual African pastors received the call. African congregations also coalesce within mainline churches like the Methodist and Roman Catholic Churches.

But the most rapid expansion has come from Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity, which has surged in Africa and in other parts of the developing world. That energy has found an ignition point in a city where a tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism intersects with large-scale immigration.

Most of the African congregations are from Nigeria and Ghana, sub-Saharan Africa's largest contributors of immigrants. But there are growing numbers of other ethnic congregations.

According to census figures, New York's African population doubled from 1980 to 1990, and again before 2000, when

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95,000 African-born people were counted. The number is probably higher because the count does not include more recent arrivals and many illegal immigrants.

The population is expected to grow even more this decade, said Peter Lobo, the deputy director of the population division of the Department of City Planning, who characterized the new arrivals as “overwhelmingly highly educated and professional.”

On Palm Sunday, about 500 worshipers filled the main sanctuary of the Church of the Pentecost. The left-most section of chairs was filled by men; women dominated the right section, with some mixing in the middle section. In Ghana, the separation would be strict, but here, church elders make concessions.

The women, wearing traditional African dresses and head wraps, were a riot of color—green, yellow, black and purple. The congregation sang hymns with the vibratoless astringency of African choruses. A band kept them rocking with a reggae-gospel beat. Voices quickly rose in a cacophony of prayer and speaking in tongues.

As the noise diminished, one voice arose. A woman stood, while the others sat with their eyes closed and heads bowed. She began to pour out words, prophesying in Twi, a major language of Ghana. “Those living in sin should repent or else God will bring his wrath upon them!” a worshiper translated for a visitor.

More hymns in Twi followed, and Pastor David Tekper’s sermon. An interpreter near the altar rendered it into English, although Mr. Tekper held an English service earlier, in one example of how his church is trying to reach out to others.

“Jesus has done his work on the cross,” he preached. “He has delivered you. He has saved you.” After each phrase, the congregation roared back with, “Wagye wo” (You have been saved).

Before the service, Mr. Tekper and Apostle Albert Amoah, leader of the Church of the Pentecost in the United States, talked about their efforts toward the church’s growth. The church has five branches in New York and on Long Island and at least 57 in a dozen districts around the nation.

It is the largest Pentecostal denomination in Ghana, Mr. Tekper and Mr. Amoah said. The American wing was started in the Bronx in 1986 by a handful of immigrants as an informal prayer group.

Like many Pentecostal churches, it is trying to reach beyond ethnic borders.

“We also need to attract much more of the Americans,” Mr. Amoah said. “The church is universal. The kingdom is transcultural, transethnic.”

Mr. Tekper acknowledged that progress had been slow. Maybe the services should be shorter than the usual three or four hours, he mused, or maybe African dress should be discouraged. Mr. Amoah added, “But we need to be careful to not cut off our own people.”

Small churches, too, are trying to bring in non-Africans.

“When I was called, God didn’t tell me to make it an African church,” said the Rev. Eddie Okyere, pastor of the Miracle

Church of Christ in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. Mr. Okyere, who was a postal worker in Ghana, came to the United States and attended a Brooklyn branch of the Full Gospel Bible Institute while working as a dietary assistant. He was ordained in 1990 and opened his church four years later.

His congregation of 120 includes Africans, white Americans, Haitians and Caribbean natives. “Jesus didn’t come from one particular group,” he said.

The Full Gospel Believers’ Church of Harlem, whose congregation is mainly from the Ivory Coast, sends preachers to the streets to bring people into its sanctuary on First Avenue and 120th Street. It also runs a food pantry. Its pastor, Victor Nimba, began preaching in his native Abidjan. “My heart was burning for having my ministry over here in America,” he said.

Many African churches are pushing roots down deeply, either by affiliating with national denominations, like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or joining worldwide movements, said Moses Biney, pastor of a Presbyterian Church of Ghana congregation in the Bronx and a doctoral candidate at Princeton Theological Seminary.

So-called African independent churches, which are indigenous to the countries and incorporate local practices, export themselves; missionary-fostered churches that grow to strength on their own preserve Western elements, like elders who govern the church, general assemblies and some liturgy and hymns.

“These churches don’t start as a way of evangelizing or proselytizing,” Mr. Biney said. “They start as a way of forming communities and dealing with new conditions. Then they begin to focus on other people.”

The new churches display a striking variety of worship styles and histories, and often have strict codes of behavior: no smoking, no drinking, no eating of pork or “crawling animals,” no lipstick in church. They help nurture African customs like naming ceremonies.

At the Christ Apostolic Church in Brooklyn, congregants bring jugs of water to be blessed by the pastor, Abraham Oyedige, a respected leader referred to as “Daddy,” said Dale Irvin, the academic dean and professor of world Christianity at New York Theological Seminary. Members drink or wash with the water throughout the week before special occasions, for informal blessings, or for illness. “The water becomes a very powerful healing symbol,” Professor Irvin said.

These churches create a cultural refuge, he said. “They are a way for Africans to pass on to their children their African values,” particularly for African immigrants who see their children quickly assimilating into African-American culture.

Some churches also provide an array of social services, like help with immigration problems, jobs and health counseling.

Mr. Wariboko, the Redeemed Christian Church minister, said the “African world view,” in which the spiritual world can hold sway over the physical world, tallied closely to the world view of the Bible.

In this view, it also meshes well with the exuberant worship style of Pentecostalism, marked by an emphasis on conver-

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sion, the power of the Holy Spirit, close attention to the Bible and gifts like the ability to prophesy, speak in tongues and heal.

For Kwasi Ohene, 47, belonging to the Presbyterian Church of Ghana congregation in Harlem lets him strike a cultural balance. "You live in America, and also you live in Ghana," he said. His father-in-law died recently, and the congregation is helping to pay for the body's return to Ghana, where tradition says

burial should take place. "Since we are from the same place, people understand that," he said.

As Mr. Ohene spoke in Mount Morris Ascension Church on West 122nd Street, where his church rents space, Gashishie Aguedze waited outside for the services to end. Spread on the sidewalk were rows of fat yams from Ghana, tins of Africa Queen-brand mackerel and red palm oil for cooking. He fully expected them to sell out.

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