

Coming to America

Some of the nation's fastest-growing churches aren't English-speaking. Immigrants are bringing their vibrant faith to the United States.

Just a few miles from the nation's capital, hundreds of Nigerian Christians gather for worship at Jesus House, a lively congregation in Silver Spring, Maryland, that focuses its ministry on the needs of Nigerian immigrants. When worship begins here, the resultant experience can last for hours.

Visitors who join in the jubilant, African-style singing and dancing may feel as though they have been transported to Lagos, Port Harcourt or Abuja—Nigerian cities where many of those assembled once lived.

"The way we pray is different," says pastor Ghandi Olaoye, who planted the church as a mission of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a fast-growing Nigerian denomination. "Prayer to us is pouring out your heart to God. We stay at prayer meetings for six to seven hours. It's not a casual thing."

In case you haven't noticed, Nigerians are coming to America. So are Koreans, Chinese, Indonesians, Russians and Latinos. And many are bringing a raw, radical faith in Jesus.

It's a faith that has been tested in adversity. A faith that expects New Testament miracles.

"We must believe God for basic things," says Olaoye, explaining why Nigerian immigrants are so passionate for God.

Indeed, the Anglo-American church in the United States has much to learn from immigrant and ethnic communities, the fastest-growing segment of our population. Hispanics, Africans, Asians and Middle Easterners of many nationalities are influencing American culture and religious life.

These believers cling to a spiritual simplicity. Their congregations radiate passion for evangelism and prayer. And their leaders are committed to evangelizing an unlikely mission field: the United States.

An Immigrant Wave

Pentecostal and evangelical denominations, as well as independent churches, are all experiencing a surge in immigrant and ethnic church growth and new church plants. Ethnic minorities represent 34 percent of the Assemblies of God's membership. They are the fastest-growing segment of the denomination, which numbers 2.8 million adherents in the U.S.

Based in Missouri—and known for being predominantly white—the Assemblies of God (AG) has added more than 150,000 new ethnic members in the last three years. And AG leaders recently established a dialogue with a network of 450 Slavic Pentecostal churches, through which they share resources and assist in church loans.

In December the AG also set up the Office of Hispanic Relations, headed by Efraim Espinoza, a 20-year denominational veteran and well-known leader among Hispanic Christians. The new department serves as a bridge to the more than 1,800 Spanish-language AG churches.

“There are language and cultural barriers to clear communication,” Espinoza says. “I want this office to bridge those barriers and create an environment that is not intimidating but instead known for its friendly cooperation, care and ability to help.”

Ethnic minorities account for more than 30 positions in the AG’s executive and general presbytery. “Through the spiritual dynamics involved, we recognize a releasing of God’s blessing,” says Scott Temple, director of AG Intercultural Ministries. “We do not want to limit or label anybody based on their ethnicity. God commands us to bless the aliens in our midst, and we will be blessed.”

The Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) reports a similar trend. About 20 percent of the denomination’s members in the U.S. and Canada represent ethnic minorities who worship in 3,000 churches. “This group represents the fastest-growing segment of our church,” says Larry J. Timmerman, director of International Evangelism and Home Missions. “They have a contagious fever and a passion to do something they have never done before.”

“Today Christians in ethnic churches don’t rely on doctrinal minutiae, but a passionate worship experience based on a revelation of who God is, and who we are called to be in His Word,” says Arthur Gray, vice president of Urban and Multicultural Ministries for the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel in Los Angeles. About 18 percent of the Foursquare Church’s 1,800 congregations are ethnic. Many of these churches have been planted by foreign-born pastors serving as missionaries to America.

Gray says foreign-born and ethnic minorities bring a wave of

unrestrained, exuberant worship from their countries. For some, their freedom in worship developed because they lived under repressive governments.

More than 7,000 ethnic churches account for 17 percent of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and represent its fastest-growing segment. The ethnic breakdown is 6 percent African-American, 6 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian and 2 percent other. Two-thirds of the more than 1,700 SBC churches planted in 2004 were ethnic congregations.

New York, California and Washington, D.C., are home to many diverse immigrant communities. New York City claimed 2.9 million foreign-born residents in 2000, about 36 percent of its 8.1 million residents. Today about 400,000 Russian Jews and 500,000 Koreans call New York home, as do thousands of Hispanics, Chinese, Africans, Jamaicans, Indians and Pakistanis.

“There has been a steady and solid growth in the number of ethnic churches being birthed in New York City,” said Duane Durst, superintendent of the AG’s New York district. “Also the majority of existing churches in New York City have no ethnic majority. I pastored a church in Queens County that had 42 nations represented.”

Miracles in church planting and conversions seem to chase every immigrant and ethnic church. Juri Popov pastors the House of Peace, an independent, 600-member Russian Pentecostal congregation in the Coney Island area of Brooklyn. Hoping to reach Russian Jews, Popov began with only a handful of people in his apartment after emigrating from Estonia in 1989.

"From the beginning I prayed, 'How should I do this?'" Popov said.

He says God gave him Ephesians 2:14-15 as a promise that he would reach the large transient Jewish community in Coney Island. "Jesus is our peace," he says. "We are one in Him. Everybody feels like home in our church, Jews and non-Jews."

In 2005 Popov reported more than 3,000 decisions for Christ, many made by atheists. "Everyone saved is a miracle," he says.

Asian Explosion

God is moving among Koreans too. Nam Soo Kim, senior pastor of the AG Full Gospel New York Church in Flushing, New York, never dreamed of leading a 3,000-member urban ministry with a global outreach. He grew up in a devout Buddhist home near Seoul, South Korea, before becoming a born-again Christian under David Yonggi Cho's ministry.

"The Holy Spirit revealed that Christ died for me," he told Charisma. "I accepted Him as my personal Savior."

Kim landed in Manhattan in 1977 after serving churches in Korea, South Vietnam and Germany. He first rented space in another church in Manhattan before purchasing and renovating a nine-story, 140,000-square-foot office building in Flushing in 1993.

Full Gospel, one of 450 Korean churches in the metropolitan New York City area, of which 50 percent are Pentecostal, is a lighthouse for the region.

Koreans carry their culture, their fears, their hopes and their dreams to America. Many still carry sadness from a heritage of attacks by foreign invaders. Korean Christians were martyred by the Japanese during World War II and later by communists in North Korea.

Some Koreans endure grueling schedules, working in convenience stores and retail shops seven days a week or in other businesses so their children will have better lives. Others work as doctors, bankers, engineers and scientists. Billy Sim, 32, works every day in financial planning and real estate. He says Full Gospel church helps strengthen his walk with Christ. "It has a real feel of community," he says.

About 49 percent of Koreans living in the United States identify themselves as Christians, 47 percent are Buddhist and the rest follow Confucianism and folk religions. Through the ministry of Full Gospel church, one-on-one evangelism results in 200 water baptisms annually.

Mija Cho, a Buddhist for 40 years, had begun to question her beliefs. Health and family problems led her to accept an invitation to attend Full Gospel, where she accepted Christ. Because of Cho's diabetes, her eyesight was fading.

"I lost almost all of my eyesight," she says. "I couldn't see."

She says that during a church retreat last August she experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit. "I felt my eyesight returning in one eye," she said. "I see beautiful things and my 8-year-old granddaughter. Jesus is alive to me. I can hear His voice."

The church has expanded its facilities several times and offers Bible studies, senior-citizen social services, a medical clinic, counseling, youth meetings, seminary classes and a school. The church sponsors radio and TV programs and Christian schools in Central America and Africa. Several hundred believers gather early six mornings a week, bathing church ministries in fervent prayer.

Nam Soo Kim focuses on building a family of believers. "Everybody who belongs to this church, we are family," he says.

He encourages his staff to minister with a servant's heart. "So many people need help spiritually, emotionally and physically," he says. "We are ready to help. We serve."

Not far from Full Gospel, in Ozone Park, New York, Pervez Khokhar planted Pillar of Truth Assembly of God to reach the hundreds of thousands of Pakistani and Indian Muslims living in the area. He still works part time as a banker but hopes to minister full time soon.

Khokhar wins converts through friendship evangelism. He says Pakistanis readily accept hospitality and loving concern for their problems. "God is able to deliver situations like job difficulties, sickness and family problems," Khokhar says. "New converts are committed 100 percent. They are not convenient Christians."

The Latino Miracle

The Hispanic community has been experiencing an outpouring of the Holy Spirit for many years. Among the nation's 43 million

Hispanics, 23 percent (9.8 million) are evangelicals, says Jesse Miranda, director of the Center for Urban Studies and Hispanic Leadership at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California. About 60 percent to 70 percent of evangelical Hispanics are Pentecostals, he estimates.

Many foreign-born Hispanics come to the U.S. to escape poverty. They hope for a better life and many of them seek out the church, which has played a vital role in their heritage. They gravitate to Pentecostal and charismatic churches because of the fervent, passionate worship.

Miranda believes that Hispanics remain true to the core values of the gospel and remind us of what should define the Anglo-American church—prayer vigils, fasting and the moving of the Holy Spirit. “Immigrants are more in tune with the gifts of the Spirit,” he says.

Templo Calvario is one of the largest Hispanic congregations in America. Total Sunday attendance at the AG congregation hovers around 15,000 at the mother church in Santa Ana, California, and there are 74 satellite groups in four states.

“We are people of passion,” says pastor Daniel De Leon. “We go all the way. Hispanics are known for their prayer life against spiritual warfare. I encourage our people to dream of a better life about ministry and reach the world for Christ.”

Sal Sabino, a native of the Dominican Republic and an ex-convict, launched Heavenly Vision Christian Center in Bronx, New York, in 1990 with eight believers after he started preaching on the streets. About 65 percent of his 3,000-member congregation comes from the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica,

Honduras and Ecuador.

The independent church has blossomed through 300 cell groups. "We go into homes and gather families," he says. "Hispanics are into cell groups. It's cultural. Cell groups motivate them to bring friends and family members."

African immigrants exude a similar spiritual passion. The Washington, D.C., area is a hotbed of African congregations from Nigeria and Ethiopia. Hanfere Aligaz, pastor of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Washington, D.C., fled the communist government in Ethiopia in 1981 and founded the church a year later. Today the congregation has 2,500 members—and they are aggressively seeking to reach the 85,000 Ethiopians living in the Washington area.

Ghandi Olaoye's Jesus House church is one of 200 Nigerian congregations in Washington, D.C., and nearby Maryland suburbs. He ministers to his 2,000 members by preaching about God's ability to restore and their need to maximize their potential in Him. "They can be what God wants them to be," he says.

Though many immigrants from Nigeria serve as taxi drivers or store clerks, the church provides computer classes and other vocational training. Olaoye says his congregants want to grow professionally so they can make an impact on society.

"We have a deeper sense that God is all and all," he says. "In Nigeria people wake up worrying about basic needs like electricity, water and finding transportation to work. It makes you have a closer relationship to God. We don't have money or resources, so we spend time praying." This sense of

urgency fuels his church.

Olaoye, Aligaz and other immigrant pastors embody the kind of determination that marks the revivals occurring in Africa, Latin America and Asia. They invite the moving of the Holy Spirit and travail all night in their prayer meetings.

Could it be that God is bringing these people to our nation to evangelize our postmodern culture? Aligaz admits that is his goal.

“We pray for America,” the Ethiopian pastor says. “We love America. We believe that one of the reasons we came here is to pray for America and share Christ.”

Peter K. Johnson is a freelance writer based in suburban New York City.

The traditional Christianity of the West is about to be jolted by its counterpart from the developing world. In the coming decade we can expect churches in the United States to reflect the colors of the nations. As more and more immigrants are venturing to this country, an array of multicultural ministries are preparing to reach them—bringing their own languages, worship styles and unique outreach strategies.

Diverse Voices

These young leaders from varied ethnic backgrounds represent the future of Pentecostalism in the United States.

Paul Tan, Los Angeles
From Indonesia

Paul Tan was an international student at the University of California/Irvine when he met Christ in the late 1970s. He immediately got involved in student ministry and soon developed a network of churches aimed at meeting the unique spiritual needs of Indonesian immigrants. Today, his City Blessing Church in Los Angeles has 600 members, and Tan has also started 23 other City Blessing churches in the United States along with 50 churches back home in Indonesia.

“I tell my members that Moses, Joseph and Daniel all had a unique advantage because of the exposure to two cultures,” says Tan, who is 47. “I tell them that they can become a blessing to America even though they are from another nation.”

These immigrants are not looking for a handout. In fact, City Blessing churches are providing food, shoes, construction supplies and medical equipment to 13 nations. They also have funneled a huge amount of aid to displaced families in Banda Aceh, the region of Indonesia hardest hit by the 2004 Asian tsunami.

Fernando & Sylvia Pinto,
Orlando, Florida
From Brazil

Official U.S. Census statistics say there are only 212,000 Brazilians in the United States, but it is widely known that the number may be as high as 1.2 million. Many of these Brazilians come to central Florida, where pastors Fernando and Sylvia Pinto offer a unique church that caters to the

Portuguese-speaking community.

Trained for ministry in Connecticut, the Pintos pioneered Harvest Ministries in 2001 near Orlando's tourist attractions. Like most evangelical churches in Brazil, the church is distinctively Pentecostal. The congregation meets on Sunday nights because Brazilians prefer to spend Sunday mornings with their families.

Fernando, 47, says reaching Brazilians is a challenge, and he spends much of his time helping people overcome issues such as drug addiction and domestic abuse. "Brazilians who come to the U.S. and who do not know Christ are dealing with a spirit of immorality that is rampant in Brazil," Pinto says. "They are going to discos looking for meaning. They are spiritually hungry, but reaching them is hard work."

**Peter & Mildred DeJesus,
Dallas
From Puerto Rico**

Puerto Ricans who helped pastor a church in New York City, Peter and Mildred DeJesus now live in Dallas, one of the most Hispanic cities in the nation. Their inner-city church, The Oaks Fellowship, affiliated with the Assemblies of God, attracts a growing number of Spanish-speaking congregants from Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia and Chile.

The DeJesuses' dream is to harness the passion of Hispanic believers and channel their energy into worship and evangelism. Peter believes that Hispanics will play a huge role in the spiritual transformation of the United States—partly because the social marginalization of Hispanics

has fueled a desire in them to make a big difference in their new homeland.

“I believe the body of Christ in this country is hungry and thirsty for the fiery passion that burns within the heart of Hispanic people,” says Peter, who is 32. “Dallas will experience this move of God and will lead other cities in the same experience.”

**Frank & Mary Ofosu-Appiah,
Atlanta
From Ghana**

A veteran church-planter with congregations in the United Kingdom, Germany and Ghana, Frank Ofosu-Appiah planted his first American church in the Atlanta area five years ago. Today, with 800 members, All Nations Church attracts immigrants from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya, Zambia, Congo, Togo, South Africa and the Ivory Coast—along with many African-Americans who are Georgia natives.

Ofosu-Appiah believes his mission is to train leaders who will eventually heal nations in Africa that have been crippled by violence and poverty. “Africa’s problem is a leadership problem,” the 48-year-old pastor says. “God brought African immigrants here to America to learn leadership skills so that we can export those back to Africa.”

The pastor, who was born in Ghana, blends contemporary Western-style praise with lively African rhythms during Sunday worship services. He emphasizes a multicultural experience because he doesn’t want to build an exclusively Ghanaian church. Says Ofosu-Appiah: “I am proud to be a Ghanaian, but

our vision here is much bigger than just one country.”

**Shaddy Soliman,
Orlando, Florida
From Egypt**

Born and raised in Egypt, the son of a pastor, Shaddy Soliman believes that a powerful movement of the Holy Spirit is brewing in the Middle East, and he does not want Arabs who live in the United States to miss that wave of spiritual blessing.

“Our vision is to see the Spirit of God come into the dry bones and form a mighty army for the Lord,” says Soliman, 36. He started Orlando Arabic Church in 2001, just one month after 9/11. His congregation is 60 percent Egyptian but also includes members from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Sudan, Iraq and Israel.

“It is God’s heart for His truth to penetrate the hearts of the most isolated people,” says Soliman, noting that there are 8 million Arabs living in the United States today. Soliman is now preparing to air his church services on Alkarma TV, a new satellite network that is reaching all of North America with Arabic-language broadcasts.

**Nathaniel Saingbe,
Bridgeport, Connecticut
From Nigeria**

A lawyer trained in Nigeria, Nathaniel Saingbe came to the United States in 1997 and eventually planted Dominion Chapel in Bridgeport. Because his church of 120 members is not able

to fully support him yet, he works as a realtor during the week while preaching on Sundays, leading prayer meetings on Tuesdays and ministering to the needs of his congregation 24 hours a day.

Dominion Chapel is part of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, one of the world's fastest-growing denominations. Based in Nigeria, Redeemed currently oversees more than 250 congregations in North America. Most of them attract Nigerian immigrants.

Saingbe, 39, says Redeemed ministers come to this country to evangelize, not to transport Nigerian culture. Sunday worship is not a rehash of African songs but rather a sound designed to reach people on this side of the Atlantic. "We have adapted to American culture," Saingbe says. "The needs in this country are different. Evangelism here must be done differently than in Nigeria."

**Sergio & Kathy Scataglini,
South Bend, Indiana
From Argentina**

Argentine evangelist Sergio Scataglini had plenty of ministry opportunities in his own country, including a large church in the city of La Plata. But he put that aside in the year 2000 and moved his family to Indiana, where he now considers himself a cross-cultural missionary.

"It is a new day," the 48-year-old revivalist says when describing the movement of the Holy Spirit in the United States. "Things are changing so quickly. Now [Latin Americans] are coming to the States as missionaries. God is using us to

come alongside the nationals and help.”

Scataglini is pioneering a new ministry concept that many Americans have yet to grasp: Internet churches. Through his ComunioNet strategy, he conducts multiple worship services each week via live computer connections. The churches are in Argentina, Spain, Switzerland, Peru and several U.S. locations, and are often bilingual. Recently he also conducted a wedding and a baptism ceremony via the Internet.

“There is no more time to waste,” says Scataglini, whose American wife, Kathy, works alongside him to establish new cell churches. They believe their method of church-planting is not only cost-effective but also will spread the gospel quickly—at a time when America is threatened by a moral crisis.

“We sense an impending sense of risk in the United States,” Sergio says. “We face the risk of war and terrorist attacks. We want to be a part of the return to moral values.”

J. Lee Grady

America's Ethnic Stew

The U.S. Census Bureau says the nation's foreign-born population topped 34 million in 2004, accounting for 12 percent of the total U.S. population. Of this group, 53 percent were born in Latin America, 25 percent in Asia, 14 percent in Europe, and the remaining 8 percent in other regions such as Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. By 2045 the number of Asians and Hispanics in America is expected to triple. And by 2050 Anglo-Americans are projected to be a minority.

Second-generation Americans (people who have one or both parents from a foreign country) numbered 30.4 million in 2004, or 11 percent of the U.S. population.

A research study conducted by the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture reported: "Immigrants are a potential source of moral renewal at a challenging moment in U.S. history. Anchored in community, immigrants know something about extended family ties, the value of community, and the importance of preserving a cultural heritage while contributing to the new society."

In a recent research study, The Barna Group reported that 29 percent of Hispanics who were polled claimed they were born-again Christians, compared to 12 percent of Asians, 47 percent of blacks and 41 percent of whites.