

Ethiopian Slips Communist Grip To Pastor U.S. Church

Hanfere Aligaz arrived nearly penniless in the U.S. but now heads a thriving church in the nation's capital

A Christian who fled communist Ethiopia in 1981 and arrived in the United States with his family of five and only \$140 between them now pastors the largest U.S. congregation for Ethiopians, a flock of almost 2,000 of his former countrymen.

Hanfere Aligaz founded the Evangelical Ethiopian Church of Washington, D.C., with 15 people one year after he and his wife and their four children defected from their communist-run homeland. Today his congregation is an estimated 99 percent Ethiopian.

The church also ministers to Ethiopians from surrounding areas in Virginia and Maryland. More than 125 weekly home Bible study groups provide a sense of community for church members. Evangelistic teams preach the gospel on the streets and have touched the lives of alcoholics, drug addicts and the homeless with their message.

Yet, Aligaz's sphere of ministry as a relative newcomer to foreign shores doesn't altogether surprise him. He said it was in obedience to a call from God to start a church specifically in Washington that he first sought a way for himself and his family to defect from the communist Ethiopia of 21 years ago.

When Aligaz became a Christian in 1977 he was an active member of a charismatic church in Ethiopia. He said that he "didn't know anything about being a pastor or an evangelist," but he

sensed God wanted him to establish a church in the U.S. capital.

Aligaz made a bargain with God: "I told the Lord if I could leave [Ethiopia] without a guarantor—someone who would have to pay \$25,000 to ensure my return—I would go."

Within a month, the airline company he worked for sent him to the United States for 15 days of flight training. Aligaz took his family with him, and they arrived in Washington with scarcely a trace of the material goods they left behind. "We left everything behind—my job as a pilot, my wife's bakery business, our house, our bank account," Aligaz told Charisma.

Aligaz had no contacts in the area, but he visited church after church, talking with pastors and telling them of his vision to plant an Ethiopian church in the city. After several months of no offers of support, Aligaz attended a Bible study with 12 lawyers.

One of them promised him a meeting room near the World Bank. Another pledged to purchase 2,000 Ethiopian Bibles for the congregation. An immigration lawyer and an IRS lawyer also offered assistance. Said Aligaz: "Within just 20 minutes, I had everything we needed to set up the church."

Thirteen years later, the congregation had outgrown the meeting room and the subsequent sanctuary of a Presbyterian church. When a local synagogue came on the market, church members asked God to reduce the price from \$2.5 million to \$1.5 million. Two years later the price was lowered.

Aligaz stepped out in faith. Drawing from the \$50,000 in their

building fund that had taken nine years to amass, he made a \$40,000 deposit on the property. He knew his congregation would lose it all if they couldn't come up with the rest of the money in four months.

What happened next was a miracle, Aligaz believes. When he challenged his congregation to give sacrificially, he said God told him: "If you want them to give, you have to give the best."

The only thing Aligaz owned was a car. He obeyed by offering his car, and the congregation responded, emptying bank accounts, selling jewelry and other belongings.

"They gave and gave and gave," he said. "Even the children and teens gave. One 16-year-old gave \$500 he was saving for a car." With more than \$250,000 in hand, they were able to secure a loan.

"In less than a month we had all the money, and the owners had to vacate so quickly that they left us everything—chairs, tables, utensils, classroom supplies," Aligaz said.

Three years after moving in, the church had swelled from 450 members to its current membership of 2,000.

In addition to regular, congregational prayer and fasting, all-night prayer meetings are held at the church every Friday and Saturday.

Aligaz believes God has plans for the church to reach "many souls in America." He said the 1,000-seat sanctuary already

seems too small, with more than 85,000 Ethiopians living in greater-metropolitan Washington. The congregation is again reaching out in faith, he said, hoping to acquire a facility that will seat 7,000.

Sandra Chambers in Washington