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## A Midnight Service Helps African Immigrants Combat Demons

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Daniel Rosenbaum for The New York Times

Alain Languieu prays during Spiritual Warfare's midnight service. The congregation meets at Deeper Life Bible Church in northeast Washington D.C.

By NEELA BANERJEE

Published: December 18, 2007

**WASHINGTON** — At an hour when most people here are sleeping or sinning, the worshipers of the Spiritual Warfare ministry gather in the cold sanctuary of a neighborhood church to battle evil.

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Daniel Rosenbaum for The New York Times  
Members of Spiritual Warfare.

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The students, taxicab drivers, homemakers and entrepreneurs, all Christians, mostly from French-speaking Africa, attend a midnight service four nights a week to seek deliverance from lust, anger, fear and sadness.

They sing. They pray fervently. Finally, they kick and shadowbox with what they contend is the real force behind life's problems: the witches and devils whose curses they believe have ground down their families, towns, entire nations in Africa and that have pursued them to a new country, making it hard to find work, be healthy and survive.

"Some situations you need to address at night, because in the ministry of spiritual warfare, demons, the spirits bewitching people, choose this time to work," said Nicole Sangamay, 40, who came from Congo in 1998 to study and is a co-pastor of the ministry. "And we pick this time to

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Daniel Rosenbaum for The New York Times  
In an attempt to chase away the Devil, Passal Batsimba, 24, a musician for the congregation, prays aggressively during the midnight service.

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Daniel Rosenbaum for The New York Times  
Rene Tameghi leaves Spiritual Warfare's service after 2 a.m.

pray to nullify what they are doing.”

Founded by a Congolese couple, Spiritual Warfare is one of many ministries and congregations in the growing African diaspora in the United States and abroad grappling with witchcraft. In most other churches, Ms. Sangamay said, you could not even raise the issue, let alone pray to combat its effects.

Those other churches might argue that such a focus on witchcraft is a relic of Africans’ old beliefs, a dangerously pagan preoccupation. But scholars say this is Christianity made profoundly African. Spiritual Warfare considers itself Pentecostal, and like many other Pentecostals, worshipers see the battle between God and Satan, or what they also call the Bible against witchcraft, shaping the world.

“Religion for them is not like in the West,” said Jacob K. Olupona, professor of African religious traditions at the Harvard Divinity School. “It’s not simply seen as meaning and reference to a transcendental order. Religion is seen as something that works. It has a utilitarian view, and people are looking for solutions in different angles and different ways.”

The Spiritual Warfare congregants here said that because their ancestors were not Christians, they were cursed, Africa is cursed and the sins of their fathers are now visited upon all the children.

One blustery Monday night, men and women trickled into the ministry’s rented space at Deeper Life Bible Church on

Sargent Road Northeast, some groggy from the nap they had to take to stay awake to midnight.

René Tameghi put his Bible and notebook down before kneeling, placing elbows in his chair and praying. Sita Waba would have to be at work at 8:30 a.m., but these two hours, Ms. Waba said, holding a cup of coffee, gave her strength. A few parents carried sleeping toddlers.

“Say, ‘Jesus, I am here for you tonight,’” José Shinga told the congregation from a small, raised stage covered in red carpeting and bordered by pots of silk flowers.

The men and women, still in coats, vests and caps, sang a song of “Allelujahs” in French, stomping, clapping and shuffling along with the joyful beat. The voices seemed stronger than those of the 25 people gathered, a quarter of the regular Sunday attendance. The neighbors once called the police to complain, a congregant said, and the police told them to keep it down.

The day before, the parishioners began a fast. “Why do we fast toward the end of the year?” Mrs. Shinga said to the worshipers. “That is when Satan wants sacrifices, blood, and so we ask God to protect us and our families.”

When Mrs. Shinga asked the worshipers to pray for forgiveness, the loud pleas of each man and woman, faces turned to the floor or heavenward, rose together like the rumble of a train.

People repeat accounts that they have heard of cancer and infertility cured through Spiritual Warfare. But few such events have occurred so far in Washington, Ms. Sangamay said, because the congregation is just two years old. Still, she said, people turn to her and her husband for “soul therapy,” which involves prayer and fasting. The

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ministry does not turn away people from secular resources like counseling or medicine.

"Every day in the village, or even here, people are putting curses on you," said Yemba Shinga, Mrs. Shinga's husband and the other preacher on Monday. "They declare that you won't get a job, or will be separated from your family or get an incurable disease.

"But you know how to pray to God. Tell them, 'C'est fini!' I will not repeat the story of my ancestors, of my past, of the devil."

The congregants shouted, "C'est fini!"

They listened, they moved the red chairs to the back of the hall, and then they called on the Holy Spirit to fight the enemy. Following Mr. Shinga, they said: "I rise now against every form of the devil! You want me under a curse, but I renounce you in the name of Jesus."

With each prayer, young men and middle-age women punched, kicked or stood and quaked. They pounded their fists. They reviled the devil in all his forms.

They sliced their arms through the air to cut the chains of evil binding them. They pretended to tie up Satan. A toddler happily stamped the floor like the grown-ups. Mr. Shinga ran out of breath as he urged on the worshipers. The prayers ended. They did all that they could.

"We declare this place to be blessed," Mrs. Shinga said, as the worshipers quieted down. "Thank you, Lord, Jesus Christ. Go in the peace of the Lord."

People had already zipped up against the chill. They walked out into the Washington night, ready.

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