The World Comes to Georgia, and an Old Church Adapts

Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The Rev. Phil Kitchin leads his multicultural congregation at the Clarkston International Bible Church in Georgia.

By WARREN ST. JOHN
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Correction Appended

CLARKSTON, Ga., Sept. 21 — When the Rev. Phil Kitchin steps into the pulpit of the Clarkston International Bible Church on Sunday mornings, he stands eye to eye with the changing face of America. In the pews before him, alongside white-haired Southern women in their Sunday best, sit immigrants from the Philippines and Togo, refugees from war-scarred Liberia, Ethiopia and Sudan, even a convert from Afghanistan.

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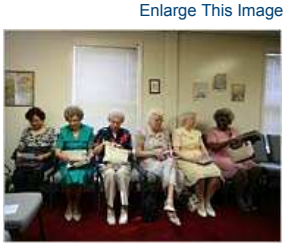

Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

A Sunday school gathering at the Clarkston International Bible Church near Atlanta, once all white but now home to parishioners from 15 countries.

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"Jesus said heaven is a place for people of all nations," Mr. Kitchin likes to say. "So if you don't like Clarkston, you won't like heaven."

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once noted that 11 a.m. on Sunday was the beginning of the most segregated hour of the week in America, and for the better part of 120 years, that certainly applied to this church. From 1883 until a few years ago, anyone on the pulpit would have gazed out at a congregation that was exclusively white. The church is a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, a group that in 1995 renounced its racist past.

But an influx of immigrants and refugees transformed this town in a little over a decade, and in the process sparked a

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A congregation of Liberian immigrants holds separate services at the church, as do other groups.

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Adhieu Malang and her daughter, Diyo Chuti, go to Sudanese services.

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battle within this church over its identity and its faithfulness to the Bible, one that led it to change not just its name but its mission.

The Clarkston International Bible Church, which sits along an active freight rail line down the road from the former Ku Klux Klan bastion of Stone Mountain, is now home to parishioners from more than 15 countries. The church also houses congregations of Ethiopians, Sudanese, Liberians and French West Africans who worship separately, according to their own traditions. The church's Sunday potluck lunch features African stews and Asian vegetable dishes alongside hot dogs, sweet tea and homemade cherry pie.

The transformation of what was long known as the Clarkston Baptist Church speaks to a broader change among other American churches. Many evangelical Christians who have long believed in spreading their religion in faraway lands have found that immigrants offer an opportunity for church work within one's own community. And many immigrants and refugees are drawn by the warm welcome they get from the parishioners, which can stand in stark contrast to the more competitive and alienating nature of workaday America.

Indeed, evangelical churches have begun to stand out as rare centers of ethnic mixing in a country that researchers say has become more culturally fragmented, in part because of immigration.

A recent study by the Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam underscored the practical complications of diversity. In interviews with 30,000 Americans, the study found that residents of more diverse communities "tend to withdraw from collective life," voting less and volunteering less than those in more homogeneous communities.

The study noted a conspicuous exception.

"In many large evangelical congregations," the researchers wrote, "the participants constituted the largest thoroughly integrated gatherings we have ever witnessed."

Change Comes to Town

Diversity came to Clarkston like a bolt from the blue. The community, just east of the Atlanta Perimeter and 11 miles from downtown, was settled by white farmers and railroad workers in the late 1800s.

Clarkston remained rural and mostly white until the 1970s, when developers began to build apartment complexes for middle-class workers drawn to Atlanta after the international airport here opened. In the next decade, many of those workers began to move to new suburbs farther from town. Vacancies increased, rents fell and crime rose.

In the 1990s, aid agencies that contract with the federal government to resettle refugees pegged Clarkston as the perfect place for these vulnerable newcomers. The town had cheap housing: those empty apartments. It had public transportation — few refugees could afford cars. And Clarkston was within commuting distance of downtown Atlanta's booming economy.

From 1996 to 2001, more than 19,000 refugees were resettled in Georgia, many in Clarkston or surrounding DeKalb County.

The change to Clarkston was profound. The schools became crowded with children who spoke little English. Locals learned not to drive down Indian Creek Drive on Friday afternoons because of traffic from Friday prayers at the mosque. A third to a half of Clarkston's 7,100 residents are now foreign-born, most of them refugees.

Some older residents left town, alienated and concerned over the quality of education at the overburdened schools.

Many of those families had attended the Clarkston Baptist Church, leaving empty pews. By the end of the decade the church had canceled one of its two Sunday services. The congregation had dwindled to fewer than 100 from 600.

Concerned about its survival, the church commissioned a study that found blacks and immigrants would soon outnumber whites in the area. William S. Perrin, 75 and a member of the church since 1948, said that at one meeting on the issue, a deacon stood up to express his anger.

"If you think black folks are going to come in here and take our church away from us," Mr. Perrin remembers the man saying, "you got another thing coming."

Reaching Out

William Perrin was no stranger to such attitudes. A retired Army lieutenant colonel who survived a midair collision over Vietnam, he grew up in Clarkston before the civil rights era. Some old ideas about race were embedded in his own psyche.

He recalled that while in the Army he once used a racial epithet in front of a black pilot he admired. When he realized what he had done, Mr. Perrin said, he broke down, hugged the pilot and begged for forgiveness.

"I'm ashamed of myself," he said he told the man. "That's just my white upbringing in Georgia."

The pilot forgave Mr. Perrin, who then vowed never to disrespect another person because of race or ethnicity.

With his church failing, Mr. Perrin and other longtime members looked to the Scriptures for guidance and found what they believed was a mandate from Jesus to diversify their church.

"We realized that what the Lord had in store for that old Clarkston Baptist Church was to transition into a truly international church and to help minister to all these ethnic groups moving into the county," Mr. Perrin said.

To offset costs during the lean years, the Clarkston Baptist Church had leased space to congregations of Filipinos, Vietnamese and Africans for their own services. Mr. Perrin and other members of the church proposed that they invite these congregations to join them as a single multiethnic church.

While an outspoken advocate for diversity within his church, Mr. Perrin is quick to point out that he is no liberal. He voted twice for President Bush. Mr. Perrin said he advocated for an international church because the Bible told him to.

That view is growing more common among conservative Christians, said Mark DeYmaz, a

leading proponent of multicultural churches and the pastor of the Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas, in Little Rock, a congregation of 700 from some 30 countries.

In the Book of John, Mr. DeYmaz points out, Jesus is portrayed after the Last Supper as praying for unity among his followers, a message he said runs counter to the notion of an ethnically homogeneous church.

The idea of combining their old Baptist church with congregations of Filipinos and Africans appalled some older white members of the Clarkston Baptist Church, who feared giving up their ways of worship. Some threatened to leave.

“They struggled,” said Allen Hill, the pastor at the time and now an official with the Georgia Baptist Convention. “It’s something Southern Baptists have to struggle with more than others because of our history.”

That history stretches back to 1845, when the Southern Baptist Convention was formed by a group that seceded from a larger national Baptist organization after that group decreed it would not appoint slaveholders as missionaries.

In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention apologized for its failure to support civil rights and for its congregations that “intentionally and/or unintentionally” excluded blacks. To this day, the overwhelming majority of its members are white, said Michael O. Emerson, a professor of sociology at Rice University who has studied the group.

In 2004, the Clarkston Baptist Church adopted the changes proposed by elders like Mr. Perrin, and merged with the Filipino and Nigerian congregations.

They renamed their church the Clarkston International Bible Church.

That change was too much for many of the older members, like Brenda and Robert White. They left after more than 20 years as members.

“I really resented that,” Mrs. White said of the name change. “I know it’s the 21st century and we have to change and do things differently. But I don’t think it’s fair that we had to cater to the foreign people rather than them trying to change to our way of doing things.”

“It just wasn’t Baptist church anymore,” she said.

A New Church Thrives

Rosa Paige, a 79-year-old Alabama native and member of the church for 46 years, winced and put her fingers in her ears. The staid Baptist hymns of her old church have been replaced by “praise music,” contemporary Christian songs, played by teenagers on electric guitars, that church leaders thought would appeal to new congregants.

“It’s a little loud for me sometimes,” Mrs. Paige said.

Merging congregations has meant compromise for everyone. The immigrants who join the main congregation have to give up worshiping in their native languages. Older Southern Baptist parishioners have given up traditional hymns and organ music.

Other areas, like the potluck lunch in the gym every Sunday, have required little adjustment. “Everybody likes everybody else’s food,” Mr. Perrin said.

The pastor, Mr. Kitchin, a North Carolina native, joined the church in 2006 and learned quickly to keep his sermons simple because so many in his new congregation were just learning English.

“I’d say, ‘You can take it to the bank,’ and nobody had a clue what I was talking about,” he said in a thick drawl.

Mr. Kitchin described his job as part minister, part cultural translator. Church members seek his advice and help.

Recently, Mr. Kitchin said, a Liberian refugee asked him to sponsor a child's visa so the man's family could be reunited. Mr. Kitchin declined.

"If I do it for him, I have to do it for everyone in the church who wants their children to come in," he said. "To tell this man no rips your heart out."

There are other problems beyond the church's front doors. Not everyone in the community has appreciated the church's efforts to proselytize among Clarkston's newcomers. Salahadin Wazir, the imam at al-Momineen mosque here, said he frequently heard from Muslim refugees and immigrants who say they attended a community outreach program administered by the church where conversation quickly turned to the teachings of Jesus.

"It's inappropriate," Mr. Wazir said. "Playing on the minds of small children or desperate, needy people — that's not the way to preach."

Mr. Kitchin said he heard such complaints frequently, but he does not apologize.

"I'm a believer in Jesus Christ, and I am commanded by him to go and tell everybody who he is," he said. "And because we're in a free country you have the freedom to choose."

"How can you choose if you don't know what's available?"

Despite those tensions, Mr. Kitchin's church is now thriving. The congregation has grown to more than 300 from 100 a few years ago, and the 10:45 a.m. service on Sundays, which Mr. Kitchin leads, is well attended.

Ultimately, Mr. Kitchin hopes, the groups who worship separately will join the larger congregation as the Filipino and Nigerian congregations did; many of the youngest members, who prefer church in English, already have.

But those congregations face the same tough choices as did the old white Baptist church. Some have been torn between a desire to assimilate and a fear of giving up their own identities.

That is the case with the Liberian congregation led by the Rev. Peter Nehsahn. His flock had considered joining the larger group but decided against it for now, for fear of losing elements of their worship style, which includes drumming and singing African hymns.

"Our people might get lost in the mix," Mr. Nehsahn said.

But even worshiping separately within the church gives some of the newcomers a sense of connection to the Clarkston community they would not get if they worshiped alone.

For many of those who have joined the main congregation, the experience has been life changing. Marcelle Bess, a white American and a lifelong member of the church, said two of her daughters were dating young Filipino men they had met through the church. She hopes they will marry, she said.

Mr. Perrin said the impact of the church on his life hit him when he and his wife were traveling through the Midwest. They stopped to worship at whatever Baptist church they could find.

"Every church that we walked into was pure white Caucasian," he said. "My wife and I really felt uncomfortable, because, we realized, here in Clarkston is what the world is all about."

Mr. Kitchin thinks that in the not-so-distant future many more American churches will face the sort of questions his church has. He said he was frequently asked for advice.

"I tell people, 'America is changing,' " he said. " 'Get over it.' "

Correction: September 26, 2007

Because of an editing error, an article on Saturday about a church in Georgia that is adapting to an influx of immigrants referred incorrectly to Interstate 285, the highway that circles Atlanta. It is commonly known as the Perimeter, not as the Beltway.

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