New York, Prime Conversion Ground; Missionaries Reverse a Path Taken for Generations

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The Church of the Pentecost has been a hard sell for the Rev. Andrews Donkor.

It seems that the three-and-a-half-hour services, colorful African dress and exuberant clapping and singing are not drawing many of the non-African New Yorkers whose souls he wants to save. Few have joined the church in the past two years.

But Mr. Donkor, 38, from Ghana, is undaunted in his mission. "I believe if you don't enjoy, you can't do it," he said softly in a recent interview at his church, just north of Central Park on West 110th Street.

Mr. Donkor is one of a recent generation of religious men and women who see New York City as prime conversion ground. Missionaries with a twist, they are reversing the path that for generations has sent Americans and Europeans to Africa, Asia and Latin America to convert the local people to Christianity. Instead, these envoys are traveling to New York to evangelize their compatriots as well as to convert members of other immigrant groups.

They include people like Darcy Caires, a Brazilian Presbyterian pastor who is helping to establish a multiethnic church in Astoria, Queens; Joel Magallan, a Jesuit brother from Mexico who has become one of the city's best known advocates for Mexican immigrants; and Jae Joon Lee, a Methodist minister who came from Seoul 20 years ago to study and was quickly drafted to lead or found Korean congregations in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York State.

Such emissaries are drawn to the city's vast and growing ethnic populations, to its reputation as a salvation-needy capital of sin, to its status as a major metropolis. Tony Carnes, a sociologist of religion who directs a seminar on immigration at Columbia University, has identified the reverse missionary phenomenon; he calls it the Sinatra-ian effect. "There's an idea that if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere, and if you can make it for your faith, your faith can make it anywhere," he said. Many of these messengers come from cultures that were themselves the objects of 19th- and early 20th-century European or American missionaries, who combined hospital building with church building, often adding a dose of what they considered a civilizing influence.

Like their earlier counterparts, they preach in public (on street corners, in some cases), establish churches, help educate and try to improve lives.

In the background is a larger movement in Christianity that has been identified by many scholars: a shift in vitality from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere.

"Wherever there's vitality, there's a tendency to 'missionize,'" said Donald E. Miller, director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California. "That's where this reverse missionary phenomenon is coming from, this perception that the Northern Hemisphere, particularly in the West, is in need of the Christian Gospel."

Sometimes, the new ethnic missionaries also have a cultural mission, but in this case it is

to reinforce the culture of home. Like traditional missionaries, they help care for the people in their communities, but usually that care takes the form of English classes and help with immigration paperwork, instead of clinics and schoolrooms in the bush.

"A lot of religious leaders who come here are in a sense 'remissionizing' their people, who have loosened their faith," said Matthew Weiner, director of programming at the Interfaith Center of New York. "It is maintaining and deepening that group's tie to their religion."

Others, like Mr. Donkor, are trying to branch out. The Church of the Pentecost, the largest Pentecostal denomination in Ghana, has 57 churches in the United States, including 5 in New York City. In 2000, the church established the Pentecost International Worship Center, between Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and Lenox Avenue on West 110th Street, specifically to reach out to non-Ghanaians. Mr. Donkor was put in charge two years ago and has increased the congregation to 165 from about 135.

"It all started like in the Acts of the Apostles," Mr. Donkor said, "where people traveled to bring the Gospels to foreign lands. That's what we are doing with our own people, with the hope to bring this to indigenous Americans and other nationals who come to the U.S."

Scores of other African pastors have done the same; African immigrant congregations have rapidly increased in New York over the past 15 years, with more than 100 new ones.

Most of Mr. Donkor's congregants are Ghanaian, but they also include a number of Francophone Africans, from Togo, Benin and Ivory Coast, as well as a smattering of Latinos and African-Americans.

To make the services more inviting, he has shortened them by an hour and allows men and women to sit together, unlike the more traditional arrangements in the Church of the Pentecost. And unlike other pastors of the Church of the Pentecost here, he preaches in English, not one of Ghana's languages.

Mr. Donkor says that more outsiders might be attracted to the church if there were more congregants in Western-style dress, but he does not want to impose a dress code. The congregation meets in a building that belongs to Seventh-day Adventists. The lack of their own church building is another drawback in attracting outsiders, he said.

Tradition is strictly adhered to in some respects at the Pentecost International Worship Center: the church's precepts, like a ban on alcohol, tobacco, premarital sex and same-sex marriage; and its practices, including speaking in tongues, the laying on of hands, and baptism by immersion.

Dale T. Irvin, professor of world theology at New York Theological Seminary, said that ethnic missionaries were "shifting significantly the North American theological spectrum."

"They tend," he said, "to be much more conservative on social issues."

Two weeks ago was revival time at Mr. Donkor's center, where there were daily sessions of prayer and praise. At a session during the day, there were a half-dozen people, but the evening meetings are better attended. "The Lord will set you free!" the pastor proclaimed, as a small boy in a Kobe Bryant jersey ran through the aisles clutching a sippy cup.

The only worshiper not from a recent African immigrant family was Georgina Verley, 28, an African-American from the Morrisania section of the Bronx. She said she was a member of the large, interdenominational Times Square Church, but was brought to center prayer sessions by a couple for whom she works, providing rehabilitative services for their child.

Ms. Verley stayed quiet while the others sang a chorus typically found in Ghanaian churches and she sat out a babble of glossolalia, speaking in tongues. But she said the church's small size, its welcoming atmosphere, the cohesion of the Ghanaians and "the

spirit of the people" drew her to it. She said she was leaning toward joining permanently, "if that's what God's plan is."

The other great ethnic church engine in New York City is the Korean population. Several hundred Korean churches dot the boroughs, and have become a major center of social services and cultural continuity, said Wontae Cha, a professor of ministry at New York Theological Seminary.

Jae Joon Lee was a minister with the independent Korean Methodist Church when, in 1985, he left Seoul to study theology at Emory University in Atlanta. A bishop from the United Methodist Church, a sister to the Korean branch, quickly tapped him to start a Korean congregation in West Paterson, N.J. He arrived at the United Methodist Korean Church of Astoria, at 30-44 Crescent Street, by way of pastoral positions in Buffalo; Stamford, Conn.; and Livingston, N.J.

Competition for Korean congregants can be fierce, he said. He sends church members out to distribute fliers in Korean markets in Queens and advertises in Korean-language newspapers. The flow in and out of the neighborhood keeps his congregation changing. To serve different generations, he offers services in Korean and English. The church provides English classes for recent arrivals, and Korean classes for immigrant children.

"I'm trying to be a bridge builder, in a broader sense, between cultures, between languages, even between generations," he said. "I see myself as a domestic missionary, because traditionally missionaries go to another country. I do this for my people."

Some reverse missionaries follow their people, like Pastor Darcy Caires, a Presbyterian who came from Brazil to build up churches for Brazilians in the New York area.

Mr. Caires was pastor at one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in Brazil, founded in São Paulo in 1859 by the American missionary Ashbel Green Simonton, who brought the denomination to the country. In 1988, Mr. Caires came to the United States. "Since when I was a child, I had a dream to live in America, to be here," he said. He assisted at a church in Newark, and moved on to establish the Presbyterian Christian Community church for Brazilians in Mineola, on Long Island, building the congregation to about 80 people.

"My goal was to share the Gospel, to make them have an opportunity to decide what they wanted in life," he said, "but at the same time to introduce them to a new culture in America and to comfort them."

Two years ago, he and David Ellis established the Astoria Community Church, which is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America, the more evangelical branch of the denomination.

The idea in Astoria, Mr. Caires said, was to create a cross-cultural church, bringing in people from the Queens ethnic cauldron. About 20 nations are represented in the small congregation, which meets in space rented from a synagogue, at 27-35 Crescent Street. The church is beginning its social mission with programs in English.

"We have a long way to go," he said, "but God has been good in terms of differences, people from different places coming in and feeling welcome."

On the other end of the spectrum is Joel Magallan, the Jesuit brother from Mexico.

The American Roman Catholic Church, of course, has always been an immigrant church, with a long tradition of immigrant priests ministering to ethnic blocs. In New York, Mexicans constitute a recent Catholic wave. The Archdiocese of New York welcomed Brother Magallan nine years ago to serve them. He established the Tepeyac Association, an immigrants' rights organization that takes its name from a hill in Mexico where a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe was reported. Cardinal John O'Connor provided a former convent, on 14th Street off Eighth Avenue, for the group's use, and Catholic Charities provided financing.

In a warren of offices, Mexican newcomers -- mostly from the Mixteca Indian-speaking region of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla -- can learn about computers, or take English and G.E.D. classes. They receive counseling and legal help. Tepeyac runs a summer soccer program for children and gathers their parents into workshops on the sidelines.

A Jesuit university in Guadalajara, known as Iteso (for the Instituto Tecnologico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente), supplies young interns who often take on staff positions.

Inside the Tepeyac building, there is little evidence of a religious mission except for a large statue of the Madonna in a hallway. Volunteers visit Mexican households in the city to lead families in prayers. Mexican Catholics venerate the Virgin of Guadalupe, and one of the association's major activities is the relay of a torch from Mexico City to St. Patrick's Cathedral in her honor.

Brother Magallan was studying for a master's degree in education at Loyola University in Chicago when a group of priests from the New York Archdiocese asked him to visit and study the needs of a rising number of Mexican immigrants in the mid-1990's. He came and he stayed.

"We thought that it was a kind of mission for us to come here to the City of New York instead of going to Africa or Latin America or some poor place," he said. "Every Jesuit has to be a missionary. Our place is any place where we have something to do to serve our people."

Correction: July 19, 2004, Monday A picture caption on July 11 about missionaries who see New York City as prime conversion ground misidentified the man laying hands on a congregant's face. He was Samuel Owusu, an elder at the Pentecost International Worship Center in Harlem, not its pastor, the Rev. Andrews Donkor.

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