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## African Drums and an Organ

Md. Church Welcomes Easter With a Joyful Noise

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Monday, March 24, 2008; B01

It's a setting you could find in Presbyterian churches all over the country: a generic beige fellowship hall with a coffee urn at one end and an upright piano at the other. But few others would likely be the scene of an Easter celebration quite like the one that greeted the dawn yesterday at [Silver Spring](#) Presbyterian Church.

Eight women in brilliant batik wraps danced in a circle, shaking beaded gourds, pounding skin drums or dipping and reaching with clapping hands. They chanted and sang to the thundering accompaniment of a dozen other drummers, white and black, seated in the folding chairs that filled half of the hall.

"Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" the women sang in high alto harmony. Through an arched window behind the small altar, an orange horizon began to glow behind a mesh of leafless oaks. Boom, boom, boom came the crescendo as the sun slowly rose on the holiest day of the Christian calendar.

And then, silence.

"Christ is risen," called the Rev. Currie Burris, the church's pastor.

"He is risen indeed," answered his congregation, many with strong West African accents.

And with that, music director Russell Moore turned to the piano for a straightforward, drum-free singing of No. 113 from the Presbyterian hymnal, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today."

Washington congregations mark Easter in many ways. For Silver Spring Presbyterian, the day is also a celebration of the unique cultural fusion that has emerged at the church on University Boulevard. The once majority-white congregation is now made up mostly of immigrants, mainly Cameroonians, which gives Easter a distinctly West African flavor.

"We have what you would call a blended service," said Burris, who is white, after the hour-long ceremony. "It brings in the African element, but we maintain the traditional."

The shift hasn't always been easy, and the church lost many white members who weren't comfortable with services that sometimes feature dancing and ululating, where the ushers' names include not just Allens, Parkers and Myers but Mbahs, Mbides and Nzelles.

But at a time when most U.S. churches remain largely segregated, the white American-born members who remained at Silver Spring Presbyterian say they thrive on the crossroads atmosphere.

"A few years ago, I realized I belonged to an African congregation," said Julia Schaeffer of Silver Spring, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister and a member of the church since the late 1980s. "And I realized in the same breath that it really works for me. Now I find most other Protestant services to be rather staid."

For the newcomers, the church's atmosphere differs from their home traditions in the opposite way.

"The singing and the dancing are much more intense in [Cameroon](#)," said Doris Hapi, who immigrated to the United States 10 years ago. The early sun, streaming through the east window, cast a brilliant light on her yellow-and-black head wrap and matching ankle-length wrap.

But in some ways, said Jonas Nguh, who comes from [Baltimore](#) each week, a fully equipped U.S. church gives the Africans even more voluble ways to make a joyful noise.

"In Cameroon, we only have drums and voices in most churches," Nguh said later in the morning, as hundreds of congregants filed into the bright, contemporary chapel for the day's biggest Easter service. "Here we have the organ."

That organ was in full voice for the main Easter service, but so were the African rhythms. That ceremony featured music from six church choirs -- American, African and mixed.

"The music here is sort of like opera -- everything goes into it," Moore said. "We have used just about every type you can think of, from Bach to [Mary J. Blige](#)."

Some congregants brought their own drums, a varied collection of dark woods and worn hides, some adorned with elephants. Moore had

the church's collections of drums distributed and then suggested to those without percussion to beat on the hymnals or the pew in front of them.

After a short preamble by the church's mostly white Chancel Choir, a drummer struck three sharp beats, and suddenly the church was awash in thumping rhythms. Moore, on the organ, joined in with some booming riffs on Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus, and it was hard to find a motionless body in the chapel.

"It's impossible to resist," said Bob Crossgrove, a white member of the church since 1997.

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