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God's Row

By JAMES ANGELOS

AS noon approached on a recent Sunday, the mostly Jamaican congregation of New Life Tabernacle gathered in its small storefront on White Plains Road in the Wakefield section of the north Bronx. Women in elaborate, wide-brimmed hats and men in dark suits filled six rows of pews and two dozen wooden chairs. The pastor's wife, Paulette Randall, wearing a violet dress and holding a microphone, stood before the congregation.

"Is your soul right with God?" she asked the crowd of about 60, her voice exploding into the microphone. "That is the question."

As she spoke, the low hum of a bass guitar resonated through the walls. Inside a drab storefront next door, the three-piece Heavenly Sound Band of the Bible Fellowship Pentecostal Assembly was warming up. "Hallelujah be your name!" band members sang as they began the service. A score of West Indian worshippers, standing near their metal folding chairs with hands raised in the air, sang along.

At Maha Shiva Parvati Mandir, a storefront Hindu temple just down the block, a service dedicated to the Lord Ram had just concluded. "Let the birds and quadrupeds prosper," the priest had uttered imploringly before a group of about 50 mostly Guyanese worshippers, one of whom pumped a harmonium while another tapped a tabla. "Let peace come from everywhere."

As Hindu faithful in colorful saris and kurtas filed out the temple's tinted glass doors, shouts of "Gloria a Dios!" drifted into the street from the whitewashed Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal next door.

If this were not enough spiritual fervor for one block, worship at three more storefront churches was also about to begin. As the afternoon wore on, the worshippers became increasingly ardent, cries of hallelujah turned to shrieks, and White Plains Road between 239th and 240th Streets, home to seven houses of worship in all, throbbed with the ardor of believers readying their souls to meet their maker.

The abundance of churches in Wakefield is not limited to this block, which sits opposite a desolate strip of auto body shops. Amid the retail stores on the two-mile stretch of White Plains Road that runs from 240th Street south to East Gun Hill Road, there are about 30 storefront churches.

While the faithful often attribute the proliferation of churches to the will of God, a few earthly factors help explain their numbers in this particular part of the Bronx.

Starting in the 1970s, in a trend echoed throughout much of the city, Wakefield was plagued by crime that drove many of the neighborhood's residents, among them large numbers of Italian and Irish families, to the

relative safety of the suburbs. In response to their departure, many of the butcher shops, travel agencies, pharmacies and other small businesses along White Plains Road closed, leaving behind empty storefronts.

During the 1980s, immigrants from the Caribbean began replacing residents who had left. The immigrants brought with them faiths like Pentecostalism, and they established fledgling churches in the cheapest and most convenient places they could find, the White Plains Road storefronts widely available at low rents.

The houses of worship do not, however, inspire praise from all quarters. Some along White Plains Road contend that the churches take up ground-floor space that might otherwise be occupied by large stores capable of luring shoppers to the area. As the churches cater to the longings of the soul, some claim, they slow the forward march of commerce.

'The Way Up Is Down!'

At New Life Tabernacle, the three-hour-long Sunday worship is filled with song. The keyboard player often offers renditions of a syncopated reggae melody, while the pastor's 17-year-old son keeps a pulsing rhythm on a pearly white drum set. The faithful dance in place, clapping and slapping tambourines as they sing, and interspersing the melodies with shouts of "Thank you, Jesus!"

Near the end of a recent service, the pastor, the Rev. Al Randall, a 52-year-old with freckles and slight salt-and-pepper whiskers, stood before the pulpit and delivered a rousing sermon.

"The world says, the way to get ahead is to step on somebody and get ahead!" he said in a quavering voice and a preacher's cadence. "But the way of God says the way up is down!" Cheers echoed from the pews, and sweat glazed Pastor Randall's forehead as he hit his oratorical stride. "If you want to be great with God, you've got to get down, amen, in humility!"

Storefront churches frequently begin with a determined pastor, and often, the story goes, that determination grows out of a call from God. Pastor Randall said he received such a call in dreams that he began having 14 years ago when he was working as an ornamental plasterer. In one dream, he found himself in front of a pulpit before a slithering mass of multiplying fish — future parishioners, he thought to himself.

Pastor Randall held his first service in the living room of the two-family house on Paudling Avenue in nearby Williamsbridge, where his family lived in those years; his audience consisted of his wife, their newborn daughter and their young son.

In 1996, with just seven members, the church began paying \$525 a month to rent a former office space on the corner of White Plains Road and 240th Street. As word of mouth brought in more members, the congregation swelled to about 50, and after two years, the church moved across the street to the current location, paying \$850 a month to accommodate its growing numbers.

Starting early on, church members have contributed money to the congregation's "building fund," intent on one day owning a house of worship. In 2005, the money was used to buy a two-story house with light blue siding on Dyre Avenue, in the Eastchester section of the Bronx, for \$380,000, where the pastor now lives on the second floor with his family. Next month, work will begin to convert the house into the

congregation's new and far more spacious home. As the church grows, Pastor Randall hopes to begin ministering full time.

"I see there is a need," he said the other day in his living room, the plans for the new church spread out on the coffee table. "I want to make an impact in my lifetime."

After his sermon one recent Sunday, Pastor Randall asked, as he does every week, that those in need of a special prayer approach the stage. A woman wearing a gold-color mesh hat slowly approached the pulpit. As the pastor leaned over, she murmured her troubles into his ear. The congregation sang with a hint of melancholy, "They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint; teach me Lord, teach me Lord, how to wait." Pastor Randall placed his hand on the woman's forehead and uttered a minute-long prayer.

Upon returning to her seat, the woman confided that she had asked God to help her find a second job. The pay from her full-time job as a nurse's aide was not enough to allow her to support her five children, she explained, and she was behind on rent. But she said she felt optimistic. "It's going to work out," the woman said. "I feel strengthened."

The Retailers' Lament

While the churches offer their members spiritual reinforcement that helps them endure life's trials, some neighbors view the sheer number of houses of worship with exasperation.

"There are too many churches," Mario Ferrante, the gray-haired owner of Fairbanks Lumber and Home Center, said one recent afternoon as he stood outside his lumber yard, flanked on either side by a church. "How many gods are there?" he asked with a shrug. "How many popes?"

Donna Stewart, owner of Salon Express, a business sandwiched between two storefront churches, would agree. "Business could be better," said Ms. Stewart, who was working near four hair dryers that sat dormant. "If we had other kinds of businesses around, we'd have more people walking by."

According to Ingrid Gould Ellen, a director of the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at [New York University](#), there may be some truth to this claim. "They fail to attract the 24/7 street traffic so critical to urban retail," she said of the churches, which are typically shuttered most days. "Retailers want to be around other retailers."

Yet there are other reasons business could be better here. Nail and hair salons, seemingly immune to laws of supply and demand, are in oversupply on White Plains Road, and shoppers seeking more options head north to malls in the nearby suburbs. And on this particular block of White Plains Road, auto body shops and a [New York City Transit](#) yard add to the desolate mood.

'The Challenges of Tomorrow'

The pastors, of course, see the situation very differently.

"Whatever people say about the churches affecting commerce is not true," said the Rev. Ben Anthony of Bible Fellowship Pentecostal Assembly, reeling off the names of stores on the block that have gone out of business since his congregation arrived, among them a furniture store, a bakery and a printing shop, all of

whose storefronts, he said, are now occupied by churches. “Commerce was affected before we got here.”

Pastor Anthony, a thin man with glasses and a mustache, emigrated from Guyana in 1982. His small congregation, of mostly West Indians of Indian ancestry, worships in a style only slightly less ebullient than that of its Jamaican neighbors.

In 1997, the congregation moved into a shabby storefront next door to Pastor Randall’s congregation. The space had previously housed a Jamaican patty restaurant, closed by the city, according to Pastor Anthony, after the police discovered drug dealers operating inside the restaurant. The pastor renovated the place himself, ripping out the greasy kitchen appliances and replacing them with a small stage on which he delivers Sunday sermons.

When he preaches, Pastor Anthony sounds a bit like a motivational speaker.

“We need to accept the challenges of tomorrow!” he yelled into a microphone one recent Sunday, pacing back and forth on the stage in a tan business suit. “We need to make the changes that will improve ourselves!”

The self-help flavor of his homily was intentional. Pastor Anthony said he preferred to preach practical messages that would help his congregants in their day-to-day lives. At Wednesday night Bible study, for instance, he has given lessons on how to pay taxes, draft a will and deal with [immigration](#) issues, matters of particular relevance to his mostly foreign-born congregation.

As if to prove, however, that he is concerned not just with mundane matters, the pastor sometimes joins the church’s Heavenly Sound Band, strapping on a guitar and bellowing a country-inflected spiritual. “People cheat for wealth and gold,” he sang with a twang one recent Sunday. “But then they learn on the Judgment Day that gold and silver will melt away.”

Like his colleague next door, Pastor Anthony formed his church in the living room of the house where he then lived, in Yonkers, delivering his first sermon to his wife and in-laws. But unlike his colleague, Pastor Anthony does not aspire to become a full-time minister. He is content to volunteer his time on nights and weekends, commuting to the storefront from his home in Rockland County, or from his job as a computer systems manager in Elmsford in Westchester County.

“I do it because this is what I love doing,” Pastor Anthony said. “We’ll continue to be here.”

The ‘Higgler Shop’ Gantlet

After worship one Sunday, Pastor Randall and members of New Life Tabernacle piled in the maroon van that church members affectionately refer to as “Big Red.” There was a baptism to perform, and the congregants were headed to a nearby church equipped with a baptismal pool.

After the vehicle sped off, Audrey Marshall, a 64-year-old Jamaican, lingered in the near empty church, waiting for an Access-a-Ride van to take her back to her apartment near Yankee Stadium.

Ms. Marshall had arrived at New Life Tabernacle after a few disappointing stops along the way. She had been repelled by other churches she had attended, she said, after encountering what seemed to her to be

money-hungry pastors. “Not everybody is in it for your soul,” she added. “Jesus didn’t say, ‘I’ll heal you if you give me \$50.’ ”

It took some searching to find the right fit.

“I shopped around,” Ms. Marshall said. With so many churches to choose from, she likened the experience to shopping at “higgler shops,” using a Jamaican term for street vendors. She settled on New Life Tabernacle, she said, after finding the “love, unity and warmth” she had been seeking, and she plans to stick with the church as it charts its future.

Tacked on the wall behind her was an architect’s rendering of the congregation’s next home, on Dyre Avenue. The presence of the drawing raised an inescapable question.

When New Life Tabernacle moves out of the storefront, who do you think will move in? Ms. Marshall laughed. “Another church,” she guessed.
