All Nations Evangelical Church:
Bringing the Nations Together and Creating a Community of Faith in the New African Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

MICHAEL KNOLL: All Nations Evangelical Church: Bringing the Nations Together and Creating a Community of Faith in the New African Diaspora
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

This thesis explores the role All Nations Evangelical Church plays in the lives of its members, especially its diverse sub-Saharan African immigrant members. The Greensboro, North Carolina church acts as a vehicle for its members to adapt to their new lives in diaspora. This thesis also discusses the ongoing development of the church's identity as a product of the constant negotiation of the disparity between the church's vision and the day-to-day reality of its experience. In various creative ways, and to varying degrees of success, All Nations attempts to reconcile this tension. In creating church practices that are at once familiar (reflecting the lives its immigrant members lived in Africa) and new (reflecting the reality of the church's membership), the church creates a sense of togetherness. In the end, All Nations best achieves its vision for oneness as a community of faith.

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CHAPTER ONE

Exploring the New African Diaspora in Greensboro, N.C.

The Gate City. This is Greensboro, North Carolina's, nickname, coined in the late 19th century by a Greensboro newspaper editor. At that time, railroad traffic, including forty passenger trains each day, made Greensboro a "gateway to the South." Before World War II, many of North Carolina's earliest highways intersected—as the railroads did—in the city. And in the 1950s, the early interstates I-85 and I-40 also converged there. Today, Piedmont Triad International Airport continues to ensure Greensboro's status as a transportation center.[1]

But the nickname "Gate City" is fitting for another reason; since the middle of the 20th century, Greensboro has been a gateway to America for thousands of immigrants from all over the world. Recently, the Center for New North Carolinians at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro estimated the number of Guilford County residents in "immigrant families or families that speak a language other than English at home" to be about sixty thousand. Not surprisingly, these newcomers include large numbers of Latinos (mostly from Mexico); they also include Asians (Vietnamese, Degas, Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, and others) and Europeans (Bosnians, Russians, and others).[2] Many of them live in Greensboro, Guilford County's principal city.

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[1] Schlosser 2005-2006: 20-21

[2] Center for New North Carolinians 2008

Additionally, about fourteen thousand sub-Saharan Africans from at least twenty nations have settled in Greensboro and its surrounds.[3] While the number of African immigrants in America seems small when compared to those coming from Latin America or Asia, it is nonetheless significant. Few Americans, however, are aware of the African immigrants' growing presence. Nationally, the 2000 U.S. census reports the number of black African-born people at more than six hundred thousand, while one estimate puts the number of their non-legal counterparts and visa overstays at four times that.[4] Scholars have termed this recent influx of African immigrants to America, and around the world, the "New African Diaspora," distinguishing these Africans from those forced to come to America and elsewhere as slaves.

In this thesis, I will explore the role Greensboro's All Nations Evangelical Church plays in the lives of its members, especially its African immigrant members. The church is pastored by Rev. Dr. Albert Som-Pimpong (a Ghanaian immigrant). I am curious about how All Nations acts as a vehicle for its immigrant members to adapt to their new lives in diaspora. Like other immigrants, African newcomers face a particular set of hardships thanks to the immigration experience, including its associated cultural shifts. They often need assistance in negotiating these hardships, and religious organizations often provide that help. One way these organizations assist is to help immigrants build a feeling of community in diaspora.

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[3] Center for New North Carolinians 2008. Several hundred North African newcomers have also settled in Guilford County. My thesis, however, focuses on the area's black African immigrant population.

[4] Roberts 2005: A1

I will show how Pastor (as Pastor Som-Pimpong is usually called) and the church members actively create community, a community of faith that is at once familiar—reflecting the lives its immigrant members lived in Africa—and new—reflecting the reality of their new lives in diaspora. This community-building allows for the newcomers to re-establish and create their individual and collective identities. The latter creation helps especially the church's immigrant members to find a sense of belonging in a foreign environment. Creating this sense of belonging is one of Pastor's goals, as the church's motto suggests: "Bringing the Nations Together to Serve the One and Only God."

This thesis will also show that the ongoing development of the church's identity, or this sense of belonging, is a product of Pastor and the church members' constant negotiation of the disparity between Pastor's church vision and the day-to-day reality of the church's experience. Pastor's vision for the church calls for its membership to consist of more than just immigrants, and also calls for the membership to be in "one accord," especially spiritually, as a Christ-centered family. In reality, however, All Nations' membership consists of mostly African immigrants (although a diverse group of them), and it sometimes struggles to maintain a sense of unity. In various creative ways, and to varying degrees of success, Pastor and the church members attempt to reconcile the tension that exists between Pastor's vision and the reality of the church's situation, as basically an immigrant church. In the end, All Nations achieves a sense of "one accord" as a community of faith, an emergent community that makes sense to all involved in its creation.

FINDING ALL NATIONS

I began to seriously explore the topic of African immigrants creating community in diaspora in 2004. That year, I purchased anthropologist Paul Stoller's ethnography of West African street traders in New York City. To my surprise, early on in that book Stoller mentions, "In Greensboro, North Carolina, a growing community of West Africans (Ghanaians, Nigerians, Malians, Senegalese, and Nigeriens) has taken root and grown. In 2000, Nigerien traders estimated that nine thousand of their compatriots lived in Greensboro."[5] Those two sentences deepened my interest in attending the Folklore graduate program at UNC-Chapel Hill, which was less than an hour's drive from Greensboro.

In September 2005, shortly after beginning the program, I volunteered at Greensboro's North Carolina African Services Coalition (NCASC), an African immigrant/refugee services organization. Working under the NCASC's director, Omer Omer, a Sudanese immigrant, and the organization's job developer, Gloria Poole, I assisted some of the NCASC's clients, especially several recently resettled Liberian refugees. I helped these newcomers in various ways, assisting them in finding jobs, buying winter coats, and negotiating culture clashes. My months at the NCASC taught me not only about the challenges immigrants and refugees face in America, but also about African Greensboro, including its African-owned businesses, national and ethnic associations, soccer clubs, mosques, and churches.

Since I had spent time in Ghana, I was interested in connecting with Ghanaians in Greensboro. Consequently, very early in my tenure at the NCASC, I asked Omer about

[5] Stoller 2002: 9

Greensboro's Ghanaian population. He suggested I ask Pastor Albert Som-Pimpong, a Ghanaian who headed a local church, and was also involved with the NCASC. I had heard of Pastor from another contact as well. A few months later, in late January 2006, I called him. And soon thereafter, I visited All Nations Evangelical Church for the first time.

UNDERSTANDING ALL NATIONS

In 1995, Pastor and his wife Dora co-founded All Nations. Believing in the ultimate authority of the Bible, the importance of the personal conversion experience, and salvation through Christ's crucifixion, All Nations resembles a typical evangelical church, especially since evangelism is central to the church's vision. But, as Pastor is quick to point out, the church is non-denominational. The church vision is complex and constantly evolving, largely as a response to the continuously changing reality of the church's situation. The church's *Doctrinal Statements* lists the following priorities: providing a place of worship where everyone employs their gifts as endowed by the Holy Spirit; establishing a house where prayer is central; and preparing its members to "storm the citadel of the devil to do exploits for the Lord."[6] My thesis, however, focuses most closely on two other aspects of the vision: the goal to welcome people of *all* nations, and the goal to unite the membership, especially as a Christ-centered family. As Pastor and others explain, the church achieves this latter goal when the membership acts in "one accord."

[6] Som-Pimpong n.d.: 5. Because this source has no page numbers, I added numbers for ease of reference.

At the moment, although Pastor would like to shepherd a more diverse membership, sub-Saharan African immigrants constitute the vast majority of the church's more than one hundred regularly attending congregants. They mostly come from English-speaking West African countries like Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. But they also come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Niger, South Africa, Togo, and other places. Church regulars also include several American-born African Americans and a couple of white, non-Hispanic Americans.

In addition to being from a variety of African countries, the African immigrant members also come from a variety of Christian denominations. For example, the congregation includes both former Catholics and Pentecostals. And for some members, All Nations is their very first church.

That the church's immigrant members are not only African or immigrants, but also Christians, is an important point to consider here. Losing sight of their identity as Christians is a mistake. Not unlike other researchers, I am interested in the immigrant experience, including the challenges newcomers face, how they rebuild community, etc. But I recognize that focusing too much on these interests relegates faith to the background. Faith is central to the church members' understanding of themselves, and I do not want my interests to override the congregants' interests. So as not to do a disservice to them, a fuller picture of the lives of the church members needs to emphasize the central importance of their Christian identity.

For about fifteen months, I conducted research at All Nations. Over the course of this period, I learned a great deal about the church, and grew close to Pastor and several church members. Besides Pastor, my consultants included Pastor's wife, native North

Carolinian Dora Liverman Som-Pimpong (Mama Dora); native Alabaman Lula Roseboro (Mama Lula); Sierra Leonean immigrant Dora Iris King (whom I will refer to as Mama Dora Iris King so as to distinguish her from Mama Dora, Pastor's wife); Liberian immigrant Samuel T. Jlay (Brother Jlay); and Ndifreke Friday Amama (Brother Ndi), who was born in the U.S. and raised in Nigeria. These friends were my main sources of information, although I also learned from many others. They helped me reach my understanding of All Nations.

My attitude regarding the ends of ethnographic research mirrors that of Henry Glassie. Glassie explains, "Culture is not a problem with a solution. There are no conclusions. Studying people involves refining understanding, not achieving final proof."[7] And I understand the sharing of what I understand to be a subjective, artful endeavor. I hope to evoke an accurate sense of the church, and to do that honestly, by foregrounding the fact that I am conveying *my* sense of the church in this thesis. Of course, my interpretation is heavily influenced by my consultants' understandings of their lives and the church; Pastor's interpretations in particular have been especially significant to mine. He often critiqued my early writings on the church, and also served on my thesis committee.

My particular life experiences and biases, especially my disbelief (which often made me feel like an outsider at All Nations), no doubt also color my interpretation. At the church, I often felt more like an observer than a participant, but over the course of my research I gradually understood that members of All Nations participate in church life in diverse ways. There is not one way to be there. In fact, concerning belief, some church

[7] Glassie 1995: 13

attendees are probably not believers, while others have not always been. Likewise, the nature of the experience of belief is diverse; different people experience it in different ways. Nonetheless, I frequently felt like a "church reporter," as Pastor has called me.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a relative dearth of research on the New African Diaspora, especially when compared to that on the African Diaspora associated with slavery. Migration expert Khalid Koser suggests, "a preoccupation with slavery and its descendants has diverted our attention from striking new patterns and processes associated with recent migrations."[8] Sociologist John Arthur agrees, admitting that there is a "paucity of research" on the New African Diaspora.[9] Likewise, Africanist Ali Mazrui says, "People of African descent continue to multiply in the most unexpected parts of the world. African Studies has yet to catch up with them."[10] This thesis is an attempt to contribute to the literature on this subject.

To begin, the second chapter tells the migration stories of Pastor and a few members of All Nations. Additionally, the chapter contextualizes these stories. Unfortunately, as noted above, the literature on the New African Diaspora in America is slim, but three sources have helped me place the migration stories in context: John A. Arthur's *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States* (2000); Khalid Koser's *New African Diasporas* (2003); and Kwadwo Konadu-Agyemang,

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[8] Koser 2003: 3

[9] Arthur 2000: 38

[10] Mazrui 2001: 17-18

Baffour K. Takyi, and John A. Arthur's *The New African Diaspora in North America: Trends, Community Building, and Adaptation* (2006). These works have contributed immensely to my understanding of the New African Diaspora, unfolding the history of African immigration to America, the reasons for this journey, immigrant settlement patterns, common hardships that African immigrants encounter, and many other aspects of these newcomers' lives in diaspora.

Next to no information on recent African immigration to North Carolina exists. The website for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Center for New North Carolinians (CNNC) is a helpful source on this topic. John A. Arthur's field survey of some African newcomers in Charlotte is another source.[11] The CNNC's website and its director Raleigh Bailey's 2005 article, "New Immigrant Communities in the North Carolina Piedmont Triad: Integration Issues and Challenges" explain some particulars of the history and current situation of African Greensboro. Obviously, these two sources speak more immediately to the experiential context of Pastor and the church members.

My third chapter discusses the creation of All Nations, including the acquisition of its church building, and the transformation of its building, a space originally designed for commercial use, into a suitable church. Geographer Tim Cresswell's discussion of place-making, or assigning meaning to a space, offers a useful analytical tool for understanding how Pastor and others converted the commercial space into a sacred place. My analysis is informed by Cresswell's suggestion that in studying places one should focus on "the individual biographies of people negotiating place and the way in which a

[11] Arthur 2000

sense of place is developed though [sic] the interaction of structure and agency."[12] For obvious reasons, this place-making is especially important to displaced immigrants.

As the third and fourth chapters discuss, one important aspect of All Nation's vision is to create a place of worship for its members, enabling the church to provide for its members' spiritual welfare. Hugo Kamya's 1997 article, "African Immigrants in the United States: The Challenge for Research and Practice," discusses stress among African immigrants and how religion serves as a coping mechanism for them. Kamya's interpretation has informed my thinking on the role religion and religious organizations play in the lives of African immigrants. Kamya demonstrates that among the African immigrants he studied, spiritual well-being was tied to lower levels of stress and greater self-confidence. And he also suggests that religion "may offer grounding and hope in a foreign land and culture."[13] Kamya's study suggests that All Nations may provide the same to its members.

Perhaps the most valuable source for contextualizing the religious practices of All Nations is Kwasi Kwakye-Nuako's 2006 essay "Still Praisin' God in a New Land: African Immigrant Christianity in North America." This essay's information on African immigrant Christianity in Canada and the U.S. has helped me interpret, especially in chapters four and five, the specific history and present experience of All Nations. Particularly useful is Kwakye-Nuako's discussion of the significance of religious organizations, such as African immigrant churches, to the well-being of African immigrants. These churches are places that not only offer immigrants answers to their

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[12] Cresswell 2004: 37

[13] Kamya 1997: 159

religious questions, but also help them adjust to their new lives. Specifically, this essay explores why and how these churches are founded, their general beliefs, their general worship style, and the challenges they face, as well as their role in offering services similar to those a social services agency might offer.

Two case studies on the importance of religious organizations to refugee or immigrant communities—folklorist Barbara Lau's *The Temple Provides the Way: Cambodian Identity and Festival in Greensboro, North Carolina* (2000) and folklorist Enrique Armijo's *Un Nuevo Pueblo: An Ethnography of a Hispanic Protestant Community of Faith* (2000)—serve as models for my fifth chapter's interpretation of All Nations as an emergent religious organization created by an immigrant community. These sources explore the ways that refugee and immigrant religious organizations create practices that meet the needs of their members.

Finally, folklorist Dorothy Noyes' understanding of the concept of group, and in particular her idea of performing community, aids my conclusion's discussion of how performance, especially the performance of faith, helps to unite the social imaginary, or All Nations' vision, and the empirical reality of the church group, helping to bring group feeling into being, and helping to create community at the church.[14]

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

The second chapter of my thesis explores the need for immigrants to create a new identity in their new homes. The chapter tells the migration stories of Pastor and a few All Nations' members, illuminating the experience of leaving a homeland and settling in

[14] Noyes 2003

America. This chapter also contextualizes these stories, placing them within the New African Diaspora generally. After exploring the concept of the "New African Diaspora," I discuss the identity crisis many African immigrants face. I then focus on the story of recent African migration to North Carolina, and to Greensboro in particular. The chapter concludes by discussing the diverse reasons why sub-Saharan Africans leave their homelands and come to America. Despite the diversity of migration experiences, they all become immigrants, a confusing transformation that requires them to create an immigrant identity.

In creating this new identity, it is important to have a place to be creative, especially for displaced immigrants. The third chapter discusses the founding of All Nations, focusing on Pastor's role in creating the church and crafting the church's vision. First, the chapter explores Pastor's childhood experiences with Christianity, including the story of his calling, a miraculous healing. After telling the story of the prophecy that influenced the establishment of All Nations, this chapter focuses on the acquisition of the church building and the building's transformation into a church space. Lastly, the chapter concentrates on the vision Pastor and others had and continue to have for the church and its members. Although the vision includes many goals, this chapter foregrounds the church's wish for All Nations to welcome people from *all* nations and for the membership to be in "one accord."

The fourth chapter highlights some enactments of All Nations' vision. These practices manifest the vision, making the imaginary real. The chapter focuses on several liturgical and social acts that meet two important church goals: creating a place of worship, and helping immigrant members adjust to their new lives in America. The

section on liturgical acts describes a typical Sunday service and then discusses the importance of fasting, prayer, and evangelism, All Nations' practices that are central to its identity. The second section of this chapter deals with the social acts that embody the vision. One specific goal of Pastor's vision is to provide an "easy transition for Christians from other nations into the American society."[15] In many regards, All Nations acts like a social services agency for its immigrant members, helping them to navigate the American immigrant experience. This section explores the types of services the church provides its members.

Creating a sense of belonging is no easy task. Chapter Five discusses the church's ongoing struggles to reconcile the tension between its vision and its reality. How do Pastor and the church-workers respect the reality of the membership's African diversity and, at the same time, accomplish their goal for unity? The church reconciles this tension by creating new church practices, among which are its unique song repertoire and its baby dedications. This chapter highlights these two practices, which are familiar to many members from their homelands, but also take into account the realities of All Nations' membership, enabling everyone to participate in the church's activities, and also engendering a sense of togetherness.

Several issues, however, make reconciling the tension between Pastor's vision for the church and the church's reality more difficult. The sixth chapter begins by discussing these issues, and then concentrates on the importance of performance in bringing group feeling into being. Here I discuss the performance of faith, and how it creates a sense of group cohesion, despite the church members' diversity. Faith is central, pulling everyone

[15] Som-Pimpong n.d.: 6

together. In the end, the conclusion shows All Nations as a community of faith, a community that achieves to a significant degree the unity Pastor and the church members seek.

CHAPTER TWO

"So new and so different"

Coming to Greensboro, N.C.:
Identity Issues in the New African Diaspora

Recently, I visited a Nigerien friend of mine in Reisterstown, Maryland. While sitting in his living room, Moussa Dambo and I chatted about how migration affects identity. He recited a Hausa proverb to make a point: *I che ya jima a ruwa, bay a zama kada la!* He translated the proverb as: *A log will stay forever in the water, but it will not become a crocodile!* For Moussa, the proverb illuminated the immigrant experience. He explained that African immigrants in America are "no more African" and also not American. They are, as he put it, "in the middle," which means they "lose twice."

This double loss suggests the need for African newcomers to create an identity as immigrants in diaspora. As anthropologist Donald Carter explains, "I would like to suggest that diaspora is not merely a form of transportation—a way of going from here to there—but rather a way of *being* here or there and all the points in between."[16] This need to create a new identity—a diasporic identity—leads to the community-based vehicles that emerge to meet this need. All Nations is one of these vehicles.

This chapter recounts the migration stories of Pastor and three members of All Nations: Mama Dora Iris King, Brother Jlay, and Brother Ndi. All are members of the New African Diaspora. In addition to telling their stories, this chapter offers a contextual

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[16] Carter 2003: x

discussion, telling the larger story of recent sub-Saharan African migration to America, and to Greensboro. Together, the stories and contextual information illuminate the diversity of African immigrants' experiences, and also establish a foundation for understanding that—despite their diverse experiences—African newcomers to America find it necessary to create a new identity for themselves in their new homes.

One of these African newcomers is All Nations' leader, Pastor Albert Som-Pimpong. Born in Ghana in 1957, on the very day the West African country gained its independence, Pastor came to America in 1983. As Pastor remembers: "I had wanted to go to America for some time. I wanted to go to school there and spread the word of Christ. There were prophecies about me that involved America. It seemed as if I was meant to go there." Pastor had everything ready to obtain a visa; his brother Harry, who was already in the U.S., found him a sponsor and a school to attend, and got him a plane ticket.[17] Pastor considered his chances a "slam-dunk."[18]

But when Pastor went to the American embassy, the consul suggested that he go to Libya instead. Around that time, Jerry Rawlings overthrew the Ghanaian government and accepted aid from Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi. Not surprisingly, then, the American consul denied Pastor's visa application. Pastor remembers, "I was downcast. I felt as if nothing worse could happen. I'd had such hopes, and now they were all dashed. I returned home feeling the terrible weight of depression." He recalls, too, the shame he suffered: "When I left the American consulate I was going back to people who had already said good-bye to me. I had resigned my position as a teacher. I had made them

[17] Som-Pimpong 2005: 61

[18] Som-Pimpong 2007

all believe that I was going to fly to America, and here I was, stranded in the same place I'd always been. I had been proud of my plans. Now I was ashamed of my failure."[19]

"So for four years," Pastor explains, "I was languishing in a country called Ghana."[20] Several friendships, however, gave him a sense of "self-worth." And Pastor knows the Lord planned for him to receive friendly support at that time. For the next few years, Pastor taught math while a dedicated friend pestered the American embassy about Pastor's visa application. The friend's help, along with a change in consul, resulted in Pastor finally acquiring a visa. He planned to leave in June of 1983.[21]

This time, Pastor did not tell anyone of his trip until the day before he left. A friend gave him ten dollars, which was all the money he had. Another friend gave him a bag. He took all his belongings, including a brother's suit (the one Pastor wore to church) in that single bag. Pastor's flight was his first plane ride. After a stop in Amsterdam, he arrived at JFK airport in New York City. Today, he likens the role that JFK airport plays in the lives of new immigrants to that which Ellis Island played in the lives of past ones. The airport was his "first step up from the dunghill." From JFK airport, Pastor continued on to Raleigh, North Carolina, where his brother Harry and his brother's family met him.[22] His American life had begun.

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[19] Som-Pimping 2005: 61-62

[20] Som-Pimpong 2007

[21] Som-Pimpong 2005: 62-64

[22] Som-Pimpong 2005: 65-67

THE DUALIZATION OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Like Pastor, most members of All Nations are sub-Saharan African immigrants. They are part of the New African Diaspora. In the mid-1980s, Africanist Ali A. Mazrui coined the term "Global Africa," meaning "the experience of people of African descent worldwide." As Mazrui points out, before the middle of the last century, Global Africa included people in Africa and in the African Diaspora in the Western hemisphere and the Middle East. But, since the middle of the 20th century, Global Africa has included more destinations. Mazrui speaks of the "dualization of the African Diaspora," with the more recent era featuring migrations to the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and other places.[23]

Mazrui breaks the history of African migration into two periods: the "Diaspora of Enslavement" and the "Diaspora of Colonialism." In North America, the "Diaspora of Enslavement" began in 1619 when the first Africans were forced to come to America. Mazrui defines the Africans who make up this diaspora as "survivors of the Middle Passage and their descendents." The "Diaspora of Colonialism," on the other hand, is a more recent phenomenon. Mazrui defines those who constitute this diaspora as "survivors of the partition of Africa in exile and their descendants." He adds that they are "casualties of the displacement caused either directly by colonialism or by the aftermath of colonial and post-colonial disruptions."[24] My thesis deals with this more recent diaspora, which as I mentioned above is also called the "New African Diaspora." Like migration expert Khalid Koser, however, I recognize the definitional complexities of this

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[23] Mazrui 2001: 3-4

[24] Mazrui 2001: 4

and any term used to label this new era of African migration.[25] Nonetheless, I find the term useful, especially to distinguish the newer phenomenon of migration from the older one.

WHO ARE THEY?

The challenge of naming or defining this new era of African migration is emblematic of a larger issue that many African immigrants face in their everyday lives; how do they name or define themselves in diaspora? When African immigrants come to America, they step into a confusion of identity, especially vis-à-vis America's more established black population—Mazrui's Diaspora of Enslavement.[26]

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[25] Koser 2003: 4. For the purposes of his book, Koser defines the newer wave of migration, which he terms the "new African diasporas," as "migrant communities from so-called 'Black' Africa, currently living outside the African continent." Of course, as Koser argues, for various reasons this term and definition are problematic. He recognizes that the definition excludes North Africans, South Africans, and others. Koser also problematizes what "new" means in "new African diasporas." Likewise, he questions "who comprises or what forms a diaspora." To be a diaspora, for example, does there need to be a "critical mass" of migrants? He also recommends that scholars be aware of not only diasporas defined by national origins, but also those defined by ethnicity or religion. In essence, Koser concludes that the concept of "new African diasporas" is a complex one. But he also concludes, "There is arguably nothing wrong with not defining fixed criteria in the definition of a diaspora – a flexible approach is perfectly appropriate for a plural and dynamic concept."

[26] This particular identity issue is discussed in a recent New York Times article titled "'African-American' Becomes a Term for Debate." See Swarns 2004. Swarns writes that some American-born blacks consider it inappropriate when foreign-born blacks call themselves "African-American." These American-born blacks argue that African immigrants "have not inherited the legacy of bondage, segregation and legal discrimination." However, an Ethiopian-born man who is featured in the article argues that he is both African and an American citizen, and that the census counts him as "African-American." He also points out that white people see him as African American.

In a chapter titled "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: My Journey in the American Maze" in *Foreign-Born African Americans: Silenced Voices in the Discourse on Race* (2002), Nigerian-born education professor Festus E. Obiakor explains his experience with this dilemma: "To some Anglo Americans, I am just another Black man and foreigner; and to some African Americans, I am not Black enough and not aware of racism and its aftereffects. The underlying message is that I should be invisible in the discourse on race—this thinking places me in a rather precarious position where I am neither 'White' nor 'Black.'"[27]

Similarly, Michael Oladejo Afolayan, also an Education professor originally from Nigeria, admits that he feels like a "member of several worlds," an experience that he calls "confusing and conflicting." He concludes, essentially, that this confusion leads to a "clash (or crash) of identity." Describing one situation that forced him to "ask myself who I truly was," he remembers:

> I was once invited to give a lecture at a school in Hamden, Connecticut. One minute before my hostess would introduce me, she walked to where I was seated and shyly asked, "Sorry, Michael, I don't want to offend you, please, how do I introduce you—African, American, African American, Nigerian American or just Nigerian?" Without much thinking, I responded, "any of those will be just fine." I never knew who I was would ever be an issue for me when I left Nigeria. I was forced to embark on a "meta-ego search" of asking myself whom [sic] I was, and to even go further to question why I needed to ask myself about myself.[28]

As Obiakor and Afolayan suggest, many African immigrants in America are, to some degree, forced to create a new identity for themselves. As my Nigerien friend Moussa Dambo explained, African immigrants are "no more African," but also not

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[27] Obiakor 2002: 4

[28] Afolayan 2002: 56-57

American; they are stuck "in the middle," a positioning with which they must come to terms.

Sociologist John A. Arthur, a Ghanaian immigrant, writes that many African newcomers desire to separate themselves from "American blacks," preferring to be understood as "African blacks." As "African blacks" they are not associated with mainstream American stereotypes of American-born blacks.[29] Mazrui, however, suggests that African immigrants, whom he calls "American Africans," will evolve into "African Americans," especially once the children and grandchildren of American Africans lose their ancestral language.[30]

So what should we call these African newcomers? As Afolayan, Arthur, and Mazrui indicate above, a confusing mix of terms exits. Since my thesis deals primarily with first and second generation African newcomers, for clarity's sake I prefer to use the term "African immigrants." The term represents an extremely diverse group of people, encompassing immigrants from all over sub-Saharan Africa, a region divided by a great variety of nationalities, ethnicities, histories, religions, languages, cultures, worldviews, economic classes, conflicts, etc. By extension, then, America's African immigrant population is equally diverse, with most black African immigrants in the U.S. coming from Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, and Kenya.[31]

This diversity leads Koser to use the term "new African diasporas," in the plural. Not only do African immigrants come from and go to different countries, but also their

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[29] Arthur 2000: 77

[30] Mazrui 2001: 5

[31] Roberts 2005: A1

homelands push and their destinations pull them for a variety of reasons. They may leave for economic reasons or because of war, while they may pick their destinations based on established social networks or job opportunities. Different diasporas also exhibit different return movements; Senegalese traders return frequently, while Ghanaians might return only to retire. Koser's plural term also highlights differences within a diasporic group—for example, along gender, generational, or economic lines. But despite these differences, African immigrants often share similar experiences, such as discrimination, or invisibility.[32] For this reason alone, one could argue that the term "New African Diaspora," in the singular, best fits the reality.

All Nations' membership certainly reflects the diversity suggested by Koser. While some members are American-born blacks and whites, the majority are African immigrants and their children, who may or may not be American-born. The immigrant members come from Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Niger, South Africa, Togo, and other countries. They represent many ethnic groups, native languages, worldviews, and Christian denominations. As we shall see later in this chapter, they left their homelands for different reasons and came to America, and Greensboro, for different reasons. Additionally, they have pursued various levels of integration into the dominant American society, and they work a variety of jobs. Generally, however, all of them are immigrants experiencing the rigors of adapting to life in America. This commonality acts as a unifying force.

[32] Koser 2003: 7-9

AFRICAN SETTLEMENT IN GREENSBORO

In this section, I tell the story of how the Greensboro area came to have its large African immigrant population. I also recount the migration story of Brother Jlay, a Liberian immigrant. His story illuminates one aspect of the larger story of the New African Diaspora in the U.S. and Greensboro.

Like in other host countries around the world, in the U.S. African newcomers typically live in urban areas. In 2000, the largest urban populations of African-born blacks were in Washington, New York, Atlanta, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Los Angeles, Boston, Houston, Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia.[33] Many also call Newark, San Francisco, Baltimore, and New Orleans home.[34] African immigrants have additionally settled in North Carolina's urban areas, including the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill) and Charlotte, and in Greensboro in particular.

The 2000 Census says North Carolina's population was 8,049,313, with a foreign-born population of 430,000. Of the latter number, 20,369 were born in Africa. Many of these African-born North Carolinians live in Guilford County, with most living in Greensboro, a city with an estimated 2000 population of 223,891. Guilford County's sub-Saharan African immigrant population includes about 3,500 Nigerians, including second and third generations; 2,700 Sudanese; about 3,000 Nigeriens; over 1,000 Liberians; several hundred Sierra Leoneans; a few hundred each from Ghana, Somalia, and Ethiopia; and many others from francophone West Africa, as well as Central and

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[33] Roberts 2005: A1

[34] Arthur 2000: 41-42

East Africa.[35]

Up until the middle of the 20th century, Europeans dominated the number of immigrants who came to the U.S. That changed in the 1960s, when the 1965 Immigration Act ended the national origins quota system, which favored Europeans. Between 1891 and 1900, 350 Africans immigrated to America. During the next fifty years, from 1900-1950, just 31,000 came. Starting in the 1960s, African immigrants came in much larger numbers. In fact, the number of Africans in America grew by a factor of five between 1970 and 1990, from 61,463 in 1970 to 363, 819 in 1990.[36] All the immigrant members of All Nations arrived after 1965.

Given this national trend, it is not surprising that the story of voluntary African immigration to Greensboro began in earnest in the 1960s. In that decade, Greensboro was at the forefront of the Civil Rights movement, and North Carolina A&T State University, a historically black college, attracted many African students. Nigerians, Ghanaians, Liberians, and Sierra Leoneans came around this time. But they remained practically hidden, receiving little attention from the larger public. In the 1970s and 1980s, more immigrants arrived in the area; and they too were little noticed.[37]

Many Africans have also been resettled in the Greensboro area as refugees. The 1980 Refugee Act supplied fifty thousand visas for refugees, and granted the President the power—with the approval of Congress—to accept more than the fifty thousand

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[35] Center for New North Carolinians 2008

[36] Arthur 2000: 1-2

[37] Center for New North Carolinians n.d.

maximum.[38] In 1979, Lutheran Family Services (LFS), a refugee resettlement agency associated with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, opened a resettlement office in Greensboro. Additional refugee resettlement agencies established offices in Guilford County by the 1990s, including World Relief in High Point, Jewish Family Services in Greensboro, and Church World Service (who had contracted with LFS) in Greensboro. As a result of these agencies' location in Guilford County, large numbers of refugees were resettled there.[39]

Starting in the 1990s, African immigrants and refugees came to the Greensboro area in increasing numbers. A Somali community started in 1994. By the middle of the 1990s, Sudanese refugees arrived and were joined later by others, including immigrants. By the turn of the century, their population had grown to 2,200.[40] As mentioned above, it now stands at about 2,700.[41] Likewise, newcomers from Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, and Liberia (totaling only a few hundred together) have resettled, and have been joined by their compatriots from elsewhere.[42]

The 1990 Immigration Act contributed to the influx of Africans coming to the U.S. in the 1990s. The act allowed for more immigrants with employable skills to come to America, and also started a program to increase immigration from countries and parts

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[38] Arthur 2000: 8

[39] Bailey 2005: 59-60

[40] Bailey 2005: 64-65

[41] The director of the North Carolina African Services Coalition, Omer Omer, a Sudanese immigrant, expects the Sudanese population to double in the next several years.

[42] Bailey 2005: 65

of the world that had little representation in America.[43] Initiated in 1990, the Visa Lottery program gives 55,000 visas annually to people from underrepresented immigration sources; Africa receives 20,000 of these visas. Those Africans who find it difficult to come to America for other reasons are given a chance to win the lottery and migrate.[44] At least two members of All Nations have won the lottery.

Brother Jlay, a deacon at All Nations, was one of these. Born in 1967 near Greenville, Liberia, he was the first person in his large family (which included his father, his father's two wives, and their nine children) to leave their village to go to Monrovia. He was also the first and only person in his family to come to America.

In 1989, during Brother Jlay's first semester of college, the Liberian war began. He fled Monrovia, not returning until 1992. He recalls that during the war, traveling to America "was out of my mind." He explains why he did not leave the war-torn country for the U.S.:

> I must confess, from day one, when I started knowing myself, I don't like America. I must confess. I said, "I don't want to go to America. I don't want to go there." The first reason is that we Liberians—we don't like traveling so we don't take the risk of traveling. What I mean by that is that when we are going to a place, we expect to meet somebody there that will host us. We don't want to take the risk and say, "Let me just go. I may find somebody." So, that was in my mind. I don't want to—not only did I not want to come to America, I don't even want to leave Liberia. That's why the whole wartime I did not leave Liberia. I was just migrating from one village to another village. That's what I did. And when the war seized down a little bit, I went back to Monrovia.[45]

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[43] Arthur 2000: 9

[44] Konadu-Agyemang and Takyi 2006: 5

[45] Jlay 2007. All future Brother Jlay quotes come from this interview.

Back in Monrovia, Brother Jlay worked two jobs, but still found little success in life. His existence was "hand-to-mouth." As he describes it: "You were living a daffodil's life." The future was bleak.

But not all was bleak. During this period, Brother Jlay met his wife and became a father. When his wife and daughter left for America to live with relatives, it left an aching "gap" in his life. His daughter was four months old at the time. Up until that point, Brother Jlay had done all he could to avoid migrating to America, but now he desperately wanted to. He explains, "So now in my heart, now I know who I'm coming to."

Brother Jlay tells the story of what happened next: "A friend of mine came and say, 'Oh they have a diversity lottery program at the embassy. You want to take part?' I said, 'Man, I don't want that,' because I don't believe in chances. Well he brought it [the paperwork]. He and I would apply. He applied. I applied. And, as God would have it, I was blessed. I won." But his friend did not.

Leaving his family at the airport was "sad," he remembers, but after entering the airport, he felt excited. After all, winning the lottery meant he could join his wife and daughter in America. It had been two years since he saw them. Brother Jlay came to Greensboro, where his family was. For nearly ten years, Brother Jlay has called the city home.

WHY ARE THEY HERE?

As the migration stories of Pastor and Brother Jlay suggest, African immigrants leave their homelands and come to America for various reasons. But they all seek to

make a better life for themselves. Regarding how he felt about coming to the U.S., Pastor explains, "There's an elation because you are leaving behind a future that you didn't know how bleak it was going to be or how bad it was going to be. You didn't know."[46] As Arthur points out, many Africans "view the United States as the land of immense economic opportunity, liberty, and freedom." That perception, he continues, "has created a 'going abroad to the United States' syndrome in all levels of African society, particularly among youths, urbanites, and educated people."[47]

Coming to America, as Brother Jlay elaborates, is "everybody's dream." He points out that, from his perspective, few Americans understand the "importance of America outside America." And he explains why the U.S. is so desired: "Because people out there see that there is an opportunity here [in America], that when they come here they can spring up." He adds, "Pastors sometimes preach that there [are] some people in Africa [who] don't even have fitting shoes. They come here, they even have cars. So that's a good future for them. Yeah, that's a good future." Similarly, when Pastor's brother promised to help him come to America, Pastor remembers, "I said, 'Wow, that's great. I'm going to heaven on earth.'"[48]

Different people come for different reasons. Arthur surveyed several hundred African immigrants in four American cities and found four chief reasons why Africans

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[46] Som-Pimpong 2007. In reading an earlier draft of my thesis, Pastor was uncomfortable with how some of his quotes read. Recognizing the disparity between the spoken and written word, and wanting to accord Pastor the same editorial prerogative that I have, I felt it appropriate to make these quotes read more fluently. Pastor has reviewed and approved all of the changes I made.

[47] Arthur 2000: 24

[48] Som-Pimpong 2007

come to America. First, many immigrate to receive a higher education. Second, they travel to reunite with relatives. Third, they come to pursue economic opportunities. And fourth, they immigrate to flee "political terror and instability" in their homelands.[49] Economist Kofi Apraku, after surveying 250 highly skilled African immigrants from various countries, discovered a similar set of reasons.[50] But Africans do not simply come for one or another of these four reasons. Often they come for a combination of them. Brother Jlay, for example, came both to reunite with his wife and daughter, and also to escape a bleak economic future.

In like manner, Mama Dora Iris King, a long-time member of All Nations, came for a variety of reasons. Born in 1933 in Lagos, Nigeria, to Sierra Leonean parents, she spent her first twelve years in Nigeria before her family moved to Freetown, Sierra Leone. There, after finishing high school, she worked as a secretary/typist, first at a bookstore, then at a college, and later at two government ministries. Mama Dora Iris King got married in 1956 and had five children—three boys and two girls—before separating from her husband. In 1991, she came to the U.S. because her daughter, who had attended Bennett College in Greensboro, was getting married. The wedding took place in 1992.

Mama Dora Iris King first went to New York City, where she had another daughter living at the time, before arriving in Greensboro for the wedding. She fully expected to return to Sierra Leone after her daughter got married. But this was not to be. She recalls, "I came to visit and then we had a war. The year I came that was the year

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[49] Arthur 2000: 20

[50] Apraku 1991

there was a war back home in our country."[51] She added, "I couldn't return back." Although her situation at that time was similar to that of refugees from Sierra Leone, she did not get refugee status. Instead, her daughter filed for her to become a permanent resident. "The country got spoiled because they, they destroyed our country and some of our relatives died, you see. And then some of my—I have two kids back home who are still there. They cannot get jobs because the country is deteriorated." A short while later, one of her sons won the diversity lottery and joined her in the U.S. Her family had brought her to America and war, along with her three children in the U.S., kept her here.

Church member Ndifreke Amama's migration story suggests the complexity of the motivations that cause Africans to come to America. He was born in 1985 in Lafayette, Louisiana, while his father was studying at a university there. Brother Ndi has always been an American citizen. But before he was a year old, his family moved back to Nigeria, when his father got a lucrative job. Brother Ndi grew up in Lagos State, finished high school in Nigeria, and then came to America at age seventeen.

Brother Ndi did not come for any of the four main reasons cited above. He did not migrate to pursue his education (although he recently finished an Associate's degree in Biology at Guilford Technical Community College and is currently attending the University of North Carolina at Greensboro). Nor did he come to reunite with his family (although he did reunite with his brother in Greensboro when he came). And he was not escaping economic hardship; his family was financially secure, with his father working as an electrical engineer for Nigeria's number one telecommunications system, and his mother, a social worker by training, working at the Ministry of Information. (In fact,

[51] King 2007. All future Mama Dora Iris King quotes come from this interview.

when he first told his father he wanted to go to America, his father responded, "You are not going anywhere. What is the point? What is the point of going to the States when I can take care of you here?")[52] Finally, he did not come to escape political problems or instability in Nigeria.

The major reason for Brother Ndi's migration was that he wanted to earn his keep in life. Before making up his mind to leave, he had lived a pampered life, and acted like a spoiled "rascal." He explains: "I just had this mindset of being independent because, you know, I grew up having everything, everything. And I just thought that, you know, let there be change." Likewise, he recalls, "I actually wanted to be like, if at all I am successful, yes I will have a proud father, by the grace of God; but also at least people know that I worked hard for it. It's not something like I just inherited without any work." He concludes, "I'm glad that I took that step, because it has actually made me a better person now." Brother Ndi thanks God for giving him this mindset, for inspiring him to "come [to America] to become a man."

Just as Africans come to America for many reasons, so too do many reasons determine where they end up settling. Many settle where family members already live; others pick places for less obvious reasons. Still others have no choice, as they are resettled somewhere. They may decide, of course, to leave this resettlement site and relocate elsewhere.

Greensboro is one of these resettlement sites for refugees. The city attracts immigrants because of its manufacturing, construction, farming, and service sector jobs.[53]

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[52] Amama 2007. All future Brother Ndi quotes come from this interview.

[53] Bailey 2005: 71

The availability of jobs is highlighted in the story of Nigerien immigrant Garba Hima, one of anthropologist Paul Stoller's consultants for his book on West African street traders in New York City. Mr. Hima remembers, "I heard that there was work for Africans in Greensboro, North Carolina. I flew there, found a job, found an apartment, flew back to New York City, packed my belongings and took a bus there." Stoller reports that Mr. Hima worked at a raincoat factory and at McDonald's, and that he eventually found a larger apartment. And Stoller explains, "From the outset, he [Mr. Hima] urged his compatriots to come to Greensboro." Listing why Greensboro was good for African immigrants, Mr. Hima said, "The weather is warm here. There are many Africans working in factories. We have a nice mosque. Apartments and food are cheap. No crime. And people are friendly. They treat you with respect."[54]

Not all African immigrants, of course, come here to stay; many immigrate fully intending to return to their homelands again. Arthur reminds us that many African immigrants are "waiting patiently for conditions to improve at home, and then repatriating."[55] He elaborates: "Many consider themselves sojourners in the United States, intending to return home when economic and political conditions improve."[56] Many immigrants no doubt do return, but many also stay. Those whose migration to America is temporary often invest in their home countries, building homes or starting businesses. And, as mentioned earlier, there are different types of return movements;

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[54] Stoller 2002: 142

[55] Arthur 2000: ix

[56] Arthur 2000: 3

some immigrants, like traders, move back and forth regularly and others will retire back home. Many, however, will never set foot in their home country again.

Kofi Apraku's survey suggests a variety of factors that African immigrants take into consideration when deciding to stay in America or return to their homelands. They miss "family; friends; the friendly African atmosphere; the sense of belonging and recognition; and the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to their countries and communities." For these, and no doubt other reasons, a large majority of those surveyed intended to return to their home countries at some point to live permanently. Nonetheless, many of them will stay in America. In explaining this choice, the survey's respondents pointed to: "political freedoms; civil liberties; economic system and economic opportunity; economic conveniences; and job satisfaction." They also do not miss "political dictatorship, corruption, economic mismanagement, civil wars, tribalism, and lack of political and personal freedoms in their countries."[57]

Whether African newcomers stay in America for a short time or for good, they have to make their lives here. And that is not always easy. Apraku reports that those who responded to his survey disliked America's "racism and discrimination against blacks; crime; drugs and violence; low prospects for professional advancement; and the feeling of alienation and the lack of a sense of belonging."[58]

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[57] Apraku 1991: 4-5

[58] Apraku 1991: 4

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I told the diverse migration stories of Pastor, Brother Jlay, Mama Dora Iris King, and Brother Ndi. At the same time, I discussed the identity issues many African immigrants face, the history of African immigrant settlement in Greensboro specifically, and the diverse reasons why Africans leave their homelands and settle in America and Greensboro. Telling the stories and contextualizing them in this way shows that African immigrants, like Pastor and the other immigrant members of All Nations, do not always share similar reasons for leaving their homelands and settling where they do. But once they arrive in America, they all become immigrants, a confusing transformation that requires them to create an identity as immigrants.

In attempting to create a life in America, Pastor remembers feeling what most African immigrants probably feel: "This world was so new and so different, and I had no idea where my place in it was."[59] However, Pastor remembers: "But God also had a plan in it [coming to America] for me. And the plan that He had in it for me I believe is this, where we are now, the church. You know, to be what He wants me to be, to evangelize a nation called America, and to bring the people together to serve the living God."[60] In bringing the church's immigrant members together, Pastor and All Nations attempt to combat the confusion of identity and feeling of displacement—this feeling of alienation and the lack of a sense of belonging—many of these members no doubt experience.

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[59] Som-Pimpong 2005: 68

[60] Som-Pimpong 2007

CHAPTER THREE

"God had a plan"

In the Beginning:
Place-Making at All Nations

As the previous chapter discussed, immigrants find it necessary to re-imagine themselves in their new homes; they must create new individual and collective identities. In order to achieve this, however, it is important for these newcomers to create a meaningful place in which to do this re-imagining. Religious organizations, such as churches, often serve this purpose; this is certainly true among African immigrants. And spiritual leaders like Pastor often take the lead in place-making, and in helping newcomers construct their new identities.

This chapter focuses on the beginnings of All Nations, including its vision. Generally it chronicles Pastor and the church members' earliest steps in creating a meaningful place of their own, a particularly significant achievement when one considers that immigrants typically have no places to call their own. After telling the stories of Pastor's earliest divine encounters, which transformed his early life and guide him to this day, this chapter recounts the prophecy that influenced the founding of All Nations, the acquisition of the church's building, and the transformation of the building into a church. The final section of the chapter discusses the church vision, including its goal to welcome *all* nations and to unite them. In the end, this chapter lays the groundwork for the fourth

chapter, which discusses how aspects of the vision are made real through various liturgical and social acts.

TWO ENCOUNTERS

In *The Changing Face of Christianity*, historian Joel A. Carpenter reports that between 1900 and 2005, the number of Christians in Africa increased from approximately nine million to 380 million. As he understands it, the increasing popularity of Christianity in the non-Western world is "one of the most important but least examined changes in the world over the past century." Carpenter sees Christianity as "more vigorous and vibrant in the global South than among the world's richer and more powerful regions" and refers to this phenomenon as a "globalization from below."[61]

Pastor's homeland, Ghana, is a "global South" country in which Christianity is definitely "vigorous and vibrant." As a youngster, Pastor spent several years living in a community that included members of the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Catholic Churches. Additionally, other people practiced what Pastor calls "old religions" (traditional faiths); still others followed hybrid religions, mixing traditional faiths with Christianity. And some practiced Christianity in public and a traditional faith in private. (Pastor is sure to mention that he was *not* of this type). At age six, Pastor was confirmed in the Anglican Church.[62]

Two important events shaped Pastor's early religious life, as well as his life beyond, including his vision for All Nations. Both events became testimonies that would

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[61] Carpenter 2005: vii

[62] Som-Pimpong 2005: 31-32

affect and inspire many others. At ten years old, Pastor experienced his "first encounter." He remembers:

> That was almost like the experience that Paul had on his way to Damascus. Mine was while sleeping. In the afternoon, I was just taking a nap and I fell in a trance. At age ten, I saw like the image of Christ right in the window, wearing a white veil with his palms open as if he was telling me something. But the only communication was that silence with his palms. In my heart, once I saw his palms, you know I felt a deep sense of grief, because I was seeing like the nail scars in his palms. And instantly I woke up. As soon as I got up, I mean the sight was not, the person, the image was no longer there. So that really startled me. So I worried about it.[63]

Pastor asked his senior brother, Walter, who was already a Christian, what the encounter meant. Walter used a wordless book to explain to Pastor how Christ operates in a person's life. The book featured only colors: black symbolized a sinful heart; red the cleansing blood of Christ; white a cleansed heart; and gold the streets of gold in heaven. Walter interpreted Pastor's encounter to mean that Christ had shown himself to Pastor in order to convey how He died for Pastor's sins and would set Pastor free by washing him clean of sin. After hearing his brother's interpretation, Pastor remembers, "I gave my life to Christ."[64]

"I saw the vision of Christ, and He entered my heart," Pastor explains, "but I was still just a boy."[65] He recalls, "Even though I took that step, it didn't profoundly affect me because I was just a child, ten years old. The real encounter came four years later at age fourteen."[66] By that time, Pastor was attending Suhum Secondary Technical School,

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[63] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[64] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[65] Som-Pimpong 2005: 33

[66] Som-Pimpong 2006a

a boarding school in eastern Ghana.[67] Perhaps the most life-changing period in Pastor's early life began at this school. In addition to being a top student, Pastor was also a good athlete; during a tied soccer game, Pastor found himself alone with the ball near the other team's goal, with only their goalkeeper left to beat. If he scored, he would be a hero.[68] Pastor recounts what happened next:

> When I was on my way to score, there was a mid-air collision. I had jumped. The ball was in the air. I was going to head the ball past the goalkeeper. And this goalkeeper was a huge guy. Then, you can imagine, I was short, very short, but this guy was tall and huge, like Shaquille O'Neal, you know, that build. He jumped in the air, grabbed the ball whilst we were both in the air. Grabbed the ball with his hand. He had the advantage over me; he can use his hands. I can only use my head because if I use my hands it's a foul. So he grabbed the ball, grabbed me from mid-air, and then hit, brought me down hard, you know, fell on me.
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> So when I fell, that affected my spinal cord. So I had a sprained spine which affected my everything—my memory, my concentration, my focus, everything. From that point on, it's like I started going down academically. Before then I was on scholarship. I was among the first ten in a class of 135, . . . I was among the ten best students. That gave me a full scholarship to go to school. But because of my injury, my grades were going down because I couldn't concentrate, focus, couldn't retain anything in my mind.
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> It affected me so bad, to the point that I started thinking of committing suicide, because I had no joy. I had no peace. . . . For a whole year, I never took exams, nothing, but they promoted me to the second year because of my previous academic performance. But then when you go to the third year in Ghana, it's very competitive because you have a few high schools and everybody wants to get in. So when you get in, you have to justify your being there by being academically bright. So I found myself lagging behind, which meant that I was going to be expelled from the school if I didn't, I mean, do well. I would lose the scholarship, I would be expelled from the school to go home, and what a shame that would be. And because of the humiliation and all those things, I said "No. I just have to commit suicide."
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> But then before I did that, I had some letters. You see those books over there [Pastor points to some books on a nearby shelf in his office], there's one of the

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[67] Som-Pimpong 2005: 13

[68] Som-Pimpong 2005: 15

books called *You Will Never Be the Same*. It's a book written by a lady named Basilea Schlink, a German author. She's a Christian. Very powerful book. I had the privilege of receiving that from my brother, Walter. He gave me that book. So as I read the book it's a book about 48 sins in one's life. I said, "48 sins. I am not aware of any." So I just took the book and a Bible, left for the classroom. I was in a boarding school and I left the dormitory for the classroom. I went to the third floor of the classroom. And I told the Lord, "I'm going before you. Seven days of fasting. I will sleep in the classroom. I'm not going to the dormitory. I'm not going to the dining hall. Nothing. I'll go from the cubicle on the third floor, from there to classes, and then back there." And, I said after the seventh day if the Lord has not healed me of this injury, I was going to jump from the top floor and commit suicide.

But before I took this decision, I had been going to doctors upon doctors. All they could afford to give me was Neuralgene [an injection], something to kill the pain, but it was not doing anything. They all got fed up. So I was left to fend for myself; I went to consult a fetish, this kind of a prophet. There are some fake prophets in Ghana. They profess to be the ones who are visited by angels. They can heal you and everything. It didn't work. They gave me holy water, everything to drink. None of them worked. So I knew that now the last resort was between me and God and an encounter. If nothing happens, you know.

But then the first day came and passed. Nothing happened. The second day came, I was tired. I was weak because of no food, no water, nothing. I wasn't drinking. I was going dry. The third day came, I could feel some kind of—it's like, some weaknesses, like something was going to happen, but I didn't know what it was. On the third day—at the end of the third day of fasting, reading the scriptures, praying with that book and confessing my sins, and weeping and all that before God, third day—when the third day ended in the evening, it was like somebody had poured cold water over me, a bucket of cold water over me, some kind of joyous sensation. I don't know where it was coming from and I felt like a heavy load had been lifted off me. And I said, "Could this be the healing?" But I couldn't place my finger on it.

The next day we were to take math exams in the class. Here is somebody, I just go to class just to be there. I was like a zombie. All through they were teaching, nothing gets in. That was how bad my situation was. I was just out of the place, even though there physically, but mind-wise and all that I was just away. Nothing was sticking. So when I went to sleep that night, the third night, with that joyous sensation and that weight lifted, I was so hilarious. I felt so joyous, a sense of joy, and went to sleep. Then in the night, I had a visitation. The angels were whispering into my ears. They were telling me, they had come to tell me I need to go to the exams, because I was afraid. I didn't want to go, but they said I shouldn't be afraid, "Go." There were two angels—one here, one there [Pastor points to one shoulder, then the other]. I could feel their presence, but I didn't see them and I could hear them as they spoke to me, "Go and take the exams."

> So the next day, I got up and I went—that was on a Thursday. I went, sat in the exam's room. The math problem was put on. I started writing. Looked at the test. Each problem, I saw the problem, the answers just started coming, and you don't just write down the answers, you have to show your work. And I was working; I was showing everything, you know, working. And joy, this deep sense of joy and excitement. The answers were coming. Everything was just coming naturally. At the end of the day, when the results came, I had 95%. That was an A. The Lord said, "Albert, this is it. I've healed you. Now I need you to go and tell the whole world about me." So that was the most profound experience that I had. And that is what has leaded me on, besides the picture of Christ that I saw at ten, because that was the day of my commissioning when the Lord said, "Albert, you need to go and minister." And so that was the beginning of it.[69]

Very soon after his healing encounter, Pastor began ministering. At school, he did what he calls "dawn broadcasts," preaching into the air outside of his school's dormitories every morning at around 4 a.m.[70] This was one way that Pastor spread God's Word. Around the same time, he joined an Apostolic church called United Calvary Church, where he began "crusading." The church's founder, Auntie Susie—whom Pastor admits "contributed most to my development as a Christian"—encouraged crusading, or outreaching to spread God's Word.[71] During this early period of Pastor's evangelistic activities, he helped foster a revival at his school, inspiring many students to become Christians. At the time, Pastor considered the revival as a confirmation of his calling to tell the world about God.

After coming to America, Pastor spent his first Sunday at Union Baptist Church in Roxboro, N.C.; the church, which his sister-in-law's family attended, had sponsored

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[69] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[70] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[71] Som-Pimpong 2005: 58

him.[72] But Pastor did not stay there. While in Raleigh, he joined Watts Chapel Baptist Church, where he met his future wife, Dora Lovie Victoria Liverman. Born in 1956 in Elizabeth City, N.C., Mama Dora—as many All Nations' members prefer to call her—was attending graduate school at North Carolina State University at the time. Later, Pastor and Mama Dora attended another Raleigh church, Spiritual Life Fellowship, where they married. From Raleigh they moved to Greensboro when Mama Dora got a job at North Carolina A&T State University.

In Greensboro, Pastor and Mama Dora began crusading, as Pastor had in Ghana. For many years, they crusaded in several of Greensboro's housing projects. They also ministered at a nursing home and prisons, and broadcast on television and over the radio.[73]

A PROPHECY

But all that would change when Pastor and Mama Dora co-founded All Nations. In 1995, a visiting pastor prophesized the church's founding. During the Gulf War, Pastor and other Christian African immigrants came together to pray for peace, and engaged in various other activities as well. While so doing, they became the Greensboro chapter of the African Christian Fellowship (ACF), a national organization. In late 1995, Pastor and the other ACF members held a revival, and invited a visiting pastor, Lufile Ehambe, to come and speak. Because Ehambe, like Pastor, had been sick and

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[72] Som-Pimpong 2005: 68

[73] Som-Pimpong 2005: 78-88

miraculously healed, he had inspired Pastor.[74] Originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pastor Ehambe came to Greensboro from his home in Texas, and during the revival he prophesized that Pastor would "settle down and start a church."[75] Pastor remembers that life-changing moment:

> When everything else was done, Reverend Ehambe had a prophecy for me. He called me up to the stage and said, "The Lord has work for you." He then told me that the work the Lord had planned for me was described in the book of Ezekiel in chapter thirty-four, when the Lord speaks of a shepherd settling with his flock. In that chapter it is written: "And the word of the Lord came unto me saying 'Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say unto them, thus sayeth the Lord God unto the shepherd, woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?'"[76]

Before the prophecy, as mentioned earlier, Pastor and Mama Dora had been evangelizing in various ways, but not from their own church. At that time, they were members of the First Church of God. Pastor was used to, and happy about, these aspects of his life. As a result, for the month following the prophecy, he thought little of it. But after an ACF prayer meeting, someone asked Pastor what he was thinking regarding the prophecy. Pastor decided he needed to go before the Lord to make sure that starting a church was the correct thing to do. Mama Dora recalls, "In fact, all throughout his ministry he was not looking towards pastoring because he's been preaching and ministering for a long time. He was not seeking to pastor a church, so he wanted to make sure that that's what God wanted him to do."[77] After all, for Pastor, starting a church

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[74] Som-Pimpong 2005: 88-90

[75] Som-Pimpong 2006c

[76] Som-Pimpong 2005: 90

[77] Som-Pimpong, D. 2007a. All future Mama Dora quotes come from this interview.

meant sacrificing much, including his ministerial activities in the housing projects, the nursing home, and prisons, as well as his membership at First Church of God. Pastor explains, "I didn't want to leave any of those things. I was just enjoying it." And he continues:

> I hadn't thought of starting a church, period. I had to fast; I had to go before the Lord, fast, and see God's face to make sure that it was His voice that I heard, that is concerning the prophecy, and not some man just telling me something. Because we live in an era where you have people who come and want you to start a church to benefit them. And I didn't want any part of that. I wanted to make sure that I am doing what the Lord wants me to do. So for that seven days [of fasting], there was some things that the Lord was showing to me to confirm that was His voice. The nursing home that I was going to to minister—it shut down. They closed it down because somebody died [they fell]. . . . So that was one sign. They shut it down. And then the church I was going to, the First Church of God, I mean they kept on changing pastors so much, things going on. It came to a point where there was not even a pastor. Somebody was just coming from Burlington. All those things, plus the things that the Lord spoke to me in my dream [during the fast], in the vision and everything, confirmed that that [starting a church] is what the Lord wanted me to do.[78]

The prophecy concerning All Nations' founding was not the only one about starting a church that Pastor had experienced. In Ghana, at a revival in 1980, a prophetess told him she saw him wearing a pastoral robe in front of a congregation. And before that, an American evangelist from California, who came in 1978 to crusade in Ghana, prophesized that Pastor would shepherd a flock in a "faraway country."[79]

ACQUIRING THE CHURCH'S BUILDING

"I didn't have really mixed feelings," recalls Mama Dora regarding Pastor's decision to start a church, "or I didn't have any fear or just—I've always been that way,

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[78] Som-Pimpong 2006c

[79] Som-Pimpong 2005: 58

just go along with whatever God's will is. If it's God's will, then I just have no other choice." In order to go along with God's will, Pastor would have to find a building the church could call its own. As we shall see, that would prove to be difficult.

Prior to the prophecy, the ACF met as a prayer group at its members' homes—one this Sunday, another the next. After attending their respective churches on Sunday morning, they came together for prayer on Sunday afternoon. When planning an ACF anniversary celebration, which they wanted to be "big," Pastor and some other members approached Pastor Nelson Johnson of Faith Community Church in downtown Greensboro to request the use of his chapel for the event. The church agreed to lend the ACF the space it needed. After the celebration, the ACF returned to meeting in its members' homes.

But then the prophecy came, along with Pastor's decision to found a church, prompting Pastor to find a suitable space for use as a church. Once again Pastor asked Pastor Nelson for the use of his chapel, and once again Pastor Nelson obliged. Pastor's new church, now named All Nations Evangelical Church, had a space. But the space was not the church's own. Nonetheless, the chapel served its purpose and All Nations' Sunday services began. While some ACF members continued to attend their original churches, others left their church homes to join All Nations. Altogether, All Nations met at Faith Community Church's chapel from the end of 1995 through 1996. For most of that time, they paid nothing for the space.

While All Nations met there, Pastor began searching for a different space. "You don't want to overstay your welcome," Pastor explains, "so while there I was looking for a

place to, that we'd call our home."[80] In late summer 1996, Pastor found a suitable candidate, a building that was formerly a Peugeot car dealership (and today is the Greensboro Children's Museum). But the building cost $1.5 million. Obviously, the young church could not afford this price. The search continued.

The next building Pastor considered—another commercial space—cost just $275,000. Pastor expressed interest in the building on Ring Road and met with its realtor:

> I wanted it so I went and saw the guy. . . . That was Trip Brown, Chester "Trip" Brown, Brown Investment Property. So he said, "Albert, it's $275,000." I said, "I don't have money." "So what are you going to buy with? What are you going to use in buying?" "I don't have money." So just then, because we didn't have money, the Lutheran Family Services, they jumped ahead of us because they have money. So they got the building on lease to buy. When we came to look at it the first time, it looked messy. Very messy. So not only are we going to buy it for $275,000 if we had money, but we are going to spend extra thousands of dollars to fix it up, which we didn't have. So God had a plan. He knew what He had for us. So we lost it to Lutheran Family Services.

Again Pastor resumed his search. But after looking at another building—a church—that cost $600,000, he gave up. He remembers:

> I left there really disappointed because I thought God was going to do a miracle there. I started campaigning to raise funds, but you can't raise $600,000, especially when you are Albert Pimpong. So I left that and gave up. I just gave up. I wanted to just stay where we were, but I was still praying.

A year later, God intervened. While praying on his knees, Pastor received a phone call that would change his and All Nations' fortunes. On the other end of the phone was Trip Brown. Pastor recounts the phone conversation:

> He said, "Albert, are you standing or sitting?" I said, "I'm on my knees." He said, "Yeah that's the right place to be. Well Albert, do you remember the building that we talked about last year?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, the Lutheran Family Services, they said they don't want to continue the lease anymore so there [the building] is becoming available and I've spoken to Malbert Smith who owns the building and he's willing to sell the building to you if only

[80] Som-Pimpong 2006a. The next four Pastor quotes come from this interview.

> you can come up with $30,000 by the 31st of December. And he is going to give it to you for $100,000."

It was the 15th of December. Pastor had about two weeks to raise the money. After calling many friends asking for donations, he eventually raised almost $20,000 by the deadline; but he was $10,000 short. But Trip Brown offered to help, loaning Pastor the rest (and later gifting it to him), enabling Pastor to purchase the building. While closing the deal on the last day of December, the lawyer said, "I couldn't even get a building at such a prime rate. So what is it that you have been doing to make this happen?" Pastor responded, "The Lord." Pastor signed the building's papers and was handed the key. When I asked Pastor how he felt at that moment, he responded, "Wow." And he continued, "Once the key came it was like the heavens had opened. It is like you are entering into a whole new world. That was the feeling that came upon me; you are entering into a new world."[81]

CONVERTING THE NEW WORLD

Pastor and All Nations' members now had a space of their own. Their new building was what folklorist Susan Slyomovics calls "the quintessential urban venue, the commercial storefront." She defines "storefront" as "a first-floor space facing on the street, its entrance flanked by glass windows for merchandise display, that is generally owned or rented by a business for use as a shop."[82] That description fits All Nations' building perfectly. The building is one story tall; faces the street; has an entrance flanked by glass windows, which presumably displayed merchandise at one time; and at least two

[81] Som-Pimpong 2006c

[82] Slyomovics 1996: 204

businesses have inhabited it in its history. Just as the Muslims described by Slyomovics transformed various types of urban buildings into mosques, Pastor and the members of All Nations would transform their new building into a suitable church.

It would be helpful to keep in mind the concepts of "space" and "place," as many scholars understand them, in order to better understand how Pastor and All Nations' members transformed—and not just physically—a building designed to be a store into their church. Geographer Tim Cresswell writes: "Space . . . has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning—as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way . . . it becomes a place."[83] Thus, he defines "place" as "a meaningful location."[84] Making a place, or investing a space with meaning, can help people form their identity, as individuals and also as a group. It can also help people create a sense of belonging, which is especially important in the immigrant context.

The church's 6,000 square foot rectangular building sits very near the southwest corner of a 32,000 square foot lot, allowing for about 40 parking spaces.[85] Pastor thinks the building dates to around 1972, but is unsure about its original occupant. The Greensboro city directory lists no Ring Road (the street the building faces) until 1979. At that time, Kelly Ed TV & Appliance Company occupied the space. That business was there until around 1983, when the directory lists the building as vacant. In 1984,

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[83] Cresswell 2004: 10

[84] Cresswell 2004: 7

[85] Som-Pimpong 2005: 121

Computerland Inc. occupied the building and stayed until the mid-1990s; they were the occupants that Pastor associated with the building. It was around that time, in the mid-1990s, that Lutheran Family Services and then All Nations took it over.

Though the building's condition was poor when Pastor bought it, he was nonetheless "excited," adding that he was "the first African to start a church in Greensboro" and "the first African to own a building" that "we could call our own." He remembers that his excitement "overshadowed everything," such that he "wasn't looking at how bad this or how bad that was."[86] All that mattered was that he and the church members had their own building, their own space. Like Pastor's first impression, Mama Dora's was similarly positive:

> I was amazed by it. It's like, unbelievable. Could this be ours? And then there—it was just empty space and there were a lot of compartments. You see all these compartments now [she points to some rooms]? There were a lot more compartments, but we came in and tore some of the walls down to make it more like a sanctuary. I often say, I mean, it's like it was just perfect for us for a church because there are at least two bathrooms, one for male and female, and the way we have the kitchen and the fellowship hall. I mean, this was a computer store originally, but it's just perfect for a church, for a small church like ours.

According to Pastor, a church can be created anywhere. In fact, he admits that a church does not even need to have a building. When I asked Pastor what he thought a space needed in order for it to be an acceptable church, he answered, "That one I believe is left to one's own taste, because you don't have to have anything. You could worship, you could just be under a tree and it will—and if you call it a church, it's a church."

Despite this assertion, Pastor admits that there are accepted norms regarding what constitutes an "acceptable" church. The first of these is a platform on which the pastor stands in order to see the congregation; the second is a pulpit on which to put the Bible.

[86] Som-Pimpong 2006c. The next two Pastor quotes come from this interview.

A member rescued All Nations' first platform from a dumpster at a Lowe's Home Improvement store; later, the church built a bigger platform, which they placed against the sanctuary's east wall. On the red, carpeted platform sit two wood, throne-like chairs and some plants, as well as a clear plastic pulpit. The platform raises these objects, as well as Pastor, about eighteen inches off the ground.

Pastor also included two other features in his list: an overhead projector and musical instruments. He uses the overhead to project song lyrics, freeing the congregants' hands for clapping. From the congregations' point of view, the projector is located to the platform's right. In addition to the overhead, Pastor uses musical instruments, and especially drums. Percussive instruments, like congas and a drumkit, are common in churches like All Nations, which count many African immigrants as members. Used as an integral part of praise—as suggested in the Book of Psalms—these instruments sit to the platform's left, opposite the overhead. "So basically," concluded Pastor,

> those are some of the things for us we have chosen to have to make it a complete church. But without them, the test of whether you are really worshipping God or serving God should be how would you be if all these things are taken away. If they are taken away and you can't worship God, then I'm afraid there is a question mark on it. And so we are able to do with it and we are able to do without it.

As Mama Dora has suggested, transforming the space into a church proved to be quite difficult. As had also been prophesized by Pastor Ehambe on that fateful day in 1995, Pastor would receive help with the renovation from family and friends, like Trip Brown. Help also came from some unlikely sources, including Cecil Little, owner of a mom-and-pop grocery chain in the Greensboro area. A friend introduced Pastor to Mr. Little, who suggested that the 1,200 square foot sanctuary, which was somewhat

crowded, could be reoriented to face east instead of north. The reorientation, which entailed demolishing four rooms, would make way for a new platform and area for the praise team, and would provide the sanctuary with more space. Pastor, although hesitant to destroy rooms, agreed and Mr. Little lent the church a worker to complete the job.

Reorienting the sanctuary was only one of a handful of renovation projects. Another was fixing the shoddy bathrooms. Mr. Little also lent the church a laborer to re-work the bathrooms, which had to be re-done to meet the health department's regulations. Similarly, Westover Church helped re-wire the space, and gave All Nations $5,000 to purchase kitchen equipment, including refrigerators, a table, a gas stove, and a sink.

Pastor received even more help when acquiring the chairs for the congregation. Mama Dora remembers, "And we came in, it was empty. So I was like, 'We have a church, but where are we going to sit?'" The very week they moved in, a couple who had been fellowshipping with the church, and who are now doing missionary work in Kenya, acquired the church's first set of chairs. A relative's church donated the chairs, which All Nations used until they purchased their own set.

Other than creating an A/V room (where church-workers—including Brother Jlay—record services), fixing the air conditioning, and insulating the ceiling (which lowered the electric bill considerably), the church did no other major projects inside the building. Much, however, was done outside. One of the first projects was painting the building's exterior beige. Pastor painted it himself, which saved the financially strapped young church thousands of dollars. He and his sons also patched the cracks in the parking lot with tar. And Trip Brown, in turn, helped fix a broken gutter and a missing awning.

Pastor and the church members converted a former commercial space into a space suitable for church, keeping in mind Pastor's vision. What they did, however, was by no means unique. Their efforts mirror those of many other immigrant groups who have transformed a piece of the built landscape into something different. Examples of this phenomenon include the many storefront religious buildings, like All Nations, that dot America's urban landscape.

Anthropologist Paul Stoller speaks of West African traders transforming Harlem's 125th street corridor into an African market, and quotes Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson: "The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through their own conceptual and political acts of reimagination, means that space and place can never be given."[87] Similarly, while discussing Senegalese immigrants' strategies for selling on the streets of New York City, Stoller explains: "the Senegalese confounded mainstream American spatial assumptions to their own economic advantage."[88] Like the traders Stoller describes, Pastor and the members of All Nations have "re-imagined" their surroundings—in their case a building—transforming a commercial space into a space suitable for use as a church.

However, the most important part of the re-imagining of the commercial space that became All Nations is not necessarily physical. As Pastor suggests, the physical space and the objects placed in it are aids to worshipping God, but faith alone defines a church. Faith trumps the physical set-up, even if the latter is "complete." Without faith, that physical completeness is nothing more than a shell, empty of substance. In Chapter

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[87] Stoller 2002: 126

[88] Stoller 1997: 101

Six, this discussion of place-making continues, addressing the significance of the performance of faith in both making All Nations' building a meaningful, sacred place and in creating community. The next section of this chapter discusses the church vision, which infuses the church's physical space with meaning.

THE VISION

Since All Nations' founding in 1995, Pastor has been central to the conceptualization of the church's vision. Although he is open to the ideas of others, and often incorporates them, his vision dominates. Thus, this discussion of All Nations' purpose will concentrate most closely on Pastor's vision for the church. The fact that this vision is complex and constantly evolving makes it difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, the vision seems to consist of several core ideas.

From the very beginning of the church, Pastor knew what he desired. Comparing churches back home in Ghana to those he had experienced in America, he remembers, "At home churches were a place where a whole community met. They were where people gave of themselves. They gave worship to God and help to each other. America has no lack of people who give of themselves, but not all churches take that fact into account." Pastor did not want All Nations to be like some of the "franchise" churches that sold salvation as if it were a product. He had experienced churches like this in America. Instead, Pastor wanted a church that "would be the people in their worship of God, and within that would be a giving attitude toward their fellow members."[89]

[89] Som-Pimpong 2005: 118-119

A key part of Pastor's imagining of the church is its non-denominational status. Pastor made this decision "under the inspiration of the Lord," feeling that "denominations kill." Explaining his use of the word "kill," he noted that even those churches that claim to be non-denominational are often denominational, emphasizing or de-emphasizing selected gifts of God and thus misunderstanding God's Word. Pastor continued:

> We take the middle, the middle being that the Word of God has to speak. The Bible says in the Book of 1st Corinthians that . . . God gives His spirit to everyone, and then to one is the gift of this, then one the gift of that, so that all those gifts are functional, and they are still with us today. But there is not one particular gift. . . . So because of that we are very careful . . . in trying not to come under any denomination.[90]

Pastor does not want other churches' doctrines to dictate practices at All Nations. He gives an example:

> For instance, on the issue of money, I don't want to be associated with—I don't want to come under any church where they will begin to say, talking about prosperity, as if the Gospel is all about getting rich. I don't want that. And neither do I want to also be at a place where the Gospel is always, "being poor is righteous"—no. But I want to be at a place where it is Christ and Him crucified. That He is the one who chooses to make you what He wants you to be. To be in a position where I can preach the Gospel without feeling like I am manufacturing a new doctrine.[91]

Pastor has started a church free from denominational constraints. Although All Nations does borrow aspects of worship from various streams of Christianity, Pastor is quick to note that it follows its own path. For instance, he is careful not to lump All Nations into the "evangelical" category, as it is most commonly understood, even though the word "Evangelical" is in the church's name. He explains, "I don't see myself as belonging to the 'evangelicals,' quote, unquote." The church's "evangelicalism," he

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[90] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[91] Som-Pimpong 2006a

says, is that "we want to be out there ministering to people and everything." Pastor thinks evangelicals have become "so politicized" and "so right-wing."[92] Mama Dora agrees that the core of the church's vision is evangelism: "The vision is to reach out to the lost souls. The vision, the Great Commission, to reach out to the lost on the highways and byways and compel those to come to the Lord. And that's our main mission."

In terms of where All Nations fits in the broader landscape of Christian practice, Pastor admits that the church is "a blend" of aspects of various denominations. He explains: "We are egalitarian in our—when you take all of them, we are egalitarian. We take that which is in them that we know it is within the perfect will of God and put it together."[93] For example, the church's style of praise and worship, including the singing of choruses, leans toward Pentecostal practice. At the same time, the congregation sings Baptist, Anglican, and other denomination-specific hymns, as well as a few charismatic songs. All Nations also invites congregants to speak in tongues, which is characteristic of both charismatics and Pentecostals. But—and this is hugely important—All Nations borrows these aspects from other denominations only because they fit within the confines of the Bible. Hence Pastor's assertion that All Nations is "non-denominational, but egalitarian."[94] (He notes that it could be termed "full gospel," but shies away from this term because it sounds as if he is saying others do not preach the full gospel.) Pastor just wants to ensure that what All Nations does lines up with the Word of God.

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[92] Som-Pimpong 2006b

[93] Som-Pimpong 2007

[94] Som-Pimpong 2007

A number of preachers influenced Pastor's development as a Christian, and, by extension, his vision for All Nations. One was Billy Graham, whom Pastor listened to in Ghana via a Liberian radio station. A second was Mama Susie, who encouraged Pastor's evangelism—including crusading—at her Apostolic church, United Calvary. A third influencer was Enoch Agbozo of the Ghana Evangelical Society, who is considered "an important figure in the rise of Ghana's charismatic Christianity."[95] He had a significant impact on Pastor because of his "evangelical fervor" and leadership abilities.[96] American evangelist Morris Cerullo, who visited Ghana a few times while Pastor was there, also inspired Pastor. Cerullo was as a model for what Pastor wanted to become. (Pastor was especially taken by Cerullo's humility.) In fact, Pastor interprets a dream he once had—in which a tornado swept him off his feet and deposited him in the arms of Cerullo and Agbozo—to mean that he has been given the two preachers' spiritual gifts.

One way All Nations introduces the vision to newcomers to the church is by giving them a pamphlet, called *Doctrinal Statements*, which presents the church's beliefs. The pamphlet lists the church's Mission Statement, Vision, and Doctrinal Statements. I have included the Mission Statement and Doctrinal Statements in an appendix, and will discuss the Vision in the remainder of this chapter.

The Vision part of the pamphlet emphasizes the importance of evangelism, pointing specifically to the inner city. "We envision our sharing the good news of Christ['s] death and resurrection with thousands of unchurched friends and people in our community, many of whom accept Him as Savior." Next, it establishes the need for a

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[95] Gifford 2004: 164

[96] Som-Pimpong 2005: 59

place of worship comfortable for "the homeless, poor, and downtrodden." After mentioning the significance of "people-friendly worship services, Sunday school, special events, and most important small groups," the Vision calls for "providing for the needs of members where possible or be a vehicle by which means contact is made with the appropriate source(s) of help." Following a statement about the church members modeling "biblical community," the Vision explains: "We envision providing easy transition for Christians from other nations into the American society." The Vision continues: "We envision having a place of worship for people of all nations with the ability to sing songs and pray in the languages of their respective nations." The Vision then stresses the importance of "helping all our people—youth as well as adults—to discover their divine design so that they are equipped to serve Christ effectively in some ministry either within or outside our church." The Vision concludes by highlighting the church's goals to create and send "missionaries, church planters and church workers" around the world, to acquire a larger church facility, to grow through evangelism, and to found a Christ-centered school.[97]

One of the most important facets of the Vision is that Pastor wants All Nations to be all-embracing. Unsatisfied by the narrowness that he and Mama Dora found at other Greensboro churches, Pastor decided to name the church "All Nations Evangelical Church." "At the time, and it even still goes on, we found that, what I was seeing was that the churches were so like segregated," he explains, "You have whites. You have African Americans." He continues:

> And not only that. You look at the homeless. You see how many people are homeless here. It's like, it's more for, it's either you are African American and

[97] Som-Pimpong n.d.: 5-6

> you are okay or you are European and you are okay. There are churches for them. So the Lord said, "I want you to have a church where you bring the nations of people, nations of people. Not nations per se like Ghana, but nations of people where you have the nations of homeless people, nations of the poor and the needy, nations of everybody. A church where they can come and feel comfortable and be at ease worshipping Me. All races of people, nations of people." And He said, "It should be 'All Nations.'" So we went with "All Nations." So we have "All Nations" and you know I started with evangelism, doing evangelistic work. So it's "All Nations Evangelical." We are people from all nations and we are evangelistic in our outreach, reaching all people also for the Lord. So it's "All Nations Evangelical Church."[98]

In his autobiography, Pastor elaborates on the meaning of "nation" as "a people": "And in that sense there is really only one great nation of which we are all members: the human nation, a nation of people under God. It is to that nation that the name spoke."[99] Clearly, Pastor envisioned a church open to all, with an early emphasis on including the homeless, poor, and downtrodden, which may be linked to his poor economic status in Ghana, as well as to his status as an immigrant.

Mama Dora Iris King understands the vision similarly: "Anybody can come into it. Formerly, they'd go and pick the homeless. They'd bring them to church. Pastor would pray for them, find jobs for them, find place for them, like that." Brother Jlay echoes this understanding:

> The vision is "All Nations." Okay? And many people don't understand the word "All Nations." The "All Nations" include downtroddens. We are not looking at Americans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Liberians, no. They, they will come, but we are looking at—the "All Nations" include, the, well it's not limited to nations that have borders. It's nations without borders. And then "nations" also includes downtroddens, because if I am from a place where I'm not used to wearing shoes, I should have empathy for somebody who is not wearing shoes now.

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[98] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[99] Som-Pimpong 2005: 91

Pastor's vision of the All Nations community as reflecting all of humanity became clear during a conversation about the make-up of the church membership. I asked, "Among the Ghanaians, is there a particular ethnic group that's more represented than others?" After thinking for a moment, Pastor—a Ghanaian himself—answered, "We have Asantes." Pausing for another moment to think, he continued:

> This is something that I have not even paid attention to because I have tried—the reason why I have tried not to even look at that is that I wanted to be as nationalistic, nationalism-blind as possible. So I try to see them all as [claps hands once] one: All Nations, that kind of thing. So I've not tried to find out where this person is from or whatever. I really don't know how representative the tribes are.[100]

Mama Dora expressed a similar sentiment regarding differences within the membership: "As far as I'm concerned, I don't really think about that they're different. We encourage people to think that we're just all the same. I don't think so much, 'Oh, this person is from Nigeria, this from Liberia, blah blah blah.' We're all one. That's, that's the ideal, so we're still working on that."

This desire for oneness is evident in Pastor's messages (sermons). On 24 September, 2006, for instance, Pastor quoted Acts 1:14 and Acts 2:1, emphasizing that the church had to be in "one accord" in order to grow spiritually and numerically. He mentioned that some All Nations members had complained that the church was not growing numerically and he blamed that on "discord," adding that heaven does not run on discord. Pastor even offered the United Nations as an example of the power of being in one accord. To underline the oneness of being in "one accord," Pastor paused when reading this phrase in Acts 2:1 and asked the congregation, "Two accords?" Many in the congregation responded, "One."

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[100] Som-Pimpong 2006c

CONCLUSION

This chapter told the story of the beginnings of All Nations, including Pastor's early divine encounters (and their importance in his life), the prophecy that inspired the foundation of All Nations, and the acquisition and transformation of the church's building, which created a suitable church and a meaningful place for the church's membership. Since most of the church's members are immigrants, creating a place of their own in their new home is significant, as this offers them a place at which to re-imagine themselves. The chapter concluded by discussing the church's vision, especially its goal to welcome a diversity of people, and also to unite them. Discussing the vision lays the groundwork for the subsequent chapters, which will analyze how the vision, especially its emphasis on oneness, is made real at All Nations. The church's story continues in the next chapter, which concentrates on several important enactments of the vision.

CHAPTER FOUR

Enacting the Vision:
Key Liturgical and Social Practices

How do Pastor and All Nations' members make the vision a reality? After all, the vision is simply an idea. Inspired by God, the vision is a mental picture of the church's desires. As the doctrinal statements pamphlet states, "Vision is not about reality or what is. Vision is all about our dreams and aspirations or what could be."[101] Like other churches, for All Nations to realize the vision, it must undertake various acts that make the vision real. It is in the *doing* of the vision that the imaginary is actualized. In order to look at the church's complex vision in its fullest sense, this chapter discusses some liturgical and social acts that fulfill two important church goals: creating a place of worship and helping immigrant members adjust to their new lives in America.

The chapter begins by describing and discussing several liturgical practices that enact the church vision to create a place of worship. As the first chapter mentioned, focusing too much attention on the church's African immigrant nature and not enough on its Christian one does a disservice to the church's understanding of itself. In addition to describing a typical Sunday service and discussing the importance of fasting and prayer to the church, this section highlights evangelism, one of the pillars of the vision. Evangelism is important not only to winning lost souls, but also to helping the church's displaced immigrant members. The church strives to give these immigrants a church

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[101] Som-Pimpong n.d.: 5

home. And in doing outreach to "mainstream" America, the church also assists them in adapting to their new surroundings. The church's goal to welcome people of *all* nations is rather unusual, especially when compared to other immigrant churches that focus on attracting particular national or ethnic groups. Like many of these churches, however, All Nations often acts like a social services agency, an important component of the church's vision. This chapter finishes by analyzing several ways in which the church meets the particular social needs of its immigrant members.

LITURGICAL ACTS

What do Pastor and the others do to actualize their vision to make All Nations a place of worship? The first section of this chapter discusses some of the liturgical acts the church undertakes. To begin, it describes a typical Sunday service—the focal point of the church's week—and features Brother Ndi's interpretations of the worship. He is a particularly eloquent explainer. Although many of the church practices resemble those found at other churches, Pastor and All Nations have developed a unique set of practices that makes up a normal service. Like other leaders of independent churches, Pastor must select practices that he feels are right. And he must also take into account the church's diversity. Following this description of a standard service, this chapter focuses on fasting and prayer, and then evangelism. These acts are key liturgical practices that Pastor and the church often emphasize as central to the church's identity.

On Any Given Sunday

The structure of a Sunday service is a series of enactments of the vision that help make the church a place of worship. Becoming familiar with the acts that make up the structure helps to appreciate the particularities of worship at All Nations.

As the 11:00 a.m. service nears, All Nations' members trickle in with increasing frequency, and come even after service begins. Their shoes, especially the women's, clack on the tiling of the vestibule as they enter through the front door. Everyone entering is dressed-up, wearing Western-style garb, traditional African clothing (like colorful wax-print cloth), or some combination of the two. After greeting one another, most of them sit down, usually scattering about the one hundred or so seats; some stand near the front door or in back. In the fellowship hall, which is adjacent to the sanctuary, Pastor concludes the School of Discipleship and Leadership (Sunday school). As his students file into the sanctuary, church-workers set up the two main video cameras. Interrupting the visiting going on among all those who have come, another church-worker standing in front of the platform invites everyone to stand and move forward, nearer to the front. Most people eventually do that, creating a half circle in front of the caller.

When most have positioned themselves, the caller assumes the role of prayer leader, sometimes beginning the opening prayers with a song. A few rounds of prayers ensue, with each round featuring the leader prompting the congregation to pray aloud on a certain topic; the leader encourages everyone to thank God for all He has done, to confess their sins, to pray for the sick, and to pray for the safety of those on their way to the church. Throughout these rounds of prayer, some members bow their heads and

whisper, while others speak loudly, with pained expressions on their faces. Still others say nothing. This part of service usually ends with an "Amen," as everyone returns to their seats. As Brother Ndi remarks, the opening prayers, "reverence the reason we are here," underlining why Sunday is set aside to worship God. The prayers let God know, "Oh Lord, we are here. We are not here for anybody, we are here for you. So just take over."

After the opening prayers, Pastor guides the church through the Praise section. To begin, he leads everyone through a series of hymns, starting, singing, and stopping them. After a few hymns, the praise team leader takes over, leading several choruses, all of which are played at the same lively tempo and bleed together. The praise team, stationed to the left of the pulpit from the congregants' perspective, supports both song leaders; it includes a row of several singers, a drum set player, a congas player, a keyboardist, a guitarist, and an electric bassist. Additionally, some congregants play shakers and tambourines. An overhead projector projects each song's lyrics onto a white screen located to the right of the pulpit from the point of view of the congregation. Standing watch next to the projector, a church-worker switches the overheads when appropriate.

In addition to singing songs of praise, many congregants also dance their praise, dancing in the church's few open spaces or swaying at their seats. Many churchgoers clap with the music, while some raise their hands to just above their shoulders and hold them there, seemingly in reverence. Throughout this part of the service, Pastor sings, lightly bounces around the platform, and sometimes joyously waves his white handkerchief over his head. According to Brother Ndi, praises—when they come from

sincere hearts—encourage God to inhabit the church. After opening a conversation with God during the opening prayers, the praise of song and dance invites Him into the church. The churchgoers know that praises move God.

When the tempo of the Praise section's last song slows by half, the Worship section has begun. The mood changes from outwardly celebrative to inwardly reflective. The final song usually comes to a slow ending, like it is tired, and Pastor—speaking into a microphone, sometimes over the keyboardist's slow chording—quietly directs the congregants, whose eyes are closed, to "Let the Holy Spirit minister to your heart." This is a time for reflection, when congregants should listen to and converse with God. Thus, the Worship section is for meditation. Pastor wants everyone to examine themselves and to recognize the awesomeness of God.

Brother Ndi understands the worship part of service similarly. He explains that during the praise part, "you're being appreciative of everything." You are happy, for instance, because you are alive, and being alive is evidence of God's grace. So you sing and dance to praise Him. But during the Worship part, Brother Ndi elucidates, "personally, you are now focused on heaven and pouring out your heart. You're pouring out your—it's like you are bringing your heart inside out." He continues, "every now and then the spirit of God can even hit you, like you start—you really kind of see the type of person you are." Knowing that he is a sinner, Brother Ndi "want[s] God to really expose me." The worship section thus focuses congregants' minds on heaven, as Pastor directs them to speak to God.

After about five minutes, the worshipping finishes, and the church recognizes first-time visitors. A church-worker asks them to introduce themselves by giving

everyone their names and telling who invited them. Typically, the church receives at least one visitor each week, although sometimes it gets none. Congregants usually clap for the newcomers, and then turn their attention to Fellowship Time. During this part of service, the praise team plays a lively song, while everyone moves about the sanctuary and greets one another, shakes hands, blesses each other, hugs, and chats with one another. Fellowshipping—as Brother Ndi explains—invites congregants to show love to "bring that bond together," so "you don't see yourself separated."

After the fellowshipping ends, a church-worker reads out loud the announcements, which sometimes include meeting times for the men's fellowship or women's fellowship; reminders to attend other church activities, especially Wednesday's Bible study and Friday's prayer meeting; announcements of upcoming church events, birthdays, and graduations; and even requests for congregants to refrain from eating in the sanctuary. The same church-worker then usually reads aloud Mama Dora's weekly column, which appears in the bulletin. Next, with everyone standing, two members come to the front, stand behind a podium, and read a passage from the Bible, with one reading in English and the other in French. The reading leads again to praise, with the praise team typically performing a song or two, sometimes led by Pastor, as most of the congregation sit quietly and listen, while others sing along.

Before the message, Pastor often recognizes a visitor, compliments the congregation, or encourages people to attend the post-service fellowship meal. Then the message begins with "Father we thank You for this morning. Speak to our hearts through Your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen." Sometimes the overhead projects the message's theme, for example: "Abiding in God's Favor: Jesus' Blood." And sometimes the

projection lists several Bible passages. Usually, however, Pastor simply delivers the message, as inspired by God, without using the projector, and without the assistance of a script or notes. As he explains, he simply acts as a conduit, letting God's message flow through him. Messages last no more than thirty minutes, and vary in topic from Sunday to Sunday, although sometimes a topic straddles Sundays. Pastor's basic delivery of the message includes reading Bible passages; interpreting them for the congregation, often through secular illustrations; and frequently asking questions that encourage one word or short-phrase responses from everyone. The message ends when Pastor says, "All heads bowed, eyes closed."

With heads bowed and eyes closed, the congregation enters a section of service that resembles the earlier Worship part. Pastor encourages everyone to communicate with the Lord: "I want you to talk to God. Let the Lord do a deeper work in your life before you leave today." Speaking over the keyboardist's held chords, Pastor sometimes moves about the sanctuary, as the congregants listen and communicate with God. Pastor often prays into the microphone during this part of service, asking God to bless the membership in various ways. He could, for instance, pray, "For those waiting for papers to come through, make it happen." Or he could pray for those struggling financially, job-wise, romantically, health-wise, family-wise, etc. Every once in a while, as the Worship section nears its end, Pastor asks for non-official members to come forward and join the church, and sometimes some do.

The offering comes next. Up front, a church-worker often says, "Offering time" to which some congregants respond, "Blessing time." Offering time is also called "Covenant Time," according to Brother Ndi. He explains that if you do not pay your

tithes, you are robbing God. You must respect the covenant. Out of purses and pockets come small white envelopes, some of which are already filled. The ushers give an envelope to those who need one. As the praise team plays an up-tempo, spirited song, many congregants walk, while some dance, to the front of the church to drop their envelope into the offering basket. Once everyone has completed the circular motion to the front and then back to their seats or standing places, the song ends, and Pastor asks God for blessings, as he often also does before the offering. Finally, to conclude the service, everyone recites the closing grace.

After the service, people pack up their belongings, gather together their families, chat with one another, move to the side-room to participate in the fellowship meal (which is often offered on Sundays), and exit the church. Some people also meet with Pastor. The fellowship meal takes place in the kitchen, where people line up and file past servers who scoop together plastic plates of a variety of foods, and in the adjacent fellowship hall, where people sit and eat before leaving the church.

Of course, other church activities also take place during Sunday services, but less frequently than those described above. Communion happens after the message on the first Sunday of every month. Every once in a while, a Sunday features a baby dedication, faith healings, or testimonies. Likewise, sometimes the children's choir and children's dance team perform, as they do during Easter services. The rest of the week includes other regularly scheduled events, including a Bible Study on Wednesdays and a prayer meeting on Fridays. The praise team, children's groups, and other groups—like the men and women's fellowships—meet on Saturdays. The church also hosts a range of special events, including visits by distinguished guests, like the Honorable Dr. Anthony Osei,

Deputy Minister of Finance and Economic Planning of Ghana; birthday parties; baby showers; movie nights; wedding receptions; fundraisers, like yard sales; and the church's anniversary celebrations.

Fasting and Prayer

Two important enactments of the vision that help make the church a place of worship are fasting and prayer. Church members say that if you want God in your life, you have to get to know Him. Fasting and prayer go hand-in-hand and can help people move closer to God, bridging the gap between them and the divine. The sacrifice of fasting keeps one focused and spiritually hungry, while prayer opens the way for God to feed the believer His spiritual food. Fasting and prayer, however, are qualitatively different things; for example, prayer does not take special consideration and is more common. But when combined, the two techniques become more effective.

Commonly found at evangelical churches, these techniques are a way to worship, to converse with God, and to realize one's potential, as God would have it. As mentioned in Chapter Three, part of the church's vision is "that He [God] is the one who chooses to make you what He wants you to be." Fasting and prayer help guide one through life, and also help one identify one's ministry. But they are especially important to All Nations because the immigrant need for assistance is often foregrounded at the church. Pastor, the church-workers, and the immigrant members try to meet needs through encouraging fasting and specifically prayer. These techniques are what Christian immigrants—like those at the church—turn to first for help.

Fasting and prayer are important to both Pastor and the church (although the former seems more central to Pastor than to the congregation). Over the course of his life, fasting and prayer have helped guide Pastor's decision-making. His healing in Ghana is obviously an important instance. While Pastor struggled to find a remedy for his health crisis, his brother Walter encouraged him to pray, expecting that prayer would help him heal. At that same time, Pastor began listening to a religious radio show that inspired him with its talk of salvation in Christ. Pastor wrote a letter to the radio reverend, Reverend Isaac Ababio, and received a response encouraging Pastor to fast and pray.[102] As already mentioned, because Pastor utilized the two techniques, God healed him of his soccer injury.

But Pastor's healing was not the only time that fasting and prayer helped him. The practices also helped guide him to his wife, Mama Dora. Pastor met Mama Dora while he was a student at Saint Augustine's College in Raleigh and she was a student at North Carolina State University. Pastor recalls, "Our meeting was a miracle. It was all divinely appointed, how we came together."[103] Before Pastor left for America, concerned relatives and friends warned him to be careful because, they said, American women are very loose and could potentially lure him into a life of immorality and agnosticism. Pastor "armed" himself with fasting and prayer in order to make good life choices. While in America, at age twenty-six he said to the Lord, "I'm growing old. I need to be married." Pastor fasted and prayed and decided to join Watts Chapel Baptist Church's

[102] Som-Pimpong 2005: 20

[103] Som-Pimpong 2006a. The next three Pastor quotes come from this interview.

Bible Study group, where he met Mama Dora. About one year after their first meeting, they married.

Fasting and prayer also helped Pastor to decide to crusade in Greensboro's housing projects, and to start All Nations. God told Pastor, "That's why I brought you here. I need you to go into the projects. You need to go there and minister my Gospel." But Pastor was afraid, and was unsure of what he should do. He knew, however, that fasting and prayer would help. And the practices did help; God reaffirmed His plan for Pastor to hold outdoor crusades in the housing projects. Likewise, as mentioned in Chapter Three, when Pastor debated over whether or not he should start a church, he remembers, "I had to go before the Lord, fast, and see God's face to make sure that it was His voice that I heard."

Fasting and prayer are also important in the church. I received an email from Pastor while on my winter break stating: "I hope you had a blessed Christmas. We are in the midst of 3 days of fasting and prayers which commenced on the 29th and ends on the 31st—to seek God's face for direction as we enter into 2007. I wish you a blessed and prosperous New Year."[104] Each day the churchgoers broke the fast at 7:00 p.m., and at 8:00 p.m. on the night of the 31st they gathered together to usher in the New Year. During one-day fasts, some members fast for twelve hours, while others do so for twenty-four. Three-day fasts, like that mentioned above, also take place. When fasting, some members drink; Pastor chooses to drink nothing.

Unlike fasting, prayer is a simple act of conversation, which can take place at any moment. Not surprisingly, then, the church emphasizes the act of prayer to a greater

[104] Som-Pimpong 2006d

degree than fasting. This act is thus more commonly undertaken at All Nations. Prayer unfolds at various points during Sunday service, including at its opening, and during the times of reflection after the Praise section and the message. Prayer also marks various other points in the church's week, including the weekly Friday night prayer meeting. Of course, church members regularly pray at home and elsewhere.

Prayers range from the personal to the collective, and focus on a variety of themes. Obviously, different members pray for different things, depending on their life situations. They might pray for their or someone else's health, for a job, for the well-being of their relatives back home, for the success of All Nations, etc. At one Friday night prayer meeting, Pastor—prompted by a recent occurrence of bird flu in Nigeria—prayed for the health of Africa: "Asking God for intervention in Africa. First, AIDS virus. Ebola virus. Now, chicken virus." Everyone prayed for the intervention. At the same prayer meeting, Pastor prayed for an end to the segregation he sees in so many all-white and all-black churches in Greensboro: "We're praying for true and genuine transformation." After one Sunday service, many members traveled to one member's newly opened hair salon to celebrate its opening and pray for its success. These are just a few of many themes that Pastor and All Nations' members address in prayer.

One frequently discussed function of prayer at All Nations is healing. Pastor, for instance, often points out that people in the Bible receive special favors when they pray. Pastor's miraculous healing is clearly an example of this blessing. Likewise, Pastor points to the healing of patients in Ghanaian hospitals, who got better when Pastor and his Christian colleagues prayed for them.[105] And Pastor's own son, Kwadwo, recovered

[105] Som-Pimpong 2005: 41

from a serious bout with asthma because of fasting and prayer.[106] These are only a few of the many times in Pastor's life when prayer brought about healing.

Healing is important to All Nations—and many churches—because it proves the power of God. It proves He can affect the lives of believers. One often-told story at All Nations tells of Mama Lula's miraculous healing. Mama Lula is Lula Roseboro, a longtime member of the church who originally hails from Alabama. After moving to Greensboro in 2001 and joining All Nations, Mama Lula had a dramatic encounter with death. As she explains:

> One morning I got up early because I thought I had to keep the grandkids and I had a slight headache. So my husband said, "Well, you lay back down and rest because you don't have to keep the kids now." I said, "Okay." And he went on into another part of the house. He said when I, when he came back I was laying across the bed. I wasn't in the bed, I was just laying across the bed, drenched in perspiration. And he knew that wasn't normal so he called the paramedics.
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> So the paramedics came; they got me; they was taking me to the hospital, but as they was trying to work with me on the way to the hospital, my heart stopped. And when they got me to the hospital, they worked on me and worked on me and worked on me until my heart started back. I literally died and, you know, when you die like that everything shut down. Now, everything got to start back again and I had an aneurism. You know what an aneurism is don't you? And I had several doctors there. No one wanted to, to touch me or deal with me because they said I had a 3% chance. If they go in there and it didn't work right or whatever, I'll come out maybe dead or being a vegetable.
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> But this one doctor, Dr. Elsner, he said, "I'll do it." And my family told him to do [it], but before that they [the doctors] was all saying this, that, and that. The family was telling them, you know, "Do what you're supposed to do. We're not going to worry about the outcome. Do what you supposed to do because there is someone that has more power than any of us because He guides your hands, you know. So do what you supposed to do and whatever come out of it will come out of it."

Before Dr. Elsner operated, however, Mama Lula—still in a coma—experienced a few complications, which postponed her surgery. First, she had a heart attack. And

[106] Som-Pimpong 2005: 104-105

then she had a stroke. Fortunately, Mama Lula survived both complications and the doctor finally operated. But her travails were not over. Still in a coma, she suffered a pelvis infection and to fight the infection she was given a powerful antibiotic. But this remedy only made matters worse; she was allergic to the antibiotic, which badly burned her insides. Mama Lula was sent to a burn unit in Winston-Salem, and returned to Greensboro a day or so later. She continues:

> In the meantime, when I was in the hospital sick, when my family came down from Maryland and Washington and I had my one sister, she, she just, she's just in love with God. I mean everything she do, everything she touch, whatever, it's about God. And she was up there having prayer in church and just praying and whatever. They told her that if they wanted to do that, they had to go to the chapel or whatever you call it. They said, "Okay" and Pastor would come up, some of the members of the church would come up and they would just pray, pray, and pray.
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> And then I had an operation. I'm still in the coma. So one day, out of the blue, I woke up. And I sit up on the side of the bed and I asked my husband, I'm going like, "What are we doing here?" He said, "You don't remember?" I said, "No." So he started telling me what was going on, what was going on. I'm going, "Oh my God. You mean to tell me I went through all of that, I didn't feel not one pain in my—." I was not dizzy, I was—I just didn't feel anything. And that's when I thought about the 23rd Psalms, that the Lord will take you through the valley of the shadows of death and you will feel no evil. So that was proven to me.
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> That's what the Bible tell you and that was proven to me that that can happen, so that's why I believe that I'm a testimony. Because, Mike, out of all of that stuff can you imagine the pain? And I didn't know none of it, feel none of it. And so Pastor was my, I'll say he was my lifesaver [laughs] because he was there for you. He'd be there for you no matter what. And that's my story and it's been five years now and I'm still here. I don't have no problems.[107]

After Mama Lula finished her story, I commented, "So prayer was a—." Before I could finish, she said, "Was the key. Mm-hm." Mama Lula's testimony has become an oft-repeated one in the church, attesting to the power of prayer, and the power of God. She knows that prayers—those of her family, the members of the church, and Pastor—

[107] Roseboro 2007. All future Mama Lula quotes come from this interview.

saved her life. According to her, when you have a multitude of people praying for you, the Lord hears, and will send you a miracle. Mama Lula herself is a testimony for others. She explains:

> Yeah, and you're there to inspire them, you know, if it's in a way you can inspire them. And I feel like if they look at me and know what I went through and how the Lord healed me, they can have faith; they are broadening faith. So they'll have faith to know that if they pray and do right, the Lord will bless them. And believe it or not, Pastor is trying to teach them and learn them, you know, everything that you do—everything that go on in your life—that the Lord take care of it. He does it.

Pastor regularly references the story of Mama Lula's healing, and often invites her to come to the dais and pray for others who are ailing. At the church's anniversary celebration, for example, Pastor asked Mama Lula to pray for a visiting pastor's granddaughter who was sick in the hospital. Pastor, Mama Lula, and the visiting pastor stood together and prayed. The next day, Pastor announced that God had heard their prayer, as the granddaughter was doing better than expected. The three of them then prayed for the granddaughter again. Pastor has said that his healing story—like that of Mama Lula—is proof of Jesus' resurrection power.

God answers prayers in other ways too. Mama Dora Iris King is a case in point. Noting that, "when you pray, pray, pray, it helps a lot," she knows that prayer conquers everyday problems. In one narrative about her job at a daycare facility, for instance, she notes:

> I was having problem in my job. . . . They didn't like I was an African, the only African in the place there, but I continued prayer. I been praying to tell Pastor that this American woman [the director] doesn't like me. . . . So I want to let him help me pray so that I wanted to have another job. And he say, "No." He say, "Continue prayer. You will conquer." And I was there [at the job] until everything worked out. The person who was the one who was after me all the time, they had to fire her from the job. Then I still continued on until I retired in the job.

Mama Dora Iris King attributes the eleven years that she worked at the daycare to God's will and the power of prayer.

Like Sunday service, fasting and prayer enact the vision for All Nations to be a place of worship. Specifically, these practices showcase the power of God to affect people's lives. Fasting and prayer—especially the latter—also are important for the church's immigrant members as a means to meet their needs. The church emphasizes the significance of these techniques to guide members through life.

Evangelism

Members of All Nations know that God affects their world. Stories like Mama Lula's, and their own experiences, prove this to them. And once one knows what God is capable of, then one has to share it with others, especially those who are not believers. As ordained in the Bible, witnessing is a key responsibility at the church. Evangelism is one of the major ways that Pastor and the members enact the vision. Using the church's building as a beachhead, so to speak, they share their knowledge of God's power, hopefully wining new members in the process. Winning lost souls has been a part of Pastor's vision from day one.

Most members of All Nations are displaced and attempting to create a new home in America, including a church one. The evangelistic enterprise is about inviting people to find a church home. Accordingly, the church reaches out to immigrants. But unlike many other churches with large immigrant memberships, All Nations also reaches out to everyone else. The immigrant members of All Nations are not necessarily retreating from "mainstream" Americans, but attempting to invite them to the church. In this way,

the church's evangelism also helps its immigrant members integrate into the larger American society.

As Pastor explains, "In Ghana, it was expected that if one was touched by the Lord, telling the world would be a part of what came after. People assumed that a great spiritual experience would be seen and heard."[108] Thus, according to Pastor, his "dawn broadcasts" offended nobody; people assumed that he was inspired and hence respected his actions.[109] On Friday nights at United Calvary, he and his church friends held all-night prayer meetings and, at dawn, they would scatter to preach their "dawn broadcasts":

> At dawn, you are out there preaching into space. Nobody's around. People are asleep. Who are you preaching to? But we are—and it build our faith because it's like God putting us in a desert just speaking to whomever, maybe the birds hearing, or to the animals. But there's a voice there. There's somebody there who may be hearing the message, so as we preached our dawn broadcast it emboldened us. It emboldened us. We did it unorthodoxly. We were doing it—you just pick up a scripture and then begin talking, preaching. And sometimes you can't use the scripture so it encouraged us to really study the Word of God because you have to have the Word of God in your heart; at dawn there's no light to see your opened Bible, so you have to preach off what you have in your heart.[110]

This period in Pastor's life—a period filled with evangelistic activity—encouraged him to continue his outreach efforts.

In Ghana, as Pastor notes, "almost every day there is evangelistic work going on." But when Pastor arrived in Greensboro, he noticed that no churches were doing outdoor crusades. He also noticed that many murders, especially drug-related ones, were taking place in Greensboro's housing projects. He asked himself, "Where are the churches?"

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[108] Som-Pimpong 2005: 40

[109] Som-Pimpong 2005: 78

[110] Som-Pimpong 2006b

and "How is it that churches are all confined to four walls, [with] nobody going out to outreach the people?"[111] After fasting and praying to receive divine guidance, Pastor and Mama Dora decided to act. They spent many years crusading in Greensboro's housing projects and taking their ministry to nursing homes and prisons. Although they faced many challenges along the way, they met success everywhere they went.

At All Nations, Pastor and Mama Dora continued their evangelistic activities, and continued encouraging others to join them. As the church's name makes clear, evangelism has been a central goal of All Nations from its beginning. Part of the vision is "effectively reaching the people . . . for Christ through sustained, mass evangelism and person to person evangelism."[112] In one of her columns, Mama Dora summarizes this philosophy: "In fact we [as Christians] are to be separate from the world. Our contact with the world is to share the love of Jesus with unbelievers. It means we are to love unbelievers so much that we will try to win them to Christ."[113]

Early on, All Nations focused its evangelistic efforts on the homeless, poor, and downtrodden. Although this focus weakened over time, the church seems to be re-grouping in this regard. Not long ago, members went to homeless shelters, and brought homeless people to the church. The church fed them and preached to them, offering them—as Brother Jlay points out—"two foods: spiritual, physical." Pastor also found them jobs. Pastor is encouraging members to go to shelters, prisons, and nursing homes to visit with people and invite them to come to All Nations.

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[111] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[112] Som-Pimpong n.d.: 5

[113] Som-Pimpong, D. 2006

Mama Dora's women's group is particularly engaged in reaching out to nursing homes. On the first Saturday of each month, they evangelize at a nursing home. The group usually ministers the Word, sings, and encourages those they visit. They also visit their church sisters, helping to clean and make food for those who are sick or who have recently given birth.

Pastor and the members of All Nations also undertake many other kinds of evangelistic activities, ranging from simple deeds of kindness to the church's locally broadcast TV program to outdoor crusades targeting Wal-Mart shoppers. The church has even hosted movie nights to attract families who are not members.

One of All Nations' most promising evangelistic opportunities rests in its new neighbor, Wal-Mart. When Pastor bought the church's building it stood in a vast, empty gravel plain. Many friends questioned his choice, saying, "Albert, what are you doing there? That's not a good place to have a church. You need to look for a community that has homes and people." And Pastor recalls responding, "In ten years the place will revive. God is going to do a new thing."[114] But for a while, nothing much happened.

But that space is now crowded with shoppers, visiting the Wal-Mart that opened in August 2006. The coming of Wal-Mart, according to Pastor and All Nations' members, is a blessing for both the neighborhood and the church. Wal-Mart's arrival not only fulfilled Pastor's prophecy about the future of the neighborhood, but also provided an opportunity for evangelism, including crusading. Pastor described All Nations' location next to Wal-Mart as "a prime place" and "a place of advantage." He knows it will win many new souls. As Pastor explains:

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[114] Som-Pimpong 2006a

> In America here, you can't go to any mall area and set up a tent and have a crusade without a permit. And even then it will be very hard for you to get a permit and set up because . . . you'll see "No Solicitation." So even evangelism is considered as solicitation. So it's hard for you to do that. For us, to be in a place, a prime area like this where the people are coming and you don't need a permit from anybody—you just set up your tent and have a crusade. That is a morale booster for us.[115]

To attract Wal-Mart shoppers, All Nations has started holding outdoor crusades in its parking lot, in plain view of Wal-Mart. A typical crusade begins a few hours after the Sunday service finishes. A core group of church members gather outside in the church's parking lot. After an opening prayer (often lead by Brother Ndi), those gathered sing several choruses before testimonies are given, including Mama Lula's healing story. Following the testimonies, the children's choir and sometimes a solo singer perform, and then a scripture reading takes place before Pastor preaches. The crusade concludes with a closing prayer.

Members of the church also have conducted informal person-to-person evangelism with Wal-Mart shoppers inside the store. In a recent column, Mama Dora recounts how the women's group closed their prayer meeting and went to Wal-Mart. They went to shop, but also "greeted several people in the store and invited them to our church. We had only a short time, but out of the few people that we spoke to, at least two didn't have a church home and they seemed very interested in visiting our church."[116] That this story appeared in Mama Dora's column suggests the evangelistic potential with which the church views their new neighbor.

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[115] Som-Pimpong 2006c

[116] Som-Pimpong, D. 2007b

During the recognition of visitors one Sunday, a recent visitor to the church explained that they came because they saw the church on a Wal-Mart shopping trip. The continued commercial development of the once-empty space adjacent to the church suggests more evangelistic success on the horizon. As a visiting pastor at the church recently commented, "I love your location. You're beside Wal-Mart! You're destined for greatness." So great are the possibilities that Pastor has referred to All Nations as "ANEC, Home of the Heavenly Mart" in response to the coming of Wal-Mart.

The continued evangelistic efforts of the church mean the continued enacting of the church vision. Evangelism is central to the church's life, especially as a place of worship attempting to win lost souls. But it also is important because evangelism invites immigrants to make a home at the church, which is particularly significant given their often recent displacement. The evangelistic enterprise at All Nations also offers the immigrant members a chance to reach out to non-immigrant America, including Wal-Mart shoppers.

SOCIAL ACTS

Enacting the vision also includes helping immigrant members to deal with immigration-related issues. To help, the church both prays for those in need and assists them in whatever it is they need to do. Immigrants, especially recently arrived ones, face scores of challenges in adapting to their new lives in America, and All Nations acts as a social services agency to meet its immigrant members' many needs.

The Storm

The African immigrant members of All Nations not only have to deal with stereotypical assumptions that many Americans hold about black Africans, but also have to adjust to how things work in America. And adjusting can prove to be an overwhelming challenge. The challenge begins from the moment the newcomers arrive. The story of Brother Ndi's first day is an apt example. Flying straight from Nigeria, Brother Ndi deplaned at JFK airport in New York City the morning of September 11, 2002. He came by himself, a seventeen year old who looked many years younger than he was. After a confused airport official checked him through, he picked up his baggage and boarded a bus to Manhattan's Greyhound bus station, where he would catch a bus to Greensboro. Next, Brother Ndi recalls:

> The stupid thing happened. After I boarded the bus, I got, I got my ticket. I don't know who to blame, but I'll put the blame on me because I should have been wiser. I got this ticket. The ticket said one o'clock. Fine, one o'clock. I believed it—one o'clock. I got into the—I put my bag, I mean I put my luggage in the compartment where it's provided in the bus, then I put my, my bookbag on my seat. Then stupidly I just left it like that because I was going to buy something. I was hungry. I looked at the time; everything was good. Yes, one o'clock. But anyways, to cut the story short, I left the bus with everything and I mean everything. I went out of the bus empty-handed thinking I would come back to it. Unfortunately, but somebody else got what I wanted. The bus was gone [laughs]. The bus was gone. It was like I was acting in a movie. I was like [acts surprised]. And this was my first day in America. I was like, "What? What?" I, I was so puzzled. I was like, "What is going on? Please somebody pinch me. I'm dreaming, right?" But it was a reality. The bus was gone.

Brother Ndi asked a Greyhound employee about the bus; he found out the departure time had changed to 12:30 p.m. He got on the next bus, thinking he might meet the missed bus along the way, but this did not happen. All of his possessions were on the bus he missed, including his passport and six hundred dollars his dad had given him, which he hid in his Bible. Arriving in Greensboro with nothing but his shirt and pants,

Brother Ndi spent about three months without his passport, money, and his high school information, which made him wonder if he would have to go through high school again. Finally, after several visits to the Greensboro Greyhound station, he was able to retrieve his luggage, including his clothes and the book bag that held his passport and Bible. "Thank God people don't read the Bible," he commented; the money was there.

Many newcomers, like Brother Ndi and other All Nations' members, face serious immediate concerns upon their arrival. The U.S. government's *Welcome to the United States: A Guide for New Immigrants* sets forth some of the questions that immigrants face: Do you know your rights as a permanent resident? Do you have all the important documents you need? Do you need a place to live? Do you need a job? Do you need healthcare? Do you have children? Do you need to learn English? Do you know what to do in an emergency? Do you want to become a citizen?[117]

All Nations tries to help its immigrant members answer these and other questions, acting as a guide to the complexities of immigrant life. Some of the additional complexities immigrants face include: negotiating the public transportation system, obtaining appropriate clothing for the weather, and learning to cook American food. On top of all of these struggles in their own lives, many immigrants have to deal with problems facing their relatives back home. This is often a major responsibility, which can include sending remittances. When dealing with this range of issues, many immigrants, like those at All Nations, find themselves constantly navigating between despair and hope.

[117] U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2005: ii

Seeking Shelter from the Storm

The immigrant members of All Nations find help dealing with these and other issues at the church. One source of help for immigrants, generally, is religious organizations like All Nations. In Greensboro, such organizations range from church-related resettlement agencies to mainstream churches to religious organizations founded by immigrant groups.

Sometimes immigrants deal with their problems in others ways. They often rely on family members and friends, but they also create mutual aid associations. These associations act as a comfort zone, helping newcomers obtain housing or perhaps find a job. The associations often also promote, or keep alive, the culture of their members, especially for their children, many of whom have never lived in their parents' homelands.

Often, these mutual aid structures are more informal than formal. Paul Stoller reports:

> When thugs severely beat one of the older Nigerien traders in 1993, he received extensive, life-saving treatment at an expensive private hospital. Because the cost of the treatment was far beyond the man's capacity to pay, Nigerien traders in Harlem collected money among themselves to help their compatriot settle his hospital bill and to pay for his airfare back to Niger, where he recuperated in his family compound.[118]

I was told of a similar incidence while volunteering at the NCASC. When some African immigrants were evicted from their apartment, members of the community collected enough money to pay their rent. A member of the NCASC's staff calls the places in Greensboro where many Africans live, "African villages." People take care of each other in these villages.

[118] Stoller 2002: 148

All Nations is like a mutual aid association in many respects. The church, for example, acts as a place of refuge for immigrants, especially newer ones. While some of the church's members immigrated to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, most of them came during the current decade. Very early on in their stay in America, many such newcomers search out a church. As Pastor explains:

> Jesus said, "My house should be a house of prayer for all people and it also should be a place of refuge." So for immigrants coming, the first place of refuge is a church, for most of them. And you find out that some of them even back home never attended church, but when they come here the first place they want to find—majority of them—is a church, until they get their footing.[119]

Although All Nations hosts many transitory African immigrants who come and later leave, many others find All Nations and stay. Even for those who leave, All Nations plays an important role in their adaptation to life in America. Often, they develop their first friendships at the church, where they find a familiar community. Pastor remembers that he got to know "unusual" people all around him in America thanks to church.[120] According to Pastor, a church is where immigrants find "shelter."[121] Religious Studies scholar Kwasi Kwakye-Nuako agrees, "The worship communities serve as oases of peace and tranquility in a sea of confusion and chaos."[122]

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[119] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[120] Som-Pimpong 2005: 69

[121] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[122] Kwakye-Nuako 2006: 131

Lightening the Load

In many ways, All Nations enacts its vision statement by acting like a social services agency. Much like the North Carolina African Services Coalition—whose president, Nya Sua Flomo (Brother Flomo), is a member of All Nations, and on whose governing board Pastor serves—the church seeks "To assist African Refugees and Immigrants to integrate into the mainstream of America and help them become self supporting as soon as possible."[123]

One way that Pastor (and God) helps the church's immigrant members is by delivering messages that speak directly to their experience. Although messages rarely, if ever, focus directly on some aspect of immigration, they do indirectly address immigrant issues. One Sunday, for instance, the message explained how Jesus carries burdens and lightens loads. Before Pastor delivered this part of the message, he sang a song whose chorus asserted: "No, no, it's not an easy road. No, no, it's not an easy road. But Jesus walks besides me. And brightens the journey. And lightens every heavy load." The message used phrases from the song, resonating with the immigrant congregation who themselves are on a difficult journey making their new lives.

Pastor and the church-workers at All Nations, however, are not just preaching about immigrant issues. "And we endeavor to try to meet them at the point of their needs," Pastor explains, "so if you look in our bank accounts, we don't have reserves because . . . whatever comes in goes out to meet the needs of the people, as the scriptures would have it."[124] Mama Lula affirms this stance: "Pastor, he goes all out his way. I

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[123] North Carolina African Services Coalition n.d.

[124] Som-Pimpong 2006a

think he'll take the shirt off his back because you have a lot of Africans comes over here, they don't have no job. And I think he helps them. Even if he have to let them stay in the church for a minute until they get on their feet. He does stuff like that."

One way that Pastor and other church-workers help immigrants "get on their feet" is by being highly accessible; they see this as a way of modeling Christ's likeness. One of the reasons that Brother Ndi joined the church was the help he received from Pastor and Victor Takon, a church deacon. Brother Victor was one of the first people in America, outside of Brother Ndi's family, with whom Brother Ndi became close. In many ways, Brother Victor acted "like a mentor," helping Brother Ndi to adjust to his new life, especially spiritually. Pastor's modesty also inspired Brother Ndi, who sees Christ's likeness in Pastor's humbleness and leadership abilities. Pastor himself recognizes this: "Because if you watch Jesus Christ in the scriptures, He walks in the, among the people. I don't want a time ever to come where I will have to as a pastor eject through the back door because I've become too big and the people cannot access me. I cannot be bigger than Jesus."[125]

Although All Nations' assistance takes many forms, the major way they help is through networking. The first step in helping entails praying for the person in need to not follow the wrong path. The second step is introducing them to someone who can assist them. The church provides a knowledge base into which new immigrants can tap, with many members of the church having already experienced and overcome the problems the new immigrants face. Brother Flomo, from Liberia, is one of these experienced members, and he often helps immigrant members. He went from working at an

[125] Som-Pimpong 2006a

International House of Pancakes to working as a nurse. He also went from living in somebody's living room to owning his own house. The current president of the NCASC, he also helps a Liberian association in Greensboro, in addition to teaching college courses. If he is unable to assist a member in need, then he can tell them who can.

John Arthur argues that one of the factors that influences the successful adjustment of African immigrants is their "access to immigrant networks and information."[126] At All Nations, the conscious use of networking helps those in need to handle immigration paperwork, locate housing, find a job, etc. The church even periodically offers workshops on such topics as health, health insurance, and family issues.

In the future, Pastor envisions building All Nations Village to help the homeless, poor, and downtrodden, including immigrants. He aspires to purchase fifty to one hundred acres of land to build the village that will include dormitories where immigrants from Africa and elsewhere could stay for a few months after they first arrive. The community will be a transitional place to help the immigrants get acclimated to their new lives in America. Once they get their footing, they would be expected to move out of the dormitories in order to allow new immigrants to move in. The village will also have a central building, a school, and a halfway house. For now, however, All Nations will have to be content with the church serving as the key place of refuge.

[126] Arthur 2000: 29-30

CONCLUSION

In reality, however, the church is much more than a place of refuge. This chapter discussed several liturgical and social acts that help enact the church's vision to create a place of worship and a place for immigrants to receive help. Pastor and the church offer both long-term spiritual support and long-term social support. And the church offers this support to a diverse membership. Providing both types of help, and to a variety of people, is a difficult challenge.

CHAPTER FIVE

"That thin cord that binds all of us together"

Bringing the Nations Together: Enabling Participation, and Creating a Sense of Belonging

All Nations' vision and the reality of its everyday experience do not always align. Pastor desires that *all* nations be represented in the congregation, and that they all be united. In reality, the congregation is comprised of mostly African immigrants (although a diversity exists among them), and the church struggles to achieve a sense of "one accord." While Pastor and the church are to some degree fulfilling the vision of All Nations, they are not doing so to the extent to which they aspire. Nonetheless, the church has to work with the reality of the membership. The question becomes: how do Pastor and the church-workers respect the reality of the church members' diversity—something the church welcomes and strives to increase—and simultaneously accomplish their goal of bringing the nations together?

This chapter describes and analyzes two emergent church practices—song repertoire and baby dedications—that answer the question asked above, and enable everyone at the church to participate in its activities. Pastor and others design these practices to unite the membership and create a sense of belonging. These practices are unique to All Nations.

ALL NATIONS' DIVERSITY

Who makes up All Nations' membership? Of the non-immigrants, several American-born blacks and a couple of white Americans attend the church on a regular basis. A few additional white members are missionaries in Morocco, Ethiopia, and Namibia. The majority of the one hundred or so people who regularly attend the church—although rarely altogether—are sub-Saharan African immigrants (from a variety of countries) and their children (who may or may not be African-born). Pastor guessed that the Liberians—a few of whom are refugees—or the Ghanaians were the most represented numerically.

Besides these differences, the members are diverse in other ways. They represent various ethnicities, for instance. The immigrant members came to America for different reasons; they came at different times (many came in the 1980s and 1990s, but most arrived in the current decade); and they hold different legal statuses. Among the entire membership—not just the immigrants—members are of different ages, levels of education, and classes. Despite these many differences, however, these immigrants do not reflect Pastor's imagined diversity; the members include no homeless people, count in their number only a few American-born blacks and whites, and mostly come from only a handful of countries.

The disparity between the vision and the reality is significant. When I asked Brother Jlay why the congregation is mostly African immigrants, he responded, "People have the idea of saying, 'This is not my thing; it's somebody else's thing.'" Referring to All Nations, he then said: "The first separation we'll look at is the white [person] will come and say, 'Oh, that black people's church.' The Americans [American-born blacks]

will come and say, 'Oh, that African church.'" Whites and American-born blacks interpret the church in a divisive way; so also do some Africans. Brother Jlay continued: "The Africans will come, they'll say, 'Oh, that Ghanaian church.' The Ghanaian will come, they will say, 'That's Pimpong's compound church . . . Achimota [Pastor's Ghanaian hometown] church.' Achimota will come and say, 'That Pimpong's quarter's church.'" According to Brother Jlay, the Devil poisons people, causing divisions. All Nations strives to combat this, but struggles to do so at times. Brother Jlay explains that many who come to All Nations struggle to follow the church vision. He concludes: "Until you follow the vision of the church, you will not be able to survive [in All Nations] and that's the reason why you have more Africans here and not more Americans. Because the whites say it's a black church, the Americans [American-born blacks] say it's an African church . . . but it's all nations without borders."

Although Pastor will shepherd anyone he can, he wants All Nations to be more than an African immigrant church. The latter point became clear during a misunderstanding during an interview:

> MK: And I could be totally off base with this question, but at one point—I don't know it was recently, a recent Sunday—you said that here at All Nations that you worship in an "African way."
>
> Pastor: [surprised] African way?
>
> MK: You said in an "African way."
>
> Pastor: [surprised] Is that right?
>
> MK: Yeah.
>
> Pastor: [surprised] My, I have to take that back because I don't want it to be in an African way.

MK: No, no, no, no. I'm just saying you, you mentioned that you have an African style of worship.

Pastor: [relieved] Style of worship. Okay, okay.

MK: Do you know what I mean?

Pastor: Yeah.

MK: Not that, not that your mission is to have an African church.[127]

The African immigrant members of All Nations are not only from a variety of countries, but also from a variety of Christian denominations. They include Catholics—from Nigeria's Ibo area and Ghana's Ewe and Fante areas—and Pentecostals—some of whom were members of the Assemblies of God Church or The Church of Pentecost. Mama Dora Iris King grew up with the Anglican Church, later joined the Methodist Church (when she married), and attended a charismatic church in Greensboro before coming to All Nations. At age four or five, Brother Ndi attended a Methodist church, and then switched to a non-denominational church with a Pentecostal leaning. Later, he switched to a different Pentecostal church. Having grown up in Liberia—a country founded by freed American slaves—Brother Jlay attended a Baptist church in his village area and Pentecostal ones in Monrovia, one of which was an Assemblies of God congregation. Mama Lula grew up a Baptist, although she also has worshipped at another non-denominational church.

CULTURAL REFUGE

Despite the fact that Pastor wants All Nations to be more than an African immigrant church, he still attempts to make the immigrant members feel welcome, which

[127] Som-Pimpong 2006c

means respecting their linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The church's use of various languages is an example of how Pastor tries to accommodate the immigrant members. During Sunday's Bible reading, for instance, a reader repeats the passage in French. In like manner, when the congregation prays aloud, Pastor often encourages them to pray in their first language. And many of the songs are in an African language, such as Twi or Yoruba or Lingala. As Pastor has mentioned, "Language is not a barrier; it's a blessing." Even though he thinks of language as a blessing, Pastor also discourages members from speaking their first languages too much, especially when they are around others who do not understand them; Pastor does not want members to feel like strangers. In these cases, he wants the common language of English spoken (an approach that may help the church's immigrant members adapt to their new homes). So Pastor strives for linguistic balance.

Sociologist Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens suggests, "religion offers the immigrant group a 'place' of strength from which to voluntarily seek assimilation into the core society."[128] At All Nations, this "'place' of strength" is partially a product of its members' ability to reconnect with their respective roots. In a foreign land, the familiarity of home—found in various ways at All Nations—is comforting and to some degree, as Diaz-Stevens suggests, empowering.

Pastor clearly wants All Nations to be a place where its African members can be African. When asked why a reader re-reads the Bible passage in French and why the church sings many songs in African languages, Pastor explained:

> Sometimes you have this kind of a yearning for home. Being away from home, you remember the way you all worshipped back home. And we don't want

[128] Quoted in Kwakye-Nuako 2006: 123

> people to feel like, you know, you are in America and you feel like you have to throw away your language. We don't want them to, so . . . you have to sing in their language. At least they should hear . . . their language being spoken in a foreign land.[129]

One Sunday, Pastor read a passage from chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation. When he shared verses 24 and 26, he pointed out their relevance to All Nations. Part of verse 24 reads: "And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it [new Jerusalem]." Pastor commented: "Now you understand the word 'All Nations.'" Soon after, he read verse 26, which states: "And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it." Here, Pastor encouraged the congregation to maintain their cultural traditions from their homelands. He encouraged traditional dances and clothing. Pastor asked the congregation, rhetorically, "Who told you that Western culture is the only acceptable culture?" "God is not a one-color God," he said. "He loves variety." Pastor concluded this point by saying that God will bring variety into heaven and "the only thing that will exclude you from that place is sin."

African immigrants, as Kwakye-Nuako explains, "take advantage of the social climate the churches offer to immigrants to interact with others who share their cultures, as they spend most of their working hours with people from other cultures that they can hardly understand." This allows them to find a "homely environment far away from home."[130] Afolayan recalls:

> I have spent quality time lecturing my friends and colleagues about the fact that I lived inside a house while in Nigeria and not in a hut. I did not even bother to tell anybody that I lived in a better house as a university lecturer in Nigeria than most of my professors at Yale did. Such pronouncement would further complicate issues for me and I can live without them. "How do you convince somebody who

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[129] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[130] Kwakye-Nuako 2006: 131-32

> claimed that you passed excrement without wiping your bottom?" goes the Yoruba rhetoric question. How would I tell somebody at Yale that my brother was a director for a Coca-Cola firm in Nigeria when I was asked if I had ever seen a can of coke? Or, how would I explain that two of my big brothers were top university administrators when I had been asked if there were schools in Nigeria? With such inescapable and bewildering encounters, I constantly retired to bed at the end of the day with a battered and badgered brain, tired body, and stressed-out emotions.[131]

When I returned from Ghana, I fielded similar questions: do Africans live in huts? Do they live in trees? Do they eat bugs? Answering these and other similar questions was frustrating, even for me. For the immigrant members of All Nations, answering questions of this sort is even more frustrating.

All Nations enables its immigrant members to be African in America. As Afolayan's comments suggest, for African immigrants, having access to a place that allows them to be African—or at least to be understood—is a blessing. In this sense, All Nations plays a role in the lives of its immigrant members similar to that which folklorist Barbara Lau reports the Greensboro Buddhist Center plays in the life of the city's Cambodian community: "The temple is a safe place to be Cambodian."[132] The church aspires to be a kind of home away from home, especially for its immigrant members.

This goal also gives the church's immigrant members a way to pass on to their children the values of their homelands. Many African immigrants struggle with seeing their homelands' cultures slipping away in their lives and practically disappearing in the lives of their children; their children very quickly become more and more similar to American-born blacks. As a place to be African, All Nations helps to at least slow down these losses of culture or identity.

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[131] Afolayan 2002: 53

[132] Lau 2000: 6

EMERGENCE

All Nations' worship practices, however, do not merely replicate those in Africa. The members bring the cultural and religious practices of their respective homelands into a new context, where new needs must be met. Not only does the church have to respect this cultural and religious diversity, but it also—given the vision—has to attempt to unite it. Emergent church practices result.

The next sections will discuss two of these practices: the church's songbag and its baby dedications. Aspects of these emergent practices resemble aspects of practices from members' homelands. The similarities make the new practices comforting for the immigrant members. At the same time, however, these practices are unique to All Nations, having been developed in accordance with the church's needs and its vision for achieving "one accord." These new practices—although familiar to the African members—give the church its own identity.

Pastor and the church members must negotiate between their imagining of a united All Nations and the reality of their diversity. At first glance, it seemed to me that Pastor's strategy for achieving this end was one of encapsulation, a process that entails cultivating "maximum cohesiveness through a dense multiplex network in which all meaningful contacts of life occur."[133] Folklorist Dorothy Noyes explains that encapsulation often happens by the "closing of ranks in conditions of threat."[134] In other words, when communities feel threatened, they look inward for strength. They might, for example, limit their interaction with outsiders, or outside ideas. This seems to fit when

[133] Noyes 2003: 19, drawing on Ulf Hannerz

[134] Noyes 2003: 23

one considers that immigrants often feel threatened in their new situations. But "closing ranks" is obviously counterproductive for an evangelistic church like All Nations, especially given its vision to welcome a variety of people.

Pastor's strategy, in contrast, is an integrative one. Noyes understands this strategy as "drawing links between one's disparate connections, attempting to bridge the gaps but maintain diversity."[135] When I asked Pastor what, ideally, he hoped to see All Nations become, his answer suggested precisely this approach:

> A place where the people . . . because we are in one accord, we respect each other. . . . We are sensitive. A place where everybody is sensitive to the needs of the other person. Once we get there, it's not so much about the number. It's so much about that cord, that thin cord that binds all of us together that we are very careful not to cause . . . to snap by being very sensitive to each others' needs. That is where I'm looking.[136]

ALL NATIONS' UNIQUE SONGBAG

So how does the church make its diverse members feel welcome, while simultaneously uniting them? One way is by inviting churchgoers to sing in the languages of their respective homelands. All Nations' song repertoire includes songs in various languages, as well as pieces associated with the members' former denominations. This range of songs offers church members an opportunity to connect with their homelands. The church's repertoire also includes songs written by Pastor. This section will discuss the different song types that constitute All Nations' unique songbag.

I will begin the discussion of the church's song repertoire by addressing how songs are added to its "songbag." One instance of the addition of a song is

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[135] Noyes 2003: 19, drawing on Ulf Hannerz

[136] Som-Pimpong 2006c

representative. At a recent praise team rehearsal—where Pastor, the male singers, and some musicians were present—praise team member Brother Ndi introduced a new song called "E Lo Ni Mo Son (How Much Did I Pay)." He learned the song when he lived in the Yoruba part of Nigeria. The Yoruba lyrics—as they came to appear on the song's overhead (with translated title and English directives)—are below.

<u>E Lo Ni Mo Son (How Much Did I Pay)</u>

E lo ni mo son foba Ogo
E lo ti Jesu mi gba
E lo ni mo son foba Ogo
Forere lori mi

Repeat chorus

E ba mi gbe Jesu ga
Oba nla Oba to da
E ba mi gbe Jesu ga
Edumare Oba to da

Repeat chorus

Brother Ndi first explained the song's meaning to Pastor and the other praise team members. Then he taught them the song. Eventually, after some mistakes, the praise team learned the piece; they were ready to perform it at the next day's service.

After the rehearsal, Brother Ndi gave Pastor a handwritten copy of the lyrics. Pastor then handed me the lyrics, asking me to type them up. He also asked Brother Ndi to bring in more Ibo and Yoruba songs, adding that members of those ethnic groups would want to attend All Nations if their songs played a larger role in the church's activities. The following day, the praise team performed the song, while the congregation followed the lyrics projected on the screen. I include this story of the introduction of Brother Ndi's mostly untranslated song from his home country to show a typical way a

new song gets added to the repertoire, and also to show Pastor's openness to integrating new songs. Brother Ndi expresses his appreciation for Pastor's openness:

> We try to take from everywhere so that the name "All Nations" will really make sense to anybody who knows what it is all about. That it's not just about a particular place because if you think about it, if it was maybe based on how Pastor have to see it, he would reject my song like, "Oh it's not mine. It's not a Ghanaian song. Don't sing it." But no, because it is really "All Nations," he welcomes any song provided there's a meaning to it and it's powerful.

Pastor says that the church repertoire features three types of songs: untranslated ones, such as Brother Ndi's; translated ones; and Pastor's original compositions. The untranslated songs are presented in various African languages on their overheads. Many of these songs are in Ghanaian languages, such as Twi and Ewe, but some songs are in Nigerian languages, like Ibo and Yoruba, or in languages spoken in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Niger. One song in the repertoire is even in Spanish. The translated songs, in turn, are presented either only in English or in both their original language and English. Most of these translated songs were originally in a Ghanaian language. According to Pastor, some had never before been sung in English. Other songs performed at the church have always been in English. Pastor's own songs, like their translated counterparts, unfold in English; I will discuss these in more detail later in this section.

These categories—especially the first two—include hymns and choruses. The church's hymns, which come from Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist hymnals, typically feature stanzas and a chorus, a structure familiar to many churchgoers in America. Choruses, in contrast, are short songs that normally feature only a few lines, and sometimes consist of a single repeated phrase. According to Pastor, Africans have composed most choruses—many of which were originally written in an African

language—while fasting and praying. When the church performs choruses, it repeats them over and over at the discretion of the song's leader. The song in Brother Ndi's story is a chorus. So too is "I Will Lift up Your Name," a song that Pastor says has always been in English. The church sings this song to exalt the Lord.

I Will Lift up Your Name

I will lift up your name higher
I will lift up your name higher
Great Jehovah, You are wonderful
I will lift up your name higher

The members of All Nations see music as a centrally important component of worship. "It's very simple," says Brother Ndi, "It's very very simple. It's based on what the Lord has said about it. The Lord said He inhabits in the praises of His people." Brother Ndi explains that when churchgoers sing, "there's this kind of high feeling of the presence of God." Brother Ndi also asserts that there is a "power to song," suggesting that if our conversation were sung, we would be moved by it more deeply. Pastor's criteria for selecting songs for the church's songbag also suggest music's importance. In addition to being biblically sound, he explains a song "should glorify God." He continues:

> It should be very inspiring. I try to stay away from entertainment. It should be something that invites the presence of God. It should be something that when people are singing, they know that they are worshipping God, as opposed to entertaining. So, it has to fit—I mean it has to fit into that kind of mold.[137]

The songs and their performance also help members connect with their homelands, making churchgoers feel comfortable at All Nations. Pastor remembers that when he and Mama Dora visited various Greensboro churches (before starting All

[137] Som-Pimpong 2007

Nations), they found the churches musically unsatisfactory. At both white and black churches, they sang the same songs. Pastor explains, "There is no African mix as far as the songs are concerned."[138] Pastor felt those churches were not right for him for this and other reasons. At All Nations, in contrast, he wants the "African mix," but not to the detriment of attracting non-Africans to the church. Through the songs and their performance, Pastor and the church try to respect members' needs, but also try to integrate everyone.

The church's African immigrant members appreciate the inclusion of songs familiar to them from their homelands, like the untranslated songs. Brother Ndi learned the Yoruba song discussed above in the course of fellowshipping with students at his Nigerian high school. According to Brother Ndi, performing the song here in America "gets you connected with home," invoking memories of the song's original context.

Not surprisingly, the performance of Brother Ndi's song during Sunday service especially affected All Nations' Nigerian members. One woman in the back sang with her eyes closed, another got up and danced, and others—mostly Nigerians—stood up. Untranslated songs like Brother Ndi's are clearly less integrative than other types of songs. But even when members do not understand a song, they still appreciate it. For instance, though another song performed that Sunday was in a language Brother Ndi did not understand, he nonetheless enjoyed its melody and rhythm. Of course, he also wanted to know the song's meaning.

For those songs that are translated and projected only in English, it is important to note that the melody of the translated song remains the same. As a result, the song

[138] Som-Pimpong 2006a

becomes accessible to church members who do not speak the language in which the song was originally sung. Those who know the song from their homeland can still sing it in their language—something Pastor encourages—while those not familiar with the song can sing it in English and understand it. Songs projected both in their original language and in English are even more integrative. Everyone can participate when songs are presented in these two ways.

Another way Pastor tries to make people feel comfortable worshipping at All Nations is to perform songs that come from various denominations. During the Praise section of each service, the congregation sings both hymns and choruses. The inclusion of the former is meant to please those members—like the former Baptists—who came from churches where hymns were sung. Many of the hymns have always been in English and are familiar from back home. Pastor points out that if you went to public school in Ghana, Nigeria, or Liberia, you know these songs. The inclusion of the choruses, in turn, is mostly meant to please former Pentecostals. According to Pastor, however, even the Catholic Church in Ghana sings these choruses.

The Praise section begins with Pastor leading the hymn singing. Usually the congregation performs two or three hymns. Pastor selects hymns that speak to the topic of the service's message. After the hymns, the praise team performs several choruses, which bleed together, all at the same tempo. Pastor and the praise team select choruses that can be sung with no breaks between them. Although including both styles of song respects the members' diversity, it does not always work smoothly. Some former Pentecostals who attend the church are not used to hymns, so it takes them a while to warm up to the praising. They also have not accepted the fact that, according to Pastor,

the hymns are praises just like the choruses. Pastor calls both hymns and choruses "praises," which to some degree unites members under one umbrella term for both types of songs.

Pastor tries to incorporate only a few songs during service in African languages for fear that American-born blacks and whites who attend All Nations will become discouraged. Other songs, including some hymns, come from America. Mama Lula recalls: "At first they wasn't singing too many songs that I was familiar with, like American songs. But now they do." She elaborated: "Because I couldn't get with it when I first went there with that singing of them songs [laughs], but now they do sing a lot of American songs. So I guess he figured if it's 'All Nations,' he got to do 'All Nations.'" Mama Lula did not say much to Pastor early on when she "couldn't get with it" because she "didn't want to hurt his feeling[s] or try to turn his program around." Although she is not an immigrant member of All Nations, even she admits: "When you used to something, you do get a little homesick for it, you know." Both the African immigrant members and the non-immigrant members get homesick for familiar songs. So as not to alienate anyone, Pastor must strike a balance in accommodating the heterogeneous membership of All Nations.

And yet Pastor also wants the members to accommodate his vision. They must bend to some degree to Pastor's approach. Not only are different members used to different songs, but they also are used to different ways of performing those songs. Some members are comfortable singing hymns or choruses, while others are used to never singing at all. Many in this latter group are most comfortable when one or two people are singing up front. At All Nations, though, Pastor expects every member to sing. As

Pastor says, "First it was something that was very alien to them, but then, now, they begin to understand with teaching that, look, nobody else has to praise God for me. I have to praise, make a joyful noise unto the Lord."[139] Becoming active singers to praise God is just one example of how Pastor encourages members to accommodate the vision. Using Catholics and Baptists as examples, he explains:

> They are wearing the Catholic glasses or the Baptist eyeglasses. These are lenses. And then they come and you are asking them to also put on your eyeglass, but they fail to understand that they have to remove theirs. Once they step through the door, those Catholic eyeglasses have to drop because if they want to be a part of this, then they have to begin to wear the vision of All Nations Evangelical Church.[140]

The third song type is Pastor's original compositions. As is the case with many All Nations members, music helps Pastor remember his past. When he hears religious music, he often thinks about the impact that music had on him when he was younger. "Music touches the heart and the soul that way, and occupies a special place in the memory," Pastor explains.[141] He considers religious songs to be "Christ tapping at my heart," or Christ letting him know how much He loves Pastor.[142]

Pastor began writing songs in his third year of high school and has been composing ever since, especially during "travailing moments." (For example, he wrote "Be Thou Exalted" when he was searching for a church building as a way of clearing his "mind of any doubt, of anything, because when you're in a situation like that you begin to wonder if God can do it.") One of Pastor's earliest songs came to him after he had

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[139] Som-Pimpong 2007

[140] Som-Pimpong 2006c

[141] Som-Pimpong 2005: 32

[142] Som-Pimpong 2007. The next five Pastor quotes come from this interview.

finished a fast. In deciding whether or not to end the fasting, a debate raged in his mind. During the fast he felt peaceful, but once he broke it, he became sad, as if the Lord had left him. In that moment of ending the fast, this song—called "Oh Peace"—came to him.

Oh Peace

Peace where is peace
Oh Peace where is peace
Oh Peace where is peace
Peace is found in Jesus Christ

Many are groping in darkness
Searching for peace for their souls
They look everywhere but they fail to look up
Where peace can be found for the soul

Jesus the Prince of Peace is calling
Calling all seekers of peace
Why don't you turn to the Lord for His peace?
He will give you eternal peace

Pastor continued writing songs in North Carolina. One representative piece is "Let us Praise the Lord," which he composed between February and March of 2007. He remembers, "And I wrote it talking about the goodness of the Lord, the things He has done for us, our families, our children. So let us praise Him."

Let us praise the Lord

Let us praise the Lord
All ye His saints
Let us raise our voices
With brand new songs
Let us lift our hands unto Heaven
And declare that Jesus Christ is King

As for me and my house
We will bless the Lord
For He has been so wonderful to us
We will yield our all unto Jesus
And let Him reign sovereign in our lives

Bless the Lord oh my soul all that is in me
Bless His holy name, forget not his benefits
Who forgives all your iniquities
And buries them in the deep blue sea

When talking about what happens when he writes a new song, Pastor says: "It just drops into my spirit and I cannot move away from it. I have to put it down." Pastor was driving home when this song came to him. He called the church and left the song's melody on its answering machine. He also called his house and shared the melody with his children and recorded the melody on his answering machine at home. Pastor later took the words and combined them with the melody, consulting the Book of Psalms for words that would fit the structure and feeling of the song. At one point, his son Kwadwo helped him select some lyrics.

Pastor's songs are especially important because All Nations can call them its own. As Pastor points out: "I mean, this is our song. It is sung nowhere else. This is our CD. You know, just like this group Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. You know they have some songs they composed themselves and when they start singing you say, 'Wow, this is Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.' This is what identifies All Nations anywhere we sing it."

Likewise, although the church's songs come from various sources and reflect the diversity of the membership, the repertoire is All Nations' alone. Both the songbag and Pastor's original compositions transcend the members' differences and offer everyone a place of commonality, providing members a sense of belonging at All Nations. Ultimately, the repertoire and Pastor's songs help reconcile the tension between the church's diversity—which is encouraged—and the church's vision for "one accord."

ALL NATIONS' BABY DEDICATIONS

Like its song repertoire, the church's baby dedications make members feel at home and promote a distinct All Nations' identity. Having happened since the church's beginnings, baby dedications are similar to "outdoorings" or naming ceremonies that are common in Ghana. This section will explore the practice of baby dedications at All Nations, addressing how they are similar to and different from similar practices in Ghana, and why they are important to the church. First, I will describe one dedication, interlaced with Pastor's commentary. While watching a video of this dedication, Pastor and I discussed it.[143]

On one April 2007 Sunday, after the praise team performed, Pastor invited the baby's family "to come so we can dedicate this beautiful baby boy." As Pastor began a song, the Ghanaian father and South African mother of the baby and their family and friends (all dressed in their best) moved—some dancing—up to the front of the church. The praise team joined in Pastor's song, followed by the congregants, most of whom were now standing and dancing at their seats. The parents, baby, family, and friends, as well as Mama Dora and some other church-workers, gathered at the foot of the platform, with Pastor perched on the structure, rising above the gatherers below.

Pastor ended the song and with Mama Dora—the "mother of the church" and "godmother" of the dedicated babies—now holding the baby, admonished those gathered using the Word of God. He quoted and discussed a passage from Psalms 127, which says "Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward." Pastor later explained that he quotes a different Bible passage for each dedication, but each

[143] This discussion was part of our fourth interview.

passage speaks to the fact that "it is God who gives children." After interpreting the passage, and also loosening up those gathered with a joke, Pastor shared with everyone the child's name and discussed the child's namesake. As Pastor explained during our interview: "In this world system, you have people who are naming after Michael Jackson, George Bush, and the rest." Pastor does not want that. Instead, he clarified: "The people you name a child after have to have integrity." In this case, the baby was named Jeremy so Pastor spoke about the Bible's Jeremiah, whose heart and mind were on God. The baby Jeremy should "grow up God-fearing, God-loving, like Jeremiah," Pastor explained during the interview.

Pastor then washed his hands in front of the parents. He later told me that he does this so that the parents and everyone else present "understand the purity and the sanctity of what is going to happen." After drying his hands, he took Jeremy from Mama Dora. While holding the baby in one arm, Pastor held a small cup of water in his free hand and said, "This is clear water." He continued saying that there is something else that mimics water: *akpeteshie* (a local Ghanaian gin made from palm wine). Before placing a single drop of water on the baby's tongue, Pastor told him stories from "his" and another book of the Bible, that both say wine is harmful. The baby should drink water, especially the "true" water, Jesus Christ. During our interview, Pastor explained: "There is a better water, which is Jesus Christ, which when you drink, you'll have eternal life." Pastor then gently placed one drop of water on the child's tongue, intending to teach him to distinguish between the good and bad waters. Next, Pastor took a small glass of honey in his free hand and explained its significance: "Honey is very sweet, but there is something sweeter than this. That is the Word of God." Pastor then put one drop of honey on the

child's tongue. He later explained why he does this: "In the Book of Psalms, it says the Word of God is sweeter than honey, much sweeter than the honeycomb. So I do that to enjoin his heart to the Word of God."

Turning to the congregation, and then closing his eyes, Pastor prayed out loud, dedicating the baby unto God. Others closed their eyes and bowed their heads. "We are praying for this young man," Pastor said, "that that anointing that was upon prophet Jeremiah will be on this young man." He continued, praying that baby Jeremy will "be that light" that combats the darkness which is all around us. After asking for God to "circumcise his tongue" and "uncork his ears" so that he can speak and hear the Word of God, respectively, Pastor's prayer climaxed when he dedicated Jeremy: "Jehovah, in these last days when babies are being dedicated unto the world, we dedicate Jeremy unto you Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, that he will rise up and become a different child, a unique child, after Your own heart." Pastor prayed that Jeremy would be a blessing to all around him and finished this part of the dedication by placing his free hand on Jeremy's head to impart the anointing of God. He also prayed that God would use the child for good. The congregation clapped once he finished.

Pastor then lifted Jeremy high into the air with both hands. He smiled and said, "All Nations, look at him," presenting Jeremy to an appreciative church. Pastor later remembered, "So this is the first time that the church members have seen the baby. So he has been outdoored." Pastor also recalled that the church could now say, "We know this baby," which in essence integrates Jeremy into the church group. Pastor closed the dedication by stepping down from the platform, placing one hand on Jeremy's father's head and one on the baby's mother's, and, as Pastor remembered it, prayed that the

parents "take good care of the gift that God has given to them." As the praise team began the same song they performed at the start of the dedication, everyone up front slowly filed back to their seats. Pastor concluded the dedication by presenting Jeremy's family with a Dedication Certificate, commemorating the event. Pastor then moved on to that Sunday's message.

All Nations' baby dedications resemble "outdoorings" or naming ceremonies in Ghana, which is why Pastor used the term "outdoored" when he talked about presenting Jeremy to the church. These practices are familiar to many African immigrant members, especially the Ghanaian ones. Placing special emphasis on the importance of speech, Linguist Kwesi Yankah describes one important aspect of a typical "naming ritual" among the Akan of Ghana:

> On the eighth day after a child's birth, when all signs of its survival are evident, the child is taken outdoors and a naming ceremony performed. One significant aspect of this ceremony involves engaging the child's most important organ of speech, the tongue. Initiating the child into the moral values of speaking, the officiant baptizes the child's tongue with three drops of water (nsu) and three drops of liquor (nsa), accompanying this with the words,
>
> > Se wose "nsu" a "nsu"
> > Wose "nsa" a "nsa"
> >
> > When you say "water"
> > Let "water" be your word
> > When you say "liquor"
> > Let "liquor" be your word
>
> This ritual within the naming event initiates the child into the essence of truthful and discreet speech.[144]

Pastor understands that in Ghana the water and liquor symbolize good and evil, respectively. According to Pastor, the liquor is harmful. One should be able to separate

[144] Yankah 1995: 45-46

the truth of water from the lie of liquor. This aspect of the ritual promotes honesty and integrity in a child. For the Akan, the naming ceremony is the time when children experience their "first moral instruction."[145]

Another important aspect of the naming ceremony, not surprisingly, is the naming itself. According to reverend and anthropologist Peter Sarpong, when a baby is given a name, it is "humanized."[146] For the week prior to the naming ritual, some believe the baby is still a part of the spirit world, and thus not yet human. "It is the ceremony that ushers the child into the company or world of human beings," Sarpong explains.[147]

During my time in Ghana, I came across a moral education booklet for students that spoke to the importance of naming ceremonies. The booklet provided questions and answers for schools, one of which was:

The importance of a naming ceremony is to:

a. Announce that a woman has delivered

b. Make known to the society the additional mouth to be fed

c. Ask for the future suitors for the child

d. Give the child an identity

e. Solicit help for the mother

The correct answer, according to the book, is d. The ceremonies give the child an identity, effectively humanizing the baby and incorporating it into its family and community.

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[145] Opoku 1978: 111

[146] Sarpong 1974: 73

[147] Sarpong 1974: 90-91

Naming is an important part of giving identity. As was the case with baby Jeremy, in Ghana—as Pastor explains—you name babies after respected people, especially elders. For instance, in Ghana parents often name their kids after a grandfather, assuming that if the grandfather was a strong man, the child will grow up to be strong too. The baby is told about his or her namesake during this ceremony. Pastor elaborates, "I wouldn't name my child, excuse me to say, George Bush. I won't. Because for me when you mention that name, it has a different connotation—one who loves to war and who will not listen to anybody." He adds: "But if you have a name like Jimmy Carter, yes, I would love my, I can see it grow up and be like Jimmy Carter, a man who loves God. He's peaceful and he respects other nations."[148] Pastor followed this aspect of the naming tradition with his own children.

My first encounter with naming ceremonies and outdoorings in the U.S. was in Alexandria, Virginia. At an African grocery, in addition to funeral announcements and money transfer company advertisements, I came across a flyer that announced an upcoming naming ceremony and outdooring. The couple announcing the ceremonies had twin girls and was inviting everyone to share in their joy. As the flyer stated, the naming ceremony would take place from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on a Saturday and the outdooring from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. that Saturday night and Sunday morning. Soon after, I read a New York Times article that mentioned that African immigrant churches in New York City help "nurture" naming ceremonies "at which church members gather around a newly named infant."[149] And although for a while I mistakenly thought that All Nations' baby

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[148] Som-Pimpong 2007

[149] Wakin 2004: 1.1

dedications were baptisms, I eventually realized that they more closely resembled outdoorings and naming ceremonies.[150]

All Nations' baby dedications are uniquely All Nations'. Though somewhat reminiscent of ceremonies in Ghana and elsewhere, these dedications are significantly different, with the most obvious difference being the Christian context. Pastor has modified the naming ceremony to bring an African flavor to the church environment. In the process, this practice helps promote a sense of oneness among the members.

Pastor wanted to make the dedications like the namings with which he was familiar from back home, but also different. He cut out the worship of ancestors, and discouraged the ceremonies from happening anywhere but in the church. As Pastor understands it, the church is the correct place because: "We patterned it after the—you know when Samuel was born he was taken to the temple. When Jesus was born he was taken to the temple to dedicate. So it is after that pattern. So if anything at all, the traditional one came out, I mean I believe it was borrowed out of that." He also argues: "The ancestors didn't give the baby. It is God who gave the baby, so dedicate the baby back to God."[151]

In addition to cutting out the veneration of ancestral spirits, Pastor uses water and honey instead of the water and liquor in Ghana. For religious reasons, he could not include alcohol, so he substituted honey, drawing on the Book of Psalms for inspiration. He wanted to include something else of great significance and honey fit. Interestingly, even though he does not use liquor, he still makes the same point made with alcohol in

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[150] All Nations baptizes adults, not babies.

[151] Som-Pimpong 2007

ceremonies in Ghana; he simply makes the point verbally, encouraging the child to learn to distinguish between water and akpeteshie, or good and evil.

Unlike with ceremonies in Ghana, All Nations' baby dedications do not always take place on the eighth day after a child's birth; instead they happen on Sundays, and sometimes well after a baby's birth. In the case above, the parents brought baby Jeremy to be dedicated about three months after his birth. But as Pastor admits: "The most important thing is that the child is dedicated unto the Lord."[152] He hopes parents will do it on the eighth day because Jesus Christ was dedicated on the eighth day. So in this case, Pastor is not following the way it is done in Ghana—which he believes is inspired by biblical precedent—but instead is following the model set forth by Jesus Christ.

At All Nations, the dedications—like the church's songs—help members connect with their African roots. Anthropologist Takyiwaa Manuh reports that Ghanaians in diaspora remain connected to Ghana thanks to "the importation of Ghanaian institutions such as chieftaincy and celebrations of births and deaths as practised in Ghana."[153] Brother Jlay expresses a similar point concerning the dedications: "That's like a tradition coming into the church, but now we override it with, with Christianity." He continues: "Now we still tell you the same thing you used to do, your parents did to you in the interior or in the village, we want to do it to your child here, but this is the western world, we want to do it in the church. So that, that also brings people here because they are still following their lifestyle." But other members no doubt recognize the baby dedication as reminiscent of their lives back home for other reasons. Mama Dora Iris King, for

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[152] Som-Pimpong 2007

[153] Manuh 2003: 141

example, sees the dedications as christenings, which she remembers from her church life in Sierra Leone.

As has been discussed in this section, the dedications are arguably most important for religious reasons. Brother Ndi compared the dedications' significance with the significance of a service's opening prayers: "One thing that God admires is . . . giving Him glory and honor because He deserves it. He's the creator of the heavens and the earth, so when it comes to baby dedications, the parents know where this child came from." Basically, Brother Ndi explains, "What we do by dedicating our children is that we are letting Him know that we know that He is the source." God should keep "special watch over this child" so that it continues on the path of righteousness. Additionally, as is the case with naming ceremonies elsewhere, those babies dedicated at All Nations are given an identity—not necessarily a family one, but a church one.

Addressing the spatial analyses of geographer Doreen Massey, Manuh writes:

> Massey conceptualizes places as more essentially open and porous, the products of links with other places, rather than as exclusive enclosures bound off from the outside world. Seeing places as bounded can lead to their interconnections being ignored, while the conception of place as particular sets of interconnections in a wider field allows a combined understanding of local uniqueness and wider interlinkages.[154]

I interpret All Nations as a place similar to Massey's understanding of meaningfully interconnected space. All Nations is definitely a place linked to other places. Pastor and the diverse membership have created the church and its practices (such as its song repertoire and baby dedications) by borrowing from various sources. Analyzing the creativity and transnational nature of the church certainly "allows a combined understanding of local uniqueness and wider interlinkages." The "uniqueness" of the

[154] Manuh 2003: 142

church and its practices is deeply important, as it sets All Nations apart from all other churches and institutions.

CONCLUSION

This chapter offers a sense of how Pastor and the church negotiate the diversity of the membership, creating unique new practices to enable all the members to participate in church life. The sixth chapter will discuss the ways that this participation creates community. The church succeeds to some degree, but also constantly faces challenges that complicate its goals both to welcome a variety of people—all nations—and to integrate them and create a sense of belonging and oneness. The next chapter discusses some of these challenges and argues that the church achieves a sense of one accord as a community of faith.

CHAPTER SIX

"It's Christ who unites all"

Common Faith, Collective Performances, and the Creation of Community

As has been established, most members of All Nations are African immigrants who are forced to create a new identity in diaspora. This commonality helps these immigrants find a sense of belonging. But this immigrant status is not the most important unifying force at the church. This final chapter discusses the most successful way All Nations achieves a sense of "one accord." Every member of the church identifies as a person of faith, an all-inclusive identity that offers the membership a sense of unity. At the church, common faith and the collective performance of faith create a feeling of oneness. All Nations, then, unites best as a community of faith.

ISSUES

Engendering a sense of oneness, however, is a constant challenge for the church. While the church designs many practices to enable full participation, a set of additional social factors continuously threaten to undermine this goal of enabling participation, and thus of bringing the nations together. Pastor and All Nations have faced these challenges throughout the church's history. This section will discuss several of these challenges in order to highlight the difficulty of creating a shared feeling of community.

One ongoing challenge has risen from congregation members who reject Pastor's vision. In the early stages of its development, for example, All Nations experienced a loss of many early supporters, including some leaders who disliked Pastor's emphasis on ministering to the poor, especially during Sunday services. According to Pastor, those that left would not eat with the homeless whom the church fed along with everyone else after service. As a result, the church's numbers decreased to only a handful, forcing All Nations to re-build its congregation.[155]

Early on in the church's history, Pastor also dealt with some members who wanted more control over the church and its vision. These members hoped to turn the church into a Ghanaian congregation. Pastor resisted this shift, causing some members to break away from the church. According to Kwakye-Nuako, the problem of breakaways is typical of African immigrant churches, making most of them unstable. He notes that a breakaway might "be in consonance with the Reformation spirit, but it does not build the cohesion that the immigrant communities seek."[156]

While some difficulties arise from conscious challenges to All Nations' mission, others unfold from the transitory nature of the church's immigrant members. Transitory immigrants leave the church for two main reasons: 1) once they've established themselves outside of the church, they feel that they no longer need its support; and 2) they find a more familiar church. Pastor explains that a church should be a place of refuge, and the first place that many immigrants want to find is a church. But he adds, "until they get their footing." Once they get their footing, many newcomers end up

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[155] Som-Pimpong 2005: 120

[156] Kwakye-Nuako 2006: 134

leaving. "Once they get whatever they need and everything," Pastor points out, "then they say, 'Bye-bye.'"[157] As the newcomers make friends and find support groups outside of church, some decide not to attend the church anymore. The church becomes secondary to them. Some transitory members find All Nations, stay for some time, and then move on to more familiar churches. As Pastor explains, "It's like some of them were born into Assemblies of God or were born into The Church of Pentecost so when they come if they just smell Assemblies of God, they are gone."[158]

Pastor also mentioned experiencing "church prostitution" where people came to his church to take members. He suspects the half a dozen or so Ghanaian churches in Greensboro have all pooled from All Nations. The Asantes, for instance, pooled to start The Church of Pentecost, where, according to Pastor, they only speak Twi. Recently, the Liberians, Togolese, and some other groups came and pooled members. All Nations has suffered as a result. Pastor did conclude, however, that those churches that have stolen members from All Nations do not last long, because they are not based in honesty.

All Nations struggles not only with members leaving for more familiar churches because of their religious backgrounds, but also with members trying to re-interpret the vision according to their particular religious backgrounds. Pastor explains:

> When somebody is coming from the Catholic Church, he is coming from a Catholic Church vision. Someone comes from Pentecostal church, Pentecostal vision. They want to do things—they want you to do things the way they used to know it done. And so if it is not done, then it is like you don't know what you are doing. So it becomes a problem. They fail to see that there is a vision. God has given a vision. These people are used to be worshipping with their corporate church, if I can use that word "corporate," like Catholic is a corporation now and a big one, an institutional one. So when they come and they see Pastor Pimpong,

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[157] Som-Pimpong 2006a

[158] Som-Pimpong 2006c. The next four Pastor quotes come from this interview.

> he is the founder of the church? It doesn't ring a bell. No, there ought to be something like a big governing board that has this thing. You know they are looking at that kind of thing. So that also becomes a problem.

Pastor often closes his eyes during services, especially during the Praise and Worship part. He does this partially to keep focused and to model what he wants the congregants to be doing, but also because the number of people in the sanctuary on Sundays is not always encouraging. Some Sundays host only a few congregants, while on other Sundays the sanctuary is packed. Few members come to Wednesday's Bible study, Friday's prayer meeting, the men's meeting, and other church activities. Pastor is discouraged by this fact, often commenting on how it needs to change in order for the church to achieve its vision. When I asked Brother Ndi why evangelism is important to the church, he responded: "Oh, I mean, self-explanatory: the church is empty. I mean it's like we barely get members. We, we barely get visitors. So, it's really important."

Frustrated by All Nations' turnover rate, Pastor hopes to attract more white Americans and American-born blacks. As Pastor says, "I'm praying for more white members and more African American members. . . . If you have African Americans and you have whites who are already established here, it makes the church solid. And not only that. When you have whites and you have African Americans, and then mixed up with them is others, it gives it that All Nations flavor." Of course, adding more members from each group would mean that the church would have to find a way to incorporate them.

It is important to note here that a small core group of members does provide stability. They come frequently on Wednesday for Bible study, Friday for the prayer meeting, and Sunday for both the service and the School of Leadership and Discipleship

(Sunday school). Others come only on Sunday, but do so every Sunday, while still others come only on two or three Sundays per month. The latter members often work on Sundays. But despite the core group and regular Sunday churchgoers, the turnover at All Nations is still challenging. All Nations does not even keep a record of its membership because of the turnover. As Pastor explains, "We used to [keep a record], but you see people come, people go." He adds, "It's become like a transition. The people are more transitory. You have them today, tomorrow you don't see them."

The participation of even the regular members is challenged by their work schedules. Before service one Sunday, I overheard Brother Flomo jokingly say to another member, "Welcome to America." I asked him why he said that, and he responded that the member to whom he said it was now dealing with an American work schedule, forcing him to come less regularly; Brother Flomo made the comment because the member is so busy. Pastor explained to me once that back in Africa people have a more relaxed work culture, while in America they have to work around the clock in order to survive. Many immigrants get thrown into "working, working, working," working odd shifts or multiple jobs; consequently, they have less time for the church.[159]

Members work a variety of jobs, including manufacturing, warehousing, fast food, teaching, taxi driving, and nursing. Brother Jlay currently works for Harris Teeter, in their distribution center. Before working there, he worked for the post office, and before that in a factory. At Harris Teeter, he starts work—including on weekends—at 8 p.m. and finishes at 5:30 a.m., making coming to church on time difficult. The praise team's lead singer comes from the third shift at a hospital; he takes a nap before attending

[159] Som-Pimpong 2006a

service. The issue of members' work schedules was clearly evident on the second day of the church's anniversary celebration, when only a few members came because so many of them work nights. The same issue was apparent on the third day of the anniversary, when a few members had to take up such tasks as singing and playing the congas, because the regulars were absent.

Finally, the church's evangelistic focus challenges the cohesion of the membership of All Nations. This issue is different from those previously mentioned in that it speaks to the challenge of maintaining intimacy, and thus the sense of accord that binds the congregation. As discussed in previous chapters, winning new members is an important church goal, one that All Nations pursues through a variety of evangelistic activities. But extending its sense of "we" to others also challenges the cohesion of the group. Constantly accommodating changes in its membership—while the changes themselves are welcomed—nonetheless threatens the quality of interactions between members of the church. Pastor states, "I have always told them we want to be big, but also small." He explains what he means by "big" and "small:" "Big—we want our population to grow. Small—we still have to be intimate. We don't want to lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with people."[160] In any case, the church has to find a way to include new members, including non-Africans sometimes; integrating the newcomers' backgrounds and perspectives into the church's vision and practices is a major challenge.

Thanks to these last issues—the transitory nature of many members, the challenges posed by work schedules, and the success of the church's evangelism—the membership is constantly changing, causing a constant re-negotiation of the church's

[160] Som-Pimpong 2006a

identity. Most groups of people experience this constant negotiation, but the particularities of All Nations as an immigrant church make this negotiation far more threatening. Bringing together such diversity is a greater challenge than simply creating a narrow community of like people from like backgrounds.

A LARGE WOOD CROSS

My first attempt at locating All Nations was confusing. Turning onto Ring Road, I found myself driving on a beat-up, concrete path, winding its way along the edge of an expansive construction site. A roadside sign stated that the site would soon be a Wal-Mart. I looked ahead, and saw little except for Highway 29 raised off the ground and perpendicular to me. Cars flew by. Near the highway, I spotted a building that resembled a store. No church was in sight, I thought. I briefly considered turning around, but when I noticed a large wooden cross adorning the side of the "store," I pushed on. As I approached the building, I spotted a parked van with *All Nations Evangelical Church* written on its side. Relieved, I parked and exited my car. It was 10:45 a.m.; I was right on time for Sunday service.

The wood cross does not signify that those who worship at the church are Africans or immigrants, but that they are Christians. Over the course of my research at All Nations, I came to realize that although most of the church's members are African immigrants, neither their Africaness nor their status as immigrants was the most important factor in bringing them together. Although both of these identities bring the nations together, neither are as meaningful as the members' common Christian identity.

Foregrounding this shared identity, the cross presents the church as a community of the faithful.

Despite its members' diversity, faith unites all at the church. All Nations is many things: a place of refuge; a social services agency; a place to be African. But the church is principally a place of worship. I once asked Pastor, "So what is it then that unites people here?" He answered, "It's Christ who unites all. . . . It's Jesus Christ. He unites all. It's Christ and the power of His Holy Spirit that brings us together."[161] At All Nations, Christ and His saving power are without question central, so central that faith in the power of Christ overrides all other differences at the church.

During one post-service fellowship meal, I chatted with an American-born black couple who regularly attend service. I asked them if they felt like outsiders at All Nations, given that most of the church's members are African immigrants. They both answered "yes," adding that they have few strong relationships with other church members. But they also offered, without being prompted, that their relationship with God is what matters. Accordingly, they felt connected to everyone else at All Nations, because everyone there has a relationship with God. As they see it, faith clearly unites. Despite a feeling of outsider-ness, faith offers commonality.

The religious takes precedence for a good reason. During one message, Pastor warned, "Don't align yourself too much with a nation; align yourself with Jesus Christ." He went on to explain that: "We are *in* this world, but not *of* this world." Thus, according to Pastor, the "only nation you should bond to is the heavenly nation." In another message, he declared that in the kingdom of God, "Our citizenship transfers from

[161] Som-Pimpong 2006c

'Ghanaian' to 'Heaven.'" If believers are not going to be Ghanaians or Nigerians in heaven, but instead will simply be those "who know the Lamb of God," then on earth they should understand themselves similarly. Pastor continued: "It is the perfect will of God that we be what? One." Brother Ndi echoes this belief:

> He [Pastor] actually taught me on one thing—that when it comes to the body of Christ, why should we be separated when Christ actually wants us to be in unity? So it's not about the denomination you are in, or where you're brought up from, provided that we have a sense of what goes on and that is Christ being exalted. So that is all that matters, that we should try to break that boundary of denomination and let us all come together as Christians as we've been called to worship Christ for who He is. And that's what it's really all about.

Although the cultural backgrounds of Pastor and the church members inform such church practices as its song repertoire and baby dedications, they ultimately act in service to the sacred. Folklorist Enrique Armijo found that much the same was true for Iglesia Unida, the Hispanic immigrant Protestant church that he studied in North Carolina: "But rather than interpreting Iglesia Unida Protestantism as culture, therefore minimizing its transcendent elements, we should interpret the culture of the church, and all that occurs in it, as religious."[162]

THE PERFORMANCE OF COMMUNITY

This chapter has discussed the members' common Christian identity that plays an important role in uniting the diverse congregation. The rest of the chapter focuses on how the performance of this identity helps the church achieve a sense of community. Noyes' concept of the performance of community provides a helpful analytical

[162] Armijo 2000: 32

framework for exploring All Nations' collective church practices and their significance to bringing group feeling into being.

Noyes explains, "Working ethnographically, we are aware of the fragility of the group concept put to the test."[163] Recognizing this "fragility," Noyes attempts to define *group*. Basically, she divides her exploration of the concept into two parts: "the empirical network of interactions in which culture is created and moves, and the community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance." She concludes, "Our everyday word *group* might best serve as shorthand for the dialogue between the two."[164]

As this thesis has shown, creating a feeling of groupness is a real challenge. At All Nations, it is through performance—especially of faith in Christ—that Pastor's vision of All Nations in "one accord" and the empirical reality of the church's diverse membership coalesce. Noyes states, "The community exists in its collective performances: they are the locus of its imagining in their content and of its realization in their performance."[165] To a significant degree, the performance of faith at All Nations unites the imaginary and the real, thus making Pastor's vision more concrete.

Collective performances that create community-feeling need to be located. Pastor recognizes the importance of place in creating a sense of community and oneness. For instance, during the same message that he asked "Two accords?" and the congregants responded "One," Pastor also asked "Different place?" and the congregants answered,

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[163] Noyes: 2003: 7

[164] Noyes 2003: 11

[165] Noyes 2003: 30

"Same." The "place" question also came from the Bible verse (Acts 2:1) he was interpreting at that time. The church serves as a place at which its members create and sustain community, and achieve a sense of one accord, especially as Christians.

In Chapter Three, we learned that Pastor and the members created the church and made it a place that they could call their own. They re-imagined and physically converted the former commercial space into their church. Having a physical, stable place offers the church's immigrant members a chance to re-establish, create, and maintain their identities in diaspora. And at the church, a religious identity ultimately reigns supreme. The church building is not only a store that was physically converted into a usable church, but also a building infused with prophecy and God's power. People see the building differently because of God's choosing. The building thus becomes extraordinary. The sacred is projected into the space, infusing it with meaning, and transforming it into a place.

Likewise, collective performance helps make the church sacred. In the same way that performance lent an air of sacredness to the homes of the African Christian Fellowship members, the Greensboro housing projects, the nursing homes, and the prisons, so does it inject the sacred into the space of the church. When I asked Mama Dora Iris King how the church building became a church, she answered not by saying they destroyed some rooms or re-wired it, but that they had revivals, church meetings, and invited others to join them in worship.

ACHIEVING ONE ACCORD

As Pastor suggests, being in the same place is important to creating a sense of one accord. But collective action also is important. Noyes agrees with Pastor when she explains: "Acting in common makes community."[166] At the church, the congregation frequently acts in common. Chapter Four suggested numerous parts of a typical Sunday service at All Nations when members act together. During opening prayers and at other times, for instance, they pray together; during the Praise section, they sing and dance together; during Fellowship Time, they fellowship together; and at the service's end, they recite—practically with one voice—the grace together. At one Sunday service, Pastor explained the significance of acting in common. During the opening prayers, he directed everyone to close their eyes and bow their heads. According to Pastor, undertaking these actions together "shows our solidarity, our unity together." These are just a few examples of when the members of All Nations act in common.

All Nations uses three aspects of performance—repetition, formalization, and consensus—that help an imagined community make itself real.[167] These aspects of performance enable the church to accomplish its vision for oneness. At the church, examples of repetition and formalization are abundant. They include Sunday service, the Wednesday night Bible Study, and the Friday night Prayer Meeting. They also include the various sections of each of these church events, and the various actions repeated during each of these sections, including regular communions and fellowship meals,

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[166] Noyes 2003: 29

[167] See Noyes 2003 for a discussion of these three aspects of performance.

which highlight "the bodily basis of community," and suggest a "common humanity."[168] The third aspect of performance that plays an important role is James Fernandez's idea of "consensus" or "feeling together."[169] Noyes describes consensus as resulting from the "coordination of collective action."[170] Be it during the singing of hymns or choruses or during outward or inward prayer, the All Nations community certainly is feeling together. These three aspects of performance help All Nations achieve a sense of one accord.

What does being in one place and acting in common equal? Brother Jlay elucidates: "The fire coal. If you put it in the coal pot . . . [or] in the grill, put it together, put fire on it and they [the pieces of coal] are together, they make good fire to blaze up. If you take out one and drop it there on the side, it goes off." The acting in common sets the fires of community burning. When the church takes collective action, Pastor explains that "suddenly" happens.

Achieving a feeling of oneness is difficult, as the opening section of this chapter made clear. I asked Pastor when he felt a sense of one accord at the church, and he was quick to tell me when he did *not* feel it. A few examples will suffice: when he directs everyone to move forward to fill the front rows of the seats and only a few do, while others take no action, and still others stand at the back of the church; when he asks everyone to pray "together" and some do, but others just look around, move around the sanctuary, or talk to one another; when he requests that congregants stand—out of respect for God's Word—during the service's Bible reading, and some remain seated. Pastor

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[168] Noyes 2003: 31

[169] Fernandez 1988, discussed in Noyes 2003: 30

[170] Noyes 2003: 30

dislikes when congregants act "under duress" as if they are being "forced" to take part in church performances. He states, "The oneness comes when the person just gets up because he wants to get up, the person prays because he loves and wants to pray." And he emphasizes that these actions must be undertaken "together."[171]

Being in the same place and acting together has a profound effect on people. "When we do that," Pastor explained one Sunday, "we will see the presence of God." During one message, he preached that the glory that Christ has given is meant to unite everyone. Referring to the Holy Ghost, he says: "If He is truly in you and I, He causes us to unite." He cited Mormons, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses as examples of unity. Later he explained that when the congregation is in one place and in one accord, then "suddenly happens": "Suddenly Satan flees"; "Suddenly yokes are broken"; "Suddenly financial burdens are lifted"; "Suddenly doors are opened." According to Pastor, when the church achieves oneness, then "burdens are lifted."

Pastor and others at All Nations often succeed in creating this sense of oneness. Each such moment speaks to the importance of being in one place and acting in common. For Brother Ndi, Fellowship Time particularly serves this purpose. During this part of service, he explains, "there's an importance of that oneness. That is what Christ desires." He suggests that if one has not seen someone else for a while, one should go and show that person love. This allows both to "bring that bond together, and you don't see yourself separated." Pastor sees much the same happening at baby dedications. He suggests that those gathered up front experience a "cohesive bond that speaks to unity," one to which the rest of the church members at their seats contribute through their

[171] Som-Pimpong 2007

excitement; those seated thus come "together" with those gathered at the platform.[172] This example also suggests the significance of a common goal. During the baby dedication, those not physically gathered up front were still "together" with those who were, because everyone was engaged in dedicating the baby.

As the baby dedication example suggests, acting in spiritual accord is as important as acting together in one place. Speaking about how he feels when singing with everyone else, Brother Ndi explains:

> It just brings that oneness, that unity. You know it's like—I don't know how to explain it. . . . It makes me feel stronger spiritually because as we know: united we stand, divided we fall. You can take just a single broomstick—you can easily break it. But you take a bunch of broomsticks—you can barely break one. So that is what this song that when we sing collectively in one spirit—and that is most important, in one spirit—that we really feel that connection amongst ourselves and most importantly that we know it is channeled to one place and that is to heaven. And that really makes me stronger, which I also know that each and every one of us can all testify to that same thing.

Mama Lula also commented on the bond created by acting in common. When the congregation prays together aloud or inwardly, she feels that she is part of a community that is in one accord. Mama Dora Iris King echoes Mama Lula's sentiment regarding prayers. She mentions that even though everyone at the church prays individually, they are all focused on God, and He hears them all. The commonality thus rests in the shared act, the shared direction, and the shared receipt. Even though the prayers' content is very personal, praying collectively and to the same God unites the membership. Collective prayer, according to Pastor, helps strengthen the bond between everyone at the church. As Pastor says: "A church that prays together, stays together."

[172] Som-Pimpong 2007

At All Nations, achieving one accord also helps fulfill the church's evangelistic goals. As a united front, members can more effectively evangelize and present All Nations to outsiders. Currently, the church conducts outdoor crusades in its parking lot, which sits very near to Wal-Mart. The crusades can be considered an example of what Roger Abrahams calls "display events." They are "planned-for public occasions" that "are invested with meaning and [where] values are put 'on display.'"[173] Pastor and the members of All Nations not only have extended the space of their church beyond the physical building itself, making the building's surrounds a meaningful place, but also have united in evangelistic action, displaying their values to the public.

Noyes suggests that the "productive tension" between "the community of the social imaginary" and "the empirical world of day-to-day network contacts" is what we should call *group*.[174] This point has proven helpful in elucidating my research at All Nations. Pastor's vision of what All Nations *could* be (which is clearly an aspiration) and the reality of what the church actually *is* often conflict, making it difficult for All Nations to achieve "one accord." But through faith in Jesus Christ, and especially through the performance of that faith, the dream and the reality unite, enabling the members of All Nations to find common ground, and to achieve a sense of one accord.

ALL NATIONS AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY

At All Nations, performance not only brings group feeling into being, but also creates a sense of spiritual family, with God as the head. This aspect of the church is

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[173] Abrahams 1981: 303

[174] Noyes 2003: 33

especially important to its African immigrant members. They find not only a church home, where they can continue their Christian identity, but also a home at which they are accepted in other ways. Many immigrant members no doubt feel cut off from much of American society. They also feel lonely because they are so far from their distant families. In some ways, All Nations acts as a surrogate family for the newcomers.

Brother Ndi's case illuminates the importance of this sense of family. Saying that he is "really established in Nigeria," he estimates that 99% of his relatives—including his parents—live there. Brother Ndi continues, "I came to the United States on my own and I just have a brother and an auntie in Greensboro. But it's like this church has really given me the opportunity to expand my family, you know." The church family gives him confidence, such that when he participates in church outings, he feels as if he is "being backed up by your own family."

This sense of familial support is particularly significant for newcomers like Brother Ndi. Stoller mentions that many of the immigrant traders' "subjective well-being" suffers from "loneliness, cultural isolation, and alienation." He points out the centrality of family and the collective to Africans (recognizing that this characterization is a generalization) and that this value has survived in America.[175]

But the support offered by the church family is not only meant to help immigrants. Mama Dora finished our interview by concluding: "We just want everybody to feel welcome at this church. And you come here and you just experience the love of Christ. You don't—no barriers—you don't feel intimidated; you don't feel like, 'Oh, is

[175] Stoller 2002: 158-159

anybody going to smile at me?' So basically, we just want people to be loved, to feel loved here." Love is important for everybody. Mama Lula explains:

> All I know is that I just love that church. I just, I just love the peoples. I love Pastor. And, you know, [if] you get, you get a church home like that, I mean that's like having your own family—how you love your own family. Because if something happens in this family [her biological family], I can go to that family [the church] and get help.

The story of the passing of one church sister's father is a telling example of the church's significance as family. During one service's announcements, the reader revealed that the father had died in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and suggested that members call the church sister to console her. Before the message, Pastor added that everyone should visit the sister to show her that she has a family who cares; after service, many members did just this. A convoy of cars, with Pastor at the front, and Brother Jlay, Brother Ndi, myself, and others following in the church van, slowly made its way to the sister's home.

We all parked and crammed into her house, positioning ourselves in a circle in the living room. After a song, the sister told everyone about her father, many consoled her with stories of their own experiences with death, and the sister thanked everyone for coming. After another song and a prayer, everyone left. In the sister's time of need, the significance of the church as family was clear. Unable to be with her family back home, the church offered her loving support. At a subsequent service, Pastor announced that the sister was "still receiving visitors." But he quickly corrected himself noting, "not visitors, [but] family"—meaning All Nations family members.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, All Nations is a typical immigrant religious organization. As the fourth chapter discussed, the church offers a range of services, including social and spiritual ones. But unlike many other immigrant churches, Pastor is not satisfied with serving a specific niche of people; he does not envision All Nations as an Asante or Ghanaian or African church. Because of his particular calling to bring *all* the nations together, he has set up a major challenge for himself. His approach is more integrative, resembling the American ideal of unity in diversity. And Pastor is not waiting for the "mainstream" to integrate him. Instead, he is trying to bring the "mainstream" in.

As Chapter Five showed, a disparity exists between Pastor's vision for All Nations and the church's reality, especially in terms of the members' diversity. Basically, the church is an African one, albeit one with a very diverse grouping of Africans. Pastor welcomes the actual diversity of the flock he shepherds, but how does one create a functioning church given this diversity (in this case the African diversity)? In attempting to bring the nations together, Pastor and the church actively create a community that simultaneously reflects the lives the immigrants lived in Africa and the lives they now live in diaspora. The church community is thus both familiar and emergent.

Pastor and the church borrow aspects of the members' cultural and religious pasts to create their welcoming and new community. At the moment, the vast majority of members are working-class African immigrants. But if Mexican or American Indian or homeless or wealthy Christians (or whomever else) joined the church, then Pastor and the

church would find ways to incorporate them as well. Though the church would become less sub-Saharan African in flavor, it would embrace its vision to an even greater degree.

The church integrates its members' diverse backgrounds into its workings, acting in service to Pastor's particular vision, which includes creating a Christ-centered family. But as this chapter explains, the church often struggles to achieve Pastor's vision for oneness. The members' common Christian identity and the performance of various church practices, however, engender group feeling and a sense of belonging. The identity that best unifies members is not an African or an immigrant one, but a religious one. The members' Christian identity—an umbrella-identity that embraces everyone—trumps all others, and the collective performance of this identity helps the church bring the nations together as a community of faith.

APPENDIX

Mission Statement and Doctrinal Statements

The church's mission statement and doctrinal statements are below. They are quoted from the church's *Doctrinal Statements* pamphlet.

Mission Statement

1. To create a Christ-centered family where the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ is without respect of persons and love is very pure and real. James 2:1-20; Ephesians 5:2; Ezekiel 2:9-10.

2. To provide a place of worship where everyone's gifts, talents and abilities as the Holy Spirit has endowed, are fully employed. I Corinthians 12; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Peter 4:10

3. To establish a house where prayer is the delight of or soon becomes a delight for all who come in and where prayers are incessantly offered unto God. I Thessalonians 5:17; Luke 18:1

4. To prepare men and women who would storm the citadel of the devil to do exploits for the Lord. Psalm 60:12

5. To fulfill the great commission through evangelism and church planting. Matthew 28:19.

Doctrinal Statements
1 Timothy 4:16; Titus 2:1

We believe that our doctrine and conduct must be in accordance with God's Word as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. We believe that the Bible is God-breathed. (2Tim. 3:16; 2Peter 3:15b-16)

1. God is the infinite personal Spirit, who has revealed Himself as a Trinity in Unity, existing eternally as Father, Son and Spirit- three persons yet one God.

2. The Bible, including both the Old and New Testaments, is a divine revelation, the original autographs of which were inspired by the holy Spirit, so that the words were kept from error.

3. Jesus Christ is the express image of the invincible God, which is to say, He is Himself he very God. He took upon Him our nature, being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary; He died upon the cross as a substitution sacrifice for the sins of the

world; He ascended into heaven in that body glorified, where He is not our interceding High Priest; He will come again personally and visibly to set up. His Kingdom and to judge the quick and the dead.

4. Man was created in the image of God, but fell into Sin and that sense is lost; this is true of all men and except a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God; Salvation is by Grace through faith in Christ who His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree; the retribution of the wicked and unbelieving and the reward of the righteous are everlasting and as the reward is conscious so is the retribution.

5. The church is an elect company of believers baptized by the Holy Spirit into one body, each believer living his life in the power of the Holy Spirit; its mission being to witness concerning its head, Jesus Christ and teach and preach the gospel among all nations

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