Black churches struggle to survive in downtown: "In it for the long haul"

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A fading sign at the corner of Cleveland's East 79th Street and Golden Avenue announces the Last Stop Bonanza Inc. as "the stop that has your everyday needs"—even though the gate is locked and the space is filled with trash.

Farther down East 79th, Pastor David Cobb Jr. presides over a block party where smiling children ride ponies, Christian rappers perform and young men play basketball near older adults in conversation at shaded picnic tables.

"This has the potential to be a safe haven for the community, for the city and for those who want to serve God," says Cobb, the 35-year-old pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church. "God is going to do it. God is going to use us."

So many in the inner city have given up: businesses, the middle class, many of the predominantly white churches that filled this once-thriving neighborhood. But black churches—Emmanuel and more than 30 other congregations within a ten-block radius—have stayed.

The question is, for how much longer?

Here in what has been described as the nation's poorest big city, the black church is at a crossroads. Longtime congregations like Emmanuel are critical to struggling neighborhoods, providing safety, social services and an anchor for revitalization plans.

In a time of unprecedented black geographic mobility, the churches face the same social and economic forces—including people moving to the suburbs and the high cost of maintaining older buildings—that caused many predominantly white Protestant churches and Jewish synagogues to flee downtown decades ago.

Even the Cleveland Catholic Diocese, which maintained its urban presence long after dioceses elsewhere closed large numbers of churches, is looking at ways to close or

merge more than 25 churches in the city.

Now the black churches are facing their defining moment, trying to hold on to a centuries-old mission that expects men and women who have moved up the economic ladder not to abandon those left behind.

“There is a definite trend toward black churches moving to the suburbs,” says Lawrence Mamiya, chair of the religion department at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York.

That leaves congregations like Emmanuel, which has stood at the same street corner for 90 years, at the center of the struggle throughout the inner city. Without such churches, says City Council member Mamie Mitchell, the neighborhood “would be desolate. It would be without faith, without hope.”

Emmanuel was started by blacks in 1916 in what was then a mostly white neighborhood. When fire destroyed the wooden structure in 1939, the congregation rebuilt it. By the mid-1950s the sanctuary was so crowded that ushers had to set up chairs in the aisles.

But in the 1960s, those who could afford a move took off for safer neighborhoods. The Sunday crowd at Emmanuel dwindled from 600 to around 200. Like other area congregations, Emmanuel has become almost a suburban church in an urban setting.

Yet those who still attend Emmanuel, a faithful remnant of auto mechanics, teachers, salespeople, small business owners, factory workers and retirees, are committed to this corner.

So is Cobb. He looks out of his office to the empty lot across the way and envisions a family life center and a Christian school.

To start this revival, however, Cobb is aggressively trying to persuade members to reach out to the neighborhoods many of them fled years ago.

The pastor plans to station a church bus at a nearby public housing complex every Sunday morning to let residents know they are welcome at Emmanuel. He also is starting a group called GANG, or God’s Anointed New Generation, to show his commitment to teen ministry.

Bringing in new people is only the first step; the harder part is keeping them, Cobb acknowledges. “You almost have to think of this the same way as if you are going to another country,” said parishioner Rochelle Smith, who knocked on doors at the housing complex to invite residents to a church-run block party.

Black churches struggle to find money for expenses such as roof repairs and filling a hole in the parking lot. Those challenges would be enough for Emmanuel, yet a medical obstacle looms over Cobb and his church. On Saturday nights, a church deacon hooks up Cobb to a kidney dialysis machine in the pastor’s home and waits six hours as he undergoes treatment. On Sunday afternoon, the deacon’s brother, also an Emmanuel deacon, does the same.

Cobb learned he had a kidney disease six years ago. He has been on dialysis and awaiting a transplant since May 2007.

The illness has cemented the relationship between Cobb and Emmanuel. Several members say Cobb’s honesty about his disease and sincerity about his faith won them over right away. Still, church members have doubts: Is the pastor asking too much of himself and them? Even Cobb admits to his own dark nights of the soul. “A lot of times I ask God for strength,” he said.

It is then, the pastor says, that he hears the Holy Spirit responding that Emmanuel Baptist is where he is meant to be. Sometimes, he says, the confirmation can be as simple as a phone call or a letter from a church member thanking him.

“God, I guess, knows how much I can bear. He knows it is rough for me,” Cobb says. “He also knows I’m not going to quit and run from the challenge. Because I’m in it for the long haul.” *–David Briggs, Religion News Service*