

Storefront churches are lifeblood to urban poor: Outreach funded mostly by tithes

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When Abraham Smith retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1996, the last thing on his mind was preaching from a storefront in one of the most depressed areas of the nation's capital. But an elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church asked the lieutenant colonel and ordained minister to create a new congregation in the district's troubled Petworth neighborhood. Smith found he couldn't refuse.

"I had no experience or knowledge or background other than what the Lord planted in my heart," Smith said. He has pastored the Christ Our Redeemer AME Church for seven years now from a brick-faced storefront on Upshur Road in Northwest Washington.

No more than 30 people pack the tiny church on Sunday mornings, swelling their voices to the size of a large gospel choir, praising God for giving them life in a place where death may wait on the streets outside. "The men and women and children here, they don't have lives," Smith said. "They are walking dead today."

Storefront churches dot most street corners in Petworth, ministering from dilapidated row houses and boarded-up commercial strips. Some are new, but most have been there for several years, having started in school buildings or the basements of more established churches. Many of the area's largest congregations once worshiped in storefront sanctuaries, sandwiched between liquor stores and funeral homes.

In the era of the "megachurch," storefronts buck the trend toward massive congregations and televised, PowerPoint sermons. They instead offer intimate Bible studies to which members can walk. An urban phenomenon, storefront churches are difficult to study because so many are started by unordained ministers and are independent of denominational hierarchies.

But they are a lifeblood in urban communities plagued by violence and economic depression, picking up where the government leaves off with social services and reaching those considered beyond help.

“Churches, especially black churches, have historically been the only place Americans could go to get help,” said Susan Newman, an ordained religious adviser to Washington Mayor Anthony Williams. “They were the only thing accessible by walking distance. They started out by servicing the needs of people—giving showers, hot meals, donated clothes.”

Smith said storefronts are a predominantly black phenomenon because they are the foundation of a resilient people. “A storefront is where we as a people have evolved from,” he said. “In urban settings, storefront churches are planted wherever there’s a significant grouping of people of color. They start out of a specific need.”

The storefront church tradition has its roots in the Great Migration that swept many ex-slaves northward after the Civil War. The influx changed the demographics of urban centers, causing large-scale white flight from cities.

“You had overcrowded black neighborhoods in urban areas, and the religious life reflected that diversity. Churches became enclaves for different types of black people, by national origin and preferences for different flavors and styles of worship,” said Omar McRoberts, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and author of *Streets of Glory*, a book examining storefront churches in Boston. “Lots of commercial spaces ended up being vacant. The deli, the library . . . all those things left, and churches moved into those spaces,” he said.

Immigration waves keep storefront churches vital, said Edwin Hernandez, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Religion at the University of Notre Dame. Latinos are the fastest-growing immigrant group in Washington, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and the district’s Office of Latino Affairs. The many new Spanish-speaking storefront churches testify to that trend.

“Increases in the numbers of immigrants create conditions for these religious communities to grow and to multiply,” Hernandez said. “Storefront churches are the first stop in providing social services.” Instead of supporting large-scale charities, storefronts reach out to communities on a personal level—giving food to the homeless outside their front door, helping new immigrants learn English, and preaching on street corners about gang violence and drug addiction.

Christ Our Redeemer runs workshops at a recreation center to educate residents about healthy eating and getting out of debt. The church donates school supplies to a nearby elementary school, and cooks a free Thanksgiving meal each November.

The outreach work is funded almost totally by tithing. "We are a small church," Smith said, "but we have a big heart. -*Amanda Mantone, Religion News Service*