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In New York, Billy Graham Will Find an Evangelical Force

By **MICHAEL LUO**

Correction Appended

When a fiery young preacher named Billy Graham first journeyed to New York City in 1957, his national reputation had already been building. But he arrived in this famously secular city - regarded as something of a graveyard for evangelists - feeling more than a bit of trepidation.

"No other city in America - perhaps in the world - presented as great a challenge to evangelism," he wrote in his memoirs. He confessed during his opening sermon at Madison Square Garden that he had been "frightened" by the prospect of coming.

Now, nearly a half century later, the Rev. Billy Graham, 86, his once-booming baritone reduced to a scratchy whisper, is set to preach to New York City once again, for what he and his aides say is probably his final crusade. But after preaching his story of God's love to more than 200 million people in 180 countries and territories, he comes this weekend to preach in Flushing Meadows, Queens, to a drastically changed city, according to many pastors and academics.

It is a New York that while still populated by considerable concentrations of Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims and others, is alive with a varied, vibrant and, by many accounts, growing population of evangelical Christians: young and old, wealthy and dirt-poor, immigrant and native-born.

"I have had people say to me, 'Oh, it must be hard living in New York because there are no Christians there,' " said Tony Carnes, a Columbia University sociologist and a writer for Christianity Today, an evangelical magazine. "I said, 'You don't understand what's going on. The city has really changed.' "

The change is evident every Sunday at the sprawling campus of the Christian Cultural Center in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn, built in 2000 in the style of a suburban megachurch, with a restaurant, a coffee shop and an outdoor garden with ponds stocked with Japanese koi. More than 10,000 flock there every week to praise God. It is evident at a warehouse in Flushing occupied by Faith Bible Ministry, where six services are held every Sunday, in English and three dialects of Chinese, for more than 700 congregants.

And it is evident in any drive through Harlem and the Bronx, where large charismatic Latino churches, as well as their smaller storefront siblings, spring into view. Among them are La Sinagoga in East Harlem, a historic center of Pentecostalism in the city; John 3:16 in Longwood, the Bronx, a thriving congregation of several hundred; and Fountain of Salvation in Washington Heights, an influential church here as well as in Latin America.

"Even though we live in a city of darkness, within the darkness, there is light as well," said Esther Castro, a longtime member of La Sinagoga.

Mr. Graham, in a recent interview, said pastors in New York had been calling on him to come to the city, assuring him that his audience was eager and growing.

"They just felt after 9/11 there was a search on the part of many people for the purpose and meaning in their lives," he said. "And they felt that a crusade like this could be one thing that could speak to a lot of people. They said their churches are growing, and a thousand new churches have sprung up since I was in New York, especially in various ethnic groups."

Precisely tabulating how many evangelical Christians there are in the city - and what exactly constitutes such a Christian - is notoriously difficult. In a study commissioned by the Christian Cultural Center, the church in Canarsie,

Mr. Carnes set out in 2003 to conduct a census of the city's evangelical churches. Mr. Carnes and his staff went through the city, visiting churches and dropping off surveys in five languages, asking about their theological beliefs and attendance.

Defining an evangelical can sometimes be problematic, Mr. Carnes acknowledged, especially since the word has acquired so much political baggage. Evangelical churches are typically defined by their emphasis on doctrine, including the authority of Scripture and the importance of personal conversion. Meanwhile, Pentecostal and charismatic churches emphasize manifestations of the Holy Spirit, like praying in tongues.

Mr. Carnes included all three types of churches in his tally of what are essentially theologically conservative Protestant churches in the city, and in all he counted more than 7,000.

Vivian Z. Klaff, a professor of sociology at the University of Delaware, analyzed a separate batch of data from a 2000 study conducted by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. Counting up the results of membership surveys sent to churches, denominations and councils, Mr. Klaff estimated there were about one million evangelicals, Pentecostal or charismatic Christians in the city, the vast majority of them from historically African-American denominations.

In any case, the number is hardly trivial. And it was armed with this portrait of the growing ranks of the faithful that Rev. Robert J. Johannson, of Evangel Church in Long Island City, Queens, and the Rev. Marcos Rivera, of Primitive Christian Church in Manhattan, went last year to Mr. Graham's mountaintop retreat in North Carolina to issue an official invitation.

"We went down and said, 'God is moving in New York,' " said Mr. Johannson. "The church is growing."

But evangelical leaders have been frustrated, he said. Despite what they sense are their growing numbers, evangelicals still can feel invisible in the city, Mr. Johannson said. They see Mr. Graham's visit as a chance to change that.

"He has the ability to give a city an awareness that something is happening," Mr. Johannson said.

The invitation this time contrasts markedly from when Mr. Graham came to New York in 1957 at the behest of a besieged and shrinking cadre of evangelical and main-line denominational leaders, pastors said. At the time, the church was losing congregants in droves - to the suburbs, for instance.

But what was intended to be a crusade of several weeks stretched into a stunning summerlong run before capacity crowds at Madison Square Garden that catapulted Mr. Graham to national prominence. Even after the crusade, however, churches in the city continued to struggle. It was not until the 1980's and 90's that evangelical faith began to grow in the city, pastors and academics said.

Unlike most of the rest of the country, where the image of evangelical Christians is of people who are white and middle class, in New York City, conservative Christian faith has become quite polyglot.

Fueled by a large influx of immigrants, for example, there are more than 100 African churches in the city alone.

"Things got very intense in the 1990's when you had pretty much a doubling of the sub-Saharan African population in New York City," said the Rev. Mark R. Gornik, a Presbyterian minister who is writing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Edinburgh on New York's African churches.

The result has been churches like the Flatbush congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, pastored by the Rev. Nimi Wariboko, where more than 300 people, mostly Nigerian immigrants, worship every Sunday, with many of the congregants swathed in kente cloth and dancing to an African beat.

"When you walk in, you might think you're in an African church in Africa," he said.

Since the mid-1960's, evangelical Korean churches have proliferated in Queens, numbering more than 250 in that

borough, according to one recent count. Some of the city's largest evangelical churches, such as the Korean American Presbyterian Church of Queens and Full Gospel Church of New York, both roughly 4,000 strong, hold services in Korean. But now, Chinese-language congregations are also beginning to spread, as more people arrive from China.

"A lot of folks from overseas, they come from a more simplistic background," said the Rev. Henry W. Kwan, who pastors First Baptist Church in Flushing, a congregation of about 1,000 people with services in English, Chinese and Spanish. "When they come to America, many of them it's the first time they're exposed to genuine freedom. Because of this exposure and this openness, they grab the opportunity and take up, to me, a sincere and genuine evangelical faith."

But the emergence of evangelical faith is not entirely limited to the working class communities outside Manhattan. Redeemer Presbyterian Church, started in the late 1980's, by the Rev. Timothy Keller, draws several thousand on weekends, mostly young professionals, to its services in Manhattan. The Journey, a Manhattan church that started after Sept. 11, 2001, now draws about 1,000 people to its Sunday services and Bible studies, and has many actors and artists in its congregation.

But the Christian Cultural Center, in a gritty neighborhood in eastern Brooklyn, is perhaps most emblematic of the resurgence in evangelical faith in the city. It is believed to be the largest church in the city, claiming more than 24,000 members. Located opposite several auto body shops, the center's tan facade rises out of the neighborhood like a mirage.

The church began in 1978 as a small Bible study in a storefront in Brooklyn. The Rev. A. R. Bernard, a Panamanian immigrant, left his Wall Street job to start the congregation, calling it the Brooklyn Household of Faith. The congregation moved several times. In 1989, with about 625 registered members, it was in an old supermarket in Crown Heights.

Mr. Bernard runs a celebrity Bible study in the city, attended by the likes of Angela Bassett and Star Jones. On Father's Day, the basketball star Jason Kidd, along with his wife, Joumana, and their three children, arrived for worship.

"When the mayor of New York City tells me he can't go anywhere in his office without meeting someone from my church, that says a lot," Mr. Bernard said.

Interviews with several pastors and their congregants indicated that even if their church's roots and the language of their prayers are far different from those of Mr. Graham, many plan to see him during his three day's of preaching in Flushing Meadows this weekend, where as many as 70,000 are expected each day.

Still, the prevailing culture of this city is still unsure of what to make of evangelical Christians, most churchgoers interviewed agreed. They can be treated with contempt and other times curiosity.

Mickey H. Sanchez, 26, who works for a city councilman and attends Redeemer Presbyterian Church, said he finds that people are often confused when they discover that he's an evangelical.

"That you're in New York as an evangelical, it has to be processed by them," he said.

Laurie Goodstein contributed reporting for this article.

Correction: June 22, 2005, Wednesday:

A picture caption yesterday with an article about evangelical Christians in New York City referred imprecisely to the people pictured at the Korean American Presbyterian Church of Queens. They were attending a youth event in advance of this week's Billy Graham crusade; they were not necessarily members of the church.

Correction: Tuesday, June 28:

A front-page article on June 21 about evangelical Christians in New York City referred imprecisely to Tony Carnes, a sociologist and a writer for the magazine Christianity Today. (The error also appeared in articles on Dec. 13, 2004, and Nov. 5 and 14, 2004.) He is the director of a social sciences seminar at Columbia University; he is not on the faculty.

