

## STORY ONE

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### Foreign-born residents weave detailed religious tapestry in the area

# Ethnic faithful provide a colorful landscape

By Peter Smith  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Hundreds of Indian-Americans gathered on a recent Sunday evening in the social hall next to the Hindu Jain Temple in Monroeville — many dressed in colorful saris or shalwar kameezes, others in Western clothing — all chatting, eating native foods and watching performances of song, poetry and millennium-old dances marking a festival dedicated to the goddess Durga's triumph over evil.

Uphill in the quiet temple, filled with intricately carved statues to several deities, each surrounded by offerings of flowers, scarves, food and incense, Vijay Shah and his family came to offer a ceremonial scarf to the statue of Durga and to pray and prostrate themselves before the various shrines.

Afterward, Mr. Shah recalled how he came to Pittsburgh for a temporary work assignment more than 20 years ago. When his wife, Arti, joined him with their newborn daughter, she found the region more friendly and less frantic than where they had been living in New Jersey.

"My wife loved Pittsburgh so much she said, 'Do what you have to do. We are not leaving Pittsburgh,'" recalled Mr. Shah, 48, of Upper St. Clair.

Central to the family's life here is the temple, not just for religious reasons but also for the cultural and social support that has helped the Indian immigrants to assimilate while maintaining core traditions, and passing them on to their American-raised daughter, Avisha Shah.

"I can probably call 400 people here my family," said Ms. Shah, 21, a student at the University of Pennsylvania, who grew up attending festivals and other events with Indian-American families.

"They've got each other's backs," she said. "Having all kids see that and develop those relationships is one of the best parts of Pittsburgh."

Such stories of spiritual, cultural and social cohesion are playing out throughout Pittsburgh's immigrant populations.

The temple is one of several religious institutions — Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and Christian — built in recent decades in large part by the Pittsburgh area's Indian-American population, which includes more than 10,000 Indian-born residents and their children. The Sri Venkateswara Temple in Penn Hills, dedicated to an incarnation of the deity Vishnu and launched in 1976, has drawn pilgrims from distant cities as North America's oldest major Hindu shrine.

Pittsburgh's estimated 75,000 foreign-born citizens overall, ranging from the highly educated to refugees arriving with minimal literacy skills from the tortured lands of the globe, have started Muslim, Buddhist, Baha'i and other faith congregations. Churches have absorbed immigrants from the fast-growing, youthful Christian populations of Latin America, Africa and Asia, and synagogues have received Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union. Congregations serve as spiritual filling stations and all-purpose social networks for those seeking referrals for jobs and human services or just the experience of familiar languages and foods.

"This is my spiritual home, also my home away from home," said Jane Chan of Pittsburgh Chinese Church in McCandless, where the Bethel Park resident has been a longtime member and volunteer. The independent Protestant church, with roots in 1930s Chinatown, has weekly services and classes in English, Mandarin and Cantonese, followed by a communal meal.

### **Storefronts to cathedrals**

Pittsburgh's changing religious landscape has been evident in visits by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette to more than 20 congregations, worship services and faith-based service organizations serving immigrant populations:

\* At the historic St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in the Strip District, amid displays of Polish icons and prayer cards reflecting its immigrant founders, a bride and groom kneel at a side altar to offer prayers and flowers to the Virgin Mary after a bilingual wedding in English and Vietnamese.

\* In a carpeted former Presbyterian sanctuary in downtown Carnegie, rows of Muslims from many nationalities kneel and prostrate amid Arabic prayers at a Friday service.

\* At a Pentecostal church in a former auto parts warehouse in Wilkinsburg, immigrants from West Africa and a few Americans bob and sway, raise their arms and sing exuberant worship choruses: "I've never seen your kind-oh, this kind God- oh!"

\* At a makeshift temple in the storage room of a Carrick grocery store, refugee priests from Bhutan chant in Sanskrit and prepare a small fire offering in honor of the Hindu goddess Durga.

\* At a modest Greenfield storefront, a dozen mostly American-born participants recite an ancient Buddhist chant, sit silently on meditation cushions and hear a teaching from a Tibetan lama.

\* On the streets of Oakland, Spanish-speaking Catholics process with a painting of the crucified Christ, re-enacting a centuries-old Peruvian tradition in honor of Senor de los Milagros, "Lord of the Miracles."

The marchers were from St. Regis Church, which celebrates Mass in English and Spanish, the latter drawing hundreds of Latino immigrants from throughout the region.

"It's not that I need a Mass in Spanish because I was able to speak English from the beginning, but having people you get to know from the same country, same customs, same community was really nice," said Rebeca Dosal, 47, a native of Mexico living in Squirrel Hill and active at St. Regis in Oakland. "I just love it."

More than 100 children, mostly Hispanic, take part in a religious education program that only recently had an enrollment of eight, said the Rev. Daniele Vallecorsa, the multilingual pastor of St. Regis.

All this "has brought a revitalization of the parish," he said. "Seeing large numbers in church excites people even in the Anglo population."

### **Multicultural outreach**

That influx of youth is one of the common characteristics of the otherwise diverse array of immigrant faith groups. U.S. populations of Hindus and Muslims, who are largely immigrants, and Hispanics, a third of whom are foreign-born and most of whom identify as Christian, are younger than the national average, according to the Pew Research Center.

Coming up with precise numbers for Pittsburgh's immigrant religion is difficult, given the diverse and decentralized structures. A 2010 survey estimated more than 11,000 Hindus, 7,000 Muslims and 1,700 Buddhists in Allegheny and six surrounding counties, although it did not determine how many were foreign-born, according to the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies.

The Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh celebrates Mass regularly in Korean, Vietnamese and Spanish, while anecdotes abound of Protestant services in Spanish, Swahili, Burmese and other languages.

The influx of refugees and immigrants has also brought a response by faith-based institutions, such as Catholic Charities, Jewish Family & Children's Service, Casa San Jose, South Hills Interfaith Ministries and AJAPO (Acculturation for Justice, Access and Peace Outreach). They and non-sectarian charities are active in helping foreign-born arrivals learn English and gain legal status, driver's licenses, medical care and jobs.

"I do this because God calls me to do this," said Sister Janice Vanderneck, Roman Catholic Sister of St. Joseph and director of Casa San Jose, based at St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brookline amid a growing South Hills Hispanic population.

Several groups are also working to build interfaith relations. While many praise the region for religious tolerance, attributed partly to the broadening influence of its many colleges and universities, they say it's important to be vigilant against religious prejudice.

Religious faith is far from universal in the foreign-born population, which is affected by the same secularizing trends affecting the rest of the U.S. populace. Recent nationwide surveys, for example, have found that half of Chinese-Americans identified with no religion, as did about one-fifth of those of Hispanic, Vietnamese and Korean ancestry.

Many Jews who came as refugees from the former Soviet Union, where religion was forcefully repressed, arrived with little knowledge of Judaism. Some, however, have gradually found their way into religious observances.

For Arthur Udler, that involvement came gradually through contacts with rabbis and his children's Jewish schools. "It was always important for me to be what I was meant to be, and I feel absolutely confident this is supposed to be this way," said Mr. Udler, 57, of Squirrel Hill.

But the story is different for many foreign-born residents, particularly those fleeing harrowing circumstances.

"The bottom line is practically all refugees come with a faith. It's always really strong," said Yinka Aganga Williams, executive director of AJAPO, a refugee resettlement and service agency based at the former St. Benedict the Moor Catholic School building in the Hill District.

Dasarathi Nepal, an 80-year-old refugee and Hindu priest, is trying to help thousands of his fellow Bhutanese Nepali refugees transplant their traditions here after they were driven out by the Bhutanese majority, partly over religious and cultural differences, even as they struggle to find adequate jobs and housing. "To be a priest is to protect one's religion and culture," he said through a translator.

Pittsburgh has received several waves of immigrant religion, from the early Scots-Irish Presbyterians and German Protestants in the 18th century to later Jewish immigrants

The demand for labor in mines and mills drew an influx from Eastern Europe and Mediterranean lands, their church spires and onion domes still sharing skylines with defunct blast furnaces and smokestacks.

A 1913 directory for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh listed McKeesport as home to Polish, Hungarian, Italian, Ruthenian and "Slavish" parishes, not counting ethnic Orthodox and Protestant churches. Nearby Homestead had "a sacred density to rival Rome and Jerusalem," in the words of Franklin Toker, a University of Pittsburgh architectural historian. Yet a 1958 publication of the Committee on Religion for Pittsburgh's Bicentennial Association contained only two religious symbols on its cover, a cross and a Star of David. It said the region plays host to "all the major religious faiths: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Eastern Orthodox."

Today, one can still attend the occasional polka Mass and ethnic-heritage fair at some of these churches, and some are receiving new influxes of Eastern European immigrants, but most ethnic parishes were stirred into the American melting pot, if not closed after the population losses amid the steel industry's collapse.

Meanwhile, the notion of "all the major religious faiths" would broaden.

After historic legislation in 1965 ended discriminatory U.S. immigration policies, skilled immigrants from Asia and elsewhere were drawn to Pittsburgh's universities, medical centers and corporations. Their ranks have swelled with small but significant Hispanic immigration and an influx of refugees of war and exile from Bhutan, Burma, Somalia and elsewhere.

While immigrant congregations can be found throughout the region, a modern "sacred density" can be found in the eastern suburbs of Monroeville and Penn Hills, now home to multiple Hindu centers, a mosque, a Sikh gurdwara and ethnic churches.

Immigrants and refugees also face the challenge of passing on their faiths to children growing up in a vastly different context than their foreign-born parents and clergy. Many congregations have launched Sunday schools and summer camps.

Pittsburgh Chinese Church, is working to "reach the second generation with English ministry" and to "not see them as secondary," said Pastor Benjamin Lee.

It's harder to pass on the faith if the parents, many of them working weekend shifts in health care and other fields, can't get there. A 2011 Princeton University study found that regular worship attendance tended to drop among immigrants who had frequently attended worship in their homelands.

"It's got to do with trying to survive in this country," said Ms. Williams, of AJAPO. Many refugees and poorer immigrants have to take work when they can get it, posing the question: "How do we become part of that system without losing faith?"

SIDEBAR:

## **Indian community makes imprint**

### 10,000-strong group delivers religious diversity

By Peter Smith  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Seated in front of the floodlit, intricately sculpted facade of their Hindu temple in Penn Hills, hundreds of people looked into a clear October night sky, their faces glowing with the colors of fireworks bursting overhead to mark Diwali, a sacred festival of lights marking a god's victory over darkness and ignorance.

People travel from across North America to make pilgrimages to the Sri Venkateswara Temple.

Built in the mid-1970s and based on a much larger South India shrine that is one of the world's largest pilgrimage destinations, the Pittsburgh version claims a historic role as the first temple in North America to capture the architectural pomp and sacred sense of a major shrine in Hinduism's native land.

Being able to make the regular trip there from his home in the Sewickley area is so important to Srini Bellamkonda that the software engineer, who was transferred by his company from his native India in 2001 and came to Pittsburgh in 2004, hasn't sought transfers anywhere else since.

He knows of fellow Indian immigrants who left Pittsburgh for jobs in Texas or Florida, only to return.

"This is important to us, definitely," said Mr. Bellamkonda, 40, after he helped a neighbor's young son light a sparkler to celebrate Diwali. "They might not like the weather so much, [but] the temple is one reason why people want to stick to Pittsburgh.

Of all Pittsburgh's immigrant groups, its 10,000-strong Indian community has made the most visible imprint on the city's diverse religious scene.

Many immigrated since the 1960s to work as engineers in corporations such as Westinghouse and in the city's academic and medical centers.

Indian-Americans have organized two major Hindu temples and other smaller Hindu institutions, a Jain shrine, a Sikh temple and small Christian congregations, including a Catholic group worshipping in the ancient Syro-Malabar tradition.

Muslim immigrants from India are also active in the region's mosques.

Earlier in the Diwali festival at the Sri Venkateswara Temple, that religion's full, sensory worship experience was much in evidence. Priests chanted in urgent tones to the backdrop of bells, drumbeats and declamatory notes from wind instruments known as nadaswarams.

Worshippers prayed before the idol of the deity to whom the temple is dedicated, Sri (Lord) Venkateswara, an incarnation of Vishnu, surrounded by consorts Lakshmi and Bhodevi, goddesses of wealth and the earth.

The deities were surrounded by such gifts as floral garlands, mango leaves and rice.

From the temple's modest origins in a Squirrel Hill store, "It's grown, grown, and we have a lot of devotees from all over the country now," temple chairman Ashok Sarpeskar said.

In Monroeville, a few miles from the Sri Venkateswara Temple, the Hindu Jain Temple features elaborate turrets and other architectural flourishes.

Inside are five major shrines to deities primarily venerated in northern India, one of them especially by Jains, followers of a religion historically connected to but distinct from Hinduism.

Young people learn Hindu basics at temple Sunday schools and a summer camp.

"When we were young we never asked why," said Indian native Vijay Shah of Upper St. Clair, who is active in the Hindu Jain Temple.

"Today we have to explain, 'What's the significance of this god? Why do I put a dot on my forehead?' There is more value in that," he said

Closely overlapping with the role of the temples are various Indian ethnic associations and educational institutions teaching classical Indian dance.

"I feel like I've learned a lot about Indian culture and heritage by learning to dance," said Anika Roy, 16, of Monroeville at a Bengali Association of Greater Pittsburgh festival at the Hindu Jain Temple, where she performed an elaborate, ancient choreography depicting the goddess Durga's triumph over evil.

The Pittsburgh Sikh Gurdwara was formed in the 1970s, also in Monroeville, by followers of the monotheistic religion, which emerged in India in the 15th century with distinct Scriptures, worship and traditions of dress.

Indian religious leaders say they have been involved in interfaith efforts and find the climate generally friendly despite isolated incidents of prejudice, but national events, such as a massacre committed by a lone gunman at a Wisconsin Sikh temple in 2012, have prompted heightened security and educational efforts, such as giving temple tours and speaking to school and church groups.

"We need to work a little more on telling people who we are," said Chitratan Singh Sethi, who is active at the Sikh gurdwara. "We definitely try our best with whatever opportunities come our way."

## STORY TWO

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# Immigration shapes religion's evolution here, across U.S.

By Peter Smith  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Margaret Standard came to Pittsburgh from her native Georgia in the late 1950s when her husband was transferred here by Westinghouse Corp.

"We were supposed to stay here for two years. Somebody can't count," recalled Ms. Standard, now 85. But, she concluded, "we were sent here for a reason."

With other Southern transplants, the Standards helped found Pittsburgh Baptist Church in Dormont, the first Southern Baptist congregation in the Pittsburgh area. It quickly set and met a goal of ringing the city with new churches. "There was just a need, and we were able to meet it," Ms. Standard recalled.

The congregation is back to cultivating new churches today — cooperative ventures between the spiritual descendants of Southern migrants and more recent arrivals from foreign lands.

On a Sunday morning earlier this year, while the mostly white, English-speaking congregation was singing traditional hymns such as "He Leadeth Me" in the upstairs sanctuary, about 20 Vietnamese-Americans were finishing up worship in a downstairs classroom. Teenagers on piano and drums accompanied "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" and "Because He Lives," sung in Vietnamese and accented English.

In the afternoon, the Slavic Baptist Church, a small group of mostly Ukrainian immigrants, met in the sanctuary for prayer, preaching and singing to lyrics written in the Cyrillic alphabet on the large screens.

And that evening, at a sanctuary in Brentwood, a Bhutanese pastor affiliated with Pittsburgh Baptist Church led fellow refugees in Nepali-language worship to the accompaniment of drums and a well-amplified guitar.

These are a few scenes of the ferment surrounding immigration and faith today in Pittsburgh and the United States. While many immigrants transplant Old World faiths to new soil, others have switched or left their historic religions.

Some American churches are actively evangelizing among the newcomers — seeing a historic moment in which the populations of the once-distant mission fields are now in their own backyards. Some immigrants themselves are proselytizing among their own ethnic and language groups and their U.S.-born neighbors.

Many faith-based social-service organizations forbid proselytizing in their work with immigrants and refugees, but some congregations do evangelize while also offering practical aid such as food, clothing and English lessons.

That has raised concerns among some immigrant and refugee advocates over what they see as potentially coercive tactics — even if unintentional — aimed at vulnerable populations.

"These mission groups that help with those resources, that's great," said Sancha Rai, a leader in the Bhutanese community. But some people "later feel obligated" to attend the churches that helped them.

Still, Mr. Rai said the Bhutanese community, which celebrates Hindu and Buddhist festivals, has encouraged its Christian members to hold a Christmas celebration, saying: "You organize it and we'll come. Every religion we take as holy."

Courtney Macurak — director of Prospect Park Family Center, a refugee-service agency of South Hills Interfaith Ministries with strict no-proselytizing rules — tells refugees they "have the right to say no" when proselytizers knock on their doors. But sometimes the message gets lost in translation.

Some immigrants themselves are fervent evangelizers.

Living Spring International Center, a Pentecostal church in Wilksburg, is part of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a Nigerian denomination active in scores of countries with a goal of being within a short drive of every soul in developed nations and within a short walk of everyone else.

"We are mandated to go to the whole world," said Laide Ogunyemi, a founding member of Living Spring.

And Christianity is hardly the only religion causing a cross-cultural shake-up. The growing presence of Muslims has led to some converts to Islam. And while some Buddhist temples are community centers for Asian immigrants, others largely draw U.S.-born learners to classes on meditation, with the resident lama or monk often the only Asian in the room.

### **A 'send city'**

The Southern Baptist Convention — the nation's largest Protestant body, but with only a small presence locally — has officially designated Pittsburgh one of 50 "send cities" in North America. That makes it a destination for money and workers to expand beyond its mostly white, Southern base.

Pittsburgh Baptist also has helped launch two neighborhood churches among predominately U.S.-born populations, but its ethnic focus reflects its goal to reach the entire city.

"We cannot effectively do that just speaking English," said Pastor Kim Grueser. "The world has come to Pittsburgh."

The church soon connected with pastors with visions of their own for "church planting" — a missionary strategy of starting congregations geared to unreached populations.

Among them was Deo Lagoon — one of thousands of ethnic Nepalis who are refugees from Bhutan. The son of a Hindu priest, he converted while a refugee student in Nepal, concluding only Christianity offered hope for eternal life and forgiveness of sins. He sensed God commanding him "to tell your people about Jesus," he recalled.

Mr. Lagoon, now 58, started a church in Nepal and connected with Pittsburgh Baptist after resettling here. The congregation meets at Brentwood Christian Church to be closer to refugees' homes in Carrick and Whitehall.

The small Vietnamese congregation was founded by Dan Nguyen, 64, who previously pastored other churches here and in Vietnam. He "followed God, and the Bible says to go out and spread the word," he said through a translator, and has done so through such means as passing out religious literature at Vietnamese markets.

Pastors Lagoon and Nguyen both receive funding to work as church planters by the Southern Baptists' North American Mission Board.

The Slavic Baptist Church started about 15 years ago, its service a mix of Ukrainian, Russian and English. "We definitely want to reach people for Christ," said longtime member Yuriy Kostyuk, 40, a welder from Plum. "Our goal is mostly for our people, but we accept everybody."

### **Prayer, praise and pinatas**

The view is similar at Iglesia Cristiana Sion, a Spanish version of the name of the congregation where it meets Sunday afternoons, Zion Christian Church in Carrick.

At a recent service, the small but spirited group of worshippers raised hands as they prayed and sang in Spanish. Afterward, they gathered for lunch in the fellowship hall, followed by a birthday celebration featuring cake and a pinata.

Raised with little religious training in Venezuela, Pastor Frank Rondon became a Christian as an adult. He met his future wife, Stephanie, whose father is pastor of Zion, while he translated for a mission team she was on. He felt a call to ministry, went to a Bible college in Massachusetts and led two New England congregations.

They returned to Stephanie's hometown and opened the church in 2012.

"Sometimes the need is the call," he said. "Seeing there is a need for a Hispanic church in Pittsburgh and knowing that God called us to preach the gospel, and having a Hispanic heritage myself, we decided to follow God and start the church."

### **'I have a very big God'**

Over in Wilkinsburg at a Wednesday evening service earlier this year at Living Spring, dozens of worshippers sang a full hour's worth of high-octane praise songs with words including, "I have a very big God who is always on my side."

The church, launched more than a decade ago by one in Philadelphia, has since planted others in the South Hills, Erie, Pa., and Morgantown, W.Va., and plans another in the North Hills.

Pastor Adegboyega Esan said he was working as a banker in his native Nigeria when he got involved with Redeemed Christian Church of God. "At some point you just find yourself pastoring a church once you have a call," he said.

Pastor Esan preaches what he calls a "full gospel" of a holy lifestyle and both material and spiritual prosperity.

While most attendees are West African immigrants, the church tries to connect to the surrounding African-American neighborhood and wider community through school supply give-aways, public festivals and health fairs.

Among the U.S.-born attendees are Gerri and Lephate Hines, who were invited by a member who is a nurse who was caring for her sister.

"When you see people who love the Lord, you can feel it," said Ms. Hines, 65, who brought a well-worn Bible to the service and knelt in prayer during the worship time.

### **Teachings from the East**

Things were far quieter on a recent evening at the Olmo Ling Bon Center in Greenfield, one of several Buddhist sites in the region. About a dozen mostly Caucasian participants sat in meditation on cushions or chairs in the modest storefront, lavishly decorated with sacred scrolls and mandalas and images of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhist leaders.

The center follows the Bon tradition, which both predates and is interwoven with the main strands of Tibetan Buddhism. The session included ritual chants, silent meditation and a teaching on compassion by founder Tempa Dukte Lama.

The teachings have resonated with practitioners like Kate Bazis, 42, an artist from Wilkinsburg. Raised Catholic, Ms. Bazis gravitated toward Buddhist practice but isn't interested in labels: "If it's a true truth, it doesn't matter what form we put it in. They all should have the same teachings."

## **SIDEBAR:**

# **Church offers Burundians new start**

By Peter Smith  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In the middle of a Sunday worship service at Cornerstone Church in the North Hills last month, Ntahirera Evelyne stood up from her pew and called out the first ululating notes of a worship song with its roots in Central Africa.

She and several others in the congregation then strode rhythmically to the front, where they sang joyfully in the Swahili and Kirundi languages, with lyrics such as "My love for Jesus has no end, and I'm taking care of my salvation."

They swayed and rolled their arms in simple choreography, the women with bright-patterned skirts, blouses and layered headscarves, the men in collared shirts and jeans or baggy linen pants.

The scene repeats itself regularly at Cornerstone, where a chain of events beginning half a world away has led to the integration of dozens of African refugees — exiles of a genocide that occurred so long ago that many grew up entirely outside their native Burundi — into the small, mostly white church.

Since the first Burundian refugee families connected with the church about six years ago, the congregation has helped its members learn English, get driver's licenses, prepare for jobs and navigate the bureaucratic obstacles of getting health care, housing and school enrollment.

Many live in North Side neighborhoods and have found work in pharmaceutical manufacturing and other manual labor. In turn, the congregation has received an injection of new energy, an infusion of children into what had been a small Sunday school program and powerful examples of faithful resilience amid adversity.

"I feel really passionate about this church," said Boniface Rukundo, 28, a North Side resident who was born in Congo and spent his entire life there and in Tanzania before coming to Pittsburgh six years ago.

It started around 2008 when the Rev. Michael Guthrie received a call from the refugee service organization of Catholic Charities, seeking to set up a meeting between the church leaders and the first three families of Burundians to arrive.

Through an interpreter, the Burundians told the church leaders: "We are looking for our mother."

To understand what that meant requires more than a century's worth of church history.

Cornerstone is a member of the Free Methodist denomination, a small evangelical body whose historic anti-slavery stance also prompted missionary work in Africa.

Free Methodist workers were thus in place in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo to help Burundian refugees. They had fled a genocide of ethnic Hutus in 1972 by the governing Tutsi group, according to a background publication by the Cultural Orientation Resource Center, funded by the U.S. State Department to help in refugee resettlement.

After the refugees spent many years in the camps, with no hope of returning safely to Burundi, the U.S. government agreed to resettle some of them here. Those arriving in Pittsburgh soon sought a Free Methodist Church.

As the same time, Cornerstone "had been in a time of asking God, 'What should we be doing to reach out to the community?' " Rev. Guthrie recalled. "When these first three families made contact with us, there was agreement that this was what we were supposed to be doing."

Those who never taught a Bible class found they could teach the use of stoves and ovens to people who had to cook over open fires in refugee camps. Law enforcement officers talked to young men about how to respond safely if stopped by police.

Member Rick Davidek recalled many hours helping set up and fix computers, teaching refugees to drive and helping them get licenses. The church helped teach job skills and how to file applications and prepare for interviews.

"Their faith is incredible," he said, citing the case of one refugee woman who, lacking any money to put in the offering plate, put in some of her own dishes instead.

In time, more refugees arrived. Some refugees eventually departed the congregation, amicably, to create a more exclusively African church, but many have stayed with the intentionally cross-cultural congregation.

That mix can be seen in everything from the children's programs, with white, American-born youth rehearsing on a recent Sunday for a traditional American Christmas pageant performed by African children, to the worship band that features Americans and Africans blending their voices, guitars and bongo drums.

For the longtime members, the benefit is "to be in a church that is diverse," said Leonora Kivuva, a linguist and native of Kenya who has helped the church and the refugees for the past six years. For the refugees, "they are able to benefit from people who have lived in this country from the beginning in a setting where they feel they are safe and accepted and loved." Ms. Evelyne, 27, is a mother of four children, ranging from 1 to 9 years. She spent 11 years in a refugee camp before coming to Pittsburgh, arriving with her husband, a toddler and a newborn.

"Everything is different for us," she said. But "I feel very happy because I found our church."

The Burundians do not readily talk about the terrors and hardships they have been through, focusing more on the present.

"Absolutely, it was very tough," in the camps, said Mr. Rukundo. But "I have seen God in our lives from where we came from to here I am. It's only of God," he added.

"One of the main things we have learned is how faith can help us deal with difficulty and tragedy," Rev. Guthrie said.

With Americans, "if something bad happens, we're angry at God, that he must have caused it," he said. Among the Burundians, "I've never heard that. If anything, I've heard them say God allowed us to be on this journey to bring us to this point. Suffering is not what you think it is and it doesn't have to destroy you."

He would never go back to the "calm" days before their arrival.

"When you have noise in the church because of kids, then the church has life, and if it has life, it has a future."

## STORY THREE

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# Synagogues struggle in dying mill towns

## An out-migration of young Jews causes numbers to dwindle

By Peter Smith  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For one evening in mid-April in New Castle, Temple Hadar Israel bustled with the sounds of prayers, the tinkling of glasses and dishes and even the joyful outbursts of a visiting toddler. About three dozen members and visitors had gathered on the first night of Passover over matzo ball soup and other traditional fare for a communal celebration of the ancient Jewish ritual meal.

The chatter and laughter among the mostly older, formally dressed group provided a respite from the reality that the days of the historic synagogue in the Lawrence County city are likely numbered.

Once with about 300 to 400 families in the two synagogues that have long since merged, Hadar Israel is now down to about 70 individual members.

"Way back when, they used to have a service every day," said Arthur Epstein, 81, who has been a member for about 50 years. "That's when they were a booming congregation."

On Judaism's holiest days, the worshippers once overflowed from the main sanctuary into a fellowship hall filled with folding chairs. Today, there are plenty of empty seats at regular prayers, and classrooms once serving 100 young students now sit idle.

"We're trying our best to keep it alive," said Mr. Epstein. But "you have to have people."

The story is being repeated throughout small-town America -- but nowhere more so than in the constellation of small mill cities in the Tri-State area that have long since passed their peak industrial years.

Along the Ohio and Monongahela river valleys, in the Laurel Highlands and in county seats through the region, synagogues with rich legacies have been entering what some describe as hospice care.

Many are already the last synagogues in town -- mergers of Reform, Conservative or Orthodox congregations that once flourished separately, now using a blend of denominational liturgies. It's often a matter of when, not if, they will close. Many are preparing for the care of their cemeteries, endowments and Torah scrolls after they close.

Chalk it up to mills, malls, marriage and mobility.

As the traditional steel and other industrial employers closed or downsized, fewer customers frequented the downtown shops run by Jewish merchants -- who also faced competition from new, larger store chains.

And like Jews elsewhere, younger generations are more likely to pursue professions in Pittsburgh or other larger cities.

"In smaller towns, kids go off to college and don't come back. That tends to age a lot of these small congregations," said Rabbi Howard Stein, who commutes from Pittsburgh's South Hills twice a month to lead services at Hadar Israel, which went from full- to part-time rabbinical services to stretch its budget.

And small-town synagogues are buffeted by trends sweeping American Judaism overall.

A growing minority of Jews -- including nearly one-third of younger adults -- say they're not religious, according to a 2013 study by the Pew Research Center. More than half of Jews who married since 2000 did so to non-Jews. When asked what makes one Jewish, significantly fewer listed Jewish community involvement or observance of religious law than pursuing more general values of morality, ethics and justice.

**'It's really an emotional thing'**

While small-town congregations face challenges, they're not unique to synagogues.

Traditional ethnic churches of all stripes of Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism have been shrinking or closing across the Tri-State region and many Northern and Midwestern states.

But the loss of a city's historic synagogue has unique poignancy for Jews.

Communal worship is central to Judaism, and synagogues often provided both a social outlet and a haven in times overt discrimination.

"It's really an emotional thing" for people to close a synagogue where they had marked the years by bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings and funerals, said Sharon Perelman, associate director of the Jewish Community Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, which is helping several area synagogues plan their legacies.

"The synagogue was the bedrock for the Jewish community. It wasn't just a place where you had worship," she said.

"When a synagogue or temple closes in a community, that's it," added David Sarnat, president of the Atlanta-based Jewish Community Legacy Project, which has consulted with declining synagogues in the Pittsburgh region and in the South and Midwest. "In almost every community we deal with, they're down to their last congregation. It's not like we're able to say to them, 'Go down the street to Congregation XYZ.'"

Instead, those Jews are faced with longer commutes to worship in Pittsburgh or another city.

Many area synagogues trace their roots back a century, when growing industrial cities attracted Yiddish- and German-speaking Jewish immigrants.

Jonathan Solomon, 67, of Temple Hadar Israel said his grandparents came to New Castle from Eastern Europe during an era of pogroms. By the time Mr. Solomon was having his bar mitzvah around age 13, he had about two dozen Jewish schoolmates just in his junior high school, and he and his friends could spend all day in the bustling downtown.

"It went downhill very, very, very fast in the '70s," he said. "Obviously it's not unique to us as a religion. It's happening to the city as a whole with the industry dying and young people moving away and not coming back and the older people retiring to Arizona or Florida, or dying."

Gwendolyn Buntman, 13 -- whose great-grandfather opened a shoe-repair business in New Castle a century ago -- had her bat mitzvah at Hadar Israel last year and may well be the last to have that rite of passage there. She appreciated the one-on-one Hebrew tutoring she received but laments the lack of peers.

"Everybody here is older than me," she said. "There are just not a lot of kids here."

She expects to move out of town when she grows up.

Other cities are seeing the same out-migration of youth.

"It breaks my heart," said Phyllis Ackerman, a lifelong member of Temple Beth Am in Monessen. "We all work very hard to keep it going, but the writing is on the wall."

In Johnstown, the three synagogues have been reduced to one, Beth Sholom Congregation, following the declining fortunes of the steel industry.

"Other than the jobs, there's good living here," said Bob Horowitz, whose grandfather came to the Cambria County city from Czechoslovakia to serve as a synagogue cantor in the 1920s. "There's friendship, community, safety. I would imagine if there were jobs in Johnstown, we would have a much larger population here" of both Christians and Jews.

Myron Chijner, past president of Temple Beth Israel in Steubenville, Ohio, which closed in 2013, said the city likely had more Jews in the early 20th century than it does today.

"We really didn't run out of money," he said of the temple. "We basically ran out of people."

### **An orderly closing**

Working with the Jewish Community Legacy Project and the Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, the synagogue planned for an orderly closing of Beth Israel, the sale of its building and the perpetual care of its cemetery.

Various congregations accepted its artifacts, including Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh, which received the sculptural work "Procession," depicting a line of Jews bearing a menorah, prayer book and other ritual items and which had long stood outside the Steubenville synagogue.

Beth Israel also put assets into funds for Jewish education, youth camps and other future-oriented programs.

When members can plan their legacy, "this is making them feel good about it," Ms. Perelman said.

Mr. Sarnat said synagogues need to ask themselves, "How do you want to be remembered? What things were important to you?"

He added: "It's like a will. You don't necessarily write your will when you're dying. As a matter of fact, it's preferable that you don't do that."

Sam Bernstine, president of Hadar Israel in New Castle, said the synagogue hopes to maintain religious services, classes and other activities as long as it can.

"Our goal is to keep this open so these wonderful senior citizens can finish their lives with the temple they began their lives with," said Mr. Bernstein, who turns 58 this month and is often the youngest one at services. In part, he wants to repay his debt of gratitude to synagogue elders who mentored him after the death of his mother when he was 10.

When the congregation does close, the plan is to leave "a footprint of positive historic Judaism in Lawrence County," Mr. Bernstine said.

But there's still hope for revival in some small-town congregations.

In Washington, Pa., the Beth Israel Synagogue's membership has decreased to about 40, but the congregation has attracted new members recently and maintained a religious school and full-time rabbi. It has rented space to a church, an arrangement that has "worked out nicely," said Marilyn Posner, president of the congregation.

"We're still here," Ms. Posner said. "We don't know how long this will be, but we are active, we are holding services every week, we have a balanced budget, we're fixing things that break."

She added: "We are not actively working toward an end at the moment, because we don't think we need to."