

Imani services continue in spite of bishops' plea

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Just days after the 13 U.S. African-American bishops urged the founder of a church for black Catholics to return to unity with the church, some 2,300 people attended the church's July 16 services.

Since the July 2 founding of Imani Temple by Father George A. Stallings, former evangelist for the Archdiocese of Washington, a total of five liturgies have been celebrated. Each attracted more than 1,000 people.

Gloria Nurse, press spokeswoman for the priest, said the total collection from the five services was \$42,000. Imani Temple is looking for land to build a church and a school, she said. In the meantime, services are being held at a public high school in suburban Maryland.

Father Stallings had not responded by July 17 to a July 12 appeal from the nation's 13 black bishops that he return to unity with the church. Nor had he commented on a July 13 statement published in *The Washington Post* by Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington, who suspended Father Stallings for celebrating unauthorized liturgies.

Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, also issued a statement on the Father Stallings' situation.

On behalf of the U.S. bishops' conference, Archbishop May "pledged anew" to ensure that the church recognize the gifts and needs of African-American Catholics.

The archbishop said all U.S. Catholics are saddened by the action of Father Stallings and his followers. "Please know that your concerns are the concerns of every bishop in this land," Archbishop May told black Catholics.

"Your pain is our pain, your joy is our joy," he said in the July 14 statement. "We are a family, and no brother or sister suffers or rejoices alone.

"There have been elements of racism in the church and there continue to be," the archbishop said, observing that African-Americans must be appointed to more leadership positions. Continued efforts

must be made to incorporate African-American culture in the liturgies, he said, adding that social problems, which have a disproportionate impact on the black community, "cry for our increased attention."

The archbishop also cited gains the church has made within the black community, including doubling the number of African-American Catholics in the last five years and diocesan efforts to implement the National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan.

The black bishops' statement meanwhile called Father Stallings a talented person. "His gifts belong to us and to the church he was ordained to serve," they said.

Father Stallings is "a brother of special and unique talents. He is a priest and shares with us the bond of priestly office," the bishops said. "He is an African-American who possesses the vibrancy of our cultural and spiritual heritage.

"We urge him, we implore him to return to the unity of the church and to continue to encourage the church to reform," they said. The only way such reform is possible is "within the unity of the one Catholic Church.

"We do admit that the sin of racism still makes the harmonious dialogue between our church and our cultural heritage a challenge for all of us," said the statement signed by the black bishops and issued by Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard of Baltimore, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Black Catholics.

"Nonetheless, we do not, we cannot envision the surrender of those efforts even in the face of difficulty. African-American Catholics have faced far more difficult challenges in the past and yet remained firmly and joyfully within the embrace of the church that we love," the bishops said.

Cardinal Hickey's statement asked Father Stallings to "come home.

"As your bishop and your brother, I ask you to return to the church that called you and ordained you to the service of God's people," the cardinal wrote.

"Return to the real struggle to make the church a better sign of unity and diversity," Cardinal Hickey said. "Return to an integral, healthy, effective and accountable ministry within the Roman Catholic



Father George A. Stallings Jr. dances across the stage of a public high school in the Washington, D.C., area during Imani Temple services Sunday, July 9.

AP Wide World Photo

Church."

Father Stallings' action, and the media attention it has received, has "belittled or ignored" the work of African-Americans in the archdiocese and has been personally hurtful, he said.

"This is not a dispute between those who

oppose racism and those who support it," he said, "but between those who choose to stay and work to make our church a better sign of the Lord's love and justice and those who abandon their Catholic faith to follow some personal crusade outside the church."

Bishops decry threat of fundamentalism

MOBILE, Ala. (CNS) — Like Adolf Hitler or Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, biblical fundamentalism tries to give simplistic answers to the tensions and complexities of life, the Catholic bishops of Alabama and Mississippi said in a joint pastoral letter to their people July 14.

Fundamentalism prospers because "for many, life in general seems so complex that they feel they have lost control," the bishops said.

They called fundamentalism a "grave temptation" and a "danger" because it offers:

- "An unreasonable certainty about the meaning of Scripture texts regardless of their context.
- "An overly simplistic certainty of salvation, achieved instantaneously upon acceptance of Christ as savior.
- "A deep sense of personal security, in often identifying the 'American Way' with God's call and will.
- "Intimacy with God in a relationship so personal that it effectively excludes others."

"Such attitudes," the bishops said, "are too readily accepted by those who equate the 'American way of life' with rugged individualism and self-sufficiency."

Signing the letter were Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile and Bishops Joseph L. Howze of Biloxi, Miss., William R. Houck of Jackson, Miss., and Raymond J. Boland of Birmingham, Ala.

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