

Church experiences decline in Rwanda

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News Analysis
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Declan Walsh/CNS

KIGALI, Rwanda — Several thousand worshippers swayed, sang and clapped through a music-filled service in a large, barn-like building in the dusty Rwandan capital.

A preacher dressed in a shirt and tie strode across a small stage, by turns shouting, whispering or hectoring in Kinyarwanda, the local language. When he was finished, the crowd pressed toward the stage.

Some people babbled prayers, others shut their eyes. The preacher laid his hands on their heads. Some appeared to fall in his arms. The preacher shouted "Hallelujah!"

This is the Zion Temple Church, an American-inspired evangelical sect that, like many nontraditional churches, has experienced a sharp rise in followers since the Rwandan ethnic genocide of 1994.

The growth has come partly at the expense of the Catholic Church. Before the genocide, 62 percent of Rwanda's 7.8 million people were Catholics. Today that number has dropped, although the extent remains unclear: Various sources estimate the church lost between 6 percent and 12 percent of its membership.

"A lot of people are connecting with Christian sects, and some are converting to Islam," said Archbishop Anselmo Pecorari, papal nuncio to Rwanda. Some evangelical churches receive funding from U.S. church groups, he added.

The shift partly reflects a broader growth in evangelical churches across Africa, with their emphasis on song, music and the possibility of miracles in their services.

But in Rwanda, the decline in Catholic attendance also reflects disillusionment with the church's role before and during the genocide that killed some 800,000 Rwandans, predominantly Tutsis and some moderate Hutus, ethnic groups with a history of violence.

"Some Catholics left after the genocide, because they saw the church as being linked with the previous government," said the Zion Temple pastor, the Rev. Dieudonne Vuningona.

Some lost faith because the worst massacres took place in churches. During previous pogroms, Tutsis found sanctuary in Catholic churches, but during 1994 entire congregations were murdered. Some victims were killed on altars.

Some genocide survivors found their faith in God strengthened.

"The church did its best. Now is the time for forgiveness. We need to



Declan Walsh/CNS

Worshippers pray during a service at Zion Temple Church in Kigali, Rwanda, in early June. Evangelical churches have experienced growth in the country since the genocide of 1994.

find a medicine to clean Rwandans' hearts," said Athanasie Nyirabagasa, who runs the country's largest orphanage.

But other Rwandans say the church failed them as an institution. Church leaders failed to speak out against the genocide in time, they say, and some bishops had an uncomfortably close relationship with the ruling Hutu party.

Fundamentalist churches have claimed an increase in numbers, but Islam claims to have the most startling growth.

Muslims are perceived to have acted honorably during the genocide, either avoiding killing or saving those in danger. Muslim leaders claim their following has doubled to 1 million people over the past decade, although no reliable census has been conducted.

Jean-Pierre Sagahutu, a Tutsi and a genocide survivor, converted to Islam after 1994. The conversion was inspired partly by the courage of a Muslim who saved his life, he said.

A stranger named Mohammed allowed him shelter in a storage tank behind his house for two months, during the genocide. When he emerged, he discovered that most of his family had been killed in Catholic churches.

"I find it very difficult to enter a church now," he said. "I see blood on the walls."

Now he practices a moderate version of Islam: He avoids alcohol and pork, but said he does not feel compelled to pray regularly or wear Islamic clothes.

He still blames the Catholic Church for not exerting a stronger moral influence during the genocide.

"If the priests had spoken out on

time, it might have stopped the killing," he said.

The church — like all of Rwandan society — was divided at the time of the genocide, said Archbishop Pecorari. The reason that few people died in mosques is that their doors were closed at the time, he said.

Other Christian churches also have been implicated in the genocide. Last year, the war crimes tribunal sentenced the Rev. Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, a 78-year-old Seventh Day Adventist pastor, to 10 years in prison on charges of aiding and abetting the genocide. Anglican, Free Methodist and Presbyterian ministers also were implicated in the killings.

Pope John Paul II has said the Catholic Church cannot be blamed for the faults of individual members.

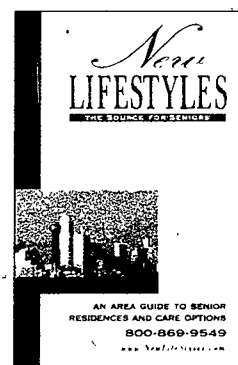
"The church as such cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of its members who have acted against evangelical law," the pope wrote in a 1996 letter addressed to Rwandans.

"All the members of the church who sinned during the genocide must have the courage to face the consequences of the acts that they committed against God and against their neighbor," he said.

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