At first, the devout Muslims who gathered in a Washington, D.C., conference center seemed like they could have come from any mosque. There were women in headscarves and bearded men who quoted the Quran.

But something was different. While mingling over hors d'oeuvres, they discussed how to change Islam's future. A woman spoke about fighting terrorism; she had married outside the Islamic faith, which is forbidden for a Muslim woman. A Pakistani man mentioned his plans to meet friends for drinks, despite the faith's ban on alcohol.

In a corner of the room, an imam in a long gray tunic counseled a young Muslim with a vexing spiritual conflict: being gay and Muslim. The imam, also gay and in a relationship, could easily sympathize with the youth's difficulties.

On this brisk Monday night in late October, members of Muslims for Progressive Values, a nascent American reformist organization, had gathered from around the country to celebrate a milestone: In four years, the group had grown from a few friends to a thousand members and spawned a string of small mosques and spiritual groups that stretched from Atlanta to Los Angeles.

Today, as America's Muslim leaders debate controversial topics like political radicalism inside mosques and states' attempts to ban Shariah law, this growing network of alternative mosques and Islamic groups is quietly forging a new spiritual movement.

They're taking bold steps, reinterpreting Islamic norms and re-examining taboos. While far from accepted by mainstream clerics, these worshippers feel that the future of the religion lies not solely with tradition but with them. Women are leading congregations in prayer, gay imams are performing Islamic marriages, and men and women are praying side by side.

This is not the norm for most of the 2.6 million-strong American Islamic community, accustomed to centuries-old traditions of gender relations and houses of worship that tend to draw primarily from a single ethnic group.

"We can't move forward as a society, as a faith system, if we subscribe to these old draconian ways of practicing Islam," says Ani Zonneveld, who is the president of Muslims for Progressive Values. A 49-
year-old singer-songwriter who lives in Los Angeles, she leads prayers for men and women together and tells gay Muslims, often shunned in other mosques, that their religion welcomes them.

This soft-spoken Malaysian-American who sports a crop cut with blond streaks is one of a small but burgeoning cadre of Islamic reformers in the United States, both within her group and outside it. Their causes range from fighting radicalization and educating young people to building interfaith bridges and protecting women's rights. Over the years, leaders in the Muslim community have addressed changing needs, from building new mosques to defending civil rights when unfamiliar spiritual practices resulted in discrimination. But this new movement is a radical departure.

"What's taking place in Islam in America right now is what happened before in other religions," says John Esposito, a professor of Islamic studies at Georgetown University.

A few denominations within Judaism and Christianity have openly welcomed gay people and women, Esposito points out. Some Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative Jewish communities are led by gay and women rabbis. The Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church allow gay and women clergy. The United Methodist Church ordains women.

Mosques in America, however, usually are Sunni or Shiite; they differ in how they interpret Islamic law. Still other mosques combine Sunnis and Shiites under one roof. But as far as the open participation of gay people or leadership by women imams, most mosques are much the same: It doesn't happen. Some Sufi mosques, which follow mystical traditions, welcome gay Muslims, though their numbers are sparse in the United States.

Most Muslims rarely attend mosques outside of major holidays although the Quran commands men to pray in a group every week. In a Pew survey last year of 1,033 American Muslims, just under one-half said they attend a mosque once a week. Many said they worship on their own or seldom. A majority of Muslims surveyed think the religion is flexible, with only about a third saying there is but one true way to interpret it.

That kind of view is becoming common among Muslims, according to Esposito, as more people try to separate what's in the Quran from cultural traditions. "They say if we don't see anything clear in our scripture, then that trumps tradition. And people are applying that to women's issues and gay issues."

It's among this segment of believers that the progressives are trying to make their mark. With regular prayer meetings in several cities, salons on theology, a children's Islamic educational camp and a series of printed adaptations of Quranic scholarship on issues such as homosexuality, Muslims for Progressive Values aims to fashion a new version of the ancient faith, one that members assert is truer to Islam's origins.

There's a long road ahead. While the total number of mosques in America has climbed 74 percent over the past decade, to more than 2,100, Muslims for Progressive Values has a significant presence in only a dozen cities, including Atlanta, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. The progressives' mosques are borrowed spaces: community centers, homes and churches. There's a mosque in Toronto and a prayer group in Ottawa. The group keeps a directory of unaffiliated like-minded worship centers in smaller cities.

But the progressive Muslims feel they have found momentum, Zonneveld says.
Born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Zonneveld grew up in Germany, Egypt and India as her father moved between stations as a Malaysian ambassador. Her stay-at-home mom taught Zonneveld and her five siblings the basics of Islam. The family read the Quran together in Arabic and fasted from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan. Mosques were scarce in Germany, so her parents invited other Muslims to pray in their home.

After attending college in Illinois, Zonneveld moved to Los Angeles with dreams of becoming a musician. That's where she met her husband, a Dutch-born agnostic who now runs a grocery delivery company. They are raising their daughter Jasmine, 14, as a Muslim.

For 20 years, Zonneveld worked behind the scenes in the music industry, writing and composing songs. She kept her faith hidden at work, though, out of fear that it would hurt her career. But everything changed after Sept. 11.

The attacks by terrorists invoking Islam for a war against the West had nothing to do with the religion Zonneveld knew. Imams appeared on television with politicians to condemn violence. They echoed her views, but she was put off. She had little in common with the bearded middle-aged men on screen.

"The vast majority of American Muslims believe in an Islam that is so different from the people that represent us," Zonneveld says. "It's like if you had an Orthodox Jewish rabbi representing all American Jews."

For the first time, Zonneveld put religion at the forefront of her music. Two years after the attacks, she released an album, "Ummah, Wake Up!" The word ummah means "community" in Arabic. In the opening track, she called for a new jihad. To her, that meant striving to be more merciful, not taking up arms. Another track, "Bury Me," lamented what she saw as the marginalized state of women in Islamic communities.

Her album didn't go over well. When Zonneveld applied to perform at an Islamic music festival in Toronto, the event's organizers told her that men are forbidden to hear women sing. Islamic retailers banned the album. Prominent Muslims said Zonneveld was focusing too much on the bad in Islam and not enough on the good.

Frustrated with the lack of outlets for her critiques, Zonneveld helped found a group called the
Progressive Muslim Union of North America. The broad alliance of dozens of activists and academics struggled and bickered over political beliefs and whether members wanted to reform Islamic doctrine or simply alter social practices. The two-year effort, largely academic, collapsed by 2006, never having founded a mosque.

A year later, Zonneveld cofounded Muslims for Progressive Values, which has enjoyed more tangible success. Its spiritual work has drawn endorsements from well-known Muslim activists, scholars and politicians.

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Most scholars agree that the Quran, which Muslims believe is the written word of God, does not explicitly prohibit women from leading prayers or gay people from taking leadership roles in Islam. The holy book also does not forbid men and women to pray together. Yet, centuries of scholarship on the Quran and the sunnah (the way the prophet lived his life) have resulted in the prevailing view among Muslims worldwide that prayer leaders should be male and that homosexual activity is a sin.

To answer the question of whether women should lead prayers, records of the prophet's life -- whose authenticity remains under dispute -- are seized upon by people on all sides of the debate. Progressive scholars say the prophet permitted women to lead prayers at any time.

In three-quarters of American mosques, women gather in separate rooms or behind partitions or curtains, according to the most recent mosque study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations. The practice stems from Quran, which says that men and women should maintain modest relations. The Quran does not explicitly say the sexes must keep separate.

People like Zonneveld say they take their cue from the early years of Islam, when it was common for men and women to pray together. They point to Mecca, the holy Islamic city where Muslims go on pilgrimage every year and where men and women pray side by side.

There are parts of the Quran that condemn homosexual acts but their interpretation is debated. Today, in at least seven majority-Muslim countries, gay sex is punishable by death. Most opposition to homosexuality in Islam stems from the Quran's story of Lot, which follows the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Conservative clerics say Allah destroyed these cities because men were having sex with men. Like liberal Christians, progressive Muslims interpret this story to be one about condemnation of rape, not homosexuality.

The idea of welcoming gay and lesbian Muslims as part of the Islamic community is more recent, says Kecia Ali, an Islamic studies professor at Boston University who researches sexuality and gender in the Quran.

"We have always had gay people in prayer [groups], but they have been closeted," Ali says. "What's new is this idea that we are now thinking why we are praying the way we are praying, why we are Muslim and who is considered Muslim."

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On a recent Saturday afternoon, Zonneveld and other spiritual activists gathered for one of Muslims for Progressive Values' biweekly salons in Los Angeles around a living room table strewn with pamphlets
and books on Islamic law. Among those present were a Shiite from Iran, a Sunni originally from Iowa who dabbles in Sufism, a Muslim convert and an agnostic Palestinian. They were united by a question and a cause.

"What is Shariah?" asked Zonneveld, referring to the Islamic code that has been used to guide everything from rules for prayer and marriage to deadly punishments for minor crimes in majority-Muslim countries. As Muslims trying to establish a radically different Islam, they asked, How could Shariah be used to their benefit?

The answer did not come easily.

"Shariah is how we live according to God's will for us," said Jamila Ezzani, 28, an autism specialist who has been in the group for almost two years. "It's an ideal to reach for."

"But it's good to know scripture and verse," chimed in Vanessa Karam, a general education professor at University of the West. "No Muslim cannot say that's the foundation for everything, right?"

"I think Shariah [law] is totally made up," shot back Zonneveld. "It's not like there's a page in the Quran that says, 'For you to be Muslim, you have to live by these set of rules.'"

Their differing takes were emblematic of that often unspoken conflict within this community: Are the progressives practicing religion? Or do they resemble secular, cultural Muslims?

Yasir Qadhi, a popular conservative cleric and dean of academic affairs at Houston-based AlMaghrib Institute, holds the latter view. A lecture on progressives that he has given at Islamic conferences has garnered thousands of views on YouTube.

"The very fact that the movement is so small or marginal speaks volumes about their sway and influence," says Qadhi, who lives in Memphis, Tenn., and whose institute trains 6,000 students annually. "It's pretty clear the mainstream of Muslims of North America, who are under no pressure or threat of physical violence, have clearly identified with traditional voices."

"Let's look at the text of the Quran and see what Allah and his messenger want us to do rather than to project our ideas onto the text," Qadhi says. "We traditionalists firmly believe the Quran is the book of Allah and the speech of Allah."

Dalia Mogahed, director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, also takes a critical view of the progressives.

Muslims for Progressive Values "are little more than a footnote or a special interest," she writes in an email. "Their actual influence in the [Muslim American] community is virtually non-existent," adds Mogahed, who spent six years collecting 50,000 interviews for the book "Who Speaks For Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think."

Mohamed Magid, the president of the Islamic Society of North America, takes a softer approach. As the imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society, a 5,000-member cluster of mosques in Northern Virginia, he welcomes a "marketplace of ideas" competing within Islam. "I have no right to strip anyone from Islam who wants to be Muslim," he says. Men, however, always lead prayers at his mosque, and Magid doesn't believe Islam condones homosexuality.
Across the globe, the rise of the women's and gay rights movements has not left Islam untouched. For more than two decades, Muslims scattered around the world have been re-examining gender roles within Islam. In the Middle East and South Asia, Muslim activists have fought against female genital mutilation and honor killings, convincing clerics to issue fatwas declaring the practices un-Islamic.

In the United States, Amina Wadud, who taught Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, has been leading prayer sessions with men and women for years. One of her first, in South Africa in 1994, led conservative Muslims to call for her removal from the university's faculty.

A prayer session of men and women that she led in 2005 in New York, as part of the Muslim Women's Freedom Tour to several U.S. cities, resulted in her condemnation by prominent Middle East sheiks and anonymous death threats.

Asra Nomani, a former Wall Street Journal reporter who organized the freedom tour, has held prayers at several American mosques, with women congregating in the men's section during Friday prayers and refusing to leave.

Such controversial events, though, have brought little change within most mosques.

The gay rights movement within Islam has been quieter. An organization for gay Muslims, Al-Fatiha, sprang up in the United States the late 1990s. The group organized annual retreats and its members marched in gay pride parades in San Francisco. Widely condemned by sheiks for promoting homosexuality in Islam, the organization disbanded by the mid-2000s.

Muslims for Progressive Values doesn't espouse the kind of public activism of prior movements. Members say their goal from the beginning was for Muslims to build spiritual communities around their own interests. Some attend local mosques, while others like Zonneveld don't care to join long-established mosques. They want their own.

"It's hard to tell how successful these progressive groups will be," Esposito says. "Often, these kinds of reforms, when they start to take place, usually consist of small groups that are a vanguard within the religion. You run the risk of alienating even people who see themselves as reform minded if they see one issue, such as gay imams, that they think goes too far."

Two weeks ago in Los Angeles, Zonneveld gathered with progressive Muslims at a Middle Eastern cultural center to inaugurate a new mosque. Sitting cross-legged in a circle with her companions, she sang the call to prayer, exulting the glory of God. She made a bold proclamation about the believers who were joining her that day. Muslims from San Francisco to Seattle tuned in via Skype.

"We are gender equal, queer-friendly and religiously nondiscriminatory," Zonneveld declared. "In other words, all are welcome. Allah tells us in the Quran that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was a 'mercy to the worlds.'"

The group praised Allah in Arabic -- and English, a language rarely used for formal prayers. Women
stood beside men. Among the ragtag group of Muslims were gay converts, feminist academics and lapsed believers seeking to rediscover their faith.

After prayers, the imam, a Shiite convert with Korean ancestry, read from a list of requests that others passed toward him. One congregant asked the group to pray for his friend's brother who was in the hospital. Another asked for a blessing for those caught in the violent upheaval in Syria. A few requested prayers for the pregnant women in their community.

In an Arabic nod to tradition, the congregation recited Surat Al-Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Quran. Observant Muslims say it before every prayer. The chapter praises the "master of all reckoning," asking him to "guide us along the road." In English, they chanted another prayer, based upon the dances of Sufi dervishes. "O Allah! Increase my light everywhere," they recited, asking God to open their hearts and minds. It expressed hope for the future.

This wasn't the first time the Los Angeles Muslims had met for prayers. In 2009, they had gathered at a Methodist church but never could draw steady crowd. And not all Muslims received them well. In one instance, a traditional Muslim stopped by to lecture them on their faults. Then the church, where they rented a meeting room, closed in April.

That mosque never had a name, but on their listserv, the progressives debated passionately last week about what to call their place of worship. "Light of Islam Mosque," suggested one person. "The Progressive Mosque," pitched another.

At last, the group came up with a simple solution, one reflecting its aims of openness and inclusion. The plaque outside their rented space, they agreed, would bear an inscription that started with "MPV" (Muslims for Progressive Values) and ended with "mosque."

And in the middle there would be one word: "Unity."
BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- On a recent Tuesday night at Rojos, a trendy Mexican restaurant on the south side of the city, a group of women were kicking off an unusual welcome party for someone they'd never met.

Their guest of honor: Lisa Pataky, a 25-year-old student who was new to town, trying out a summer internship and considering moving to Birmingham full-time. Around her were supporters of the Birmingham Jewish Federation, peppering her with reasons to stay: abundant jobs, lack of traffic, low cost-of-living, and -- most important -- a friendly, tight-knit community of 5,200 Jews spread among five congregations.

Caren Seligman, the outreach coordinator for the group, had recently been introduced to Pataky through a mutual friend. And Seligman was the one responsible for inviting these women to the restaurant that evening for their first crack at recruiting Pataky to their city.

"If I can get her to like this place for the next six weeks, maybe I can get her to move back here when she graduates," Seligman, 53, recalls thinking at the time.

Though the population of Jews in the South hovers at 1.1 million overall, Jewish life in less bustling parts of the region has taken a dive. More than half of Southern Jews -- 638,000 -- are in Florida. Another 140,000 are in Texas; 120,000 reside in Atlanta, and 97,000 are in Virginia. But the Jewish communities in cities like Birmingham have suffered.

"There has been a huge influx of Jews from the Northeast down South," says Stuart Rockoff, director of the history department at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Miss. "But there's also been a significant migration of Jews from other parts of the South to big Southern cities."

Alabama, once a beacon for Jewish immigrants and American-Jewish migrants seeking prosperity in its booming steel industry, has 8,850 Jews left in a state of 4.8 million people, down from a high of 13,000 in the early 20th century, when the state's population was less than half of what it is now. The decline has become more evident as historic congregations and communities have lately shut their doors and
withered.

In the small towns surrounding Birmingham, two synagogues have closed in recent years and two Jewish religious schools have merged. Synagogues in a handful of other Alabama towns -- the state's 16 amount to a third less than what it had at its peak in 1927 -- are in danger of closing. Several don't have rabbis and are led by volunteers. In Greater Birmingham -- home to one million Alabamians and the bulk of the state's Jews -- the Jewish population has plateaued, and by some estimates, declined. Meanwhile, the region's broader population has grown by tens of thousands in a decade, fueled by growth in its medical research industry.

To help combat this trend, Seligman, the outreach coordinator, is looking for a few good Jews to bring to her city.

The stakes are high. Not only could Birmingham's historic synagogues one day disappear, but so could its secular Jewish organizations, including popular schools and social service groups that often cater to non-Jews. For Seligman, who lost her own children to the Jewish metropolises of Houston and Minneapolis but dreams of the day they move back, the job can get personal.

Her task is not easy. She works long hours -- often arriving at her modest office by sunrise -- trying to recruit young Jews, one at time, to a city with a graying Jewish community that's eager for a more balanced population. She tracks down college students who have moved away to entice them to return. She travels to campuses as close as Tuscaloosa, Ala., and as far as Bloomington, Ind., to pitch the city to students who would otherwise end up in Chicago or New York. She fields phone calls from strangers considering jobs in Alabama. When a new Jew arrives, she's ready with a welcome kit of shabbat candles, kosher wine, memberships to the Jewish community center and a pitch to stay.

Once a place where Eastern European Jews flocked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Birmingham was home to powerful, enterprising Jews who ran major merchants and department stores, such as the now-defunct Parisians chain. Poised for much of its history to become the new Southern Jewish metropolis -- the titles instead went to Atlanta and South Florida -- the community is now at a crossroads.

The old are getting older. The young are in short supply and headed to big cities. Neither the smaller towns that once fed into the city's Jewish landscape nor the region's former industrial or retail strength can be counted on to propel the population into the 21st century.
Birmingham isn't the only place recruiting Jews. In Tulsa, Okla., a similar effort is underway, while in Dothan, Ala., and Meridian, Miss., graying small-town synagogues have offered to pay Jewish families as much as $50,000 to relocate. In New Orleans, where Hurricane Katrina wiped out an Orthodox synagogue, the Jewish federation gives small stipends and memberships to a Jewish dating website to encourage newcomers to settle.

Fueled by immigration and transplants from other parts of the country, the religious makeup of the South has diversified, with Islamic, Mormon and Spanish-speaking congregations making headway in places once reliably spiritually homogeneous. Birmingham, too, has become more diverse. But unlike more prosperous Southern cities with large Jewish populations, Birmingham's Jewish community is being confronted with a harsh reality: it needs to grow to survive.

"We're not worried about the Jewish community in the next ten or 20 years," Seligman says. "We're worried about the next 100."

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A third-generation Sephardic Jew, Seligman exudes Southern hospitality with a sense of cosmopolitanism that sets Birmingham apart from much of the state. She punctuates conversation with "sweeties" and "hones" while extending her vowels in a drawl. She has a weakness for iced tea and banana pudding, and can only take the "hustle and bustle" of big cities like Atlanta for a few days at a time.

With seemingly endless energy, she starts her workday by checking emails and text messages from home before arriving to the office hours ahead of her small group of colleagues. A recently certified spin instructor, Seligman leaves mid-morning to teach class, an occasion where small-talk after exercises often leads her to learn about new Jewish arrivals to the city. In her rare moments of relaxation, she enjoys lounging on the white coastal sands of the Florida Panhandle. When she picks up newcomers for tours of the city, she opts to use her top-down convertible over her sedan, where her stereo shuffles between Frankie Valli, Michael Jackson and Maroon 5.

But when she imagines what her Jewish community may look like in a generation, she thinks back to growing up in Montgomery, 90 miles south of her current home.

She remembers the festive songs and celebrations at Congregation Etz Ahayem, the Sephardic synagogue her grandparents' generation helped establish in the early 20th century after immigrating from Rhoades, Greece. The small temple -- its name means "Tree of Life" -- would overflow on Fridays with the close-knit 30 families who had maintained it for decades. Prayers were in a mix of Hebrew, English, and Ladino, a flavorful Judaeo-Spanish tongue.

Like many of those she tries to lure back into the city, Seligman moved away from her birthplace after college in Tuscaloosa to follow her career in advertising and her Birmingham-raised husband. Her son's bar mitzvah and confirmation were at Birmingham's Conservative temple (their original rabbi moved to a new job in Atlanta three years ago) and she became an active volunteer in the community.

But each year for the High Holidays, Seligman would return to Montgomery for services at the temple of her forefathers. Cousins and old neighbors would catch up over fried snapper and potato and cheese-filled pastries, traditional Sephardic foods that transported Seligman back to her childhood.

Etz Ahayem, no longer able to sustain a congregation and long without a full-time rabbi, closed and
merged with another synagogue a decade ago. Its Torah scroll was transferred to the new temple along with its sanctuary doors. The building is now a Baptist church, indistinguishable from so many others. Only a memory remains.

Caren Seligman's business card boldly invites the young Jews she meets to move to Alabama.

Seligman hopes the same won't prove true for Birmingham's Jewish communities.

In her purse, she carries black-and-white business cards stamped with large blue Stars of David. She'll slip them into the pocket of any young Jew she comes across. "YOU Belong in Birmingham!" they say in large letters beside her phone number.

Like most of the broader American-Jewish community, most Jews Seligman recruits are secular or from the Reform or Conservative traditions. Her own spiritual observance is varied. She attends synagogue once or twice a month and hosts shabbat dinners on Fridays. She also enjoys the occasional barbecue pork rib.

She's armed with the email addresses of hundreds of young Jews who have left Birmingham -- procured from their parents -- a stack of resumes and an inbox with descriptions of job openings. Her goal: to get one child from every Jewish Birmingham family to settle in the city and to convince those who happen to pass through that it's a worthwhile place to be Jewish.

That can be difficult.

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Pataky, the student who arrived in Birmingham in the spring for an internship as a physical therapist, knows the hurdles.

"When I moved here, it was Passover. And when I said to people around town that I was observing Passover, nobody knew what it was," she recalls. "I never had to explain it before."

Jefferson County, where Birmingham is located, is commonly ranked as one of the most Christian places in the nation -- there are 67 churches for every synagogue. But despite the community being overwhelmingly Christian, its people by and large embrace diversity. There are two Hindu temples, two Buddhist temples, a Sikh gurdwara and several mosques. Birmingham is also home to a small community of Russians and popular Greek and Lebanese restaurants.
No matter for Pataky. A self-described "atheist cultural Jew" who observes the occasional Jewish holiday, she has a month to go in the city. It's not a bad place, she insists. She's not accustomed to being around so many evangelical Christians, but everyone has respected her beliefs. She's grown attached to the craft brewery not far from her suburban apartment. She loves the job and has been less bored since making friends through Seligman's introductions over sangria.

But when her internship is done, she hopes to move to New York, Boston, Atlanta or Washington, D.C. All have sizeable Jewish populations. She doesn't want to join a synagogue, but she does want to be around people who understand her.

"There are some natural cultural differences between Jewish people and others. It's nice to have a certain baseline with people you meet," Pataky says. "If I move to New York, I'd probably never even have to think of being Jewish." She feels the same about Atlanta.

While she isn't looking for a religious community, Pataky's social needs echo a refrain that Seligman often hears. Young people want to be around people like them. They want variety and a big singles scene. They want a city with a major sports team. They want to be by the buzz. Birmingham, which is revitalizing its downtown with lofts, art galleries and a burgeoning restaurant scene, still pales in comparison to bigger cities.

"All these kids go to Atlanta thinking this is going to be the place. This is where I'm going to meet that person or land this perfect job, you know, because it's Atlanta," Seligman says. "I tell people when they call me and say they are thinking of moving to the South, 'We are no Atlanta and we don't want to be.'"

Birminghamians are proud of their city, which is situated in a valley surrounded by lush, parallel mountain ranges and majestic hillside homes. Blacks and Jews here played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement. While the city of Birmingham has one of the highest crime rates in the nation, the metropolitan area has one of the lowest. Anti-Semitism is rare, though there have been isolated incidents.

About 80 percent of Birmingham Jews are members of a synagogue or otherwise involved in Jewish organizations, according to the Birmingham Jewish Federation, making for a close community of familiar faces. Nationally, the Jewish affiliation rate is 51 percent.

Despite its selling points, there's a certain unease among some Birminghamians about their city. Though its neighbor two-and-a-half hours east was also founded as a railroad town in the mid-19th century, the growth spurt that hit Atlanta never transferred to Birmingham. Many Birminghamians will lament the conservative Christian culture that pervades everyday life outside the area's urban core, where more than a third of Alabama's counties ban alcohol sales. They'll half-jokingly call the city, where a 24-hour restaurant is rare, "Boringham."

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"Our growth really depends on the fortunes of the city of Birmingham," says Rabbi Jonathan Miller, a Reform rabbi who has led the city's largest and oldest Jewish congregation, Temple Emanu-El, for 21 years.

He points to the University of Alabama at Birmingham, home to one of the best medical research programs in country, which has attracted an increasing number of the region's new Jews and temple
He mentions the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa -- about an hour from Birmingham and a feeder to the city -- where a vigorous campaign to recruit Jewish students recently resulted in a 50 percent increase in Jewish enrollment over just a few years. Similar to Seligman's program, the university's efforts included visits from admissions officials to far-flung Jewish communities in Maryland, Texas and Georgia. A new Hillel building opened in 2010 that serves 675 students, and the Jewish fraternity and sorority have grown.

In the Birmingham Jewish Federation's office hangs a poster for its fundraising campaign to cover the costs of sustaining and growing Jewish life in the community over the century.

The Birmingham Jewish Federation's recruiting, which began six years ago, has so far netted a few dozen new or returning young Jews to the city, and Miller has gleefully offered a spiritual home to many of them.

His congregation, which dates to 1882, has about 690 members, according to Miller. About a quarter of them attend services in its airy, 62,000-square foot temple that includes a sanctuary with colorful stained glass windows, small chapel, religious school and banquet hall. While Miller boasts that membership has barely budged during his time, he admits it’s graying.

Last year, Miller hired a 27-year-old rabbi to increase young adult involvement in the temple. Rabbi Laila Haas, who was raised in Miami Beach and studied in Cincinnati, has started discussion groups at members' homes on religious and cultural topics, including lessons, she says, "on how to express myself Jewishly in a non-Jewish place." While synagogue memberships can typically cost thousands of dollars, Haas says she encourages young people to join by asking them to both pay and get involved "at their comfort level."

For the more traditionally religious Jews, Birmingham has been a harder sell, but improvements to religious life have been made in recent years. The region's first kosher restaurant opened a year ago, and the Modern Orthodox synagogue has hired an energetic 30-year-old rabbi to reinvigorate its small congregation.
Still, a mohel, a rabbi trained in performing ritual circumcisions on newborns -- a segment of the population the city needs if it is to grow -- is harder to find.

Some Birminghamians have a physician do the medical procedure while a local rabbi says prayers. But for the group of mostly young couples and less traditionally religious Jews that regularly seeks a mohel's services, the most popular choice is farther away.

He's in Atlanta.
MIDVALE, Utah -- In this sleepy suburb just south of Salt Lake City, hundreds of men and women recently descended upon one of the hottest, most competitive and nerve-wracking social scenes in the state. They came in their best cars, littering an overcapacity parking lot with double-parked BMWs and Corvettes, and strutted into a bright and airy building in crisp suits and colorful dresses.

Steve Rinehart worked the room, which had the look of a large, converted high school basketball court with rows of folding chairs. He circled the aisles, scoping out the women and peering over shoulders for friends.

"It's a meat market," Rinehart, 36, said with a sigh before giving it a shot. He approached a slim woman in her early 30s who was seated alone. They shook hands. She said she was a librarian. He said he was a lawyer. She gave a lukewarm smile and looked at her phone. "Typical," Rinehart muttered to himself as he walked away before running into an ex-girlfriend who had saved him a chair.

Around him, men and women alike shot wanting glances and often looks of dejection as they exchanged names and pleasantries ahead of the main event.

"Brothers and sisters, welcome to the Sunday sacrament meeting," shouted the bishop above the chatter, before announcing that illegally parked cars were being towed.

As they do each Sunday, Mormons from all over the Salt Lake Valley had flocked to the Union Fort 9th Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a large congregation of 800 members that has swelled in recent years. The chapel is one of a unique but quickly growing breed in the faith that's made up exclusively of the unmarried. Each person is between 31 and 45, women outnumber men, and everyone but the bishop is single.

Scripture in hand, the members squeezed between the chairs and into pews to make room for those standing in the back. They praised the Lord and asked Him to fulfill one of the prime and most elusive commandments: a spouse to marry for eternity and, with that union, a required step in the Mormon journey toward God-like exaltation, the ultimate goal in this life and the one hereafter.

The Latter-day Saints church is by many measures one of unparalleled modern success. With a million new members across the globe every three years -- it has 7 million in the U.S. and 14 million worldwide -- the church is one of the fastest-growing religions in the country. It sends tens of thousands of missionaries throughout the world annually, and its faithful are blossoming in South America and Africa.

But despite these triumphs, a key part of the religion has struggled in the U.S. In a faith that's centered almost exclusively around marriage and children, where the highest level of heaven is reserved for the married and where singledom carries not just a social but a spiritual stigma, people like Rinehart are becoming increasingly common.

A crisis of singles has arrived.

Just a few decades ago, the marriage age among Mormons was often as low as 18. Mormons still marry
younger than most Americans, but most now marry in their early to mid-20s and singles in their 30s and 40s are quickly on the rise -- once unheard of.

Singledom isn't just something growing among Mormons. About half of American adults, or 100 million, are single, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Among those, 61 percent have never married. For the first time in history, married couples now amount to less than half of American households. Nationally, women marry at age 26.1 on average, while men marry at 28.2. The rates have gone up by one year for men and two years for women since 2000, and have continually increased since the 1960s.

"There's a higher rate of people wanting higher education, and people are becoming more and more concerned about having a good life. We've seen a rise in a more materialistic viewpoint," says Brian Willoughby, a professor at Brigham Young University who studies family and marriage issues and teaches a course on marriage preparation. The issue crosses into other faiths, but has stood out more among Mormons, whose faith strictly guides them to buck broader trends like premarital sex and living together before marriage.

In Utah, where the majority of the population is Mormon, records from the Office of Vital Records and Statistics show that from 2000 to 2008, the state’s marriage rate dropped faster than the national average. Per 1,000 people, the rate was 10.6 in 2000, compared to 8.7 in 2008. Nationwide, it was 8.7 in 2000 and 7.1 in 2008. That said, Utah still has one of the lowest divorce rates in the country.

Mormon scholars and independent Mormon groups estimate that up to one-third of the church's adult Americans are single, though church officials won't release their own count. Nevertheless, from their temple headquarters in Salt Lake City, the church's General Authorities -- considered living prophets -- have begun admonishing Mormons, instructing them to marry quickly. Mormon leaders have even redrawn the church map, establishing dozens of new age-restricted congregations around the nation, from Arizona to Washington, D.C., in order to facilitate marriage among singles.

"The General Authorities are aware that the church is losing single people, and they are worried about it," says Matthew Bowman, a Mormon who teaches religious history at Hampden-Sydney College and wrote "The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith." "Growth in the U.S. is about replacement levels, and much of it does come from birth rate."

Among church leaders, the concerns are many. Fewer marriages mean fewer children, which means fewer new members in a faith where conversions are high globally but low within the U.S. Fewer marriages also mean a smaller pool of church leaders to propagate the faith. Congregations are run by unpaid bishops, and only married men are appointed to the roles. Like most religions, single men and women are more likely to drop out of the faith.

But soulmates aren't easy to come across.
Steve Rinehart, 36, one of a growing number of single members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stands in front of the Salt Lake Temple.

"I'm an expert at being single," says Rinehart, who, with his clean-cut hair, polo shirts and blue jeans, fits the stereotypical image of a well-mannered Mormon with conservative style and restrained demeanor.

"I just can't find the right one," he adds. "I don't know if I ever will."

A successful patent lawyer and former web entrepreneur, Rinehart isn't lacking in what he could offer a woman. Trim, broad shouldered, with piercing blue eyes, he's the kind of guy who would stop on the highway to help a stranger with a flat tire, and he's a true believer in the Mormon faith. He carries a white card in his wallet to prove his temple recommend -- a certification that he has followed the rules of the church, received all his sacraments and has tithed, giving 10 percent of his income to the institution.

Rinehart is a homeowner with a knack for earning extra income -- he's converted parts of his 6,000-square-foot house into separate rental apartments -- and he has an array of interests. He collects sports cars and speedboats, speaks Portuguese, plays piano and has songs from Phantom of the Opera memorized. A devout Mormon, he's never drunk alcohol or had sex and, keeping with tradition, he follows Sunday at church with a meal with his parents in his childhood home. He hosts a show on local conservative talk radio and, in his spare time, hikes in the mountains.

Up until about age 21, his life seemed to be in line with a common Mormon male trajectory. Raised in Utah, he was baptized as a boy, and like the majority of Mormon men, was successively ordained to higher orders of the church's priesthood beginning at age 12. During his college years at BYU, he embarked on a two-year mission to Portugal. Most men marry either after completing their missions or after college graduation. Rinehart, who studied computer science at Brigham Young University and later received a law degree at the University of Utah, has gone on dozens of dates and had a few serious girlfriends since those days, but he has never found himself willing to commit. When he was younger, it was he who cut off the relationships. These days, it's often the women who end it.

His longest relationship lasted four-and-a-half years, until he was 34. He broke up with her when he found out she had started to drink, something that's forbidden to Mormons. Not that Rinehart hasn't had his own faults. When he was in college, he developed a Blackjack habit -- Mormons aren't supposed to gamble -- and suffered breakups as a result.

A more recent girlfriend was too demanding. Another was too jealous. Others were kindhearted and
spiritual, but couldn't keep his attention.

"I have to take seriously that there is some sort of internal psychological resistance to settling down. I don't think there is, but other people do," he says. Most of his life, though, his mind has just been on other pursuits, such as his career.

An overworked lawyer, Rinehart sometimes just can't find time for the dating scene, where up to a dozen singles dances and Mormon socials are organized each night in the Salt Lake Valley. And for all his good traits, Rinehart's confidence has waned over the years, with him worrying about everything from where to take women on a date to his receding hairline.

"Maybe girls are uncomfortable one-on-one. Rumor has it that there is a problem at the higher church level with singles who date and hang out in groups," Rinehart says.

It's true. In public speeches, the church's general authorities have started to chastise single Mormons for opting to casually "hang out" with the opposite sex instead of dating with an eye toward marriage.

"If you choose wisely and if you are committed to the success of your marriage, there is nothing in this life which will bring you greater happiness," the church's highest living authority, President Thomas S. Monson, said last year at the General Conference, a forum broadcasted from church headquarters in Salt Lake City.

Another general authority, Elder Richard G. Scott, hit at it more directly at the same conference: "If you are a young man of appropriate age and are not married, don't waste time in idle pursuits," he said. "Get on with life and focus on getting married. Don't just coast through this period of life."

Feeling out of step with the dating scene -- and a bit hopeless -- Rinehart has lately opted for "hanging out."

Gathered at the Cheesecake Factory recently over mocktails and pasta, he and a dozen single friends (it's become harder to keep in touch with the married ones) debated their evolving views on dating and marriage. Most were in their 30s. While strong in their own faith, a few were considering dating non-Mormons.

"The older I get, the more tolerant I am of people who live their life religiously or not. The older I am, the less I am judgmental of people who want to live the gospel -- if they are Mormon -- or don't if they are not and continue to be themselves," said Trevor Bruford, a 36-year-old IT administrator and divorcee.

Others shared concerns with dating outside the faith.

"But I do want to be in a situation with someone who has my same standards because it would be so hard to wake up with someone who didn't do what we do in our faith," said Olivia Luce, 35.

Katie Winn, a 29-year-old college adviser and ex-girlfriend of Rinehart's, agreed. "Just, our lifestyles are so different. How many guys could I date who are not LDS who would wait to have sex after marriage?"

Rinehart shot back: "How many LDS ones will?"
While most faiths discourage sex before marriage, the Mormon church spells out its rules directly.

"Before marriage, do not do anything to arouse the powerful emotions that must be expressed only in marriage," says an official LDS guide. "Do not participate in passionate kissing, lie on top of another person, or touch the private, sacred parts of another person's body, with or without clothing. Do not allow anyone to do that with you. Do not arouse those emotions in your own body."

Rinehart, who has readily confessed his sins to his bishops and has at times been temporarily barred from receiving sacrament as a result, admits that he has gone "a little too far." In the heat of the moment, he has crossed the line of "passionate kissing." He has touched women through their clothing and let them do the same to him, but he has never been naked with the opposite sex. Once, on a vacation with a girlfriend, he rented a hotel with two beds to avoid any temptation. "That's even a little risky for some Mormons," he says.

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Churches for Mormon singles have existed since 1973, when they were first established to cater to the many single college-aged members that swelled the ranks of Brigham Young University. But in the decades since, the number of singles churches have quickly grown, and expanded into two categories: Young Single Adult wards for Mormons under 31, and Mid-single Adult wards for those in Rinehart's age range. Last year, Mormon leaders for the first time formally created stakes, akin to Catholic dioceses, to administer the growing number of Mormon churches for young singles.

Internally, Mormons have been conflicted over the strategy of putting singles together in a church. There are debates about whether focusing on marriage at church takes away from the spiritual growth of worship. And it's unclear if it works. Over 13 years of attending singles churches, Rinehart has come out of it with one girlfriend. The church won't release it's data on success rates, but other single Mormons have shared similar stories.

What's clear is that the singles problem isn't going away.

"When I started in this position three years ago, we had 229 members. Today, we have 800," says Robert Norton, the bishop of the singles church Rinehart attends in Midvale. He estimates there are tens of thousands of more Mormon singles within his congregation's boundaries, which encompasses a third of Salt Lake County, who don't attend his congregation.

"We try to provide an environment where they feel comfortable, and where they can serve in leadership," he says, adding that the church recently celebrated its 82nd wedding in his years leading it. "The trend out there in the world is to put off marriage. We don't agree with that or with cohabiting, but a lot of times it's education, jobs, those kinds of things that are getting in the way of making a commitment."

Rinehart's approach to finding women has varied. He used to drive to several singles congregations in one day, hoping to meet the right woman if he cast his net wide enough. These days, he only looks for women at Norton's congregation. But he's also missed being around older, wiser married men and women in the church and the energy of young children.

Mormons meet for three hours each Sunday in three consecutive meetings. The first meeting is split by
gender, with men attending the priesthood meeting and women participating in the Relief Society, an educational and philanthropic group. It's followed by a mix-gender scripture study and the sacrament meeting, where Mormons drink water and eat bread as a symbol of Jesus Christ. That's the part Rinehart attends among the mixed congregation of singles. For the first two meetings, he has started to attend his local church that's largely made up of families.

And on a recent Sunday in the local family church, Rinehart was confronted with singledom head-on. He was in the Fruit Heights chapel, a small congregation near his home, attending the priesthood meeting. The day's lesson would cover service to family and community, from kin to gentiles. Rinehart's mind wandered to the former: a future with a wife and kids, maybe five like in his family, where he is the oldest, has two married younger brothers and is an uncle to six.

About two dozen Mormon men ambled into the chapel and caught up on the past week and the most recent scripture lessons. They sat down ready to study and pray. But before any of that could began, the church elder about to lead the service took a peculiar tally.

"So, anybody engaged?" he quipped, though he meant it in all seriousness. It was a question Rinehart dreaded and one that rarely arises at the singles-only church.

Two scruffy young men in their early 20s, recently back from stints as missionaries, proudly stood up to name their wives-to-be. Across the aisle, soon-to-be grandfathers clapped and cheered.

Rinehart slouched down. Single, and once again singled out, he sighed.

He thought back to when he was a child and first learning the theology and traditions of the church. He would attend chapel with his parents and siblings, and there would be whispers about one of the men in the crowd.

"He was 37 and everyone would talk about him. 'Why is he not married? What is going on?' I think his name was Murphy," Rinehart recalled. "I'm really pushing it. I'm about a year away from being in that situation. And it makes me want to cry."
SEATTLE -- They came from near and far on a Monday night last month for an unusual gathering in the city's chic Capitol Hill neighborhood, a place known for its vibrant restaurants, art galleries and gay bars, not for its diversity. They were nervous, confused and a bit scared. Should they — seven women of African-American, Native American and Asian descent — even be here?

None of them would use the same words to describe their race, but they were united around the colors of their skin. They entered a small church hall, sat in a circle, closed their eyes and faced their teacher, hungry for Buddhist wisdom.

"Challenge your notions," the 55-year-old woman with dreadlocks told them, sharing her journey as a black Christian turned Buddhist, a racial rarity among meditators. "I once thought there was something devilish and 'woo-woo' about this, that people would find out, that they would say bad things about me. There was a cultural 'I can't do this' thing. But I tell you: You can do it."

This class of Buddhist meditation was for beginners, tailor-made for minorities. Men could come, but the group happened to be women. No whites were allowed.

"Being an American Indian woman, I am judged all the time. I just feel more accepted if it's not white people telling me what to do, how to meditate," said Teresa Powers, a 54-year-old university researcher and mother of two who was drawn to the study of meditation after losing her job. "It's like I'm among my own."

Here in Seattle, one of the least racially diverse cities with one of the largest Buddhist communities in the country, a controversial movement in American Buddhism is forming. A handful of exclusive "people of color" Buddhist groups have started to meet each week, far away from the long-established — and almost entirely white — major Buddhist meditation centers that have dominated the Pacific Northwest's well-known Buddhist scenes. Many members, who have until now shied away from meditation and Buddhism, say practicing away from the white majority, among whom they say they don't feel welcome, has spiritually empowered them -- and they wouldn't have it any other way.

As the U.S. moves toward becoming a "minority majority" nation, the increasing awareness of multiculturalism has made its impact on many faiths, with churches, synagogues and mosques reaching out to recruit members of ethnic groups to broader reflect America's growing diversity. But in meditation-oriented Buddhism, one of the most popular and fastest-growing strains of this ancient religion -- now the fourth biggest spiritual practice in the U.S. -- one of the prime focuses is on letting go of any attachment to the individual self. The aim is to be one with the wider spiritual world in the pursuit of harmony, and ideally, that includes going beyond skin color differences.

Yet, the Seattle "people of color sangha (community)" is one of nearly a dozen that have been established across the U.S. in the last few years, many with support from some of the nation's most prominent Buddhist teachers. The sanghas' memberships vary from city to city, with black, Latino and Asian and Native American Buddhists often at the forefront.

Traditionally, Buddhism didn't make distinctions along racial lines -- 2,600 years ago, the Buddha traveled across ancient India to share his teachings with everyone from the nobility to the lowest
classes. But throughout its history, dozens of sects, sub-sects and cultural variations have formed among Buddhists, and they've become separated by language and ethnicity, including the dominance of mainly white sanghas in the U.S.

People of color sanghas have met varying levels of resistance and success. Are they separatists? Or are they expanding the practice? During the height of the civil rights era, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said that 11 a.m. at church is the most segregated hour in the U.S. But in 21st century America, should race continue to divide the religious?

"People say we're going against Buddhism," says Tuere Sala, the black Buddhist teacher who is one of the leaders of the movement in Seattle and taught the beginner's course in October. "They are kind of right. Only kind of."

LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY

The effort to make Buddhism more diverse and less divided is one of the biggest problems facing the religion in America today.

There are at least two million Buddhists in the U.S., and each usually falls into one of two camps. On one side are Asian-American Buddhists, who have been in the U.S. since the mid-19th century and whose numbers blossomed after 1965, when immigration quotas were lifted. About two-thirds of U.S. Buddhists are Asian, while one in seven Asians in the U.S. is Buddhist. Most Asian-American Buddhists practice at home, and small numbers also observe their faith at Buddhist temples, the kind known for their ornate architecture and large Buddha statues. Studies have found that most Asian-American Buddhists seldom or never meditate. Their practice of the faith includes venerating ancestors, spiritually observing holidays such as Lunar New Year and doing yoga, and most believe in nirvana and reincarnation.

The second camp of Buddhism is made up largely of white converts, who count for about a third of U.S. Buddhists, but whose practice of the faith has arguably seen the most cultural popularity. This group, which mostly focuses on meditation, has its origins in Tibetan, Zen and Vipassana traditions that were popularized by a handful of white Americans who traveled to South and east Asia to learn from Buddhist masters as interest in alternative spirituality peaked during the countercultural movements of the 1960s. The Vipassana ("insight") tradition has become one of the most successful because of its secular appeal. The practice hinges on the idea of "mindfulness," which is accomplished through meditation techniques, and is focused on centering and grounding one's self in the current moment to see true reality. For many non-Buddhists, it's stress-reduction. For Buddhists, it's on the path toward self-awareness.

"Outside of these people of color sanghas, many of the Buddhists who claim to meditate are not Asian-Americans. And many Euro-Americans who are Buddhist would place meditation very high on the list. Most Asians would call it a small practice," says Sharon Suh, a professor of specializes in Buddhism, race and Asian-American spirituality at Seattle University. "There is an assumption that the Buddhism brought over by Asian-Americans is less authentic."

With a few exceptions, the two groups — mostly Asians and whites — do not mix. One of the main reasons is that while they may share a common name for their faith, their practices are often foreign to each other.
Buddhist leaders, long aware of their growing differences, have tried to unite themselves around what they share in common. One of the first efforts, a 1967 meeting of the World Buddhist Sangha Council -- an international group with representatives from nearly every nation where Buddhism had blossomed -- produced a statement of "basic unifying points."

"We consider that the purpose of life is to develop compassion for all living beings without discrimination and to work for their good, happiness, and peace; and to develop wisdom (prajñā) leading to the realization of Ultimate Truth," it said. "We admit that in different countries there are differences regarding Buddhist beliefs and practices. These external forms and expressions should not be confused with the essential teachings of the Buddha."

It's taken time, but such conversations have begun to trickle down to on-the-ground action in places such as Seattle, a city both known for its liberal culture and its segregated populace. And though meditation-oriented Buddhists have yet to successfully integrate with more traditional Asian-American Buddhists from whom they adapted their practice, the meditators have recently tried to diversify among themselves, as Sala puts it, "at least make our practice less white, more open and more diverse."

Tuere Sala, a teacher at the Seattle Insight Meditation Society, is part of a new movement to create "people of color" Buddhist meditation groups that are exclusive to people who are not white.

Sala is a teacher at the Seattle Insight Meditation Society, one of the major and most well-known meditation-based Buddhist organizations in the Seattle metropolitan area, which is home to an estimated 40,000 Buddhists and dozens of Buddhist organizations and temples. With about 4,000 members, SIMS splits its classes and meditation groups between church buildings, yoga and art studios, and members' homes.

While the organization doesn't break down its membership numbers, it's leadership admits it's almost entirely made up of white Seattleites who skew in age toward 50 and above. Of 10 teachers listed on the SIMS website, only one besides Sala is not white. The situation has not changed much since her first time in the meditation hall 11 years ago, but her belief in the practice has grown. Over the last two years, Sala joined together with Bonnie Duran, a Native American Buddhist, the other non-white teacher at SIMS, with a lofty goal: to bring more minorities to the wider meditation community, but to draw them in on their own first.

"We need to bring the dharma beyond where it's been. We need to be able to teach the unusual practitioner, the outcast practitioner," Sala says. "You can't get to those deep places without someone there to guide you, to hold your truth while you take a chance with yourself."
Born in South Seattle in a largely black neighborhood, Sala grew up in public housing projects. Her younger years, she says, were full of violence. She was raped. She was abused by an ex-husband. As an adult, she was nearly always in financial ruin. Raised as a Missionary Baptist, she instantly turned to faith to cope with pent-up anger and emotional distress. For 15 years of her adult life living in Kansas City and Seattle, she hopped between Baptist, Presbyterian and Catholic churches.

Sala's Buddhist journey began with her own suffering and a resolve to improve her life, a path similar to that of many other Buddhists. She's practiced meditation for 20 years, and credits it for freeing her from emotional turmoil. Her life's goal, she says, is to bring Buddhist practice to those who are suffering. On weekends, she teaches Buddhism to prisoners, and has found herself spending vacation days from her day job as a criminal prosecutor to attend Buddhist retreats to be certified as a "community dharma leader." One day, she hopes to leave her job to be a full-time meditation teacher.

"Hopefully, to people like me," she says.

“THE EXPRESSION OF OURSELVES”

SIMS' largest meetings are on Tuesday nights, when about 100 experienced meditators come to St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Capitol Hill for a weekly "sit" and dharma talk. A sit is exactly what it sounds like. In a semi-circle, members sit on cushions and in chairs in silence for 40 minutes. While most people would get lost in their own heads and daydreams in such a situation, the idea in meditation is to avoid any complex thoughts, often called "hindrances." Instead, the meditators are supposed to become aware of their own bodies and breathing, and pay attention to how one interprets the sounds and feelings around his or herself.

On a recent Thursday, Sala was one of seven non-whites in the crowd. Facing the group was Rodney Smith, a nationally known Buddhist teacher and former hospice caretaker who founded SIMS 19 years ago. After the meditation, Smith, who was trained in Thailand and Myanmar as a monk, gave a dharma talk, a Buddhist teaching, on one of his favorite topics: the Buddhist view of the body versus the spirit. Meditators, he said, too often get caught up in comparing themselves and their own spiritual progress to other people, a negative vortex of practice. For an hour, Smith told the crowd to let go of attachment to individuality, be it self-assessment based on outward appearances, career, money, power or something else entirely.

"What we are doing in our spiritual journey is we're transforming what we thought we were, which was the expression of ourselves in form, to spirit, the expression of ourselves formless."

But where would that leave race?

"You can see differences, I can see differences, but does it have to create an anxiety or stress? I would say no," Rodney, a silver-haired, slim 65-year-old, said later. But in the people of color sanghas, that's precisely the reason many give for joining: They feel anxiety, stress and a sense of being rejected by white Buddhists or are unable to find a connection to the established sanghas.

"So the people of color, they feel they are at the stage of their development where they feel they need special groups of people leading them who are the same ethnicity of themselves; they want to gather around that common factor of color to feel a sense of relaxation. They have had enough tension being in a broader society that is often prejudiced against them. So we give them that."
He meant it literally. Smith and the board of SIMS list Sala's people of color introductory class in their pamphlets and pay the rent for the church room it uses each week. "The point of dharma is to add a point of consciousness to the society, it doesn't do any good for just a group of people in Seattle or New York to do this, the point is to make the culture as a whole more conscious," he said. "And we began to think: Are there ways we are excluding people?"

That doesn't mean he's entirely comfortable with the idea of separate meditations.

"Buddhism goes against identity. Race is a very superficial way of looking at things," he said. "Hopefully at some point the (people of color) will be relaxed enough within their humanity to be able to come into a greater room full of people and feel that same degree of relaxation, but that's a stage of development and that can't be pushed or forced upon them. And at some point they do, like Tuere, she just naturally started to come [to the broader meditation groups]. But it may take long."

After almost a decade of meditating on her own, Sala began attending the main sangha at SIMS in 2001 at the invitation of a friend. She was immediately put off.

"We walked into this room and there were 60 white people. No black people. No people of color," she said. "I did not want to stay … We had been there only five or 10 minutes, and a woman in the group began asking a question and talking about how she had transcended her body, and was looking at herself from the outside. It was way too 'out-there,' for me and it just seemed to reflect a whole different outlook on meditation than what I was used to. It was what I stereotyped white sanghas as, you know, a little hippie, a little self-involved."

SPECIALIZED RETREATS

The goal of "more diverse dharma," as Smith calls it, has proliferated across the nation in recent years. Race is just one factor, though the most easily seen in many cases. In places such as New York and the San Francisco Bay Area, though, diversity has become an ever wider effort. At the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, Calif., there are Buddhist groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender meditators, people with disabilities and those with allergies to perfumes. In New Mexico and Arizona, Buddhists and Native Americans have joined to launch meditation centers that combine teachings from both traditions and include traditional Native healing rituals. In western Massachusetts, meditation communities have formed "diversity councils" to recruit minority practitioners. In Atlanta, meditators thought separate meditation groups were too divisive, so they launched a broad campaign against all "the 'isms."

Rodney Smith is the founder of Seattle Insight Meditation Society. "Buddhism goes against identity. Race is a very superficial way of looking at things," he said.
"My hope and imagination would be that we would have a few years of retreats for people for color and then there would be a much more obvious period when we were back together, but it seems to have been a naive thought early on," says Jack Kornfield, who is considered to be one of the first western Buddhist teachers to bring meditation techniques to the U.S. He has supported retreats and teaching groups for what he calls "marginalized or historically traumatized" communities for more than a decade, and at his Spirit Rock retreat center in the San Francisco area, a scholarship has been established for minorities who want to become Buddhist teachers.

"Some of that combining has started to happen. But there are other ways in which retreats for particular communities will be important for a long time," Kornfield continues.

A similar view is taken by some members of Salzberg's Insight Meditation Society, which has been at the forefront of funding and supporting diversity initiatives and exclusive people of color courses and retreats.

"Ultimately, I don't think it's anyone's vision to have lots of specialized retreats for all these groups of people, but to provide a genuine resource for everyone," said Salzberg, who co-founded the organization with Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, and another well-known Buddhist teacher. "But I don't know when that will be the case."

‘MEDITATE. BE PROUD’

In Seattle, a big city for Buddhism but nowhere near as popular or diverse as Los Angeles or New York when it comes to Buddhist practice, efforts to combine Buddhist communities are slowly beginning, though attempts at racial diversity are generally new.

In addition to their beginner's course, which ended in early November, Sala and many of her students attend a group called POCAS each week. It stands for "People of Color and Allies," and is made up black, Latino, Native American, Asian and white practitioners. They meet at the home of Duran, the Native American Buddhist who co-taught the beginner's course with Sala, and follow the same schedule as most meditation gatherings: a 40-minute sit, a dharma talk and socializing afterwards.

After a recent meditation and discussion on vedana, the Buddhist idea of the body and mind's sense of good, bad and neutral "feeling tones" in everyday life, the conversation turned, as it often does, to race. A woman passed around flyers for a conference about race relations that was coming to the city, while others reminisced over a shared experience the weekend prior, when dozens of Buddhists from the region joined for the region's first people of color retreat about two hours south of the city.

Conversations about race are almost as much a part of some people of color sanghas as meditation, and that can be a source of conflict. At the POCAS group, which was established 11 years ago, meditation was once secondary to talking about politics and race relations. Some members say the group ceased to be Buddhist at all. But in the last five years, it has refocused itself on Buddhist teachings.

At the recent meeting, the conversation alternated between discussions about Buddhist paths toward spiritual liberation and race. A few meditators began to discuss the merits of being separate from the bigger, whiter sanghas.

"I go to lots of places to meditate. I'm going to California next week (for a retreat of) Native American
meditators, and the week after that, I'll be back at SIMS, where everyone's white. I just think there should be options," said Duran, a professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Washington.

"You know, I just feel like we're friendlier here. We can giggle, we don't have to be so serious about this meditation stuff all the time," said another woman, Barbie-Danielle DeCarlo, who almost exclusively meditates with people of color. "I just don't get the style in other places."

From across the living room, Sala chimed in: "Just make sure you keep doing it, wherever you go. Meditate. Be proud. And let the people of color out there know we're not the only ones."
WEST KENDALL, Fla. -- For 19 years, Vanessa Pardo dutifully followed her parents to church on Sunday mornings, reciting prayers to padre nuestro and studying la Biblia, trying to figure out how the parables of Jesus applied to her life as a member of Iglesia de Cristo en Sunset, a booming Spanish-speaking congregation in this South Florida suburb.

While other kids her age drifted away from the faiths of their childhoods, Pardo was sure she believed in God. But as the daughter of Colombian and Nicaraguan immigrants, she wasn't sure she fully understood him in Spanish, her second language -- and a distant one at that.

So when the Protestant congregation instituted a controversial effort last year that included encouraging youth like Pardo to switch to worshipping separately in English, it immediately piqued her interest. She just had to break the news to her parents.

"It was never a faith of my own, it was 'oh, my parents' religion' or 'my family faith' and I never saw the personal connection between me and God," Pardo, now 20, said last Sunday after a service at Sunset Church of Christ, an English congregation that shares a building with the church of her childhood but has for much of its history operated separately from it. "I told them I wanted to go, but I told them I wanted to go in my own tongue and culture. Not theirs."

As the nation's Hispanic population has grown to 50 million, so too has the Spanish-language church, one of the largest segments of U.S. Christianity. But compared to previous decades, when the growth in the Hispanic population came from immigration, and when many of the nation's biggest Spanish-speaking congregations blossomed, the growth of Hispanics in the last decade has been led by second-generation and third-generation Hispanics, such as Pardo and her peers. The latest national census showed that native-born Hispanics, who tend to prefer English, now account for nearly two-thirds of the group.

While it's become common wisdom that English-speaking churches will shrink as younger generations, who are typically less religious, become the majority, the Spanish church -- known across denominations for its religious fervor -- is battling to keep its youth in the faith. It's having to budge on one of its biggest points of pride and identity, its language, to hold on to them.

Of the thousands of Spanish-only churches in the U.S. that formed decades ago to serve growing
communities of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, several began in recent years to expand beyond their traditional culture and tongue as a means of survival, meeting varying levels of resistance and success.

The change is happening throughout Hispanic churches and neighborhoods, from the Mexican-American communities of Texas and California to the Puerto Rican enclaves of New York and in South Florida, where a mix of Cubans, Colombians, Venezuelans and Central Americans make up many of the region's Spanish-language congregations.

Oftentimes, members and pastors are torn: Do they hold on to language and heritage, losing members and relevance? Or do they adapt?

At Sunset, a dual-language, dual-congregation church building that for many years was effectively two churches sharing property, elders, ministers and lay members are grappling with such change.

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Like many churches in South Florida, Sunset has long attracted English and Spanish speakers. For 20 years, it's had a Spanish congregation, whose membership has continually grown because of new immigrants becoming more active and younger over the years compared to the English side, which traces itself to a small house church established 101 years ago. While it's going through its own transition today, Sunset is a result of an earlier merger of two churches, one which established Spanish services in 1968 to cater to a growing Cuban immigrant population.

Generally, the church's English side is made of a mix of non-Hispanic whites, blacks and a smattering of members with other ethnic backgrounds. A few Hispanics attend the English services, too, but most end up on the Spanish side. Sometimes, it's out of necessity because they speak little or no English. Many other times, it's because they want to raise their kids not only in the same faith they were raised in, but the same faith in the same language. Together, the congregations have 500 members.

Ministers say that if the youth aren't encouraged and given the option by clergy and their parents to attend church in English, they'll leave for more English friendly Hispanic churches, such as mega-churches that have proliferated in part because of their targeted appeals to specific age, language and cultural-based groups.

"When you walk into Sunset, you have to pick one: English or Spanish. The way our ministries are set
up, you can't really (have families) do both," said Jim Holway, a bilingual pastor and professional church planter -- someone who starts new churches. Holway, 53, landed at Sunset seven years ago to use it as a base to coach pastors of new Hispanic churches and congregations in the region and in Central America, but he quickly realized the bulk of his attention was needed at Sunset itself. "I started attending the church and kept on seeing these kids who were becoming teens and disappearing. Where were they going? Sometimes, it was to a church that offered them services in English. Other times, they would just drop out of church completely."

Holway, who was raised in Virginia but spent his adult life learning Spanish as a missionary in Argentina, is one of a core group of ministers spearheading an effort to transform Sunset into a successful multilingual church, where kids can speak and worship in English, parents can speak and worship in Spanish, and, he hopes, "each can grow in Christ and get along."

Ministers, struggling with the changing demographics of their congregations, have attempted a variety of means to attack the language divide. Older, monolingual pastors who separately ministered to different congregations are gone. New, younger bilingual ones have come in. The church has instituted a quarterly bilingual worship service, where hymns and prayers are alternatively said in English and Spanish ("It's exhausting and confusing to people who only speak one language," said Holway). Elders have considered having services in English for everyone, where live Spanish translation is done via headset, ("People think that is unfair to the Hispanics, and if it's in Spanish, the English speakers would be bothered," he said).

The congregations have some aspects in common. Iglesia de Cristo en Sunset uses a Spanish version of the same worship study book throughout the year as Sunset Church of Christ, and both congregations sing their Sunday praise a capella. But there are differences. In the English congregation, a recent Sunday's worship was full of a mix of Negro spirituals and 19th century Protestant hymns, while the Spanish side plucked lyrics from the Cantos del Camino, a popular hymn book that draws from a mix of traditional Christian songs from Spanish-speaking countries. During a 20-minute intermission between classes and worship, when both congregations found themselves in the hallway, and church ministers had set up donuts and coffee to entice the groups to mingle. A few of the Spanish side's members drank Cuban espresso in one corner, while English members across the room chatted over coffee.

Recently, ministers have considered a plan to scrap the church's Sunday schedule, which currently allows both worship groups and their Bible classes to meet at different times and effectively avoid each other. Classes and worship -- now spread over a five-hour period on Sunday mornings -- would happen at the same time under the new plan. That way, ministers say, families would be more likely to send kids to English classes and services while parents go to Spanish ones without extra trips to the church or any lag time spent in the halls.

All that is, of course, if the membership goes along with it. Many younger members, those in their teens through their 40s, are on board. But for those in their 50s and above, the situation is far from settled.
Holway, who is half white and half Korean, was adopted and raised in the U.S., and became bilingual as a Churches of Christ missionary in Argentina. In addition to South America, he has ministered to English speakers in Tennessee, and said his experiences have taught him the importance of language when teaching youth about Christianity.

Last January, after years of studying membership patterns, plate collection statistics and participation in youth and Bible study meetings, church leaders pulled their congregations together to explain the new Sunset. They played YouTube videos that had been produced in both languages, and went over a PowerPoint presentation projected onto the auditorium screen usually reserved for hymn lyrics. Called "One Church, Two Languages," it made a two-prong argument. First, South Florida and the nation are melting pots, it said, and churches need to adapt. And in a denomination whose hallmarks include strict, literal readings of the Bible, it said the coming changes were part of God's plan.

It quoted Acts 6:1-4, which describes conflicts between Jesus' Hebrew-speaking and poor Greek-speaking disciples, in which the Greek speakers said their wives were being discriminated against in the food lines. The apostles called a meeting of the disciples, telling them that it would be immoral to stop feeding the poor or favor one group over another. The presentation likened the English and Spanish speakers to Hebrews and Greeks. It referenced Galatians 3:28: "In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ."

Below, in bold letters, it said: "There is neither LATINO nor ANGLO. No hay LATINO ni ANGLO."

In theory, everyone got it. In practice, not as much. Some Spanish speakers were suspicious the church would turn completely toward English, losing any relevance to cultures from their native countries. Some English speakers weren’t comfortable with the style of the Spanish congregation, where kisses and hugs take the place of handshakes, and where worship can be a little less formal and a bit more social.

"It may seem like small potatoes. But these are the kinds of things that altogether make a church work," said Jeff Hinson, a church elder, during a recent gathering of Sunset's leadership team. "Some parents want kids to still maintain their identity, and we think they should, but we are not sure church is where that should happen. For us, it's better taught in the home."

"There's some resistance to that among parents," including among those who want their kids to be able to teach the faith in Spanish to newly immigrated children, such as those they would meet in school, he said. "That's good, but how much do we do that anyway? Look back 20 years, how many of our kids
Carlos Carbajal, a 30-year-old ministry coordinator who moved from Honduras a year-and-a-half ago to focus on helping the congregations unite, replied: "It's like everyone has their ideal of what the best church is. But we have to fit it all together."

There are roughly 338,000 Christian congregations in the U.S., according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Researchers say it's more difficult to count the number of Spanish-speaking congregations, but in the National Congregations Study, Duke University sociology professor Mark Chaves calculated that 16 percent of U.S. Christians were part of churches that had services in either only Spanish or both Spanish and English.

According to a recent Pew survey, most are part of Catholic churches, which tend to have separate ministers and Bible study groups divided by language. A sizable minority are among Protestants, though their share is increasing as more Hispanics, traditionally a Catholic group, continue to join evangelical, pentecostal and independent congregations. The Pew survey found that 77-percent of foreign-born Hispanics attended predominantly Hispanic churches, while 48 percent of native-born Hispanics do the same. Researchers such as Rodriguez expect the latter figure to decrease.

As it is among Hispanic communities in the majority of the U.S., the occasional clash between languages and cultures at Sunset is often one of preference, not one of ability. Most Hispanics immigrants either already speak English or learn to speak it. It's hard to get a job with no English skills, after all. Of the 12.6 percent of the U.S. population that speaks Spanish, about 55 percent said they spoke English "very well" and 45 percent said they spoke it "less than very well," according to the American Community Survey, an annual count by the U.S. Census.

"Among linguists, it's sometimes called the three-generation hypothesis. The first generation speaks the language of their country and by far prefers that. The second generation is often bilingual but prefers English. And the third-generation usually speaks only English," said Tom Boswell, a professor at the University of Miami who studies migration patterns. "And that's where some of these struggles come in. Some families think that Spanish church will ensure that their kids and grandkids grow up in their language and culture, but that may not always work."

That same three-generation pattern applies in places such as South Florida, where Hispanics are in the majority, said Andrew Lynch, a bilingualism expert and Spanish professor at the University of Miami. But the trend may be harder to notice because "the cross-generational shift to English is largely masked by the constant influx of first-generation," Lynch said.

If it's harder to notice, it's also more difficult to address.

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On the recent Sunday when Pardo attended English services, typical announcements of the season preceded worship: There was an upcoming Christmas party, an advertisement for a "Christians in Action" youth group event, and a quick reflection on the meaning of Advent, among other words. But one piece of news stuck out. The layman at the podium said a guest speaker, a professor named Dan Rodriguez, was coming in late January to talk to the congregation about the church's "top priority:" its kids and its future.
When he's not teaching, Rodriguez, an associate professor of religion and Hispanic studies at Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, spends his time traveling the country to help Hispanic congregations and churches develop membership plans for the next generation of Hispanics that will fill their pews. Two weeks ago, he was speaking at a Southern Baptist church in Raleigh, N.C., and sometime after his visit to Sunset, he'll be offering advice at a Lutheran ministers conference in San Antonio, Texas.

"We will always have Hispanic churches and immigrant churches," Rodriguez, who authored the book "A Future for the Latino Church: Models For Multilingual, Multi-generational Hispanic Congregations," said in an interview. "But there are huge waves of change coming. And it's not just in Hispanic churches. This is happening in Korean congregations, too, and among other faiths. But it's the most stark among Hispanics, if because of nothing else than sheer numbers."

"Sometimes, I go to these churches, and I hear the pastor say, 'El diablo hablo ingles' -- the devil speaks English," said Rodriguez, a former Churches of Christ missionary who met Holway at a missionary conference in Honduras. "They don't mean it so literally, but there is a fear out there of change."

In many ways, the shift is an extension of what happened in the Catholic Church, Rodriguez added. No matter where one went, Catholic Mass was once only in Latin. But then-controversial mid-century Vatican II reforms allowed local languages, such as English and Spanish, to be used in services. The church grew as a result. Today, Latin Masses are offered on occasion for those who prefer a more traditional style.

Last year, the Spanish and English congregations celebrated the Day of Americas in a joint bilingual gathering for the first time. The festival included performances to traditional Spanish-language songs.

Decades after such changes in the Catholic Church, Rodriguez's book documented more than a dozen Spanish congregations -- many that were megachurches -- that have been successfully incorporated English into services and strategized to hold on to their youth and future leaders.

In his presentations, he points to some of nation's most prominent churches that have transitioned their ministries, such as Chicago's New Life Covenant Church. A Spanish-speaking Pentecostal congregation that had 125 members a dozen years ago when its name was Templo Cristiano Palestina, it today boasts 5,000 members among English and Spanish congregations. In reaching out to English-speaking Hispanics, it started offering programs such as school tutoring, and branched out to more established suburbs where native-born Hispanics could be found.
"They become very English-oriented in some ways, but they didn't lose their Spanish side. Of six services on Sundays, four are in English. But the Spanish congregation now numbers at 500. And they're spreading God's word to more and more people," Rodriguez said. "But among a lot of the churches I speak to, there's still fear."

While there are growing pains at Sunset, there's also a realistic understanding about why changes are necessary. The process has been the hardest during Sunday worship services, but at more strictly social events, there's been success. That includes a recent church barbecue, where members who were part of both congregations and spoke both languages came in equal numbers. It also includes the church's annual Day of the Americas festival, which happens around Columbus Day as a way to celebrate the diversity among church members and includes a parade of national flags and traditional dresses. For the first time last year, the festival was conducted in English in addition to Spanish.

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As part of exploring ways to change its congregations and structure, Carlos Carbajal, the ministry coordinator at Sunset, commissioned an informal survey of the congregations. In the poll, he asked 169 members from both congregations if they understood the concept of a more unified but multilingual church, if they agreed with changing service times to help families send kids to classes and services that could better serve them, and if they had comments about the changing face of Sunset.

Nearly everyone understood and agreed with the idea of being a multilingual church. A little under two-thirds said they thought it would help to make services for both language groups happen at the same time. Among those who did not think the move would be a good one, more than half were on the Spanish-speaking side. In the comments box, some wrote that the changes would create "distraction and confusion" and a "division of families." But there were also positive words. There would be "more fellowship," members said, and the "youth can attend where they feel more comfortable." It would be easier for Spanish and English speakers to have lunch together without waiting for one another, they said, and more time in the afternoon for family activities outside of church.

The proposed ideas were hailed by people such as Pardo, one of a small number of church youth who have already switched to the church's English side on their own. People like her and their parents, who already see themselves as being part of the future, multilingual face of Sunset, agreed with the concept. It made sense to them. But some of those who were part of the church's old model, one divided by language and often by ethnicity, said they were turned off.

Joseph Hurtuk, a 38-year-old Colombian American who recently joined Sunset, is one of those who replied and said he didn't see it going in the right direction. To Hurtuk, it's not language barriers that are to blame for young Hispanics who have left church. It's lack of outreach to younger generations.

"We have a strong Latin ministry and a good English one here, why would you mess with that?" he said in an interview after attending the Spanish service last week. "It's good to combine our groups once a month (for bilingual services), and it's great to get to know each other. I don't mind English, I speak it. But my wife prefers Spanish and I don't think the language or timing excuse always works. Parents just need to get more involved in their kids lives if they want to keep them in church."

"At my old church, we would go to college campuses and pass out flyers. Why don't we do that?" he said.
Pardo's mother, Alicia, had also just left the same service. It's good for churches -- and parents -- to change with the times, she said. A women's Bible group teacher, she recently began joining her daughter for 2½ hours of English Bible classes and worship each Sunday morning before she attends Spanish service on her own.

"We appreciate when people try to learn our language and speak it to us. English is not my main language and I am not perfect, but I should do the same for my kids," she said. "It's all the same thing we are here for, it just sounds different" in English and Spanish, she said. "But we both come to glorify Christ."