BERKELEY — In a small storefront mosque devoid of furniture, men and women shed their shoes and their care to bow, kneel and pray.

On one side of a screen that separates the men from the women, Najwa Taleb-Agha, 46, kneels and touches her scarf covered head to the ground. Her 2-year-old daughter tugs at her mother's full garments. But Najwa pays no heed. She, like everyone else in the room, is answering the Muslim call to prayer:

"God is great, and I bear witness there is no God but one, and Mohammed is his prophet," the imam, or priest, intones in smooth, lilting Arabic as more men and women step in out of the nudday sun. "Come to prayer, come to success. There is no God but one."

Bay Area mosques such as the Berkeley Masjid are filled with the murmuring voices of Muslims as they observe Ramadan, which this year runs from Jan. 22 to Feb. 20. It's the most important month of the Muslim calendar and the world's 1 billion Muslim faithful heed the imam's call with a renewed vigor.

But while all Muslims are taught from the cradle the importance of God, many local Muslims from predominantly Islamic countries say it is a constant struggle to properly instill their relatively strict faith in their children, many who were born in this country and feel the pull of its more permissive culture.

"Islam is not only a religion, it is a way of life," Najwa said, waving to the nearest of her nine children with a delicate hand — the only part of her body beside her serene face that she presents to the world.

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"They cannot take just a part of Islam and leave the rest," Najwa said. "And I pray to God they are wise and can see what is going on around them and why this is what's best for them."

In the Taleb-Agha house, Ramadan is an opportunity to teach the children, ages 2 to 8, the customs and laws of Islam. Each of the children — eight girls and one boy — knows that Ramadan requires daytime fasting, reading the Koran, doing charitable deeds and praying. It is a time of worship, not of repentance.

Sawsan, 10, is fasting for only the second time. On a recent night in the first week of Ramadan, the dark-haired girl chased her two younger sisters, Raneem, 2, and Mona, 4, as they waited for the sun to set. Finally, at a signal from Najwa, Sawsan broke her fast with dates and water. Then, while the smaller children watched, she joined her older brother and sisters on colorful prayer rugs in the family's Moraga living room.

"Peace and the mercy of God be upon you," the praying children said. Beyond them, their mother put bowls of steaming flowers, meat, chick peas, bread and yogurt on the dining table. When her prayers were said, Sawsan rejoined her little sisters, and the family sat together to eat its first meal since sunrise.

As well versed in Islam as the Taleb-Agha children are, getting them there has not always been easy. All have attended local public schools with non-Islamic children, and they are constantly confronted with American television programs, newspapers, magazines, radio and billboards that contradict Muslim sanctions against alcohol, drugs, gambling, gender-mixing and pre-marital sex.

To give their children a firm founding in Islam, the Taleb-Aghas have sent them to Islamic weekend schools and Islamic summer camp. The children are sent to visit family and study in Syria for several months at a time.

But the parents' most important strategy, they said, is to practice what they preach.

"We have to make an extra effort," said Najwa's husband, Ghiath, 35, a Berkeley engineer with short, grayish hair and mustache. "Our greatest fear is that they will lose their religious beliefs and values and the morals associated with those."

The children are encouraged to study the Koran each day, read Islamic texts and speak Arabic. The girls must keep their heads covered with a hijab, or scarf. They do not attend parties with boys, their movies and television are monitored, and dating, drugs and alcohol are out of the question.

If this seems strict by American standards, the children, who were all born in the United States, do not think so. Rana, 18, whose big brown eyes peer out from beneath a cream-colored hijab, said she used to wonder why she could not do some things, but she has learned to fall back on her faith for the answers.

"I am convinced that all the rules in Islam are true," she said in a coffeehouse near the University of California campus where she sat during a class break.

"All the rules that Allah set down for us are not to torture us, but to help us," she said. "Somehow, when God guides you, he reveals the truth."

Across the table, her sister, Nesrene, 21, another UC student, agreed.

"Here, we really know why we do what we do," she said. "If I did not believe in what I practice, I would not have much pride in myself."

But not all American Muslim children are so well adjusted. Children born in this country to Islamic parents sometimes can't handle the conflicting expectations of their foreign-born parents and their American friends.

"It was one way with my parents and another way with my friends," said Maha El-Genaidi, president of a Muslim advocacy group in San Jose, whose parents came to this country from Egypt when she was 7.

"My parents never understood what we were going through because they held very closely to their environment. That's part of the reason a lot of kids leave the tradition of their parents — they rebel because they just can't handle it."

Though the Taleb-Agha girls said they have never rebelled, they have sometimes felt confused about their identity.
"That's the hardest question to answer — 'Who am I?,'" Nesrene said. "I act American, but I am a Muslim. I say I am a Muslim-American."

"It's difficult when your parents think one way and you think another," Rana added. "But I'm glad that I'm not one or the other because this way we get the best of both sides. We're really very lucky."

Other Muslim emigres have made some concessions to their adopted country, while staying true to their faith.

Dr. Ahmad Farooqi and his wife, Nuzhat, moved to the United States from Pakistan in the 1970s. While raising their two daughters, Saba, 15, and Furah, 18, in Danville, they realized they made a mistake in trying to ignore their American surroundings.

"We had the same expectations of them that our parents had for us in Pakistan," said Dr. Farooqi, 42. "It took us a few years to realize that it was much harder for them here. They were kind of swimming in a non-Muslim environment 35 percent of the time."

To combat that, the Farooqis, like the Taleb-Aghas, sent their children to an Islamic weekend school in San Jose, taught them the Koran and Islamic law, and sent them home to Pakistan when time permitted. Two years ago, they took them to the holy sites in Mecca.

But they also have made some compromises. One space on the scarlet prayer rug in the living room is now vacant. Last fall, Furah went to the University of California, Los Angeles and now lives with three other girls in a dorm — something that was impermissible for Rana and Nesrene.

"What I have done is I have explained to them their boundaries, and I let them make their own decisions," Nuzhat, 41, said. "I feel we have taught them enough about religion, and we should give them their own independence. So far, we have been lucky, and they have always made the right decision."

What the Taleb-Aghas and the Farooqis have accomplished for their children they did largely on their own, with no help from extended families. Both couples said teaching their children about Islam has brought them closer to their faith.

"Back home, you have your parents and your grandparents, and if you had a problem, you just go and ask them," Nuzhat Farooqi said. "Here, if we had any questions about religion, all we had was the Koran, and we would open it up and read for ourselves if it was right or wrong."

Such an experience is common among American Muslim families from other countries.

"I hear this over and over again from Muslims, that they became real Muslims when they came to this country," ElGenaidi said. "Many were devout before coming here, but when they found themselves isolated and almost alienated because of their different cultures, they held on to what was familiar."
LIVERMORE — Before a small audience in a darkened chapel, Virginia Thibeaux shared something about herself it took her more than 30 years to discover.

"What I am about to tell you has weighed very heavily on my heart," she said in a trembling voice from behind a wooden pulpit to 25 rapt listeners. "But I knew the time would come when I would tell you and all the people I love that I am a lesbian."

The words, drawn from a letter Thibeaux wrote, were intended to explain to an elderly aunt why she stopped writing to her — for Thibeaux, 39, the pain of concealing her true identity from someone she loved was too much to bear.

But when she spoke them Saturday night in "Out of the Silence," a play about the experiences of homosexuals in the Presbyterian church, she was also coming out to the congregation at First Presbyterian Church, where the play was performed and where she and her two daughters have worshipped since 1987.

"I spent many years avoiding who I was," Thibeaux, a San Anselmo resident, said. "But I know this is the way God made me, and in coming out, I have found such a sense of peace."

Still, facing her fellow churchgoers was daunting. In the moments before the play, Thibeaux's fellow cast members, including her partner, Ann Towler, her daughters, Danielle, 10, and Belinda, 14, held hands in a circle to pray and offer their support.

"It's hard for us, but it's got to be harder for her," Belinda said, as she bent her brown head over her sister's shoelaces. "Nobody in Marin cares, but here people are more conservative."

"But I'm also fearful," she continued, about how her classmates at Livermore High School might react to the news that her mother is gay. "I'm just getting into the swing of things and I'm just making new friends and I don't want them to be scared of me."

Danielle, who tells her story of having two mommies in the play, said being in the performance helped her over her initial sadness at the break up of her first family.

"I used to be sad about it, but now I am happy," she said, her blonde, Bo Derek braids bouncing. "I'm not the only one with a lesbian parent. I think the play helps people understand how we feel."

As curtain time approached, Thibeaux, in a gray vest and pants, paused to share her nervousness.

"It's kind of scary," she said. "But I know I'll have a lot of support. But there is a faction of people who don't want to talk about homosexuality at all, let alone in the church." Then the lights dimmed and she was off.

As the play unfolded, cast members—Presbyterian gays, lesbians, bisexuals, their friends and families—told stories of isolation, family rejection and even the suicide of one lesbian daughter who could not face society's censure.

Near the end, Thibeaux stepped up to the wooden podium, a copy of her letter to her aunt in her hand.

Her sturdied voice and deep eyes described the pain she felt denying her sexuality. Raised a Catholic, she left the church because she felt "abandoned by God." She soon found herself married with children, living what she called "a fractured life."

Alcohol helped dull her pain, but it wasn't until she enrolled in a 12-step program and began attending First Presbyterian that she opened up to who she really was, she said.

She also began to feel a call to ministry, and after her divorce in 1992, she entered the Presbyterian seminary in San Anselmo. There, she met Towler and they have been together ever since. She has never felt such joy, she said.
"But with that joy came the sobering reality that the Presbyterian Church does not ordain anyone who is gay or lesbian unless they lie about it," she said to her aunt and to Saturday night's audience. "The church is wrong on this issue. I know it with every fiber of my being."

So does the rest of the cast, who hopes to take the play to New Mexico this summer where the church's General Assembly is scheduled to reconsider the ordination of gays and lesbians. Thibeaux, now in her final year of seminary, can not become ordained unless they do. She now plans to perform chaplaincy work, perhaps with people with AIDS or HIV, she said.

If Thibeaux was worried about her reception from fellow church members, she need not have worried. After the play, the cast invited the audience back to the library for a discussion on sexuality and the church. Between cookies and coffee, no one batted an eyelash at the revelation that Thibeaux was gay.

Pat Brubaker, who attends First Presbyterian Church, but did not know Thibeaux before Saturday night, said her sexuality makes no difference to her. "I look beyond that to what kind of person she is," she said. "Whether she's homosexual or not makes no difference at all."

Robyn Myli, another First Presbyterian members, agreed, but said she was "concerned" for Thibeaux.

"I think this will make her road to ordination a lot more difficult," she said. "But I feel it will make her happy as a person, so I am happy for her."
TWENTY-FIVE years ago, five local Catholics met on a Tuesday night, in a living room to pray together. For some of them, it was their first prayer meeting outside of a church and they didn’t quite know what to do.

But they learned fast. Where there were five, now there are hundreds who come Tuesday nights to a similar Dublin home for a charismatic prayer meeting. Though most come from the Oakland area, some come from as far away as Sacramento, Santa Rosa, Monterey and Stockton.

During the 90-minute meeting, participants run a course of praying, praising, speaking in tongues, prophesying, laying on hands, testifying and singing. As the men and women stand and sway, their hands raised to God, they have one purpose, said the meeting’s host and organizer, Pat Mullins.

“It is to praise God,” said thin, wiry, 37-year-old Mullins in a voice that rumbles with gravel. “And the vehicle is praise. It exalts God and puts our problems in perspective. We are called upon to behold that God loves us. Without that perspective, our problems consume us.”

Regular worshippers, some of whom have come for as many as 10 years, say they seek a sense of peace and belonging they may not find in their regular Sunday morning worship services.

“Let me tell you, this is real stuff,” said Steve Ellenberger of Pleasanton, a Protestant, whose wife’s battle with cancer brought him to this meeting last year. “And this is from a guy who if you told me a year ago I’d be here, I’d have said, ‘Yeah, sure’. But I need this. I have such strength and joy. I could have gone to church for a 100 years and not received what I get from one charismatic service.”

And, wherever members of Mullins’ prayer community were once entirely Catholic, now they hail from Presbyteryman, Methodist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Lutheran and Episcopal backgrounds as well. Non-Catholics sometimes account for half the people who fill the sofas and chairs that line the 1,500 square-foot den-like “sanctuary” members built behind Mullins’ house on Sutton Lane in the mid-1980s.

“This is beyond my minister, way beyond my minister,” said Sharon Prickett of Dublin, a Pentecostal, as she awaited the first song of praise in a mid-February prayer meeting.

“When you come here, you can let it all hang out. We all have a personal relationship with God here and he gives gifts like you would not believe.”

“Charismatic” refers to the Christian belief that God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, bestows on worshippers gifts of prophecy (God inspiring someone to speak), glossolalia (speaking in tongues or in a prayer language), healing through the laying on of hands and the interpretation of tongues and visions. These gifts, long experienced by Pentecostal Christians, made their way into the Catholic church in 1967 during a revival-like retreat for Catholics at Pennsylvania’s Duquesne University. By 1971, Mullins and his wife, RoseMarie, began holding a meeting in their Dublin home.

Mullins began a mid-February meeting clad in a blue denim shirt hand-embroidered with a rainbow “JESUS” and bits of scripture. At his shout of “Number 56,” the 90-odd seated people jumped to their feet, only a few referring to the small yellow song books, and sang to the strumming of guitars and the banging of tambourines:

“I heard the Lord call my name! Listen close, you’ll hear the same! Take his hand, we are glory-bound.”

A string of similar praise songs followed, each more ecstatic than the last, until everyone raised their voices in individual shouts of praise.

“Thank you, Jesus.” and “We praise you, Jesus,” many people chanted, while others babbled in tongues, their words sounding like a mish-mash of every language in the world as they closed their eyes and prayed.

“Who is there among you that would learn how to praise Me?” one mustached man in a maroon shirt called when the prayer died down. “When you sing praise to him that made you, you are satisfying his justice. Let us go praising and dancing my children, for that is what pleases the Father who made you.”

For the next hour, the men, women, teens, ages and children — African Americans, whites, Latins and Asians among them — continued to sing, praise and pray. When Mullins, seated in an old brown easy chair, disbanded them, more than one called, “See you next week,” while leaving through a pair of glass doors.

THOUGH no one keeps strict count of how many people attend charismatic meetings, some scholars estimate tens of thousands of Catholics are involved nationwide, with uncounted participants in Europe, Africa, Australia and South and Central America. The Oakland diocese estimates 2,000 of its 485,183 Catholics participate each year in some 50 meetings conducted in both English and Spanish across Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The Archdiocese of San Francisco, with 110,943 Catholics in San Mateo, San Francisco and southern Marin counties, has some 70 charismatic meetings. With its average attendance hovering at 80, the Mullinses’ meeting is by far the largest of the local meetings.

The Mullinses, who are Catholic, became involved in the charismatic movement in the early 1970s when they attended a prayer meeting in the home of some friends.

“I thought how strange, how very strange.” Pat Mullins said with a spreading smile. “I was not open to this thing and I just couldn’t understand why people were making such a fuss. I said, ‘Why are you shouting? Is God deaf?’”

Soon, he attended a larger meeting at the University of San Francisco. Though he did not experience a “tongue,” himself, he began to feel that God wanted him to start his own prayer meeting, he said.

Confused, he prayed aloud for guidance and out of his mouth came words he could not recognize.

“It just came on me with the gentleness of a mist,” he said of the first time he spoke in tongues. “It just bubbled out of me and I knew that this was a sign that I was on the right path.”

The following Tuesday, the Mullinses welcomed their first three guests to their home.

At the same time, Mullins gave up his career as a cable television consultant. He and RoseMarie became like the lifelines of the field, trusting God to pay their bills and put food on the table, he said.

“It was a process of learning the will of the Lord,” Mullins said. “What God was after is who is the God in my life? As long as I was in control of the finances. I was the God of my life. But the place of freedom is, ‘I trust you, Father, and you are the one who provides.’”

Now, money “shows up,” Mullins said. When his family was months behind on their electric bill, an anonymous person paid it. A priest knocked on their door one day with several thousand dollars from a grandmother’s legacy.

Nor does Mullins preach or use his position to influence the political views of his weekly visitors. His work is a calling, not a job, he said.

“My ministry is to let Jesus live in me so that whatever God wants me to do, I am willing to cooperate and do it,” he said.

The meeting at the Mullins’ house has the support of their parish priest at Dublin’s St. Raymond Penafort Church, the Rev. Patrick Goodwin.
"I don't consider myself a charismatic," said Goodwin, who visits the meetings almost every Tuesday. "But this has grown on me. It is a place where I really see people being cared for and able to pray as they see fit. There's a real freedom there for people to express themselves in prayer."

Goodwin said the church does not frown on the meetings because they are not in competition with Mass, or any other offerings of the Catholic church. Rather, he called them "a supplement." He also praised the meetings as a way to bring some participants back in touch with the church.

That's what happened to Al Lachner of El Cerrito. Once a United Church of Christ minister, Lachner fell away from the church. Recently, he lost his Danville mortgage business and now faces a string of lawsuits. But instead of turning to the church, he turned to "the church of Jack Daniels," he said.

In the midst of his despair, Lachner’s wife, Josephine, a Catholic, suggested they attend the Dublin prayer meeting. For Lachner, the sense of relief was almost immediate.

"I stopped drinking and I’ve seen a great deal of peace," he said. "The stress is still there, but I have an avenue of prayer I can go into and allow God to take a lot of the burden from me."

Part of that prayer is in tongues. With a masters degree in New Testament from Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union, Lachner always considered himself too rational to believe in, let alone experience, charismatic gifts. But since attending the meetings, it is central to his faith journey.

"I don’t understand it," he said. "I go into prayer and this prayer language comes out and it is like God is reaching into my heart and he is communicating with me. The spirit begins to intercede for me and takes a lot of the fears that I can’t express and I begin to feel peace."

He has also returned to church in Oakland.

Other attendees, both Catholics and non-Catholics, have felt the same movement in their lives since coming to the Mullins' residence.

"At church, I believe the pastor speaks the word of God," said Judy, 38, a Catholic who has attended for six years.

"But here, when we sing to the Lord, it's like a counseling session. You spill your guts in singing to the Lord and you feel relieved."

Bob Beaudoin of Pleasanton agreed.

"There is a freedom here, there is tremendous love," he said, one hand on his Bible. "The people aren’t perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but there are many who have grown in the Lord and found new strength."
If the pastor of Tracy’s South Winds Church counts 1,000 people in his congregation this morning, he has promised to shave the church’s windmill logo into his haircut.

It just might happen, and if it does, it will be due in part to such offbeat, non-traditional tactics.

South Winds, which had fewer than 100 members when the Rev. Jack Jones arrived 10 years ago, is among the fastest growing churches in the Bay Area. While most mainline Protestant churches are struggling to fill the pews on Sunday, South Winds’ mostly young, professional congregation of about 750 is on its way to becoming a megachurch.

Megachurches — Protestant churches with more than 2,000 attendees — are flourishing across America. In the mid-1970s there were 10 megachurches. Now, approximately 450 attract 2 million worshippers each Sunday, according to Scott Thumma, a religion sociologist who studies megachurches.

And South Winds is not alone in the Bay Area. Palo Alto’s Peninsula Bible Church and San Francisco’s Glide Memorial each count 2,000 attendees. Danville’s Community Presbyterian has 2,200 and Menlo Park Presbyterian Church has 4,700. Allen Temple Baptist in Oakland has more than 4,000 attendees and Dublin’s CrossWinds has just recorded more than 2,000. At least a dozen Bay Area churches are on their way to becoming as large.

Though there have always been large congregations, some megachurches have given them a new twist. In the past 20 years, religion scholars have noted the rise of “seeker churches” — churches that reach out to baby boomers, Generation X’ers and the unchurched with non-traditional worship services. These people, ages 25-45, have either fallen away from or never attended mainline churches, scholars say. Willow Creek Community Church, which some scholars pinpoint as the first such seeker church, has grown to 15,000 members since its founding in suburban Chicago in the mid-1970s.

Seeker churches share some common characteristics. They usually have a contemporary worship style punctuated by modern music and a pastor’s “message” laced with practical advice for daily living. The pastors frequently use dancers, actors, film clips or other artistic forms to illustrate their theme. Liturgies, hymnals, stained glass, altars, vestments and other trappings of traditional churches are usually gone.

Seeker churches are deliberate in their design and rely on modern marketing techniques to flourish. Many of the larger ones, like Willow Creek, have conducted door-to-door surveys of the “unchurched.” A corporate-like structure of senior, executive and associate pastors (up to twelve in the largest megachurches) usually insure a well-organized division of labor. A proliferation of small groups is the mortar that keep individuals connected to the pastor, who cannot possibly know everyone’s name.

Seeker churches have taken off, with pastors from many different backgrounds flocking to “conferences” at the more successful ones. The Willow Creek Association counts 1,225 spin-off churches. Saddleback Community Church in Mission Viejo started with two families and now has 11,000 attendees and 27 “daughter” churches.
One of the original members of the Willow Creek Association is Dublin's CrossWinds Church. Founded less than eight years ago, it now attracts more than 2,000 people from as far away as Oakland, San Jose and the peninsula to its two services each Sunday. The Rev. John Merritt, 43, visited Willow Creek before coming to California to build CrossWinds from the ground up. "I kind of caught a vision of what a church could do to reach unchurched people," Merritt said. "That was a defining moment for me."

And for CrossWinds. There is no sanctuary, but an auditorium with cushioned chairs, bleachers and a stage with rows of colored theatrical lights overhead. There are no hymnals, no altar, no communion rail, no stained glass and only a single wooden cross. Merritt and his four co-pastors wear suits and dresses, not robes, and deliver their messages (never a "sermon") from a clear plastic podium placed on stage by a black-clad stagehand. Attendees like many seeker churches CrossWinds does not ask people to become members - watch dance numbers, skits and film clips on a descending movie screen. Recent services included scenes based on the sit-com "Home Improvement" and a snippet of the movie "City Slickers."

Congregational participation is minimal. If they are asked to sing, usually once per service, the lyrics are projected on the movie screen. Hymns are seldom, if ever, sung, and the music is up-tempo, modern and sometimes secular. One Sunday in March, miked singers backed up by several guitars, saxophone, violins, a drummer and a keyboard sang rock songs by the groups Kansas and Chicago. Worshipers are casual, wearing blue jeans, T-shirts, running shoes, shorts and tank tops on Palm Sunday. Coffee from the lobby coffee bar is welcome in the auditorium.

But if the atmosphere is laid-back, the worshipers are not, if the weekly collection is any measure. CrossWinds Church averages $26,000 each Sunday from about 1,800 attendees. At donations of approximately $14 per person a week, that's almost twice the average giving among Protestants, according to empty tomb, inc., an organization that studies church giving.

Merritt and his executive pastor, the Rev. Marty Cutrone, largely attribute their success to one thing: keeping their finger on the pulse of contemporary society and pop culture.

"What we are trying to do is get inside the unchurched mind and think like him and talk like him on Sunday morning," Merritt said. "We're trying to create an environment here so the unchurched person can come in and say, 'This is church like I have never known church.'"

South Winds, situated 30 miles away in Tracy, is also deliberately unchurch-like. Founded in 1947 as Trinity Baptist Church, South Winds saw its membership slump in the 1960s. When Jones arrived in the mid-1980s at the age of 28, he had 70 members and a will to grow.

"The question was how to reach young people in the area," Jones, now 38, said. "I began to study baby boomers, I went to conferences, did surveys. I went door-to-door. We were looking for people who did not go to church."

He also visited Saddleback Church and returned to model South Winds on its principle - know what the unchurched don't want in a worship experience. They do not want to put on their uncomfortable Sunday clothes and sit in rigid pews to listen to out-dated music and a harangue from a man in a long, white robe.

Jones and South Winds have taken that lesson to heart. At a Sunday service in March, Jones' outfit of casual slacks and a shirt was just slightly dressier than the clothes of his capacity crowd of 400. Once, he said, a family skating past the church on Rollerblades felt comfortable enough to come inside and stay. The men, women and children - most who looked no older than their pastor - tapped their feet and sang along with five pop-style singers, a
bass guitar, a drummer and a keyboard.

But the changes are more than physical. Gone are "barriers' to the unchurched, Jones said. Words such as "sanctification', "trinity' and "annoint' are absent, or are defined if they must be used. A recent lesson about redemption incorporated a return-for-deposit Coke bottle.

"As Christians, over the years, we have begun to use a language that is out of touch with the mainstream,'' Jones said. "The unchurched who walk in would feel I don't belong here because they don't understand what's going on.''

And, while scripture forms the foundation of Jones' message, he also always includes practical advice for the baby boomer to take home - how to build better relationships, the importance of mentoring and recognizing one's supporters were recent themes.

As at CrossWinds, the strategy seems to be working. The church is in its fourth space since Jones' tenure, bursting the seams at several Tracy locales save the gym at West High School, where they now hold two services each Sunday. There may soon be three, and plans are underway to erect a new 15,000 square-foot facility.

Like other seeker churches, CrossWinds and South Winds have been criticized for offering a kind of "Christianity lite.'' But pastors at both insist their churches are much deeper than they appear on Sunday morning. Indeed, both offer adult Bible and worship classes for new and mature Christians.

"If people don't see beyond the Sunday morning service, they don't know what we're about,''' Merritt said. "It's a celebration, an outreach service that gets people through the door. But unless they join a group or come on a Wednesday night, they don't see what we are all about.''

And according to people at both CrossWinds and SouthWinds, the informal worship style works _ and not only for the unchurched.

"It was very different from what I was used to,'' said Barbara Spencer of Danville, who came to CrossWinds four years ago from a Catholic background.

"But what impressed me was there was drama that seemed to be pretty relevant, and my husband and I said, 'Wow.' We really understood what the message was and we enjoyed it.''

Randy Moseley, 36, of Tracy fell away from church in his 20's because he became "disillusioned,''' he said. Then he found South Winds.

"What I appreciate about them is they really don't compromise the message, but they use a different way of telling it,''' he said.

But modern worship is not the only key to maximum capacity. Oakland's Allen Temple Baptist Church, a largely African-American church whose 4,300 members come from as far away as Vallejo, Fairfield and Sacramento, has embraced the traditional and the contemporary simultaneously.

On Palm Sunday, the Rev. Alfred Smith Sr., 64, stood behind a draped wooden pulpit, resplendent in white and crimson robes beneath a row of stained glass disciples. Behind him, a robed choir sang "Old Time Religion' and "Old Rugged Cross' while a capacity crowd of 1,400, most dressed to the nines in suits, dresses and hats, sang along. The church's guest pastor, Dr. C.A.W. Clark, quoted and even sang lengthy scripture passages from memory.

But in recent months, the church has seen Winton Marsalis and other jazz and blues artists take part in its services. A jazz ensemble plays one Sunday morning a month, and Smith and his son, the Rev. Alfred Smith Jr., are
rigorously involved in bringing younger people into the church through sports ministries and other non-traditional church activities.

The strategy is enormously successful, said Othell Dunn, 63, a church member since 1957 and now one of its trustees. The church had only 200 members when Smith Sr. first arrived there 26 years ago, and he credits the pastor's balance between the traditional and the contemporary with keeping both older and younger members happy.

"You've got to be able to please us both to keep us there," Dunn said. "And that's the reason people come to Allen Temple, because they can get some of it all."

Blending the contemporary with the traditional is the key to insuring a church's survive in the next century, Jones and Merritt said. "We live in a world of options," Jones said. "The unchurched person watches Letterman, they listen to music award shows, they listen to quality music all day long, and if they come to church and you don't provide it, they're not going to stay."
BERKELEY — Huston Smith says defining one's spirituality is like looking at a Rorschach blot.

"The atheist sees randomness and says there is no God," the 76-year-old Berkeley professor of religion said from the living room of his home in the city's hills. "The polytheist sees many gods in everything, the monotheist sees there is only one God and the mystic sees that there is only God."

Then, with a mischievous grin splitting his white-bearded face and lighting up his hazel eyes, he adds: "Now, I happen to be of the mystic type."

Indeed, Smith seems to see God everywhere. For more than half a century he has studied the world's major religions, the "wisdom traditions," as he calls them. He has studied with Buddhist monks in Northern India, practiced yoga with Hindu mystics, meditated on Zen ko-ans in Japan, celebrated the Jewish sabbath, danced with Sufi Muslims in Iran and smoked peyote with the Huichol Indians in the Native American Church in Mexico.

Smith's second book, "The World's Religions," (originally published in 1958 as "Religions of Man") has never gone out of print and has sold over 1.5 million copies in 14 different languages. It has just been reissued by Harper San Francisco in a deluxe illustrated edition.

Smith has never labored in obscurity. Musicologists credit him with bringing multiphonic chanting — "the holiest sound that I have ever heard" — to the attention of the West after a trip to a Tibetan monastery. Beginning in 1955, he produced three series for National Education Television (the progenitor of the Public Broadcasting System). His films on Hinduism, Sufism and Tibetan Buddhism all have won awards, and, after receiving a national award for distinguished teaching in 1964, he was featured on the television series "Meet the Professor."

But his greatest fame may be before him. This month, Smith will share his take on the world's religions with television viewers across the United States when he is interviewed by journalist Bill Moyers in a five-part series entitled "The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith." The first part of the taped program will air in the Bay Area on KQED at 10 p.m. next Sunday, continuing on consecutive Sundays in April at 10 p.m.

Moyers first encountered Smith through "The World's Religions," which he read as a young seminary student. Last year, Moyers called Smith and asked if they could meet. As Moyers says in the series, he and much of the academic world considers Smith "America's most eloquent and accessible authority on the history of the world's religions."

In an interview with the Religion News Service, Moyers said Smith's insight into world religions is especially relevant today as Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and followers of many other religions commonly live side by side.

Smith's insight into world religions is beyond that of most scholars. Rather than studying them from his desk, he has immersed himself in religious practices, seeking for himself, as Moyers says, a "believer's eye view." Along the way, he has incorporated much of what he has encountered into his own observances. He recites the Islamic prayer five times a day, practices yoga each morning, and reads part of a sacred text — the Bagavad-Gita, the Koran, the Bible, the Torah, the Tao Te Ching — before each day's breakfast.

His routine, he said, helps him identify with the divine before a morning of writing — he is the author of more than 60 articles and seven books besides "The World's Religions" — or jaunting off to teach one or two undergraduate courses at the University of California, Berkeley.
The first part is aligning my consciousness, sometimes through prayer, sometimes through meditation, to the ultimate,' he said, leading the way to the red patterned carpet in the book-lined home office where he both works and prays. "The yoga is to get me into my body, and the reading is for my mind. You might say it's body, mind and spirit, though I think the spirit is the most important and that's why I open the day with that.'

Tall, thin and with a voice that has begun to quaver with age, Smith was not always so well-rounded in his religious studies. The child of Methodist missionaries stationed in Soochow, China, he first came to the United States at 17 when he entered Central Methodist College. After graduating, he planned to "walk across the street" to the Methodist church and become a minister. But a freshman course in philosophy so entranced him with "the world of ideas, that I knew the life of the mind was for me," he said. From then on, he studied naturalistic theism, a philosophy in which religion steps in only when science is not enough, he said.

But six weeks short of earning his doctorate, Smith picked up "Pain, Sex and Time," a book by philosopher Gerald Heard. With its sympathetic treatment of the mystic experience _ which Smith defines as "altered states of reality in which only God seems to exist and all that exists is God" _ it was diametrically opposed to the naturalistic theism Smith had spent nine years of his time and energy on. It was a moment of epiphany for him.

"From the soles of my feet all the way up I found myself saying, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,'" he said. "This is the big picture, this is the way things are.'"

He took his degree and married fellow University of Chicago student Kendra Wieman, now a psychologist and a Vipassana Buddhist. But from then on, he sought for the mystical experience, for what he describes as "religion alive" _ religion that "calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake," he tells Moyers. First, he ventured into the Vedanta Society to study yoga with Swami Satprakashananda. In 1957, he traveled among the Hindus of India. He spent 10 weeks studying with a Rinzai Zen roshi in Kyoto, part of a 1964 sabbatical with Tibetan lamas in exile, and started the 1970s by studying Islam with Iranian Sufis.

Meanwhile, he continued to teach, first at Washington University, then Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he became friends with fellow mystic, Aldous Huxley, and Harvard proponent of psychedelics, Timothy Leary. Then he went to Syracuse University, where, at a nearby Indian reservation, he first began to study the world's primitive, oral religions. He came to Berkeley after his "retirement" in 1984.

Smith's students rank him as one of the best professors they have ever encountered.

"Because Huston has immersed himself in the religious traditions he has an intimate sense of what he teaches,'" said Philip Novak, a doctoral student of Smith's at Syracuse who is now chairman of the department of religion and philosophy at Dominican College. "Does it compromise his objectivity? Certainly not. St. Augustine had a phrase _ you must believe in order to understand.'"

Markton Ross, a Berkeley undergraduate, said he was always struck by a feeling that Smith had something to reveal.

"He has a wealth of wisdom," he said. "He speaks from knowing rather than from something he read in a book. And he imparts that knowledge freely and fully and with great sensitivity.'"

The Rev. Norris Palmer, a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Theological Union who has served as Smith's teaching assistant, said knowing Smith has
directed his own search for faith.

"Seeing that he has continued his faith journey, that it is something he continues to report on as he goes along, invites his students to pursue their conversations with him and on their own," he said. "It is not often that you meet someone of such incredible authority who is also so very human, open, eager and inquisitive."

Walking his own spiritual path, Smith has never paused to doubt the existence of God. He attributes this not only to his scrutiny of the world's religions -- each of which points to an absolute, perfect divine -- but also to the Christian upbringing he received from his parents. He continues to attend church, currently at Trinity United Methodist in Berkeley.

"I was very fortunate in the Christianity that came through to me," he said, a small statue of St. Francis beaming down at him from the mantelpiece near his chair. "It was, 'We are in good hands and in gratitude for that fact, it would be well if we bore one another's burdens. And in all of my gallivanting around the globe, I don't know that I've come across a formula that rings more true than that.'"

Smith continues to be convinced of an "infinite divine" not only through his hours of prayer and study, but by the hours he spends with a pen in his hand trying to communicate the way things are to the rest of the world.

"I get my equivalent of those heaven-opening rays coming down when I am pushing the limit of my discerning capacities and I look out the window by the computer and there are these cloud formations and the trees and, oh, I get so caught up in it," he said, spreading his arms before a window that looks out on his neighbors' flowering trees and an expanse of blue sky and white clouds over the San Francisco Bay. "Those are my epiphanies. Those are the moments when I feel most sure that I am connected to the ultimate."

His faith has withstood the toughest of tests. In 1994, Karen, the eldest of his three daughters, died of cancer. It was she who brought Judaism into Smith's life when she married a Jew and converted. When she died, Smith and his family participated in the Jewish rituals of mourning. But instead of being wasted by her death, he found a mystical experience amidst its terrible sadness.

"For an hour and a half I was alone with her body, and that was extraordinary for me," he said, his voice growing low. "About half of that time I was just sobbing, and the other half I had this uncanny sense that she was in the room. I just found myself looking around asking, where is she? If you asked me who I was more sure was there, her spirit or her corpse, which I could reach out and touch, I would have said no difference."

And, as his own life winds down, he is certain there is something beyond it.

"I look upon it as the greatest adventure," he said. "My own instinct is that for a while it will be like looking back over my shoulder at my family and friends. And then my gaze will fall on the infinite and the divine and I will become like a moth to the flame until I become one with it."

"To use a phrase of the Indians, 'The dewdrop slips until it becomes one with the sea,'" he said.

Meanwhile, he is too busy to think of the end of his own journey. Since the Moyers crew launched its publicity, Smith's phone has not stopped ringing.

Still, he is not worried about the fame that might come his way, though
insiders say he could be the next Joseph Campbell, the late mythologist who became a household name after Moyers broadcast talks with him. "We'll see if that's the case," he said. "I feel ready for whatever comes. If it is a trickle, I'll continue to enjoy writing books and if there's a flurry, I'll enjoy that, too."