2008 Templeton Contest
First Place

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MA SISS’S PLACE: THE BIRTH OF A CHURCH

From a Dorchester chop shop, a place to pray
(first of four parts)
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The one-story cinderblock garage never was much to look at.

Back in 1963, when 26-year-old Idene Wilkerson, with a sixth-grade education, four kids, and a few suitcases, left the cotton plantations and cross burnings of her Alabama youth for the three-decker apartment her husband was renting in Dorchester, the humble, gray, flat-roofed building at the corner of Baker Avenue and Quincy Street was a small foundry, belching black smoke into the railroad tracks that ran overhead, as workers fashioned manhole covers for use on the streets below.

Over the years, the foundry was replaced by a succession of shabby and sometimes shady auto repair businesses. It was an eyesore so glaring, even in a down-at-the-heels neighborhood, that it caught the attention of city officials, who, confronted with an unpaved street lined with two dozen junked cars, an abandoned motorboat, and a flour company delivery truck that had been sinking into a lawn, declared the garage an illegal chop shop and, in 1988, shut it down.

Wilkerson, known throughout the neighborhood by the nickname Siss, spent those years living around the corner, on Drayton Avenue. She worked as a housemaid in Newton and Brookline, then returned each evening to Uphams Corner to raise her children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and foster children, and nieces, and various abandoned or lost kids from the neighborhood. So much mothering that she became known to the entire neighborhood as Ma.

And, through it all, Ma Siss was praying.

Praying that God would help her survive a broken marriage; a neighborhood in which hope is a rare visitor and shots can be heard in the night; a family in which all four of her children did time for drug crimes, and one died at the age of 31.

Praying for the homeless and addicted and just plain poor folks who streamed through her house, week after week, asking for money or food or clothes or a place to stay.
And praying for a place to pray.

Today, the garage still vibrates as the MBTA commuter rail passes overhead, ferrying commuters from the fast-growing suburbs southwest of Boston to the high-rise office towers of the city's financial district. And the yard is still a sight: often filled with castoff washing machines and refrigerators, piles of used clothing, an occasional walker, a beat-up tricycle.

But the garage's main walls, inside and out, are now covered with murals depicting young black men and women walking toward Jesus. A plain wooden cross, fashioned from stained oak boards, is mounted to a white wall. And each Saturday at 1, as chicken fries in vats of oil or ham bakes in an oven, several dozen people, many of them African-American women of a certain age, come together for worship in the former auto bay.

There is one small expression of evangelicalism in America, a fragile congregation whose aim is to spread a fervent Christian faith to their friends and neighbors. That much they have in common with the conspicuous world of megachurches and televangelists, but not much more. What they live by is something closer to the original optimism of faith, a seed planted in a chop shop lot.

Those who gather here have traveled many roads, none of them smooth. They bring their stories with them.

There is Fannie Hurst, Ma Siss's longtime neighbor and friend, a frail septuagenarian who at age 30 left her children with her mother in South Carolina and headed north to work as a "sleep-in girl," a nanny, in New York City. A deeply faithful Christian, Ma Fann, as neighbors started calling her as a parallel to Ma Siss, anticipates death confidently, as a promised reward.

In the meantime, she still dons the occasional pair of leather pants or gold boots and keeps up a steady patter of praise, alternately murmuring or shouting "Hallelujah" or "Praise Jesus!"

There is Tom Groeneman, a stout 51-year-old who carries liters of soda with him everywhere he goes, and who credits the church with helping him keep at bay the homelessness, addictions, and emotional problems
that have dogged him throughout his adult life. He loves to memorize Bible verses; for years, in fact, he wondered if he might one day preach.

There is Dora Vaughan, Ma Siss's only daughter, a fierce, funny, charismatic heroin addict who, when she is not in jail or strung out on drugs, can be found on the building's front step, smoking a cigarette and chewing on ice. She is a natural leader, and also often lost.

And, holding it all together through some combination of suffering and charity, there is Ma Siss, who rarely stands or speaks but is the undisputed matriarch of the tiny, U-shaped neighborhood formed by two short one-way streets, Drayton and Baker avenues.

"It just an uplift when you go into the house of the Lord," Ma Siss said. "It's just a blessing."

A new Christian church is planted in the United States every two hours, by one estimate.

In recent years, a handful of twentysomething missionaries has migrated to New England from the South, hoping to save a region that has traditionally been inhospitable to evangelism and therefore, in their eyes, ripe for mission work. The Emmanuel Gospel Center, which keeps track of such things, says there has been a "quiet revival" here, with the number of evangelical congregations growing, even as Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches close.

Some of the new churches are outgrowths of existing congregations so successful that members are sent off as missionaries. Others are driven by self-anointed preachers, men and women who feel a call from God and set up shop in a home or a storefront.

The church Ma Siss built is different.

The Quincy Street Missional Church, as it is now called, sprang up almost organically, as an outgrowth of a mother's group that had been meeting for years in Ma Siss's dining room, and then in her basement, to chat, and then to pray, about the challenges of raising children and getting by.
Like the tiny house churches frequented by Christians in the first centuries of the faith, it is made up of an extended family related by blood, marriage, and friendship, by geography and troubles.

At first, the pews were junkyard couches and chairs that would change each week as Ma Siss and her daughter, Dora, routinely gave away the church's furniture to people in need. For a while, the church had pews that a supporter found on Craigslist, but they were so uncomfortable, and in such bad shape, that they were pushed to the side and used as bookshelves.

The garage was marked as a church by a hand-lettered sign - "Please Come Pray Eat Worship" in red, yellow, blue, and green letters - propped up against a chain-link fence.

And for months the garage was patrolled by a stray cat, dubbed Church, who was employed as a mouser to keep rodents out of the kitchen. Church would wander through prayer services, hoping for a scratch from a worshiper, until one night, while the garage was being renovated, Church wandered off.

Also gone is the person the worshipers called "the man on the rock," who for years sat on a boulder on a vacant lot across Baker Avenue, selling drugs. As the garage began to fill with people, the man on the rock moved away.

Ma Siss is a woman of big gestures and small words. Her ample body has long since started to fail her. She is hobbled by blood clots that swell her legs, asthma that hinders her breathing, diabetes that restricts her diet. Arthritis and anxieties limit her mobility.

Like many of the women of the neighborhood, her hair is cut short and is rarely visible, her head generally wrapped in some kind of fabric. She dresses comfortably, often in sweats and sneakers, and smiles often. Her favorite greetings are "Hi, darling," and "OK, baby," and she refers to almost everything as "whatsit." Her favorite word of praise is to call something an "uplift," and she often falls back on "that's the main thing about it" to end a thought.

In the neighborhood, she is regarded as a saintly figure but also as an easy mark. One of the few people around with property, she is asked for
money constantly by folks in need. In her dining room she proudly
displays the china she never uses, a symbol, for her, of hard-won, and
easily shattered, financial freedom.

She has risen. But her life has always been hard. Born into poverty in
rural Alabama. Pulled out of school before she learned to read so she
could help pick cotton. Pregnant with her first child at 17. A job as a
maid in the racist South. A job as a maid in the racially charged North.

She looks back with considerable nostalgia to the role of church in her
childhood, when everyone, unquestioningly, attended worship services
and paid attention. Starting at age 10, she would sit on a "morning bench"
at her childhood church, waiting to see if she would feel something -
something that said she was ready to be baptized, a ritual that for Baptists
takes place not at infancy, but only at the request of a believer. At 13, she
said, she was sitting on the bench when she felt a sort of chill that she
identified as the Holy Spirit, and sensed that she was being called. So she
donned the white robe of her church and joined a procession down to a
nearby creek to be immersed by her minister.

"We really served the Lord there," she said. "I remember, we went there,
we couldn't play. We was 'tention!' - it was like you was in the army,
when we went to our church."

People routinely give her statuettes of angels that she lines up on the
shelf behind her bed. She believes that faith, and the love of a lost child,
have helped her survive.

"I have been in some tough, tough, spots - mental, physical, all of it - and
God always bring me through," she said. "When I was in Alabama, I got
hit by a car getting off the bus, and my girlfriend died. I had problems
with my back. But when my son died, he come at the foot of my bed, and
he stood up, and I saw him - I said, 'Brinnie,' and he just fade away. And
I really believe that a lot of his strength went into my health."

Ma Siss was born Idene Wilkerson on August 3, 1937, or at least
sometime around then - she's not quite sure what day, or what year. Nor
does she know whether her first name (pronounced eye-deen) was an
invention of her mother or a misspelling by a midwife. She was the
youngest of eight children, born to a family of sharecroppers in Shorter,
Ala., and raised in Madison Park, outside Montgomery. Her mother had a
shack and raised cotton, corn, and potatoes on rented land. The shack was lit by kerosene lamps; there was no electricity, telephone, or running water. The only source of meat were hogs that the family raised, slaughtered, and smoked.

"I never thought that I would see the day I would be able to have more than one pair of shoes," she said.

Her nickname - Sis when she was young, Siss today - was bestowed on her as a child, reflecting her role as the family's baby sister. She uses her given name only when she's feeling angry. When she was a baby, her mother carried her into the fields; after sixth grade she missed so much school helping with the work that she was repeatedly held back until she dropped out.

At 17 she began working as a maid, cleaning barracks at Gunter Air Force Base. Then she worked her way up to cleaning the homes of officers. Soon she was getting work off base - but that was difficult, she said, because some people didn't want black people setting foot in white homes; she always had to enter by the back door.

"We couldn't sit by a white person," she said. "We couldn't speak to 'em, all of that, where I come from. It was just something we knowed."

So she returned to the Air Force base, where she felt safer, and worked her way up to earning $3 a day. Her fondest memory is of a man named Mr. Hicks.

"He wouldn't let me go, even when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on Mr. Hicks' lawn. They did it one day when I didn't go to work there, but I could see where he had a big cedar tree in his yard, and you could see where the smoke was. But he didn't care."

Her first child was 6 months old when Ma Siss's mother died of a blood clot. She then married and had three children with Willie L. Wilkerson. In 1963, Willie, hoping for a better life, decided they should move to Boston, where his sister lived; he moved first, and a few months later, Siss packed up the four children and boarded a Greyhound bus for the overnight trip north. The couple at first stayed on Drayton Avenue with Willie's sister, and that's the street where they've lived ever since.
"When we first come, we was the first blacks on the street," she recalled.

But that would swiftly change. "Everybody moved off. Everybody."

Before long, Ma Siss was working as a maid for 14 families, most of them in Newton and Brookline.

"I worked a lot serving bar mitzvahs, and especially during the holidays, Passover, Easter, the New Year - oh, my God, they had a feast at the New Years," she said. "I worked for the mother, the daughter, the daughter-in-laws; I just worked for the whole family."

The memory that has lingered with her longest is of the fine china owned by her employers.

"You had to wash all the dishes," she said. "That's the one thing I hated, that really stuck with me, cause I did so much china and silver and stuff . . . and I had to come home to a tin cup, or something like that."

But then one of her nieces bought her some long-stemmed glasses, and her own collection began. Decorated with a pattern of gray flowers, it is arrayed in a glass-front cabinet in her dining room.

For years, she would use the china on Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. But her children, to her dismay, tired of washing up, and encouraged her to switch to paper plates. As for Ma Siss, by force of lifetime habit, she prefers to drink out of fruit jars.

"All water tastes the same," she said with a shrug.

Things got harder for the Wilkerson family in 1974, when the city began busing schoolchildren in a court-ordered effort to desegregate the schools.

"My kids, Willie and Brian, was in the buses going to South Boston, and I was petrified," Ma Siss recalled. "They spit on 'em, and Brinnie had to go to South Boston court for hitting a white kid, cause he spit on him, and called him a nigger, and Brinnie hit him. They just kept fighting and fighting, and Brinnie just dropped out."
And then, in 1977, Ma Siss fell on Glendale Street, just a few blocks from her house, and hurt her ankle and knee; around the same time, she started developing blood clots. She never worked as a housekeeper again.

For a time, she lived on welfare. Then, when she took in the four children of her drug-addicted next-door neighbor, Melissa Thompson, she began receiving state support for raising them. She sent her children to a variety of churches - Bethel Baptist Church in Roxbury, and even a Catholic church, St. Kevin's, in Uphams Corner.

She saved money carefully, spending nothing for entertainment, travel, or other indulgences. She said she hasn't gone out to a movie since "Philadelphia," which she saw when it was released, in 1993, because its story of discrimination against a man with AIDS resonated with the struggles of one of her foster sons, who was born infected with HIV.

Slowly, she began to buy real estate, using rental income from the upper floors of her house at 16 Drayton, which she and Willie had purchased in 1968 for $15,000.

In 1990, the couple - now living apart on separate floors, bought the house next door, at 22 Drayton, for $85,000, after it had been damaged by a fire. The house had been used for drug dealing, and Ma Siss hoped to clean it up. In 1996, she wound up purchasing another house, at 18 Laurel St. in Roxbury, for $120,000, most of it borrowed, and rented it out.

Her income, and her frugality, mean she is one of the few people in her circle with ready cash. She often seems to be supporting much of the neighborhood, as people stream in and out of her house, asking to borrow small sums. The women, she said, generally pay her back when they get their welfare checks; the men rarely do.

"You know one thing, I'm so glad that I was born poor," she said. "because I know how to live poor. . . . I don't buy nothing that isn't on sale, and when it's on sale I buy enough to last until another sale comes. A lot of things I just won't do. I won't go and pay $50 for a pair of shoes, I won't do it. . . . Before I goes and spend like $50 or $100 on a pair of shoes, I just gonna buy a lot of food to give to peoples. Ma Fann told me today, 'You got to stop doing that,' but I just rather help another person, because I'm just happy with what I got."
Ma Siss and her neighbors live in a world in which the slightest positive development - waking up in the morning, recovering from a cold, having the money to stave off a creditor - is credited to Jesus, and any need - food, shelter, sobriety - is a cause for prayer. Many of them grew up attending black Baptist churches in the South.

"We all from the South - that's all we had," explained Darnell Booker, a tough-talking, joke-cracking neighbor who has been friends with Ma Siss for decades. Jones lives next door to the garage and regularly cooks for the worshipers, but attends worship services only for funerals. Her main demonstration of faith now is the image of Jesus she sees in the wood stain of her bathroom cabinet.

"Every Sunday morning, chicken was frying on the stove, a pot o'grits, the radio was on, and the gospel music was coming out all through the yard. We grew up with such Scriptures . . . and we carried it on from there."

Ma Siss herself is not given to deep introspection. Asked to explain her faith, she responded as if the question was ridiculous.

"I always believed in the Lord," she said.

At another point, even more simply, she said, "I was born with it."

"The main thing about it, if you catch more southern peoples, they very religious, the older ones. And they, like, really cool with God, because we went through so much."

Ma Siss has plenty to complain about, and she often does. She is largely confined to her home and her church by fear and poor health. She is afraid of elevators, of flying, of most forms of travel. She has never driven, and doesn't like to ride in cars.

All four of her biological children struggled, and then some. Sonny, the eldest, is a recovering alcoholic. Brian, the next, was a cocaine dealer who died of a heart attack. Willie Jr. is now serving a 10-year sentence in a federal prison for drug dealing. And Dora, the baby, is a recovering addict who has done several stints in prison, mostly for stealing to support her habit.
But as each child got into trouble, Ma Siss took on their children, and their children's children.

"I don't question what happens," she said. "I figure God causes these things. You look at it, and you think it's bad, but in the long run, it come out good. This is the way all of it happens to me. . . . My son died. I never blamed God because I know it was just the time."

Ma Siss's dining room and kitchen had long been a gathering spot; neighborhood women would drop by to help cook or to borrow some Saran wrap or some money, or just to talk.

Some of the women were regular participants at area churches; Ma Fann had for decades been an active member of New Hope Baptist in the South End. Others had long since given up on established congregations. Ma Siss, for example, had attended a variety of black Baptist churches in Boston, but left over frustration with what seemed to her an emphasis on fund-raising and fancy clothes.

"I went to service one day, and (the minister) really said something what really upset me," Ma Siss said. "He was taking up the offering, the money for the church, and he said he wears...Florsheim shoes, he don't wear no Payless shoes. And I'm sitting in church with a pair of Payless shoes on... And it hurt my feeling."

So Ma Siss stopped going, and turned for support to the fellowship of her neighbors.

"We started as mothers needing to talk to each other, right at this table," said Arlene Baldwin, a niece of Ma Siss who lives across the street. "It turned into a support group."

Several of the women had health issues - one had breast cancer - and others had children flirting with gang life.

By the late 90s, their casual chats had morphed into a weekly prayer gathering.

"We started off talking, the mothers talking," Ma Siss said. "Then thought we would be helped by the Bibles."
The group grew, and began to get too large for the dining room.

"It got so big that . . . she said, let's go to the basement," Ma Fann recalled. "Everybody just knew we were down there on the night, and they just come down and started being with us, praying and talking and, you know, enjoying the meeting."

As the prayer gathering turned into a Bible study, among the participants was Willie Jr., Ma Siss's youngest son. Willie had always been trouble - in high school, he had aspired to become a pimp; instead he became a drug addict and dealer. But now he was nearly 40, and sober, and he had met a local minister named Clarice Thousand, who suggested he start going to Bible study. Before long, he was helping lead the gathering in his mother's basement.

"My mom would cook - it was every Wednesday at 6 p.m. - and we would eat after Bible study," he recalled.

There were guest preachers, or just the neighbors, but always Ma Siss was at the center, modeling a kind of effortless, inveterate charity. She simply handed out whatever food and clothes she had to people in need who came by for company, for money, or for shelter. People called her house Ma Siss's place, and before long the name became a title.

"I never looked color, but just the individual person," she said. "Cause I can dislike a black person just like I can a white person if they not for the right thing. Most time I pray on it, and God show me the good peoples and the bad peoples. A lot of people, I just feed 'em out of a long-handled spoon, that's what I do."

Over time, the prayer group and the clothing and food giveaways outgrew the basement, and Ma Siss began looking for something bigger.

It was time to move.

Willie Jr., like his mother, is a dreamer, and when the garage on Quincy Street became available, he was the first to see an opportunity. His idea was that he would run a barber and beauty shop on the property, and that his mother could run a gift shop, selling the used clothes and knickknacks she had been distributing from her house for years. Willie Jr. had a knack for entrepreneurship in almost any flavor, including the flavor of cocaine.
That garage had been constant trouble for the neighborhood, and many of the neighbors said it was used for a variety of illicit activities, including drug sales as well as the dismantling of stolen cars. In 1988, the chief justice of the Boston House Court, E. George Daher, shut down the garage, saying it was violating zoning codes.

"I told my mom, we need to buy it," Willie Jr. said. Ma Siss mortgaged one of her houses, at 22 Drayton Ave., and bought the garage for $70,000 in 2000. Willie used the lot - 3,342 square feet - to park the bobcats and other vehicles of his paving business, while Ma Siss oversaw an effort to clean up the garage, which was filled with the oil and detritus of years of auto work.

"It was just a mess, and we was cleaning it out . . . and we turned it into a gift shop," she said. "All the nasty stuff was here, and we didn't have no heat in here, but we got to praying."

But then Willie got busted. "I was going to build a barber shop. But then, I got back in with the wrong people."

He had been in and out of trouble with the law for more than two decades, had fathered children with several women, and had been shot seven times.

"I relapsed," he said in an interview from the minimum-security prison camp at the United States Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Penn., where he now leads a Bible study group among inmates. "I fell away. I put drugs as my God. I put women as my God. I put material things as my God."

The barbershop idea was dead, and the prayer group stopped meeting. But Ma Siss persisted in cleaning up the garage and selling used clothes. And on Jan. 16, 2002, she formalized the operation, incorporating a nonprofit, titled Ma Siss's Place, that would not only run the food bank and thrift shop but also aim "to conduct counseling, outreach, ministerial support for teens, unwed mothers, families including but not limited to HIV counseling and awareness, media distribution, education groups, individual counseling referrals to therapy groups, fund-raising . . . and advocacy."

Ambition outran possibility, but at the start there was bread sold from a truck, five loaves for a dollar. Fair Foods, an area nonprofit, designated

The prayer group restarted in the garage.

"We started from first Genesis, and we were going through, page by page, doing lessons like that, and we just kept doing that way," Ma Siss said.

Saturday mornings, they would gather in a circle, pray, and eat breakfasts with a Southern flavor - usually scrambled eggs, bacon, and grits. Ma Siss and Ma Fann began recruiting nearby ministers to help them pray.

"She said, 'What we gonna do, we gonna serve a meal on Saturday,' " Ma Fann recalled, "and I said, 'Oh, that's good,' and so we started serving the meal on Saturday, and so many people started coming, I said to her, I said, 'Next Saturday, we gonna have church.' "
MA SISS'S PLACE: THE MISSION

A call to serve, and to lead
(second of four parts)
(December 24, 2007)

It was June 2002, and Aaron Graham was all of 22. But he had made up his mind: He would go to Boston to help save Boston.

Sitting down at the laptop in his parents' suburban Virginia home, he tapped out a parting appeal to family and friends.

"I am calling on your help in my time of need," he wrote. "Pray that I would learn the secret of being content whatever the circumstance, that I would not focus on maintaining a lifestyle, but rather on fulfilling a calling."

He didn't know where he would land in Boston, or what exactly he would do, but he did know something of what it meant to head off into the unknown. The son of a Southern Baptist missionary, he had, through his father's calling, seen more of the world's troubles than most children, from the crushing poverty of Africa to the terrors of war in the Mideast.

But his would be a very different mission, to the cool capital of New England, a region that had long been tough territory for evangelicals, but where stubborn poverty and old racial divisions beckoned.

He wanted to help, but first he wanted to feel. What was it like to wonder where his next meal would come from, or where he might find a bed? He imagined himself, like one of Jesus' disciples, relying on the good will of others to get by. He coveted a hard test of faith.

With his graduation invitations, he enclosed a note insisting that friends and family not give him money. He refused offers of assistance from other members of his home church, gave his car to a friend, and packed his knapsack - no phone, no credit card, and about $300 cash. He was prepared, if need be, to sleep on the streets.

"My heart was racing like crazy," he said. "I wanted to be put in a situation where, if God doesn't come through, I'm going to fail. God smiles when we have to rely on him."
Four months later, Aaron Graham met Ma Siss.

They were an unlikely pair, a college-educated white evangelical from Richmond and a semiliterate 65-year-old African-American great-grandmother born into poverty in rural Alabama.

Tall and angular, with an outlander's soft accent and manner, he was a virtual unknown, a spiritual tourist in an old town. She was a bedrock figure in her troubled Dorchester neighborhood, a large, laconic presence known by her nickname (her given name is Idene Wilkerson) and by her dream of a new church born in a chop shop.

They were joined together by the civic heartbreak of that summer of 2002: the death of 10-year-old Trina Persad.

The little girl had been killed just three weeks after Aaron arrived in Boston, felled by an errant bullet from a gang member's gun. Aaron, bartering work as a driver for a nonprofit called Fair Foods in exchange for a room in the Dorchester home of the organization's founder, couldn't help but notice the street-corner shrine of purple teddy bears piled up in Persad's memory. And for Ma Siss, who lived just a few blocks from the park where the girl was slain, the tragedy was way too close to home.

So that fall, when a group of volunteers gathered to build a playground in Persad's memory, Aaron and Ma Siss both showed up. Amid the sounds of hammering and sawing, Jack Sullivan, who was a tenant of Ma Siss's and a co-worker of Aaron's, engineered an introduction.

Ma Siss was intrigued by this nice young man who was a committed Christian - a contrast, she thought, with many of the youths in her own family who weren't serious enough about church. And Aaron was just happy to have a connection, especially with this woman with the strange name and the crazy-looking corner garage, surrounded by used appliances and racks of worn clothing, that reminded him of Appalachia.

A few weeks later, Sullivan drove Ma Siss and Ma Fann, her closest friend and the cofounder of the prayer group, up to Northeastern University, where Aaron was to talk about social justice with a Baptist Bible study group.
"There's like 20 college students, and he comes in with this group of older black women, and I think he had just met them," recalled Karin Hernandez, the Baptist chaplain at Northeastern. "She had the garage, and she was ... funneling through donations and giving them out to people in the area, and she began to have this vision of having a church there. And he was poor, and he needed a pair of shoes."

Hernandez had already concluded that Aaron was a bit of an odd duck; she had met him the previous summer, when he had been an intern at a Boston church, but his embrace of a self-inflicted poverty struck her.

"I was so impressed and surprised and thought he was crazy at the same time," Hernandez said.

Aaron admits that when he invited Ma Siss and Ma Fann to Northeastern, he assumed they wouldn't make it.

"I didn't think they would show up," he said. "I knew it would be awkward. Once they showed up, I was like, something's going on here. This is just strange. ... They must need help."

Ma Siss was looking for a preacher, and Aaron, in some ways, seemed a natural. At ease in front of crowds, he is passionate about the Bible, and about social justice. Also, he likes to talk.

Ma Siss saw all that immediately, first at the park, and then at Northeastern. She saw the gap between them, too. He was very young. And very white. And there was no knowing how long he might be around.

But then, she remembers thinking, a lot of folks in her experience didn't stick with things for long. Living on Drayton Avenue, people learn not to lean too hard on anything or anyone.

"He's young, very young, and ... he was raised up as a missionary in Africa, and you know how poor Africa is. He raised up with that, and once you raised up with something in you, it's a true sign," Ma Siss said.

"When he walk in this home, he walk in like he's home," she said. "He never said, 'This is a black home.' And I think that's another thing, too. He knows he's protected by the Holy Spirit, so he'll walk in here, walk
the streets, take their hands, early in the morning, late at night. . . . I can honestly say he never show no kind of color, Aaron. You know, he fit in, and he really, really love his church."

A young woman named Amy Boyer saw it too. A recent seminary graduate from West Virginia, Amy was working as a Southern Baptist campus minister in Worcester and first met Aaron in July, when she heard him speak at City on a Hill about his work with Sudanese refugees. Amy, whose Cherokee heritage had made her more attentive to issues of race, had been on short-term missions to Venezuela and Thailand, and was intrigued by Aaron. By November, when she met him again at a Christian conference in New London, romance was in the air.

Aaron had begun stopping by Ma Siss's Place to deliver supplies from Fair Foods, and he loved to linger and talk with Ma Siss and her friends. Ma Siss gave him a pair of used Timberland work boots from the thrift shop inventory. In November, she invited him to a dinner to celebrate the fact that Fair Foods had designated Ma Siss's Place a dollar bag location, where bags of produce and bread were sold for a dollar; Aaron, proposing a first date with Amy, invited her to come.

Aaron had to cancel at the last minute, but Ma Siss then made another offer: to come lead the women of the garage in a prayer meeting.

"Mom Fann said, 'We can pray down here, [but] we got to get us a preacher,' " Ma Siss recalled.

So on December 14, 2002, Aaron and Amy drove down to the garage, unsure of what to expect. They found a group of five people - Ma Siss; Ma Fann; Ma Siss's niece, Arlene Baldwin; another relative, Gary Wilkerson; and a friend, Denise Alexander - sitting around a table and ready to ask questions. Denise and Gary were both nonbelievers, but they were curious.

"We didn't have a plan," Aaron said. "Denise was like, 'I've heard about the Ten Commandments before - what is that?' and so I was like, OK, well let's go to it, and so we had Bibles, and we opened up to Exodus 20, and we read each of them."
Amy pulled out her guitar and began to play Christmas songs. Ma Siss made soup. Aaron left to run an errand, and Amy spent the morning stringing green beans with Arlene.

Aaron and Amy came back the next Saturday, then each weekend after that. Ma Siss or her daughter, Dora, would make a grits and sausage breakfast, and Aaron and Amy would discuss a Bible passage or answer questions about Christianity. Each session would begin with conversation about the week just past. Missy Thompson, whose addiction caused her to give up her four sons to be raised by Ma Siss, would talk about her challenges with drugs; someone else would mention concerns about money, or about a kid in a gang. Invariably, someone would cry.

"People were just so broken," Aaron said. "You could just say one word - God loves you - and there would be tears."

The women of Quincy Street were now calling Aaron "Bishop" or "Father." The gathering of five grew to 10, and then 20, and then 25, enough that it could no longer meet at a table, but instead in chairs arranged in a circle around the garage. Enough that Aaron had to start preparing a sermon. Enough that it started to feel like church.

"One day he came to our Bible study," Ma Siss would later explain. "I gave him a good meal, and I ain't got rid of him yet."

Aaron preaches in a conversational style, weaving his sermons into the service without a clear beginning or end, open to interruption by himself or others. He walks back and forth, as if pacing in some imaginary cage, and uses his long arms to punch the air to accentuate a point. Often, when saying something particularly prayerful, he closes his eyes.

But he rarely describes what he does as preaching; instead, he uses the word sharing. He doesn't hold himself out as a leader. In the early days, he had no idea how long he might stay, but he knew he would never be truly of this place. He didn't want people to think that, because of him, things would change for the better, or that things would crumble when, one day, he was gone.

"I am very aware of my whiteness and age, even more so than the folks in the neighborhood," he said. "Notice how I don't call myself 'pastor' much. I had a hard time accepting this for longest time. For one, I think it can
exclude other people from their responsibility. I believe we are all ministers. And two, I was never trying to become a pastor, especially in Dorchester. It was the result of loving people and sharing my story with them. The neighborhood has conferred this title on me."

By the spring of 2003, people had begun to think seriously that this earnest little group in this broken down building, with floors sloped so the auto oil would run down to a drain, with a green carpet covering the cement and paper curtains to cover the walls, might invite the presence of God.

"That's when it started becoming a little more formal," Amy said. "They wanted it to be church."

Aaron had moved into a Salvation Army center in Codman Square, called the Jubilee House - the former home of Jonathan and Jordan Knight of New Kids on the Block fame. But Ma Siss wanted him around more, so she offered him a free room at 22 Drayton, a rental property she owned that had been a den of drug dealing.

"There were kittens that were just running around, abandoned kittens, and you couldn't even see out of the windows because the nicotine stain was so thick," Aaron said. "The walls were beaten in, and the doors were beaten down."

Ma Siss just wanted to hold on to the house, but Aaron had bigger ideas. At Jubilee House, he had met a young couple, Brian and Cathi Corcoran, who were interested in "intentional Christian communities," and Brian, an architect, started helping to rehab the building. Later that year, Brian and Cathi moved in, too, determined to attract a houseful of young Christians who could help transform the neighborhood.

The worship service became regularized, Saturday afternoons at 1, so as not to interfere with any neighbors, like Ma Fann, who belonged to other churches. Someone donated a stack of Bibles. And a kind of free-range liturgy began to evolve.

As midday passed, one autumn day, about a dozen people settled into the random collection of beat-up couches and broken chairs that dot the garage. Donated chairs functioned as pews for a week, used for worship
and then given to the needy, only to be replaced by someone else's castoff furniture.

A broken piano had a makeshift crèche of religious statuary arranged atop it. Slightly deflated balloons - the remnants of some recent celebration - hung from metal pipes along the ceiling. White paper fans had been attached to the green walls as a form of decoration. On shelves above the chairs were dozens of cans of tomatoes and boxes of canned stuffing. A cat named Church wandered across the floor, the congregation's attempt to deal with a mice problem.

Dora decided it was time for prayer. She hit a pot with a spoon.

Ma Fann, her head wrapped in a colorful scarf, leapt out of her seat, the first to testify.

"I could just fly in here this morning," she blurted out. She had good news: Her granddaughter's deployment to Iraq had been postponed.

"God is a mighty God," she said, working her voice up to a shout. "I know the Lord is good. Glory. Hallelujah. Yes, Lord. I thank him."

Then Ma Siss jumped in. She doesn't have the strength to stand during worship and was sunk into a deep soft chair. Her voice rose slowly as she talked about the the birth of the church.

"What we have been praying and asking for is coming to show in our lifetime," she said, "and it just such an uplift. Make us so high that we don't know what to think. Just look what God is doing."

She slammed her hand down on a nearby table.

"He ain't let us down yet. He ain't failed us. He done brought us this far - he ain't gonna let us go now."

At times, Ma Siss had herself been uncertain that this little congregation would survive. But on this day, she offered a rebuke to neighborhood doubters.

"I know what they say about this little church - ain't nobody in there. But God showed them something this morning."
A handful of newcomers drifted into the garage, and Ma Siss invested her hope in them.

"Y'all should know the door is always open," she said. "And don't let this be your last time. We'll be looking forward for you. And thanks so much. And thank God. And thank you."

Aaron was just sitting down when Dora poked her head into the room. She generally hovers near the worship service, listening from a doorway or the kitchen or the back of the room, one foot in the service but one foot outside. On this day, she was overseeing the preparation of lunch in the kitchen, but when she heard a lull in the testimony, she stepped into the room. She didn't refer directly to her long history of drug use, but she didn't have to - everyone knew.

"I want to give thanks to God for returning the burning desire of wanting to know more about him," she said. "When I first started down here, I wanted to know God, and I wanted to do God's will, [but] I had abandoned that."

Dora had been getting together weekly with a group of women to study the Bible and was supposed to be leading the group, but she hadn't been reading or preparing, and, as a result, she said, each week she would have to ask someone else to lead. Now, she asked for prayers, so that she would return to study.

Next up was Karen, a newcomer who would not return. She spoke briefly, but clearly.

"I'm in a financial bind," she said. "But I'm not going to give up hope. I know God will be there."

The group broke into applause.

Some days, as he preached, Aaron would allude to his own story.

He was born in Memphis and lived longest in Richmond, but when he talked about his journey to Ma Siss's Place, he started with Liberia, where the Grahams lived as Southern Baptist missionaries from 1986, when Aaron was 6, until 1989. There Aaron witnessed poverty for the first time, and he has been drawn to it ever since.
"We had only been there a short time when we walked 15 minutes into the bush, into a village, and there was a baby starving in the village - she was a twin, and they couldn't feed both, so they elected to let one starve to death," said Aaron's mother, Laurie Graham. "Aaron would go with his dad to take a hard-boiled egg, or some food, to feed the baby . . . and when the baby died, he wanted to go to the funeral. Most little kids don't want to do things like that."

The experience of poverty, as Aaron describes it now, seemed linked directly to a zeal for Christianity, a zeal that Aaron found lacking back home.

"In Africa, man, people walk an hour or two to get to church," he recalled. "Being in Africa for those three years . . . I felt like the church could thrive better outside of the western culture, which is exciting for me."

It was in Liberia that Aaron first told his parents he wanted to be baptized. Maurice Graham had been baptized at age 5; Laurie, a Presbyterian, at age 12; but the couple, worried that Aaron was just eager for the thrill of immersion in a snake-infested creek, decided he wasn't ready.

Aaron was ultimately baptized at age 14, in a suburban Richmond megachurch, but his critique of Western material culture grew only sharper. By his own assessment, he became "very judgmental." He recalls returning from a mission trip at age 16, horrified by the disparity between the wealth of his own congregation and the people he had been trying to help in the Dominican Republic.

"As I got older, I was like, OK, half the world is living on less than $2 a day, and we don't talk about this?" he said. "We were raising $400,000 for a new church organ, so I calculated how many chapels we could build . . . Some people were like, yeah, that's so true, but the music minister did not like me for it."

By the time he got to college, at the University of Richmond, his journal was filled with his critique of American churches and derision for his pampered subculture - "rich-whitey", "suburban spirituality"; and "comfortable Christianity."
The summer of 2001, he came to Boston as an intern for his youth minister, who was starting a church in the South End called City on a Hill. Then in 2002, upon his graduation, he made the decision to move north.

"I fell in love with the authenticity of the people... I just felt, like, man, the white church is dead. I fell in love with Dorchester. I was looking for something different."

He found that something at Quincy Street, and Ma Siss's Place.

"I realized that this was, for sure, one of the most distressed areas of Boston," he said, "and that was exactly where God wanted me to be."

After Liberia, the Grahams had returned to Memphis for nine months, then accepted another mission, to a tiny Persian Gulf nation they had barely heard of, Kuwait. Maurice Graham was assigned as the English language pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Kuwait, which had a membership made up largely of foreign workers from India and the Philippines. The family expected to remain in Kuwait for years.

But at just about 5 a.m. on Aug. 2, 1990, Aaron heard the noise.

He was 10 years old, and sound asleep, and there was a rumble outside that sounded like the garbage man.

Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait City.

That morning, the Graham house was entered four times by Iraqi troops, and on one occasion, a soldier began assaulting his mother. To this day, Aaron believes his mother was spared the worst because he burst into tears, and the soldier backed off.

"That was a spiritual mark on my life, because I thought, either I could be killed, or my parents could be killed," Aaron said. "It was the first time in my life that I was confronted with the fact that I might lose my life, and where would I spend eternity? And then I saw a soldier a couple hours later, dead on the side of the road, and it really forced me to say, 'OK, what do I believe in?'"
He continued: "I didn't say a prayer or whatever, but I really said, 'God, if
I die, I want to be with you.' And I remember saying, like, 'When I get
out of this, I want to really make a public decision about this, and make
this known.'"

Aaron, his 13-year-old brother, and his parents fled to the US embassy,
and over the next six weeks were held hostage there, cut off for much of
the time from electricity, water, sewage, and surrounded by Iraqi troops.

Although it is not clear how well Aaron understood this, at the time, no
one was sure whether the Americans holed up at the embassy would
make it. Saddam had been using Westerners as "human shields" around
key military installations.

Ultimately, under intense international pressure, the women and children
were allowed to leave; to this day, Aaron believes his father and the other
adult men were later freed because the prayers of Baptist ministers back
home caused Saddam to have a troubled dream.

"It was a time of terror," Maurice Graham said of his son's experience,
"and it broke his innocence. He had a very severe time trying to figure
out what was real, and what was not. . . . He saw the world could be quite
harsh, even if you're a good kid."

'Last week, we talked about the whole idea of being powerless, or of
being a slave to something," Aaron was saying, as the faces of those
gathered at the garage turned his way.

It was the fall of 2004. There were new windows, but castoff couches
still served as pews, and a stack of donated Bibles shared shelving with
"The I (Heart) NY Diet"; Dickens's "Great Expectations"; and
"Disclosure," a torrid novel by Michael Crichton. There were occasional
steps toward a more polished service - one week Aaron preached through
a microphone hooked up to a boombox - but then the audio equipment
was stolen, and it was back to shouting.

Aaron had noticed very early on that his congregation approached the
worship service in the confessional style of a 12-step meeting, and so on
this October afternoon, he decided to start working his way through a 12-
week series of sermons riffing off the personal recovery program of
Alcoholics Anonymous.
After a brief joking joust with Dora - no one in the congregation knows these 12 steps better than her - he zeroed in on his theme.

Handing the congregants a list, he said, "Go down to where it says step Number 1. This is what we went over last week. . . . We admitted that we were powerless over our deficiencies, and that our life had become unmanageable. The key word here is that we admitted. This substance basically controls us. We become its slave. It becomes our master."

Aaron then asked the worshipers to give him some examples of things to which people become addicted. Quickly, the voices rose in a spontaneous litany of guilt: alcohol, anger, love, weight-lifting, sleep, nicotine, pain, TV, exercise, worshiping how you look, gambling, nosedrops, cocaine, work, sugar, people, sex, caffeine, shoplifting, chocolate, risk, pornography.

And then, weaving between the Gospel of Mark, the odyssey of that season's Red Sox ("All things are possible."), and the second step of AA, Aaron launched into the heart of the sermon.

"Many addictions plague our culture of self," he said. "It's a result of sin."

But, he said: "One of the awesome things about being a Christian is that all things are possible. Nobody is counted out."

As he spoke, a string of sirens whizzed by. Nobody looked up.

"What's going to last?" he asked. "Our faith."

And then, as he often did, he asked if anyone wanted to offer thoughts on his remarks.

Eloise Chaney stepped up. A longtime drug addict, she told the congregation about her struggles to stay clean.

"I've come a long way, but I have a long way to go," she said.

Aaron approached, and placed his hand on her head.

"Bless her," he said, his eyes closed tight. "Heal her."
The service was over. Lunch was waiting.

The worshipers stood for the closing hymn, the one with the lyrics they have made their anthem: "We have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back."

They formed a circle, joined hands, and began to sing.
MA SISS'S PLACE: A FLOOD OF TROUBLES

A crisis year, a Christmas comeback
(third of four parts)
(December 25, 2007)

Labor Day weekend had arrived, warm and steamy, and inside the old garage on Quincy Street, the heat and aroma of chicken frying in large vats of oil hung in the breezeless air.

Aaron Graham, the young and earnest pastor, paced back and forth at the front of the room, sporting a close-cropped haircut and beige shorts and waving a bottle of fruit juice as he launched into a sermon on persevering.

"That's the word of the day," he beamed.

The twenty-odd worshipers used a makeshift bulletin -a typed outline on a piece of paper - as a fan to stir the air. Some listened raptly. One woman slept on a couch. When he finished speaking, Aaron peered in the direction of the kitchen installed in one corner of the garage and shouted: "Hey, Dora! Any announcements?"

A sullen face under a straw hat, cheeks moistened from the hot stove, poked around the partition. It was Dora Vaughan, daughter of Ma Siss, the neighborhood matriarch who had begun this church in a chop shop two years earlier, in 2002. Dora spoke directly and emphatically: The women of Ma Siss's Place had started a class on the basics of Christianity, and more people should come. There was a free lunch after each worship service, so people should stay.

And change was coming. Jesus promised that. Dora had seen the evidence herself; after a lifetime of addictions, she had been drug-free for two years. And now she was throwing herself into the thrift shop and food pantry, determined to stay clean.

"God has done mighty things here," Dora said. "Hold onto your seats. Don't leave before the miracles."

Everyone at Ma Siss's Place looks to Dora, looks out for Dora, or mourns for Dora, depending on the day.
As her mother launched the prayer group and then the church, Dora was one of its most devoted members and committed evangelists. She oversaw the food pantry and the thrift shop. During worship, she would burst into song, or prayer, or tears, and take the congregation with her.

When Aaron and Amy got married, in November 2003, Dora led a vanload of worshipers on the long road trip to Huntington, W.V., to witness the event, and then while the couple was away for months on an extended honeymoon, Dora was a mainstay of the embryonic congregation, its de facto sexton and usher and deacon, cooking the food and hauling the furniture and welcoming visitors with a hard face and an easy laugh. Her spirit was infectious. When she laughed, others smiled; when she sang, others tapped their feet.

"We're trying to bring people closer to God, people that want to pray against violence, who want to take the neighborhood and grow it up stronger, and hopefully, like how Ma Siss's Place started, for another one to start in Mattapan, another one to start in the South End, for it to just keep . . . growing and going, you know," she said.

But if Dora's presence was vital, her absence could be devastating - and would be in the crisis year ahead, when this tiny, resolute, Christian outpost on Quincy Street almost vanished from Boston's map.

It was always the same thing that took her away.

She was 23 when she starting using cocaine, and already a mother, a wife, and a high school dropout.

She said she was introduced to the drug by her first husband and was swiftly hooked. A childhood of churchgoing and her own enduring faith weren't enough to protect her. Something inside was too strong to resist, too weak to fight back.

"I was on alcohol, crack cocaine, heroin," she said. "A couple of times I let someone inject me in my neck. I could have been paralyzed, or blind. But you don't think of your life at that point."

Even when she was sober, the darkness hovered nearby.
Some days she seemed to subsist largely on ice, which she ate out of paper cups, and cigarettes, which she smoked on the stoop of whatever building she was at. Most Saturdays, as the others prayed, she watched from the doorway, overseeing the thrift shop and the kitchen while monitoring the prayer, sometimes popping in to offer testimony, often a tribute to her mother, but rarely fully entering the room.

"I just stand back and listen and watch, you know, and then I'll know if this is a place I want to stay, or do I want to cut out," she said. "It's always a big precaution thing, from being hurt so much."

The thrift shop and food pantry became Dora's refuge and her domain. She and her mother would go to a warehouse to buy discounted food that they could resell below supermarket prices. She would pick up clothing and furniture from houses being sold, and donors - some of whom heard about Ma Siss's Place on the Internet - would drop off material by the door. On Saturdays Dora's husband, Raymond Vaughan, would drive to Haymarket to get fruits and vegetables that they would resell at cost. She would offer buyers a large garbage bag of clothing for $5, but if people had no money, they could just take it.

"For me it's a lifesaver, because this is what keeps me strong," Dora said. "Here I've learnt to look for other people, and help them first."

Day after day she and Raymond, whom she met in rehab, solicited donations, organized the shelves and the yard, and negotiated sales prices with the steady stream of people who stopped in to buy canned goods, used clothing, furniture, appliances.

"There's this lady, and she had five children in Africa that she wanted to bring here, and she wouldn't spend any money unless she had to," Dora said. "It was wintertime, and she had on this little bitty thin coat that was too small for her, but her pride and her will of saving the money to bring her children here was just so remarkable, I literally took the coat off of my back and gave it to her. I meet a lot of people, and I talk to them, and the stories that they tell me... how can I be selfish when they're willing to give up so much, you know?"

Dora said she couldn't be bothered to check if the people who come are really in need.
"Who's to say if a person is hungry or not?" she asked. "If they're lying, I'm not supposed to judge it. Let God handle it."

The thrift shop, she saw, drew outsiders in.

"Our first and main priority is to bring people closer to Jesus," Dora said, "and the way how we do that is by letting them know with our good-natured spirit of giving out food."

The congregation had come a long way in its first two years. The members had given the place an ambitious name, the Quincy Street Missional Church, and had signed "Articles of Organization," declaring nine lofty purposes, starting with, "to promote the application of the Word of God to the human situation."

Ralph Kee, a 68-year-old Baptist minister who had been planting new churches in Boston since 1970, had stepped in to shepherd the nascent congregation while Aaron and Amy were away on their honeymoon. He helped write bylaws, establish a formal membership process, and start an "Introduction to Christianity" course - all efforts that fell apart over time. And he helped form a sense of the church as one that is evangelical, aspiring to take its message to the neighborhood, and, ultimately, the world.

"I think God's will is for Quincy Street to succeed," Ralph said.

But there were many challenges, and chief among them was reaching the neighborhood's young people. Some of the teenagers and young children had participated back when the congregation first started meeting in the garage, but now they mostly came by just for the lunch after Saturday worship, if at all.

"It's life or death for some of these young men, because the best hope for a young black man in America is to get into church," Ralph said.

That fall, on Dec. 5, 2004, Derrick Edwards became the first of the congregation's young men to get shot. He was 18, a budding rap poet who would sit in the front row and recite rhythmic, rhyming prayers. The church's elders hoped that one day he would be a leader in a neighborhood and the church.
But just after midnight, he was standing outside a birthday party on Barry Street, just a few blocks from Ma Siss's Place, when a fight broke out. Shots were fired. Derrick was hit. By the time the ambulance got him to Boston Medical Center, he was dead.

"You could see that internal war that was going on in Derrick's life," Aaron said a few days later. "He would try to be involved with what's going on at our church, but the reality of it is that he was having to count the cost double hard, because there wasn't any other youth who were really excited about what's going on there."

At Derrick's funeral, Aaron spelled out a few options for the congregation.

"We can numb ourselves from the problem, by drinking or using alcohol or trying to escape," he said. "We can become angry, and try to get even by retaliating. . . . Or we could come together and unite and work on this."

Aaron and Amy were determined to work on it. They brought groups of evangelical college students to the garage to visit and volunteer. They set up a nonprofit, called Kaleo, and raised money from friends back in Virginia and West Virginia. Over Christmas they flew to Aaron's home church, Bon Air Baptist, in Richmond, and were ordained as ministers. When they got back, they helped found a new group, the Boston Faith and Justice Network, with dreams of a posse of young, socialjustice-minded evangelicals advocating for the poor. They considered moving to Drayton Avenue but decided to live nearby, in South Boston, where they would have some time to themselves. They were still coming to Dorchester daily, but everyone knew that wouldn't last forever.

Ma Siss, meanwhile, was growing frustrated. Worshipers came but didn't offer much assistance or money. She stopped making meals each Saturday, concerned it was costing too much and appreciated too little. The church set up a group of elders, but only two, Ma Siss and Fannie Hurst - known to all as Ma Fann - were African-American and residents of the neighborhood. The four other elders - Aaron, Amy, Ralph, and Tom Groeneman, a recovering alcoholic and would-be preacher - were all deeply committed to the congregation, but also outsiders in multiple ways.
Suddenly, as it often does for Ma Siss, help arrived, seemingly out of nowhere. In May of 2005, Tony Thompson, a garrulous 49-year-old Florida native who described himself as "a backsliding preacher" moved into the neighborhood, earning a living doing odd jobs, and occasionally borrowing money from Ma. One day Dora saw him with a loaf of bread and hollered, "You went and paid $2 for bread; we have five for a dollar."

Tony was poor - "Things was so bad the roaches and the rats left," he said - and had a criminal record, which he talked about openly, but also said was undeserved. He had a passion for Christianity, and wanted to minister on the street. Tony seemed to have a gift for preaching. He was able to recite parts of the Bible from memory, and he committed himself enthusiastically to helping strengthen Ma Siss's Place.

He started coming to worship with his wife, Gloria, a deeply devout woman who would occasionally speak in tongues, her shoulder jerking, as she prayed. The congregation had been looking for leaders - especially black men - and came to call Tony an associate pastor. He led daily prayers in the garage, often wearing a baseball cap that said "Jesus," and he would offer the invocation at Saturday worship.

But Tony also arrived with ideas that put him on a collision course with Dora. He and Gloria began spending days at the thrift shop. They thought it would be more successful if it branched out from donated clothing, food, and furniture to sell more housewares and antiques at higher prices, and if it took a more tough-minded approach, marking prices on its goods and sticking to them.

"There's a new sheriff in town," he would say, "and his name is Anthony Thompson."

Between Tony and Dora it could sound like an argument over whether to sell five loaves of bread for a dollar, or for a dollar apiece, and it often was. But it was also a question of what God would have them do - keep the shop solvent or do right by each needy soul passing through.

"If they come in," Dora said of their customers, "and you say, 'Well, could you give me $2 donation for these shoes,' and if they say that they don't have it . . . you don't say, 'Well, you don't have [the money] you don't have the shoes.' What kind of stuff is that?"
Ominously, as they squabbled, money began to disappear from the shop. Financial controls were loose to begin with, and it was weeks before anyone realized that there was a problem. Some suspected Dora was feeding a resurgent drug habit.

In the spring of 2005, as Dora grew increasingly demoralized, something gave way. She started using again, first a prescription painkiller she purchased from a neighbor, then methadone.

"I had all of the warning signs," she said. "I just chose to pick up. I could've not have, but I got really frustrated, and I was like, just forget it."

As she fell, her faith in Ma Siss's Place fell with her. She felt there was no support for her. She had been one of Aaron's biggest fans, but as she tumbled, doubts about his sincerity festered.

"I felt as though he wasn't available," she said. "I felt as though he was judgmental. I felt as though he wasn't really as he was claiming to be. And then the devil just put all kinds of things in front of me: He's not really here for us; he's here because he can go to college and he can buy a car and his rent is paid, and . . . all he has to do is tell this organization he's here in the ghetto helping these little poor black addicts and alcoholics and stuff."

Rather than confront Aaron, she simply stopped talking to him. He, in turn, was frustrated by his inability to reach her.

Dora also became critical of many of her fellow church members, who, she believed, trafficked in gossip and reveled in her woes. She also thought some had encouraged her mother's anger toward her husband, Raymond, who had an argument with Ma Siss over management of the thrift shop.

And so Dora and Raymond stopped coming to Ma Siss's Place, stopped coming to church. They were gone.

Then came the flood.

It was October, 2005, and the congregation had spent months physically transforming the garage - installing a ceiling to conceal the ductwork,
plastering the cinderblock walls, and laying vinyl tiles and plywood over the grease-stained cement floor. Adalberto Arroyo, the neighborhood handyman, had separated the kitchen and food pantry from the worship area with a wall and a glass-paned door, so that now there was a space that could actually be called a sanctuary. A group of volunteers from Pennsylvania, who had heard about Aaron, had fashioned a cross out of boards from Home Depot and mounted it to the wall.

But then a city contractor, installing a new water main at Quincy Street and Columbia Road, broke the gate that controls the flow of water through the pipes, and a massive sheet of water came gushing down Quincy Street toward the church.

It was hours before the main was fixed and the foot-deep water drained.

Everything in the churchyard - furniture, washing machines, clothing - was destroyed, as were a computer, files, food, and the floor inside. A thin coating of mud covered the yard and the kitchen area.

"Let me tell you, it was a baby Katrina," Tony said. "When I came out the door, it was up to my knees."

The next morning Tony gathered with a small group he called his "prayer crew" to ask for God's help. By midday Ma Fann and Tony's sister-in-law, Ann Beaudoin, were sitting in the cold, dark, building, waiting. Ma Siss had called her insurance agent, but nothing was happening fast.

Tom, who was starting to take classes at Gordon-Conwell's Center for Urban Ministerial Education, saw a connection between the church's various woes, tying the flood to the disappearance of Dora and the violence in the streets.

"We're in a spiritual struggle in this world, between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light," he said. "There is a war going on for your soul, for my soul, for the souls of the people in Dorchester."

The first Saturday after the flood - the eighth straight day of rain that October - the displaced congregation gathered in the living room at 22 Drayton, a three-decker owned by Ma Siss that was home to Brian and Cathi Corcoran, several African refugees, and a rotating group of young and often penniless Christian activists. The Corcorans had tied balloons
to a post to help people find the house. Rain was pouring down outside, and when Ma Siss arrived, at about 1:15 p.m., gasping for breath and saying, "Praise God," just 10 people were scattered around the room.

"Satan tried to attack us with a mini-tsunami," Tony said, his voice rising to a shout. "We are looking toward God to bring good out of this situation."

Aaron was dispirited by the flood, and feeling a little sick, but also moved by the return to worship in a house.

"Our faith is not dependent on a temple built by human hands," he said. "If we have to have church in the street, we'll have church in the street."

By the time Aaron had finished, a small crowd had gathered, including visiting missionaries from Thailand and California, acquaintances of Aaron and Ralph, who were curious to see what they were up to in Dorchester.

Ma Siss was stoic, even as the church she founded sat mildewing around the corner. She welcomed the visitors as she shrugged off the multiplying crises.

"No matter what happens, we always make our way," Ma Siss said. "Can't nothing stop us now."

Two days after Thanksgiving, Dora returned.

The congregation had moved back to the garage, after a massive cleanup effort and another round of renovations. That Saturday, a midsize crowd had gathered for worship, including Aaron's parents, up from Virginia for the holiday.

Dora, gone for months, sat in the back of the garage, as if nothing special had happened.

A few minutes into the service, she stood, and began her confession.

"I want to stand before the church and apologize to everyone and ask for everyone's forgiveness, because, as mostly everybody knows, I relapsed,
and I was trying to hide it while still being down here," she said, starting to cry.

"How can I tell people about the church, and that I love the church, if I don't set a good example? I let my family down, especially my mother, but yet still she's forgiven me again and accepted me again. . . . So I'm asking everyone for their forgiveness, and I'm asking everyone, if they see that I'm trying to take on too much, please let me know. I won't be offended at all. I want everybody to know that I miss you all and I love you all so much."

Ann approached Dora, and placed a hand on her shoulder. Cathi, cradling her son Levi in her arms, went over to lay her hands on, too. And Aaron joined in, placing his hands on Dora's shoulders. Tears were streaming down his face.

"Father, God, we thank you for our sister, Dora," he began. "We thank you for bringing her back home today."

And then he launched, singsong, into an impromptu litany of praise.

"You're a God of second chances," he said. "You're a God of third and fourth and fifth chances, God. And Lord, we just pray, God, that you would be with her, Lord, so that you would just protect her, God, protect her from the evil one, Lord, help us, Lord, to encourage her, God, and to play our part, God."

Christmas was coming. The garage was repaired. Dora was back. Hope was in the air. But the troubles kept coming, too. The congregation had to drop its weekly bread distribution because of a lack of money and volunteers. Aaron and Amy had both been admitted to graduate school so they had less time in the neighborhood.

And then Tony disappeared. His cellphone had been cut off, and Aaron couldn't reach him. He had been talking about starting his own congregation, and wanted to rent space in the garage. He came to a worship service but spent the whole time in the kitchen. Ma Fann said he'd been drinking -- which Tony denies -- and declared, "You can't be with God one day and the devil the next." Ma Siss, concerned that too many people had keys to the garage, suggested they change the locks.
She also decided to close the thrift shop mornings. There just weren't enough volunteers to staff it, or enough business to justify it. At a Thursday afternoon church meeting in early December, she displayed the telephone and gas and electric bills for the garage and said she was having trouble paying them.

"If it keep like this here, I'm going to have to put one of my houses up for sale," she said. "We got to do something. We got to go begging or something."

A few days later, the congregation gathered to mark the first anniversary of Derrick's death. His mother and her co-workers joined the worshipers for a tearful tribute, but despite shouted exhortations from Ma Fann, most of the teenagers in attendance sat looking down at their hands or the folding tables, refusing to speak. On a piece of posterboard along the wall, Derrick's mother had posted the lyrics of his favorite song, hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur's "In the Event of My Demise."

The congregation decried the violence that ended Derrick's life, but the very next night one of Ma Siss's foster sons, Stephen Thompson, was shot. Stephen had been walking home from the corner drug store when a teenage boy with whom he had had a long-running feud opened fire. Happily, his ex-friend was a bad shot, and Stephen was hit only in the foot.

Then, a few days later, Dora got arrested. She and her daughter Christine, nicknamed Girlie, had driven down to Quincy to pick up a donation for the thrift shop. A police officer spotted the family's white pickup truck, noticed that its registration had expired, and pulled them over. It turned out the vehicle was not only unregistered, but also uninsured. Dora's license was suspended, and she had four outstanding arrest warrants, from four different courthouses, for failures to pay fines for previous false check offenses.

Ma Siss and Aaron were both frustrated, but also thought maybe Dora would finally resolve her lingering legal issues.

"I've warned Dora many times," Aaron said. "Hopefully, this will be good for her, and will force her to deal with what she has in her heart."
Ma Siss, who paid off $1,200 of her daughter's fines, had a similar attitude.

"After 10 years, Dora could have all this stuff wrapped up," she said. "I tell her all the time not to drive. I don't know why she was driving."

Only a handful of people showed up at worship the day of Christmas Eve 2005 - it was an unseasonable 50 degrees outside, and many folks were traveling or shopping in anticipation of the holiday. Ma Fann exhorted Tom, who was leading worship, to keep the service short.

But Dora was back, and when Tom asked for someone to lead the congregation in song, she walked to the front, asked for a microphone, and led a spontaneous rendition of "Silent Night." Ma Siss offered a shouted prayer, saying: "It's just a joy to see another year pass along.... Just pray and hope that we can find some more Christian families to come in."

Then Daequan Baker, Ma Sis's 9-year-old great-grandson, shyly asked, "Can I say another one?"

"I pray for all these gangsters in the street, and the alcoholics that been smoking and drinking, Lord," Daequan said. "And I pray for everybody that has done the best, and I praise everybody that can keep on doing it and share this nice Christmas together. No more drinking and no more fighting. Amen."

The meal after church was simple that day - hamburgers baked in gravy, hot dogs with beans, a casserole of corn and string beans.

The next day, Christmas, Ma Siss awoke in pain, aching from arthritis, her legs swollen.

She was feeling down. She'd stopped cooking big holiday meals because her children and grandchildren didn't seem to appreciate it.

"I'm about even ready to sell my fine china, cause it's no service to me," she said.

Her dining room table was piled high with laundry and an unwrapped gingerbread house; one of her foster sons, Adam, was wandering around
with a Nerf gun and mock bulletproof vest he had been given for Christmas. A disheveled man knocked on the door, came in, and offered to sell Ma Siss bags of electrical supplies. When she declined, he asked for $10 for Christmas.

Dora skipped her next court hearing, at Boston Municipal Court; she said she didn't have enough money to pay the required fine. But at a New Year's Eve worship service the following Saturday, she led the congregation in singing her favorite hymn, "Victory is Mine," and offered her own prayer for the new year.

"What we've done - good, bad, indifferent - we can't change it," she said. "I'm praying for the new year coming up, for my faith in God to just overpower me, because, I don't know why, but I just do things at the spur of the moment, and I don't think it out carefully, and it gets me in a lot of trouble."
MA SISS'S PLACE: LOOKING AHEAD

And who, now, will lead them?
(last in a series)
(December 26, 2007)

Ma Siss's surgery was on Valentine's Day.

The new year, 2007, had hardly begun when she first felt the lump in her breast, and now it was time to deal with it. It was bitterly cold and snowing at 5 a.m. when her niece, Arlene, helped her into the car for the drive through icy streets from Upham's Corner to Boston Medical Center.

They unloaded at the wrong building on the hospital's sprawling campus, and by the time they found the right address, Ma Siss, about to turn 70, was crying from the confusion.

She had always been the rock, in her family, in her neighborhood, in the little church she'd helped found in a garage on Dorchester's Quincy Street.

But now she was tired. Lying on a gurney, an IV in her arm, listening as a parade of medical personnel disclosed the array of possible side effects from the mastectomy she was about to undergo, she didn't feel up to much. Someone else would have to take the lead.

The room was packed with family and friends.

Manny Baldwin, Arlene's husband, tried to offer encouragement. "You'll be dancing by Saturday," he said with a smile.

Dora Vaughan, Ma Siss's 46-year-old daughter, nervously ate the pecans she had roasted and buttered. She said she hoped the hospitalization would allow Ma a well-deserved rest.

"She has too much work to do," Dora said. "This is God's way of giving her a break."

But Ma Siss is no fool - at her age, and her weight, and with a host of other health issues, recovery would not be easy. Even as doctors walked her through a consent form she couldn't read, she started thinking about the next Saturday at church, and who would provide the food. She began
to give instructions - there was bread in the freezer, and garlic powder in
the cabinet; and because the weather was so cold, the food should be
something warm. Maybe pasta with a meat sauce.

What had once seemed impossible - the birth of a church in a former
chop shop - was as real as such a dream could be. But more than three
years after Ma Siss and her neighbors named their growing prayer group
the Quincy Street Missional Church, their hold on this shabby area near
Upham's Corner remained fragile.

Would the church outlast its founding generation? Would its struggling
food pantry and thrift shop - known still as Ma Siss's Place - survive the
year?

And now, the questions seemed even more pressing.

Aaron Graham, the founding pastor, was passionate about Quincy Street,
but also, at age 26, ambitious to have an impact on a larger stage. He and
his wife, Amy, were both completing graduate degrees and were working
hard to expand the network of young social-justice minded Christians
they'd helped create.

Even before her surgery, Ma Siss, whose given name is Idene Wilkerson,
was tired and often unwell, frustrated that so few members of her family
joined her at church. Dora was often gone, lost in a haze of drugs and
anger. Worshipers dropped in and out, but the size of the weekly
Saturday afternoon service rarely seemed to budge much beyond 30. The
congregation's evangelical goal, to transform lives by faith, had few
success stories, and the founders' desire to find some younger local
leaders who could help steer the church into the future had so far failed.

As she feared, Ma Siss's planned one-night hospital stay turned to three,
because of pain and blood loss. On the Saturday after her surgery,
mounds of ice coated Boston's sidewalks and streets; she was still in the
hospital, and at the start of worship only 10 people were seated in the
garage's new red-cushioned seats.

Tom Groeneman, a church elder who had risen from homelessness and
was now taking seminary classes, was sitting alone in the back row with
two jugs of seltzer water because he had been feeling sick. He started to
cry.
"It's just that I'm scared I'm going to lose Ma," he said. "I thought she'd be here by now."

The congregation tried to reassure him.

"Ma's fine. She just needs prayers," said Ma Fann, another of the elders and Ma Siss's longtime partner in prayer.

But Tom was unconvinced. His own mother, he said, had died of breast cancer.

"All these years, since I lost my mom, I've been trying to have that kind of relationship with someone," he said. "Ma's the first person who I felt like was really that for me."

Again, voices were raised in consolation. And then Aaron spoke.

"The reality is, things would not be the same without her," he said. "And that time will come, whether it's now or in 20 years, so we do have to prepare. We can't act like Ma's always going to be around."

Aaron had long been on the lookout for what he called "indigenous" leaders, young African-American residents of the neighborhood who would help direct the congregation. Ma Siss had one such person in mind - her son, Willie Jr., but he was still incarcerated in a federal prison in Pennsylvania, where he was leading a Bible study group while serving a 10-year-sentence for possession of crack cocaine. He wouldn't be back on Quincy Street for some time.

The elders made the phrase "to develop leaders within the Quincy Street community" a part of their mission statement, and stenciled it into the garage wall. But no one had emerged. It was hard to focus on the future when the present was so perilous.

Violence had haunted the church, almost from the beginning. There was Derrick Edwards, killed in December 2004, and Stephen Thompson, shot in December 2005. A few months later, Ma Fann's 25-year-old nephew, Michael, went for a late-night cigarette run to a gas station on Blue Hill Avenue; he was shot twice in the back, and doctors said he'd never walk again.
Aaron and Amy redoubled their efforts to reach out to teenagers, winning city money to employ neighborhood youths during the summer, starting a weekly youth group at the church, even taking in Keyland Fields, a teenager known by his street-name Face, for a few difficult months of foster care, before they decided they couldn't handle him. Over time, the violence would continue: Face's brother, called Cheetah, was shot in the face just outside the Bird Street youth center in 2007. One night, Ma Siss's house was raided by the police, searching for a gunman they believed was hiding inside; the whole household was transferred to a bus to wait in the middle of the night. Another night, a young man with a gun chased Face into the house.

Not all of the teenagers were so troubled. Dora's youngest daughter, Keisha, enrolled at Pine Manor College, where she wanted to study dance. One of Stephen's brothers, Terrence, enrolled at a community college in Maryland through a connection of Aaron and Amy. The youth group was at times well attended, and a new resident of Drayton Street, an unemployed lawyer named Bobby Constantino, was working with the kids. Some were even preparing for a trip they could hardly imagine, to South Africa, with a teen group from Park Street Church downtown.

And the congregation had begun to invest its hopes in its youngest members.

On a sunny Saturday morning in May of 2006, members of the congregation gathered at Quincy Street for a baptism. They had arranged to use the baptismal pool at the International Community Church, in Allston, where church elder Ralph Kee's wife, Judy, is an associate pastor.

Inside the church, Aaron, Ma Fann - whose full name is Fannie Hurst - and the kids gathered in a hallway behind the sanctuary. Aaron offered a series of warnings, starting with "the water is going to be cold," and "don't breathe in," before he and Reenie, Ma Siss's granddaughter, handed out towels to the kids, already shivering in their black shorts and white T-shirts.

Adam Thompson, a foster child of Ma Siss and the oldest of the five kids gathered that day, was first. As he waded into the chilly water, Aaron introduced him, and then offered him an arm for support. He quickly
lowered the boy into the water, and then lifted him back out, as the congregation, with Ma Siss in red in the front row, cheered. Daequan Baker was next, and then his brother, Dedric Dew, his sister, Destanie Baker, and then Nadaje Hendrix. A word of encouragement, a quick dunk, and a cheer; then Ma Fann in the hallway, waiting with a warm towel.

Aaron, standing alone in the pool, began to pray over the sound of children sloshing in the hallway behind him.

"This is just the beginning of many more lives that will be changed," he declared.

But the life that was changing most in the congregation was that of Tom, who lives in Bay Village but had connected with the Quincy Street prayer group in its earliest days. Born in Oklahoma and raised a Catholic, Tom, who is 51, had had more than his share of struggles - by his own account, since the age of 13 he has battled alcoholism and drug abuse and emotional problems. Then in 1978, while living in a homeless shelter in Long Beach, California, he started reading the Bible.

"I was going to a rescue mission, where every night you go and you listen to a sermon for about a half an hour or so and then you get to eat the meal, and when I heard the message, I chose to follow Christ," he said.

He was 21 and over the next decade, would move around the country, sometimes studying and sometimes struggling, before landing in Boston in 1988. He had periods of sobriety, and periods of addiction, but by 2004 he had become a daily participant in Alcoholics Anonymous, and decided to find a church.

"I didn't have friends and the friends I did have, all they wanted to do was use me to get money for drugs or alcohol," he said. "It got to a point where I was just fed up with the whole lifestyle, you know, just wanting to get drunk or stoned. It stopped working. It wasn't fun anymore."

It was a chance encounter with Aaron that led Tom to Quincy Street, and the power of Ma Siss that kept him there.

"She helped me heal emotionally, and it wasn't a therapist-patient relationship or a doctor-patient relationship or a formal pastor-congregant
relationship . . . I just felt God's love touching me through her . . . I don't know how else to explain it."

Tom started leading a weekly Bible study at the church, sometimes just for Ma Siss and Ma Fann, and he occasionally filled in as preacher when Aaron was away. His days were scheduled around AA meetings, but he also started taking classes at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's Center for Urban Ministerial Education. And then Aaron decided to ordain him, a first for the congregation.

One Sunday early this year, Aaron gathered a group of local ministers in the garage to examine Tom's readiness for ministry. Dressed in a suit Aaron and Amy had bought him for the occasion, Tom spoke about his conversion to Christianity, and his passion for ministry.

Then, on St. Patrick's Day, about 30 of Tom's friends and church members gathered at the garage. Dressed again in his blue suit, he stood and talked of his previous drug use, homelessness, and years of confusion.

"In my brokenness, I knew there had to be something better for me," he said. "But it took me a long time to figure out what I really was called to do."

And then, Aaron asked Tom to sit on a chair in the middle of the room, and he hit the play button on a boom box, starting a hymn called "Oh God of Mine."

Amy came up first, placing her hands on Tom's head, and whispering words of encouragement into his right ear. And then a line began to form. One by one, the worshipers walked up to Tom to lay their hands on his head, an echo of the ancient ritual for ordination. Ma Fann gave him a full embrace, and, as she got up to walk away, murmured: "Yes, God. Yes, God." Ma Siss, too weak to stand, sat in a chair by his side, placed her right hand on his left chest, and caressed his shoulder as the smell of frying oil drifted into the room and Tom began to cry.

Tom's ordination capped a difficult period for the church. Dora had drifted further and further away - she was now shooting up heroin, she had attempted to OD on sleeping pills, she was barely speaking to anyone from the congregation, and she had started stealing to support her drug
habit. Ma Siss was recovering from her surgery, which had jolted the congregation. And then there was the death of Melissa "Missy" Thompson, the mother of Stephen, who had been shot, and Terrence, who went to college, and Adam and Keith.

Missy was among the original members of the breakfast prayer group that began meeting in the garage after Ma Siss bought it in 2000. She was wiry and giddy and beaming, punctuating every interaction with a hug and a kiss. She was 40 years old, episodically homeless, infected with AIDS, and had, 10 years earlier, left her four sons to Ma Siss's care. She prayed desperately about her longing to be clean.

But prayer had not been enough. Hospitalized for pneumonia, Missy had managed somehow to procure crack cocaine on the steps of Boston Medical Center, and by the time she was discovered, the only thing left was for her four boys to ponder whether and when to pull the plug.

She died at 5:20 the morning of March 9; six days later, she was laid out for what Aaron called her "homegoing."

Mourners crowded into the tiny JB Johnson funeral home on Warren Avenue, overflowing into a hallway from which they could not see her body in a steel-gray casket covered with flowers and a giant pink bow, or smoking on the damp porch where they could not hear the litany of memories of a better time. A steady rain fell outside.

At Mount Hope Cemetery, they lined up in the mud. Mostly there was silence, broken at the end by a shriek turned into a long, loud, wail. "Missy," her sister Malvina cried. "Missy!"

"We know for certain Missy is with the Lord," Aaron said, holding a microphone in his right hand and punching the air with his left. He told the mourners - among them, just about everyone who called that garage their spiritual home - that a few days before Missy's death, he had run into her, obviously troubled, on the street. Would he sing, she'd asked him, her favorite hymn, "Somebody Prayed for Me"?

And so, standing on the sidewalk, the winter air and city traffic rushing by, he began to sing.
Aaron was constantly torn over how best to help Quincy Street. With a few phone calls, he could produce help from outside the neighborhood, and he often he did. But he knew that success would not be measured by such things, but by what he left behind - the leaders and the structure - that had a chance to endure.

Aaron's mind was also very much on the world beyond Ma Siss's Place. Nearing completion of a degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, he was tracking the national conversation over the state of evangelicalism, and found himself strongly drawn to those who feel that the evangelical movement nationally has become overly aligned with one party - the Republicans - and obsessed with sexual mores. A more directly Christian focus, he believed, should be on the poor. He had caught the eye of Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners magazine, whose national profile skyrocketed with the publication of his 2005 book, "God's Politics."

Over the Memorial Day holiday, Aaron and Amy took a brief vacation with his family on the Gulf shores of Alabama, and while there, he made what he described as "the most difficult decision of my life," to leave Quincy Street and take a job as a national field organizer with Wallis's Sojourners organization in Washington, D.C.

"It's hard to not live for expectations of other people. Some people are like, 'You've been all about downward mobility, and being in the trenches, and now it feels like you're selling out'," he said a few days later. "It would be easier to stay in Boston, because that's what I know, and DC is a place of a lot of talk and little substance. But you come to a point where you have to follow the spirit's leading the best you understand it."

They flew back on a Friday night; the next day, a steamy June Saturday, Aaron told the church, reading tearfully from a letter he had drafted hours before.

Over the next several weeks, the people of Ma Siss's Place struggled with the news.

"It wouldn't be right for us to try to hold you here," Ma Fann, dressed head to toe in pink, said one Saturday. "God sent y'all here - we didn't ask
- and that's why we went so far. . . . I'm glad I was in your life when you started."

Dorothy "Dot" Dawes, who came to worship whenever she could get a ride there, offered a simple exhortation, "don't go!" while Emanuela "Nadia" Varela, a 24-year-old Cape Verdean immigrant, who discovered the church after her brother helped paint the building, offered her own song for the occasion, "Can't Give Up Now."

Then Ma Siss, silent to this point, offered a closing thought, on the importance of moving on.

"If I still been down there picking cotton, I wouldn't be in this church," she said. "God is going to use you. God is going to test you. Yes, Lord."

Aaron foresaw a testing time as well - and warned them all to guard this fragile congregation.

"When one set of leaders leaves, there is a vacuum, and unfortunately, when there's a vacuum, somebody is always going to step in," he said as a siren sounded outside and a cat wandered through the room. "Paul warned them that savage wolves try to step in, and I want to issues a similar warning. As Ma Siss says, not everybody who says 'Amen' means 'Amen'. I challenge you not to allow someone to come in and destroy it."

Aaron and Amy allowed themselves five weeks for the move. It was a time for reflection on what had worked and what had not.

A true community had formed. "We didn't just share the Gospel, but our lives," he said. "And we haven't talked a lot about racial reconciliation, but it is quite a testimony to God's grace."

But there had been so many disappointments. "I put too much pressure on myself to start programs, and many things we tried to start failed," he said, ticking off a litany of abandoned efforts - a Cape Verdean Bible study, an addiction recovery ministry, a financial savings class.

Still, he said: "The real transformation is going to happen inside people. And I've never felt so connected. I feel tired, but I've never felt so much personal revival."
Once or twice a week, Aaron and Amy met with Ma Siss, Ma Fann, Tom, and Ralph - the six church elders - to figure out what would come next. It was an urgent conversation, for reasons inside and out. On June 27, as they began, Aaron noted that a 7-year-old had just shot an 8-year-old not too far away.

Together, they outlined their priorities for the church. Worship. Community. Food for the poor. But they knew they needed a leader, and Ralph, a veteran church planter who had been with them almost from the start, was the obvious choice.

"Somebody needs to be in charge, and I'm willing," he said. "Maybe I can make a contribution, and if it becomes apparent it isn't working, I can move on. No hard feelings."

The details were surprisingly easy. The elders, without debate, agreed that Ralph would assume the role of lead pastor, and Tom would assist him. They named Nadia as their music minister - for weeks the Berklee College of Music student had been playing that role anyway - and Bobby Constantino, who was living on Drayton, to continue his ministry to the youth.

"The main thing I'm grateful for is it's not a stranger coming in," Ma Siss, fully recovered from her surgery, said of Ralph, as she hoisted a fruit jar filled with tea. "He's been with us through thick and thin, and that really means a lot."

On a mid-July Saturday, the congregation gathered for Aaron and Amy's farewell service. Ma Siss dressed up for the occasion, in a floral print dress; Aaron stuck to a more low-key approach, wearing beige cargo pants, Teva sandals, and a blue and yellow Nautica polo shirt. Just 15 people were present as Nadia got up to sing, but Aaron noted that singing had begun to function as a kind of call to worship for Quincy Street - as the sounds hit the street, people would drift in.

As Nadia, joined by two little girls, danced and clapped and stomped her shoes, the small gathering rose to its feet. Ralph rose with them, and led the turn to prayer.
"Lord, we're looking forward to the day when this church will be too small," he said. "We know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that's what you want to happen."

"Yes, Lord," Arlene shouted.

And then, for the last time, Aaron got up to preach.

"My vision for this church is Ma's vision for this church, which is that you come as you are," he said, as a chorus of "Amen" began to rise. "And that you would feel welcome to walk in here right off the streets. You wouldn't have to worry about what you're wearing, or if you've cleaned up your life first before you walk through those doors."

As he worked his way through his list of exhortations, he began to cry. As someone shouted, "let it out baby," he mentioned Dora, who hadn't been seen in the church for months.

"As Dora always taught me to say, it's never good-bye, it's see you later."

The congregation began to cheer.

Five months would pass before Dora, on Dec. 8, walked back in. Ralph was presiding, Ma Siss was cooking, and Dora, just a few hours earlier, had been released from prison.

She and her husband had been busted for shoplifting at a Walgreens, and she had spent 50 days at the Suffolk County House of Correction at South Bay. She was miserable behind bars, but she was also sober, and missing church, missing people, missing cooking.

"I wasn't raised to steal, lie, and cheat, you know what I'm saying, but I let the devil, which is the drugs, take control of my true aspects and wear me down," she said shortly before her release. "The miracle is that I'm still alive, and my faith is stronger than ever. . . . You don't have to get rich or success in order for it to be a miracle. It's the little things, you know."

She had promised God she would come straight from prison to church, and so she did, wearing a sweat shirt and cradling her granddaughter in her arms. She sat quietly in the third row, next to Ma Siss, and listened.
Bobby Constantino, the youth pastor, was conducting a mock trial, with a jury of local teens, to see whether he could prove Jesus was the son of God or was a crazy man. As he talked through the reasons to believe in Jesus, Dora leaned toward her mother and whispered, "He's a good lawyer."

And when Ralph, presiding over the service, briefly paused to welcome her back, Dora said, simply, "It's good to be here."

About 35 worshipers applauded as the jury of teens decided in favor of Jesus's divinity. And then Nadia, in a hooded winter jacket, handed her baby to her husband and walked through the church, singing the "Victory Chant." As she belted out each lyric and worked her way to the center of the room, in front of the mural of a black-skinned Jesus leading a group of young black teenagers, the worshipers began to clap and sway and repeat each phrase after her.

Afterward, they all piled plates high with the ham and potatoes Ma Siss had been cooking since morning. Dora gave Bobby a big hug and offered to help with the youth. "You have to stay clean," he told her. "You have to." Ralph came over, and she asked him to meet with her to explain how to find forgiveness.

But mostly, smiling and serious, she talked of her plans.

"God has kept me alive for a reason," she said. "This is my chance."

A week later, Dora was frying a turkey in her apartment at 22 Drayton, while Arlene Baldwin and Darnell Booker were working in Ma Siss's kitchen at #16, preparing the meal to serve after that day's worship. Barbecued ribs and steak tips were in the oven, and macaroni and cheese was on the stove. Ma Siss sliced cheese and barked out orders:"Bring me that pan! Add more pepper!"

Christmas was coming, and then another new year. Talk had turned, cautiously, to the future. Arlene expressed hope that some of the neighborhood children would take over one day, while Ma Siss expressed newfound optimism that Willie Jr. would be sprung early from federal prison.
And then, the cooking done, they gathered in the church, where Ralph asked them all to join him in prayer.

"It was the most unlikely place in the world, to start a church in a garage where they had been chopping up stolen cars and selling the parts - that's the last place most people would think we're going to start a church," he said. "But Jesus says, you're going to see heaven poured out on you, and we're hoping that's going to happen here."

In the back of the church, Ma Siss, seated quietly, smiled.
Church rift cuts deeper for brothers
Episcopal priests hold opposing views on gays
(August 12, 2007)

The Murdoch brothers don't often talk about the controversy dividing the Episcopal Church, but they really don't have to: In the Murdoch family, schism starts at home.

The Rev. Bill Murdoch, 58, an Episcopal priest in West Newbury, is so frustrated by the Episcopal Church's selection of an openly gay bishop that he is bolting and taking his parish with him. At the end of this month, he is to be consecrated a bishop by the Anglican Church of Kenya, and he will return to the North Shore to start a new Kenya-affiliated parish there.

But the Rev. Brian Murdoch, 53, an Episcopal priest in West Roxbury, is not planning to join his brother for the ceremony in Nairobi and is not celebrating his elevation to bishop.

That's because Brian, as Bill has long known, is gay.

The crisis in the Anglican Communion, set off by the Episcopal Church's decision to approve a gay bishop who is not celibate to lead the New Hampshire diocese, has divided parishes and dioceses and is threatening to split the global church.

But the Murdochs, who maintain amicable relations with one another despite their differences, provide a rare example of how personal the theological dispute can be and how complex the responses.

Two brother-priests, unable to resolve a deep disagreement in the way they interpret the Bible, find themselves ministering just a few miles apart and yet divided by an ocean. Despite their shared commitment to follow Jesus and uphold the rituals and traditions of Anglican Christianity, they are now members of rival camps in an unusual intradenominational battle and are trying to make sure it doesn't become an intrafamily fight too.

"I am less bugged now than I have been at times," Brian Murdoch said in an interview at his parish, Emmanuel Episcopal, a tiny 19th-century
church in a West Roxbury neighborhood. "He's my brother. I have a lot of memories that have been good growing up, and those stand. And I know we'll be helping one another get heavenly aid the rest of our days. And it's not going to change how we cut the pie at the table."

Bill Murdoch, who since 1993 has been the rector of All Saints Episcopal in West Newbury, but is planning soon to launch All Saints Anglican at a former Catholic parish in Amesbury, offered a similar assessment.

"My brother and I love each other and always will," he said by e-mail. "My family and I love Brian and have always been proud of his service to others for the sake of the Gospel and the many, many people Brian has loved in the name of Christ. The pain of our disagreement over this issue will not change my love for him."

But beyond their love for each other, they are deeply divided. Bill Murdoch calls homosexual activity a sin, while Brian Murdoch calls it a gift. Bill Murdoch says same-sex relations are "alternative to that which God and the church has created and blessed," while Brian Murdoch has blessed two same-sex couples.

Bill Murdoch is the top official in New England of the Anglican Communion Network, an alliance of current and former Episcopalians opposed to the church's increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships; Brian Murdoch allows his parish to be host to Integrity, an organization pushing for greater gay rights in the Episcopal Church.

Although many Episcopal priests in the Diocese of Massachusetts know the Murdoch brothers and although Brian is out as a gay man in his parish, this is the first time either has talked about the other publicly. Both brothers were reluctant to talk, and Bill declined to do so in any detail, but Brian consented to an interview, saying he had decided he was willing to go public after reading a story in the (newspaper) last month in which Bill referred to homosexuality as a sin and decried the influence of the "gay agenda" on the Episcopal Church.

In a brief telephone conversation, Bill Murdoch said that he harbors no ill will toward gays and that the dispute is about interpretation of Scripture.
"Intolerance and abusive behavior toward gay people is abhorrent to Christ, the Gospel, and his church," he said. "Hostility toward gay people is a sin. It's prohibited by any Christian pastor, period."

But for Brian Murdoch, the issue is far more personal.

"I wonder what he would do if my partner and I went to Kenya for the consecration and were jailed," he said, referring to the fact that homosexuality is illegal in Kenya.

The Murdoch brothers grew up in a large extended Catholic family on Connors Road in Peabody, a street that was named for their grandfather, Patrick Connors. Connors had a farm and nine children, seven of whom survived to adulthood; five of the children built houses on Connors Road, and two others lived around the corner. The seven Murdoch children (an eighth died at birth) grew up surrounded by their cousins.

The Murdoch brothers were both altar boys, Brian at St. Adelaide in West Peabody, and Bill at Our Lady of the Assumption in Lynnfield, and on Sundays they would go to church with a group of several-dozen family members. But two of their uncles had married Episcopalians, and in high school and college they began to explore Protestantism. They were both football players and got involved with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Over time, they both migrated away from Catholicism.

Bill pursued theological studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton before being ordained, first at a Congregational church and then by the Episcopal Church. Brian went to General Theological Seminary in New York City and was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1987.

Their personal lives diverged in the early '70s; Bill got married while he was still an undergraduate at the University of New Hampshire, while Brian, as an undergraduate at Boston College, began grappling with the realization that he might be gay. Fifteen years later, in 1989, Brian came out in a letter to his parents and siblings.

"I have come to know that I am one of the 'special people,' as Whoopi Goldberg refers to gay men and women," he wrote. "I am hope-filled, not ashamed or angry, that this would be the hand I must play."
Over the years, they have remained friendly; for a time, Brian lived with Bill and his wife.

But from the moment of the consecration of V. Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire, their differences have become harder to ignore.

On the day Robinson donned his miter, at a ceremony so big it had to be held in the University of New Hampshire hockey arena, the Rev. Brian J. Murdoch was among the several thousand attending and celebrating. He called the event "glorious" and "exhilarating."

The Rev. William L. Murdoch was also in Durham, N.H., that day, but speaking at an alternative worship service attended by several hundred disaffected conservatives who believed the fact that Robinson has been in a long-term relationship with a man disqualified him from being a bishop.

At the time, Bill Murdoch said that with Robinson's election, "It felt as though something very precious had been sullied."

Now, Bill Murdoch is one of several American priests who have agreed to take the unprecedented step of leaving the American church and joining African Anglican provinces. He will have responsibility assisting the several dozen American congregations that have affiliated with the Kenyan province; other American congregations are affiliating with Anglican provinces in Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uganda.

"We do feel the need to separate from the Episcopal Church in this struggle, because of the crisis that has been brought about with the election of a noncelibate gay bishop," Bill Murdoch said in an interview last month. "I'm not against gay people, and neither is anybody in my church. But it's the church's blessing of a noncelibate, practicing gay that has caused a problem. It blesses what Scripture condemns as sin."

Brian Murdoch says Scripture needs to be interpreted and is understood in different ways at different periods of history.

"I think that the church certainly has been wrong on things," he said. "As time goes along, we listen to what the Scriptures have said and keep working with them. We have to use the tradition as well as our own hearts, souls, and minds."