

Bringing the Kingdom to the city

Fesenmyer, Leslie

DOI:

[10.1111/ciso.12196](https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12196)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Fesenmyer, L 2019, 'Bringing the Kingdom to the city: mission as placemaking practice among Kenyan Pentecostals in London', *City and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 34-54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12196>

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Publisher Rights Statement:

Fesenmyer, L. (2019), Bringing the Kingdom to the City: Mission as Placemaking Practice amongst Kenyan Pentecostals in London. *City & Society*, 31: 34-54. doi:10.1111/ciso.12196
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Forthcoming. For City and Society, Special Issue 'Religion and the City'

**Bringing the Kingdom to the city:
Mission as place-making practice
among Kenyan Pentecostals in London**

Leslie Fesenmyer

University of Birmingham

ABSTRACT

Kenyan Pentecostals in London (re-)frame their migration as a “mission” to bring the United Kingdom back into the Kingdom of God. Focusing on the case of one church, I examine how the pastor and church members try to realize this mission, exploring the kind of place they imagine God’s Kingdom to be and, through practice, (attempt to) create in London. The literature on place-making among Pentecostals has several thematic strands, including examining how Pentecostals use church-planting as a strategy of territorialisation by which they make their presence seen and felt in specific localities, as well as exploring, through a phenomenological approach how Pentecostals “do” space in urban settings. I aim to contribute to these discussions in two ways: by elucidating a particular form of sociality, or what I refer to as “socialising space”, as an important aspect of Pentecostal place-making and, in turn, by highlighting the different place-making strategies needed when an independent church founded in the diaspora plants a church.

One Sunday following a church service, I chatted with Josephine, a woman in her late 40s whose powerful voice had reverberated through the church hall during the praise and worship session that morning.¹ I complimented her on her voice, saying that I understood she had “inspired” another woman to join the church a few years earlier.

Josephine then shared how something similar had happened again recently. On her way to church, she said, she smiled at a woman whose eye she caught on the bus; when she saw her the next week, Josephine smiled at her again. She then alighted at her stop and headed toward the church, only to discover as she arrived that the woman was right behind her. Josephine asked, “Are you coming here?” The woman nodded.

This story, I have come to understand, captures how Kenyan Pentecostals² try to realize their “mission” of saving souls and bringing the United Kingdom back into the Kingdom of God. They view urban problems such as, poverty and unemployment, familial “breakdown”, youth gangs, and crime, as spiritual ones, taking them as evidence of people not “knowing” God and of the city and nation having left God’s Kingdom. They believe their warm, welcoming disposition, neat and stylish appearance, and material wellbeing will “inspire” others, making them curious to know the God who helps them to thrive and ultimately bringing them back into the Kingdom.³ Kenyan Pentecostals’ missionizing efforts enable them to try to close the gap between their vision of the Kingdom of God, on one hand, and their lived experiences of London, on the other. Their sense that “a different world is possible” gives them hope, while also reinforcing their sense that “this world is wrong” (Robbins 2006; Hovland 2016: 348).

I am interested here in exploring the kind of place Kenyan Pentecostals imagine the Kingdom of God to be and how they (attempt to) create it on earth. This interest coincides with the “spatial turn” in studies of religion, which follows two broad trajectories often referred to in terms of the politics and the poetics of space (Knott 2010; Vasquez and Knott 2014; Kong 2001, 2010; Bielo 2013; Chidester and Linenthal 1995). Taking as a departure point the notion that sacred space is contested space, the politics of space is interested in the interplay between power, identity, and difference.

In drawing on Marxist and post-structuralist theory, it examines how specific strategies of appropriation, exclusion, inversion, and hybridization produce and reproduce space (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 19). In relation to Pentecostalism in the Africa diaspora, research on the politics of space examines Pentecostal approaches to public self-representation and -positioning and questions of visibility and invisibility (Adogame 2010; Knowles 2012; Garbin 2013). This strand of work is closely linked to interest in materiality, particularly strategies of territorialization, such as, the planting of churches, through which African Pentecostals make their presence visible in countries in the “north” (Hunt and Lightly 2001; Burgess 2009). Being attuned to the politics of space is important in such studies because many born-again Christian migrants from Africa live in “global cities” like London (Eade 2000; Sassen 2001), a central node in the global economy, as well as other major European cities like Amsterdam and Berlin (Nieswand 2010; Krause 2011; Knibbe 2009; van der Meulen 2009), in which migrants play crucial, though unacknowledged, roles in their social reproduction. Existing social hierarchies in these cities locate those from a geopolitically weak continent like Africa at the bottom, just as enduring racial hierarchies render them invisible. In what follows, I show how Kenyan Pentecostals’ place-making helps them “to pull themselves out of [such] situations, [*and*] to resituate themselves,” while also allowing them to create new situations in which they are morally superior and their perspectives and experiences recognized (Hovland 2016: 346; italics added).⁴

In contrast, the poetics of space focuses on lived experiences of place. Phenomenologically inspired, such research emphasizes the primacy of place as experienced through the body. In charismatic and Pentecostal thought too, the body is central, as it is understood as the most immediate site of “spiritual warfare” fought between God and demonic forces (Robbins 2004). While speaking in tongues reflects

the in-filling of the Holy Spirit in believers' bodies, demons can also possess their bodies, thus necessitating deliverance rituals. Accordingly, attention has been paid to sensory experiences (Meyer 2010). In her work among Ghanaian Pentecostals in London, Krause (2008) explores the ways in which they "do space," that is, how they bring the Holy Spirit into themselves and their warehouse churches through various embodied practices, such as, walking, kneeling, jumping, waving, and singing. Those interested in the poetics of space also explore Pentecostal aesthetics, noting, for example, that the ideal interior space for evangelical Christian churches is one that maximizes the reception of the Word of God (Coleman 2000: 156-57); hence, the appeal of large warehouses. Taken together, attention to both the politics and poetics of space allow us to grasp in a non-reductionist way the interplay of the structural and phenomenological in religious place-making.

In this article, I offer a spatial reading of the missionizing efforts of Kenyan Pentecostals in London as a place-making practice. My approach to place-making is reliant on Massey's understanding of localities as always in the making and contested. Rather than bounded entities, they are constructed "out of the intersections and interactions of concrete social relations and social processes in a situation of co-presence" (Massey 1991b: 277). In approaching mission as a place-making practice, I draw on Burgess' (2011) definition of "mission" which includes not only church planting and evangelism, but also civic engagement, thus offering a broader understanding of the term (cf. Duffuor and Harris 2013). Like the Nigerian Pentecostals in London among he works, Kenyan Pentecostals see "any activity that will transform society" as part of their mission (Burgess 2011: 437).

I make two related arguments with regard to religious place-making, particularly Pentecostal place-making. First, the politics and poetics of space shape both Kenyan

Pentecostals' image of the Kingdom of God and how they try to create it in London. Given the politics of space with which they must contend in London, "socializing space" – that is, embodying a particular sociality – is central to the ability of independent Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches to (eventually) acquire buildings of their own and engage in more concrete modes of place-making. As a phenomenological approach to place-making, "socializing space" is accomplished through mundane social interactions, such as, greetings, casual conversations, and cooperative work, as well as through particular ways of being that are thought to "inspire" those who do not "know" God. Attention to Pentecostal sociality complements that which has been given to embodied and ritual practices as means of infusing space with God's presence (Krause 2008; Coleman 2000). Second, taking the case of one church I refer to as Victory Ministry, I argue that having a building is pivotal to our understanding of Kenyan Pentecostals' missionizing as a place-making practice. It allows them to reach out to those in the area where the church is based by providing a space within which they can engage with "unsaved others." In doing so, I suggest that, just as we have come to understand being Pentecostal as an ongoing process of becoming (Meyer 1998; Marshall 2009; Coleman 2003), it is also productive to see the place-making of Kenyan Pentecostals in processual terms. In this way, Pentecostal self- and place-making can be read as mutually implicating processes.

This article is based on ethnographic research in Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches and amongst their congregants in East London. For a year and a half beginning in autumn 2014, I regularly attended weekly services; participated in church meetings, activities, and celebrations; and attended periodic religious conferences. I also spent time with pastors, church members, and their families inside and outside of church, accompanying them to the shop and on school runs, watching religious TV programs

in their homes, and socializing with them at gatherings. For the purposes of this article, I focus primarily on Victory Ministry in Newham, while drawing on my work with other two churches to inform the analysis, as well as my long-term engagement with migrant Kenyans in London that began in 2009.

I begin by sketching a picture of Newham to highlight its dual nature as a place of spiritual danger and potential and then outline Kenyan Pentecostals' migration to the UK and their founding of numerous churches. With this as background, I elucidate the contrasting images Kenyan Pentecostals hold of the city and the Kingdom of God, before turning to consider what constitutes "civic engagement" among these Pentecostals. I next look at how they "socialize space" by examining Victory Ministry's acquisition and maintenance of its own building and, in turn, how the building enables them to "reach out"; in doing so, I illustrate the ongoing interplay of the politics and poetics of space in one church's place-making practices.

Newham: Diversity and deprivation

East London has historically been, and remains, a space of flux and transition. Early settlers included the Irish in the 1700s, followed by Germans, Poles, Russians, and Lithuanians. In the mid-19th century the Royal Docks became the entry point for people and goods moving from all over the world. Jewish families settled in Whitechapel and Stepney in the 1880s and 1890s. By 1935 Canning Town had the largest Black community in the country, populated largely by soldiers from the West Indies (Widdowson and Block 1985).

The churning of Newham's population continues today: close to one in five (19.5%) residents either left or entered the borough in 2007-2008, which is significantly higher than the London average of 13.6% (LBN 2010: 3). Newham is one of two

London boroughs where most residents identify as Black or ethnic minority (60.4%), compared to those who identify as white (39.4%).⁵ According to government statistics, the borough is the second most socially deprived in the country as reflected in educational attainment, income, and life expectancy. One in three (33.6%) adults (16-74) has no qualifications, as opposed to 23.7% of adults in London generally.⁶ The average gross annual income for Newham residents is 34% lower than the London average (LBN 2010: 3). And, men and women in Newham have a life expectancy two years shorter than the national average (LBN 2011: 7).

Religious diversity accompanies Newham's ethnic and racial diversity. Walking the 3-mile length of Barking Road in 2000, Smith (2003) identified 44 places where religious activity occurred. Christianity came to the borough in the 12th century, and its many denominations maintain a strong presence. Although four out of every 10 residents identifies as Christian, 32% of residents identify as Muslim – over 2.5 times that of London generally, and more than 6 times that of England (Aston Mansfield 2013: 8). Judaism has declined over time, leaving behind six closed synagogues and three cemeteries (Marchant 2007: 5). Together, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists account for 12% of Newham residents (Aston Mansfield 2013: 8). While Pentecostals have practiced their faith in Newham since the 1920s, the growth of Pentecostalism largely came with new immigrants from the 1980s onward. With 93 churches, according to a church census conducted in 2005 (as cited in Rogers 2013: 118), Newham has more Pentecostal churches than any other London borough. This rich heterogeneity alludes to a sense of Newham being a “place of religious potential as well as of spiritual danger” (Garnett and Harris 2013: 116).

Kenyan migrants and Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches in London

Kenyans comprise the fifth largest Black African group in the capital following Nigerians, Ghanaians, Somalis, and Sierra Leoneans (Werbner 2010: 158-59). Though links between Kenya and the United Kingdom are long-standing, most Kenyan women and men I met in London moved there during the 1990s and early 2000s, making them more recent arrivals than their West African counterparts, many of whom migrated during the 1970s and 1980s (Koser 2003; Kyambi 2005). On the cusp of social adulthood during an era of neoliberal structural adjustment programs, they left Kenya with the hope of realizing their aspirations to “better themselves” in Britain. Upon arriving in the capital of Kenya’s former colonial ruler and a city imagined to be a place of opportunity, they followed the path of generations of immigrants before them and (initially) settled in East London.

Though raised in the mainline denominations of their parents, including Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, and Catholicism, most migrant Kenyans I met in London identify as born-again Christians and attend Pentecostal churches. They have established numerous Pentecostal churches in the city and elsewhere in the United Kingdom. When I first began doing fieldwork in 2009, there were 31 “Kenyan churches in the United Kingdom.”⁷ Unlike many Nigerian- and Ghanaian-initiated churches, most of these churches are independent and do not have branches in Kenya or elsewhere (Adogame 2000: 400). In 2014, 10 out of the 17 such churches were located in East London boroughs.

Established in the early 2000s and led by Pastor Stephen who migrated in the 1990s, Victory Ministry has over 200 members. Families with young children predominate in the congregation, and most members were born in or have familial links to Kenya, though some come from various national backgrounds, including Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Pakistan, and Jamaica; smaller Kenyan-initiated

churches have similar demographics. While Kikuyu-speaking Kenyans predominate, some congregations have non-Kikuyu Kenyans, including Kamba, Luhya, and Luo. It would however be a mistake to presume that pastors and members see the churches as “Kenyan,” much less “Kikuyu.” Rather, they are more likely to refer to their churches as “multicultural” and their membership as “international.”⁸

Although Pastor Stephen and his family moved to a neighboring borough in the late-2000s, the church did not move with them. When asked why, Pastor Stephen’s wife said that it was important to stay in the same area because people “don’t like change.” Even more than that, Pastor Stephen remarked to me, while sharing his vision for the church, he believes “there is much to be done here [in Newham]....”

The city and the Kingdom

According to Orsi, “...the dirty city is also the holy city: [...] it is precisely into these dark, filthy depths that God comes” (1999: 11). With residents from 179 different national backgrounds who speak over 300 languages (GLA 2005; Baker and Eversley 2000), London is a fruitful place to carry out the work of God. In fact it is an ideal setting within which Kenyan Pentecostals can heed the call to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28: 16-20). Yet, life in the city and indeed the country is not without challenges, both structural and everyday. Pentecostalism thought and practice are important to the ways in which these born-again Christians navigate their lives, make sense of the difficulties they encounter, and (try to) counter their marginalization in this historically Christian country.

Since migrating, many Kenyan Pentecostals have been able to obtain permanent residency through various settlement schemes. However, the rapidity of policy changes that narrowed migrants’ options to remain in the UK – between 1993 and 2005, the

government introduced six new immigration acts – has meant that legal status continues to be a complicated, worrying issue for countless others (Vertovec 2007). Moreover, London as a “command center” of the global economy has relegated migrants, including many of my interlocutors, to low-wage and low status sectors, such as, cleaning, caring, retail, and security, regardless of their prior training and education (Sassen 1996). These sectors provide crucial, albeit devalued, support to their better-off contemporaries working in finance and trade in particular. The concentration of migrants in these fields reflects not only the stratification of and discrimination in the labor market, but also the largely invisible underbelly of globalization (Wills et al. 2010). Meanwhile, economic and political forces, including the neo-liberal economic reforms that Margaret Thatcher’s government initiated in the 1980s, continue to reshape East London’s social geography. As Vasquez and Knott (2014) highlight, the twin forces of urban renewal and social dislocation have made it difficult for migrants to find affordable places to live, much less engage in collective worship.

Adding to this picture of social marginalization and financial, if not also legal, precarity are the moral obligations they have toward kin who remain in Kenya. Familial expectations of reciprocity in the form of remittances and mobility assistance, among other transnational practices of relatedness, can weigh heavily on those living in London. As I have argued elsewhere (Fesenmyer 2016), many face a moral dilemma of trying to be a good kinsperson, while also building their lives in London. In these ways, their lived experiences of London contrast with their pre-migration imaginings of it as a place of opportunity, imaginings that in themselves contrasted with the lack of opportunities available in Kenya in the 1990s.

At the same time, they must contend with everyday challenges, including racialized social dynamics. Interactions that I have observed or have been mentioned

to me reflect the kinds of racialized encounters that make migrant Kenyans wary of their surroundings. One day, while accompanying a mother on her daily afternoon school run, we were careful not to park in front of a particular house in Dagenham because, she explained, whenever she did, the owner looked out the window angrily at her. True to what she said, a white British man looked coldly at us as he spoke with another man in his front garden, while we searched for a parking spot. Notably, in the mid-2000s the far-right British National Party made significant gains in local elections in Barking and Dagenham, electoral victories seen in part as a reactionary response to the fast-changing demographics of the borough to which Kenyan Pentecostals and other migrants contributed through their moves into the area (Keith 2008). These changing demographics coincided with a massive urban regeneration project, the Thames Gateway, which encompasses the borough, promising new jobs, more housing and improved transportation.⁹ Like the influx of new (migrant) residents, however, it has contributed to tensions over the character of the borough, as well as struggles over (welfare) resources and space (Keith 2009). Racialized encounters such as the one above trouble Kenyan Pentecostals, who insist that “we are all the same,” an allusion to their shared humanity, because it is a reminder of the persistence of social and racial hierarchies.

In contrast they hold an idealized image of the Kingdom of God, which I suggest is at least in part dialectically constituted vis-à-vis their experiences of living in London. They characterize God’s Kingdom primarily in terms of how they imagine those in the Kingdom relate to one another; in other words, the Kingdom has a particular kind of sociality. Central to all sociality is the ability to communicate.¹⁰ In becoming Pentecostal, believers (eventually) develop the ability to speak in tongues. *Glossolalia* reflects ‘the victory over linguistic differences, and the new universal language of God’s

worldly kingdom' (Droogers 2001: 55). For Pentecostals, the Holy Spirit is then “a cosmopolitan broker par excellence” (Krause 2011: 420), enabling them to transcend their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Services are conducted in English because, in the words of one pastor, “it is the language of where we are.” The emphasis on communication can be further contextualized in that many migrant Kenyans commented to me that, when they first moved to London, they could not understand people. Though they were educated in English, where it has been the language of instruction in Kenya since 1961, they found it hard to comprehend the variety of British accents and to make themselves understood.

While talking with a married man in his late 30s after a service, we picked up on the notion of “sameness” among people. He said, “When you enter the Kingdom, you are one of God’s children.... It doesn’t matter if you are black or white, rich or poor, we are all the same in God’s eyes.” In a conversation with Pastor Stephen about the differences between Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, he suggested something similar in that he thinks they are “small” differences that ultimately do not matter: “When we see each other in heaven, we will say ‘hey, good to see you. Glad we’re all here’.” Consequently, and despite experiences to the contrary, Pastor Stephen insists that people not waste their time talking about racism. Speaking of his own children and those in the church, he commented, “people try to prepare their kids to handle racism, but it doesn’t work... We need to focus on the positive and do something. Racism has been here a long time.” Their belief that they are God’s children is central to how Pentecostalism helps them to re-narrativize their lives in such a way that they come to experience themselves as having the power to change their own circumstances, as well as the wider context(s) in which they live.

As part of this re-narrativizing, they have (re-)framed their migration as a mission

to bring London back into God's kingdom, rather than an act born of economic necessity. Living in London can be seen as testing Kenyan Pentecostals' faith in God, tests which they are encouraged to see as bases for future testimonies. Their everyday struggles to understand and be understood, to co-exist with people of different backgrounds, provide a myriad of challenges. Their re-framing thus marks an important inversion of their social positioning (cf. Chidester and Linenthal 1996). And, as I discuss below, the church offers a space within which they can counter London's social dynamics by attempting to enact the sociality of God's Kingdom.

Becoming better Christians as a form of civic engagement

In keeping with the idea that spiritual and social welfare are not separate, Kenyan Pentecostals believe that, if one leads one's life according to the Word of God, God will ensure one is taken care of. And, as God's children, they have a responsibility to re-enchant the world such that becoming a better Christian can be considered a form of civic engagement. The focus on cultivating Christian ways of relating and being should not however be interpreted as individualistic acts. To do so denies the ways in which the very notion of what it means to be a good Christian is relationally and thus socially defined (cf. Elisha 2011: 18-19).

Meyer (1998) describes how, in becoming born again, converts are encouraged to "break with the past" and adopt an ascetic code of moral conduct. According to Marshall, converts should not "lie, cheat, steal, quarrel, gossip, give or take bribes, drink, smoke, fornicate, beat their spouses, lose their tempers, or deny assistance to other members in need" (1991: 24). Much of what this new code forbids entails relational situations: one steals from another, cheats on one with another, gossips about, gets angry at, and quarrels with others. For Kenyan Pentecostals, adhering to these

prohibitions can be read in part as a commentary on their perceptions of British society. For example, they perceive many British people to be frequent pub-goers who drink too much, which contributes to marital and familial breakdown and is further evidence of their not “knowing” God. In contrast Kenyan Pentecostals’ teetotaling is presented as a way to preserve their marriages and families.¹¹ Their behaviour expresses a sense of moral superiority vis-à-vis wider British society, while also underscoring key areas of moral decay in the city and among city dwellers. In this way, London emerges as “a privileged terrain of investment and moral (re)conquest that allows them to define their faith against an immoral other” (Garbin 2013: 680).

Being a good Christian also manifests itself relationally in affirmative ways. During a Sunday service, Pastor Stephen made the point that “If you have no promissory notes, if no one is counting on you, then you have failed as a Christian. You need to help others.” A few weeks later, he returned to the theme of helping others but this time underscored the interdependence central to it: “Show me your three closest friends, and I can tell you where you're going. If you are equals,” he said as he moved his hand back and forth horizontally in front of him, “you are going nowhere. You need a friend who is higher than you who pulls you up, and you need someone below who you will help to pull up.” His comments highlight the importance of reciprocity to one’s own ability to “grow” in the Christian faith. However, reciprocal relations should not be conflated with egalitarian ones. Although the Pentecostal image of the Kingdom of God holds that all saved people are God’s children, it does not follow that they are all equal. In her work among Pentecostals in Zambia, Haynes makes a point that echoes the Pastor’s words: believers need ties that reach up – “ambition” – and ties that reach down – “obligation” – and they need to be in balance; “ambition without obligation is dangerous,” just as “obligation without ambition is oppressive” (2013: 88).

In light of this, it is worth returning to what I have outlined thus far regarding Kenyan Pentecostals' image of God's Kingdom. In particular their sentiments of sameness are raised with regard to harmonious social interactions, or the lack thereof. Because Pentecostals believe it is not race or class that differentiates people (Robbins 2004: 125), but rather being saved and living one's life according to the Word of God, racial and class tension should not exist. Nonetheless, sameness cannot be conflated with equality. However, inequality in itself is not seen as a problem if people inhabit their unequal social relations in morally responsible, Christian ways (cf. Schneider 1991: 192-194). This thinking suggests that relations among Kenyan Pentecostals must necessarily be understood as interdependent, which in turn suggests a highly socialized and relational view of people, despite Pentecostalism's discursive emphasis on individual self-actualization (van Dijk 2002: 192-193; Meyer 1998).

At the same time, becoming a better Christian does not resemble how civic engagement is generally understood in Britain, that is, the ways in which people engage with the wider communities where they live through activities that address issues of public concern (Foley and Hoge 2007: 23-56; Burgess 2011: 444-445). Instead, I would argue that it reflects how both the politics and poetics of space shape the ways Kenyan Pentecostals try to realize their mission of creating God's kingdom in the city. Overcoming a key structural barrier by acquiring a building has enabled at least one Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal church to initiate a more familiar type of civic engagement activity, though it still relies largely on "socializing space."

"Socializing space": Missionizing as place-making practice

When I first began meeting Kenyan Pentecostals in 2009, no Kenyan-initiated church in London had its own building. Six years later, all except one that I know of continue

to meet in rented premises, and they face intense competition to secure worship spaces in a city undergoing extensive (re-)development (Vasquez and Knott 2014; see Rogers 2013: 75-98).¹² Pentecostals have transformed shops, schools, industrial warehouses, hotel conference rooms, and community centers, into places of worship, albeit in many instances only for the duration of a service or prayer meeting. Their use of such spaces is part of the ongoing (re-)invention of buildings in the borough and elsewhere in London (Garnett and Harris 2013; Krause 2008). The exception is Victory Ministry, which acquired a building in 2010. I suggest that the process of acquiring and maintaining a building is an (ongoing) enactment of the sociality Kenyan Pentecostals believe characterizes the Kingdom of God, one which will inspire “others” to become born again. Having the building, in turn, has allowed them to “reach out” through serving free lunches to those in need. Following Hovland (2016), I would contend that the place they (seek to) create in and through the church, not only produces situations they believe to be conducive to their becoming better Christians and to converting “unsaved others,” but it also pulls them out of situations in their everyday lives where they struggle with various forms of precarity and contend with marginalizing dynamics.

Acquiring and maintaining a building

Prior to acquiring the building, the church followed a similar spatial path to other African Pentecostal churches (Adogame 2004; Krause 2008): at the time of my first visit to Victory Ministry in 2009, members met in the main hall of a community center, which it rented on an hourly basis, as it had done since the church’s founding. Because the building’s façade had no markings that indicated a church met there, I would not have been able to find the church that first Sunday, had I not been told the day and time of the service. The experience underscored for me that I could not go to a designated

place and wait for Kenyan Pentecostals to show up. Instead, I had to meet them and then go with them to the places where they spend time, that is, the sites where they coalesce (Massey 1991a, 1993).

Victory Ministry's new building is near where they used to meet. Built in the 1930s and once a banquet hall and later a cinema, the three-story building has two large halls, which can each accommodate approximately 200 people. On the top floor is the pastor's office, a meeting room, a children's playroom, which doubles as a prayer room, and a small kitchen. Knowing that acquiring a building had been a major goal for the church, I asked Pastor Stephen how they had done so. He responded, "We have a building. We said it, we wrote it down when we were next door. We wrote down we wanted to own a building. It can be scary to some to say this. But you need to believe it." His explanation alludes to the efficacy of words for Pentecostals who believe in the performative power of speech. Citing the utterance "God said, let there be light," Marshall comments that, for Pentecostals, "a saying can be a doing and a making" whereby "an utterance can bring its truth into being and thus literally make and re-make reality" (2016: 104).

Though words are central to their understanding of acquiring the building, the process also entailed concerted collective effort. Pastor Stephen, along with a group of church leaders and other prominent Kenyans, navigated both London's competitive real estate market and the legal system to secure the space. To raise the necessary deposit, they organized a large-scale dinner at a nearby banquet hall, an event similar to pre-wedding activities for "community weddings" among migrant Kenyans (Fesenmyer 2013). Guests of honor, typically recognized Kenyan businesspeople and media figures in London, conduct the formal fund raising part of the event by announcing the donations they have already secured. Subsequently, guests bring their donations

forward, and the emcee calls out the amount of the contribution. Many Kenyans who were not members of the church contributed financially to the fund raising, including pastors of other churches and non-Pentecostal Kenyans. Their participation can be read as an acknowledgment of the symbolic importance of a Kenyan-initiated church being able to acquire a building of its own in London. This appropriation of space makes their presence visible in the city, while also signaling that there is one more space in heterogeneous Newham that has been claimed “in the name of Jesus.”

For Pentecostals, their contributions demonstrate the belief that, by giving generously, they will receive God’s blessings, that is, they will enjoy God’s favor and protection. The practice of giving is part of what Coleman (2011) refers to as the “sacrificial economy,” the logic of which can be seen at work during the offering time of services. For example, while attending a religious conference, I listened as a pastor told how Hiram, King of Tyre, sent shipmen with knowledge of the sea to aid King Solomon’s servants in collecting gold (1 Kings 9: 26-28). Part of a larger story about the ministry’s own fund raising successes in the last six months, he suggested that many must wish they had given (more money) during the period. Implicit in his remarks was that one wants to be part of something successful, which requires connecting with people who have “knowledge of the sea” because they are the ones who succeed. Thus, fund raising events are not only about raising money, but also about affiliating oneself with a successful endeavor and eliciting God’s blessing. In doing so, believers enter into vertical social relations with those who, in Pastor’s Stephen’s terms, are “above” them and who can pull them up. Though the ability to give generously cannot be read as a proxy for one’s class position, it does create a new measure for indexing people’s actions and, thus, a new basis of hierarchy.

It is worth noting that the process of place-making I have been describing contrasts with what Knibbe describes as the church-planting strategy of the Nigerian-initiated Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), which has over 670 churches in the United Kingdom, as well as churches in 177 other countries: to “start a church wherever one can expect to find well educated Africans, especially Nigerians” (2009: 145). RCCG mission is to “plant churches within 5 minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within 5 minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries.”¹³ The first step is finding a place to worship, followed by getting people to attend, developing local leadership, and finding a public. According to this thinking, a building is central to constituting the church as a place where people will gather; in other words, it precedes the social. However, in the case of Victory Ministry, as well as other Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches, most of which are independent, locally founded churches, it does not receive guidance or financial support from a parent church nor does it have extensive transnational religious networks on which to rely. Having its own building is rather a materialization of a morally and socially significant community that makes tangible Massey’s definition (1993) of place as articulated moments in networks of social relations. Identifying these contrasting approaches to territorialization helps to disaggregate our understanding of Pentecostalism in the African diaspora, which has primarily focused on large transnational Pentecostal churches like RCCG (Knibbe 2009; Burgess 2009, 2011; Hunt and Lightly 2001) and megachurches like Kingsway International Christian Centre (Garbin 2013; Cartledge and Davies 2013).

While acquiring the building was a significant accomplishment, Pastor Stephen was quick to point out that having one entails responsibility, sacrifice, and hard work: “it is a blessing, we can meet here like we are, but [it is] a headache too. With each

level of success come new challenges. Owning the building means paying bills, having it cleaned, making sure there's insurance." Nonetheless, these duties created opportunities for members to enact a Christian way of being such that their "hard work" was transformed into service to God. Members were encouraged to serve the church in a variety of capacities, ideally in roles that tapped into their unique skills and talents. In joining the church, everyone became at least a nominal member of a cell group based on residence. In addition to their spiritual and emotional roles, cell groups had practical responsibilities, including preparing a snack after services and cleaning the church. Female members predominated in the choir, while mostly male members operated the audio-visual equipment. Men and women served as ushers, setting up the church before each service, welcoming people, and handing out offering envelopes. The daily running of the church then (ideally) involved members taking up the roles God "called" them to fulfill. It is in these more mundane social ways, which can be said to complement such important spiritual activities as praying and fasting (see, for example, Krause 2008, 2014), that I suggest Kenyan Pentecostals seek to create God's Kingdom on earth.

"Reaching out"

Though many of the ways they cultivate their Christian selves are inwardly focused, as well as directed at interactions amongst themselves, Kenyan Pentecostals, particularly pastors, express a desire to "reach out" to those in need, to the "un-saved." In this way, their mission directs them to spatial scales beyond the self (Vasquez and Knott 2014: 341). "Reaching out" offers a means of evangelizing, while also helping those churches registered as charities to meet the Charity Commission's public benefit test, which requires they engage in social action in exchange for receiving the tax benefits of charitable status. Commitment to social action among these Pentecostals takes varied

forms, ranging from working at local soup kitchens, to introducing youth to higher education through presentations by graduates and offering CV writing workshops, to collecting sanitary napkins and other necessities in short supply to send to those in Kenya. Most are sporadic, one-off initiatives, rather than regular, ongoing programs and activities. Because of their theological imperative to “win souls”, Pentecostals are generally known to eschew (secular) social action. Nonetheless, no one I spoke with about “reaching out” cited such reasons; rather, they mentioned more practical issues, including time constraints, limited human and financial resources, and the lack of unfettered access to spaces in which to meet. Visibility and presence in the form of a church building are then not only about signaling that there is one less space for non-Christians in Newham, but also about being able to engage, particularly with “unsaved others.”

Here, I focus on how having a building has shaped Victory Ministry’s missionizing efforts. In the spring of 2015 the church started a lunch program that is open to everyone. A conversation between Pastor Stephen and a couple of men who he often saw in a nearby park transformed what had, until then, been an idea that a few members pursued by volunteering at a mainline church’s meal program, into a lunch service, serving an average of 25-30 “clients” daily. The program was staffed entirely by members who gave their time to shop, prepare and cook the food, serve, and clean the kitchen and dining area after each meal. Similar to how the running of church was (ideally) organized, members assumed the roles of chef, kitchen assistants, servers, and cleaners, with the roles breaking down along gendered lines whereby women primarily handled the food preparation, while men served the meals. Their teamwork offers another illustration of the social harmony they tried to enact in their efforts to serve God. Members who regularly served lunch viewed it as their personal “calling;” when

there were staff shortages, a not infrequent occurrence, they saw the extra work as an opportunity to attain additional blessings, though their positive framing of the situation did not necessarily stop them from feeling frustrated about the heavy workload.

Some members expressed a sense of affinity with the people they fed because of their shared experience as migrants to the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the clients were largely men from Eastern Europe. Having worked in construction in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics, they now struggled to find steady work without which they could not cover their own basic needs, much less meet their transnational obligations. In acknowledging how hard it could be to live in London, members saw themselves as being fortunate (enough) to be able to help others, good fortune which they attributed to their belief in God. As one woman put it, “You look at these people. They’ve gone through a lot, maybe you’ve gone through the same things but look at where they are. They’re struggling, suffering. And you’re ok. You have to ask God to use you to do something in His Kingdom.”

Given this affinity, I was interested to know if and how it translated into members’ interactions with the men who daily walked through the church’s doors and, ultimately, to the church’s mission to “save souls”. Dora, a dedicated member of the lunch program, remarked to me on the importance of treating “clients” respectfully, for example, by learning their names. At her instigation, they (tried to) keep track of who attended in order to be able to follow up if someone was absent for several days. In this way, she explained, “we become like a family to them,” a sentiment which resonates with the notion of the church being a welcoming, accepting family. People were greeted as they arrived, with some regulars receiving hugs. Male members of the church were more likely to sit and talk with the men, whereas female ones tended to keep busy in the kitchen. One day while serving lunch, I listened as a woman urged a youth member

who was washing the dirty dishes and pots to let her take over: “We know you’re blessed. We want to be blessed too.” Her comment indicates that, while the act of feeding those in need is how one can gain God’s favor, it does not necessarily entail interacting with the men themselves, much less actively trying to “win their souls.” The conversation underscores Coleman’s point that salvation is not achieved through direct and extended social contact with “unsaved Others;” rather, “only the *rhetorical* presence of the unsaved person is actually necessary” (2003: 21, italics in original).

Beyond saying a prayer at the start of the lunch service, I observed little overt proselytizing. Rather, it was thought to occur via the kind of inspiration I discussed at the start of the article, as well as through the men’s phenomenological experience of being in a holy space. I heard members comment that some men arrived early and sat quietly in the main church hall, behavior which they interpreted as the men’s desire to experience the peace of being in God’s sanctuary. Similarly, several remarked to me that those who claimed not to believe in God invoked his name when they said “oh my God,” which indicated that they nonetheless recognized His existence. Members’ interpretation of such actions and comments reflects Harding’s observation that “the membrane between disbelief and belief is much thinner than we think” (1987: 178). Accordingly, these men were seen as already being on the path to conversion, albeit a potentially very long one, through regularly dining at the church.

What is interesting to note is that, while the building has shaped the ways Victory Ministry missionizes, its importance to missionizing goes against the notion that any and every day is filled with opportunities to do so, while riding the bus, at work, and in the shop. I would suggest that the centrality of the building speaks to what might be referred to as the negative poetics of space, that is, lived experiences of racism, hostility, and even simply the uncertainty of approaching a stranger or even an acquaintance on

explicitly religious terms. In contrast, the church building offers them a way to engage collectively from what can be considered a safe space. In their approach to “reaching out”, we see how their place-making practices both endure and are transformed.

Conclusion

In approaching the missionizing of Kenyan Pentecostals in London as a place-making practice, I have tried to highlight the ways in which the city and its existing spatial regimes enable, constrain, and reciprocally shape their efforts. Their place-making reflects the interplay of the politics and poetics of space as they navigate the structural context of East London where securing their own permanent worship space is a struggle, while also tacitly acknowledging the phenomenological experience of living in a multi-racial, multi-faith context where (perceived) racialized encounters are not infrequent and where they predominate in socially marginal sectors of the labor market. I have referred to their mode of place-making as “socializing space,” reliant as it is on “inspiring” others and relating to them in a welcoming, accepting manner. Additionally, I have shown that this form of sociality is rooted in a notion of sameness, but can also be characterized by inequality. By entering into vertical relations with those “above” and “below” them, Pastor Stephen and the members of Victory Ministry were able to acquire a building. Yet, just as they broke down social and racial hierarchies, it must be noted that they also created new ones amongst themselves and vis-à-vis “unsaved others.”

In light of this discussion, it is worth considering how Kenyan Pentecostals gauge the success of their missionizing efforts. One could easily argue that they have not been successful because they have not transformed London into a city of faith. However, in their eyes, their efforts to become better Christians are important and

valued. If “God’s time is the best time,” then Pentecostal thought easily accommodates the fact they have not (yet) persuaded more people to get saved. Moreover, they believe that “events do not necessarily appear ‘in the natural’ world as quickly as they are registered as having occurred ‘in the supernatural’ realm” (Coleman 2015: 291); accordingly, the significance of regularly having lunch at the church can be read as having not (yet) manifested in clients’ lives. This processual understanding of missionizing and, thus, place-making is consistent with Pentecostals’ ongoing “work of the self on the self” (Marshall 2009: 46). In this way, Pentecostal projects of self-making and place-making can be said to converge in the notion of “socializing space”.

In exploring Kenyan Pentecostals’ religious place-making, I have also contrasted it with that of other African-initiated Pentecostal churches in the diaspora, particularly the Redeemed Christian Church of God. While RCCG place-making begins with a church building, Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches emanate from the coalescing of believers, which may eventually allow them to acquire a building. The case discussed here is important for nuancing our understanding of African Pentecostalism in the diaspora, particularly how believers draw on Pentecostal ideas, discourses, and practices to make sense of and counter the “anonymity, marginality, and exclusion they face within the power-geometry of (postcolonial) national regimes” (Garbin 2013: 692-693). Unlike the transnational networks and megachurches of their West African counterparts in London, Victory Ministry, like most Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches, is an independent church that cannot rely on such networks for support, much less to help them transcend their social positioning in London as racialized, ethnic minorities. Instead, they turn to their image of the Kingdom of God for inspiration and motivation, identifying with the imagined community of global Christendom and “learn[ing] to live with another possible space always in view... and to steer their

deepest allegiance and identity toward this other space” (Hovland 2016: 348). Similar to those of their larger counterparts though, Kenyan Pentecostals’ mission to re-enchant the city positions them as morally superior, while simultaneously co-existing with other (secular) projects of urban regeneration that threaten to displace them. Read as a place-making practice, their missionizing offers a productive and meaningful way for them to endure and navigate the persistent tension between living in this world, and feeling and believing they are not of this world.

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¹ All names are pseudonyms; in a few selected instances, other potentially identifying details, which do not have analytical relevance, have been altered to ensure anonymity.

² Bearing in mind critiques of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), I use the term, "Kenyan Pentecostal" to reflect the fact that my Pentecostal interlocutors were born in and migrated from Kenya. Nonetheless, as discussed later, it does not fully capture their subject positions. Doing so also facilitates scholarly discussion about Pentecostalism among migrants from other African countries living in the diaspora, particularly Nigerians; however, further discussion of the similarities and differences between Kenyan Pentecostalism and Nigerian Pentecostalism is beyond the scope of the article.

³ The notion of "inspiring" others to believe is akin to Maier's "conversion by radiation" (2012: 184) and Duffuor and Harris's "transitive property of civic engagement" (2013: 30).

The idea of migrants from the "south" bringing a city or nation in the "north" back into the Kingdom of God has been referred to as a "reverse mission" because they are bringing the gospel to those who initially brought it to them (Ojo 2007: 380). In contrast, most Kenyan Pentecostals do not see themselves as so-called reverse missionaries because they believe that Christianity comes from God, not Europe.

⁴ For a discussion of how Kenyan Pentecostals "un-make" and de-center places, see Fesenmyer (2017).

⁵ <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/services/lept/boroughmap/newham/>

Accessed 17 November 2014.

⁶ <http://www.newham.info/profiles/profile?profileId=138&geoTypeId=>

Accessed 8 November 2014.

⁷ www.misterseed.com Accessed June 25, 2009. No longer posted.

⁸ There are socio-economic differences among congregants and between congregations that make both a national and an ethnic identification reductionist (cf. Krause 2011: 421).

⁹ The project can itself be seen as a place-making project, marking an effort to re-
envision a 40-mile area stretching from the London Docklands to the Thames Estuary
as a “single strategic whole.” (Accessed September 1, 2016
<http://centreforlondon.org/whatever-happened-to-the-thames-gateway/>)

¹⁰ This point is important because it challenges, at least discursively and ideologically,
what might otherwise be seen as the intentional national and ethnic exclusivity of these
churches if looked at in terms of the demographics of their congregations referred to
earlier.

¹¹ Of course, there are those for whom such abstinence is largely discursive since, as a
woman whispered to me during a post-service conversation, “some” still enjoy an
occasional glass of wine. To be sure though, they too distinguish themselves from
people “who can’t last a day [without a drink].”

¹² It should be noted that churches’ access to space reflects a spectrum of situations:
while some rent spaces on an hourly basis and are thus the most constrained in terms
of access and use, others have secured long-term leases and can largely use the spaces
as they please. Nonetheless, acquiring a building of their own remains an ambition for
many pastors I have spoken with.

¹³ <http://rccg.org/about/mission-and-vision> Accessed 15 November 2014.