There's a new pastor in town

Archbishop Stallings sees challenges, hope in future

By John Sullivan

Archbishop George A. Stallings is at heart, just a pastor.

Of course, he's a pastor and spiritual leader of one of the fastest growing churches in Acadiana, the African-American Catholic Congregation. But if you talk to Stallings, he will tell you he is just a pastor. I am just a pastor and I believe in very traditional values: God, family, home.

Stallings said Thursday: "I am just a pastor and I believe in very traditional values: God, family, (and) home."

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The AACC is a religious home for Catholics who were disenchanted with the Catholic Church. The church's Acadiana headquarters are located at the Imani Temple, 221 Dunand St. in Lafayette.

Stallings said he will spend about two and a half weeks out of every month in Lafayette. The remainder of the time will be spent traveling to other Imani Temples across the United States.

Formed in Washington D.C. in 1989, Stallings said the AACC was started to offer African-American Catholics who were dissatisfied with the Catholic Church an alternative. The local pastor, the Rev. Carlos Harvin, has been working in the Lafayette temple since it was founded two years ago.

"For two decades, the Roman Catholic Church has been losing its African-American members," Stallings said. "The AACC was founded to give them an alternative to leaving the Catholic faith.

"I'm going after those African-Americans who have left the Roman Catholic Church but still want to practice their Catholic faith.

The Roman Catholic Church, shortly after the break-away, said the AACC was not part of the church. In a recent statement, the Diocese of Lafayette said, "We really have no right or desire to approve or disapprove what the Temple does. The Imani Temple is not a part of the Catholic Church."

Stallings said the Roman Catholic Church "may have the copyright on the words Roman Catholic Church but not the word Catholic.

Stallings said he selected Lafayette as the site for the movement's Acadiana headquarters because "this area has the largest number of African-American Catholics in the nation."

"For over two decades, many African-Americans have left the Roman Catholic Church because they were disillusioned and dissatisfied with the way the church was treating them. In the United States, over the past two decades there hasn't been a single new black parish opened or started by the Catholic Church."

It was the closing of the Holy Rosary School, a predominantly black Catholic school, that Stallings said led him and the AACC to come to Lafayette.

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As the leader of the Imani Temple, Stallings said he and the church members are trying to spread the word about restoring the black family and black community.

At one time, Stallings said, a black community was held together by its religious system.

"Now people don't even know who their neighbors are," Stallings said. "There is an African proverb that says an entire village raises a child. That should hold true for us today."

Stallings said the church will work with other civic and governmental leaders "to try and stop the violence out there. You cannot run away from it. We have to stop it before we lose an entire generation of our young people."

As the newest pastor in Lafayette, Stallings said he plans to be a visible shepherd for his flock.

"People will see me everyday among them," Stallings said. "They will see me riding my bicycle, jogging and playing tennis out there."

And as a pastor, Stallings said he will always look to the Scriptures for answers.

"When we are standing before God on Judgement Day, I don't think He will ask you were you Catholic or were you non-Catholic," Stallings said. "I believe He will look for your heart. There is where salvation lies and we need to remember that."

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