The Rev. Carlos Harvin says the Imani Temple began in Lafayette because some blacks are frustrated with the Roman Catholic Church.

A scientist tries to convince a farmer that an eagle’s an eagle, not a chicken. But when the scientist tells the eagle that it’s an eagle and to fly, the eagle disregards him, opting to swoop down to join the chickens when their feed is thrown. Each day the scientist tries to prove to the farmer that the eagle’s an eagle; each day the eagle opts for the companionship of the chickens and their feed.

I told you it was a chicken, says the farmer. Give me another day, says the scientist. One day the eagle finally flaps its wings and soars toward the sun, up high into the skies where it belongs.

LAFAYETTE — The anecdote is told with conviction and passion, the conclusion to a gut-wrenching sermon given by the Rev. Carlos E. Harvin, his forehead perspiring, his voice often times shrilling.

Grasping the mike, moving to and fro, his arms swaying to make a point, he preaches from deep within to his newfound congregation.

His white cassock adorned with a sash draped over his shoulders portrays the colors black, red and green, symbolizing, respectively, the collective color of black people, the blood of their ancestors and land, life and new ideas. His message this day is targeted for young people. “Young people,” he screams, “don’t let anyone tell you that you’re not an eagle, that you’re a chicken!”

It’s Sunday morning at Imani Temple No. 49, temporarily housed in the Winnfield Funeral Home Chapel on Dunand Street. The 24 pews are filled with Catholics and non-Catholics, those who have joined and those who are just visiting the newest of eight temples nationwide of the African-American Catholic Congregation.

The AACC, headquartered in Washington, D.C., was founded nearly five years ago by Archbishop George Stallings, a former Roman Catholic bishop who broke ties and formed his own denomination of Catholicism, which claims 5,000 supporters nationally.

Harvin is now calling upon the children of the church to come forward. All ages, they walk up to the chapel’s front. Two parents carry their tots in their arms. Harvin asks member Adam Broussard to assist in praying for the children.

Eyes closed during his prayers, Broussard describes himself as “a 23-year-old black male who wasn’t supposed to make it here.” But with God’s power, he adds, “I’m here.”

Harvin is calling on adults to come forward and join.
The African-American Catholic Congregation was founded nearly five years ago by Archbishop George A. Stallings Jr., a former Roman Catholic priest, who started his own brand of Catholicism.

Imani

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the church. The children have returned to their seats. The doors of the church are open for new members, and Harvin is promising them not a piece of a Jesus cookie but a full course meal.

No one has accepted his invitation yet. But he doesn't give up. He's certain there's someone out there who needs to be saved. Finally, a woman walks to the front, then another woman, and then a man.

They all have loads to bare. There's a solemn hush as the three speak, their burdens seemingly absorbed into the congregation's hearts. Each tale is acknowledged with “Amen” and clapping.

In just four months, 150 people have come forward to be part of this congregation, born out of the frustration of the Diocese of Lafayette's decision last year to close Holy Rosary Institute, a local black Catholic high school.

The school's closure has opened the doors for the Imani Temple. Lafayette wasn't even on the AACC’s agenda.

The only Imani Temple in the Bayou State for black Catholics disenchanted with the “Eurocentricity” of the Roman Catholic Church was located in New Orleans.

But all that has changed. With its large concentration of black Catholics, Lafayette has now become fertile grounds for the AACC.

“If (Bishop Harry) Flynn gave OKRA (Organization to Keep Rosary Alive) what they wanted, there wouldn't be an Imani Temple here,” says Harvin.

It was an invitation from OKRA, after all, that first brought Stallings to the area to negotiate with the local diocese to keep the black Catholic school open.

Je'Nel Chargois, OKRA chairperson, agrees that if the local diocese had been more sensitive to the concerns and needs of African-Americans, there wouldn't be a temple here.

Not only did Chargois join the local temple, but so did her mother, Effie Alfred, who had been a devout Roman Catholic for 62 years. And so did her brother, Jackie Alfred, who grew up as an altar boy in the Roman Catholic Church.

A desire for self-determination and cultural awareness has brought the Alfred family and others into the Imani Temple. It's also what attracted Harvin to Stallings in the first place.

"Everything I had been longing for as a black Roman Catholic, I found at the Imani Temple. It wasn't just a denomination but a black thing," he says.

As a Roman Catholic seminarian, Harvin said he was hungry for black role models and he didn't believe he was getting black theology or spiritual direction.

"At the beginnings of Christianity, black Christians were there. Three hundred years later, Rome stole what originated from North Africa, in the cities of Africa. Not only were the land and culture stolen but religion also.

For the 34-year-old priest, the AACC offers him the chance to reclaim the African roots of Christianity and share it with others.

Lafayette is the third assignment in three years for the Washington, D.C. native. On Feb. 20, he will be officially installed as pastor.

Yet since becoming permanent pastor here in October, Harvin already has organized the first citywide Kwanzaa celebration, which was marked in early January. He also has been a guest speaker on black radio stations, educating listeners on cultural awareness.

Harvin expects the Imani Temple to be a permanent church in Lafayette.

“We're established, we're planning to stay here,” says Harvin. “This is not something chic, temporary. But we're planning to plant our roots very deep in the Hub City of Lafayette.”