Rev. George Stallings Jr. performs a mass in which he blends African religious rites, gospel music and traditional Catholic liturgy.

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Stallings building Afrocentric church

Rebel priest chides Catholic Church

By STEPHANIE GAUTHREAUX
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NEW ORLEANS — Rev. George A. Stallings Jr., Archbishop of the African-American Catholic Congregation (AACC), is known in Roman Catholic circles as the renegade priest who was excommunicated three years ago, after establishing an independent congregation.

To the members of the AACC, Stallings is the personable archbishop who greets members of his church's governing body by first name. He's the innovative founder of a church that makes Catholic teachings relevant to members' lives, "celebrating the peaks and valleys of spirituality" and incorporating African traditions, symbols and language in the Mass.

To the 90,000 African-American Catholics in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Stallings hopes to become a household name. Beginning in mid-September, he will be spending two weeks a month serving as pastor of the New Orleans Imani Temple, one of seven AACC churches located in the U.S. and Lagos, Nigeria.

He hopes to attract a larger following in New Orleans, and he sees every African-American Catholic in the city — many of whom, he believes, are at risk of falling away from a Roman Catholic Church that he says makes few concessions to African-American Catholics — as potential members of his church. Stallings currently serves as pastor of the Washington, D.C. Imani Temple, the mother temple of the AACC, and will continue to spend half his time there after beginning his part-time residence in New Orleans. It should be noted, however, that the number of black Catholics in the Archdiocese of New Orleans has risen from 98,000 two years ago to the current 99,000. And it could be argued that the fact that at least 10 of the Archdiocese's Catholic Churches...
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providing leadership and community support. This is in keeping with the tenets of the AACC or the seven African values of unity (Umoja), self-determination (Kujichagulia), collective work and relationships (Ujima), cooperative economics (Ujamaa), purpose (Nia), creativity (Kuumba) and faith (Imani).

When Stallings, 45, broke away from the mainline Roman Catholic Church in July, 1989, he denounced the Vatican as racist and said the Roman Catholic Church had failed to meet the cultural and spiritual needs of African-American Catholics.

Two branches of the AACC's governing body - the house of administrators and the house of delegates - are composed of lay people. And Stallings says this voice in church governance empowers African-American Catholics, allowing them an "ownership and control" that they would not have in the Roman Catholic Church.

He says this involvement in a church that incorporates their heritage and is sensitive to their spiritual and cultural needs leads people to a deeper relationship with Christ.

"We're confident that we can allow African-Americans to bond themselves in a deeper relationship with Christ through having more control," he says. "For many African-Americans, a relationship with Christ has not been possible in the Roman Catholic Church due to restrictions on church life and worship."

Stallings sees the fact that they are underrepresented in the ranks of Roman Catholic clergy as a problem that alienates African-Americans.

While AACC churches uphold the seven sacraments, their teachings differ from those of the Roman Catholic Church. AACC churches believe Jesus Christ probably was black. They allow women to be ordained as priests, they allow clergy to marry, and they permit divorced members to remarry in the church without obtaining an annulment of the first marriage. AACC churches allow contraception and, while they do not encourage it, they allow abortion. The churches preach homilies on social themes, and their services feature African and Arabic prayer and dance.

Stallings says the movement is catching on with African-American Catholics and even some African-American Protestants. The median age of AACC members is 35. There are more women than men, they tend to be college educated and politically liberal. Two years ago, his church had 1,100 members nationwide. Now the figure for the U.S. and the new Imani Temple in Nigeria is 4,100, Stallings says.

And he sees the fact that many traditionally black Catholic Churches have moved toward an Afrocentric Mass - and that this has been supported by the National Black Catholic Congress as proof that the AACC is influencing black Catholics outside its membership.

The Afrocentric Mass is being used at St. Augustine's, St. Peter Claver and St. Monica in New Orleans and at least seven other churches in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Unlike AACC churches, however, these churches adhere to traditional Roman Catholic teachings.

If the AACC's practices sound somewhat Protestant, perhaps it is because Stallings, a native of New Bern, N.C., is a first-generation Catholic whose early religious experiences were shaped in Star of Zion Missionary Baptist Church. His grandfather took him to Sunday services there while his parents attended Catholic Mass without their children. Ironically, the same grandfather, Bessie Taylor, is credited with the fact that Stallings was baptized Catholic. Taylor worked as a housekeeper and cook for the nuns who ran the Catholic school at New Bern, and because of this her children attended the school and Stallings' mother converted to Catholicism.

Despite the early Protestant influences, Stallings says he is Catholic through and through. He was ordained in 1974 and served in churches in Washington, D.C. He says he is troubled that he had to split from the church, and the road away from it has been a difficult journey for his conscience.

When Stallings first broke away, rumors that he was homosexual began to fly. He denied being homosexual, and says he believes the rumors were an attempt to destroy the AACC by destroying its leader.

While he has spoken harshly against the Roman Catholic Church since being excommunicated, he acknowledges that when he formed his independent congregation, he expected the Roman Catholic Church would come to the bargaining table and his group would rejoin the church.

"I still believe it is a white, racist, sexist hierarchical church," he says. "It must become more open and receptive to women and blacks. The Church seemed to be insensitive to allowing blacks ownership. But I thought they'd come around and start to accommodate blacks."

Stallings says he still loves the Roman Catholic Church that "nurtured me but wasn't broad enough to sustain me." He says he still has friends in the Roman Catholic Church and he acknowledges an "ongoing struggle to come to grips with a church that I hoped would accept me."

He says a reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church is still within the realm of possibility. He is hopeful his group may one day return to the fold on terms agreeable to the AACC, although he believes this is probably still some years away.

"Maybe down the road there will be a reconciliation," he says. "Probably after I'm gone, someone will come to the AACC from the Roman Catholic Church and say, 'let's talk.'"