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MOROCCO: The growing phenomenon of “house churches” in Morocco

The growing phenomenon of “house churches” in Morocco

By Rémy Pigaglio

La Croix International (05.07.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3Av0g0Z> – Over the past 20 years, small evangelical communities have been established in Morocco through the settlement of sub-

Saharan Africans.

The room is just beginning to fill up when the first notes of the synthesizer are heard. On the 30 or so plastic chairs, worshipers are dressed in their Sunday best. Women in vividly patterned dresses and men in just as colorful shirts.

“Alleluia! You are present!” Yannick Backala calls out into the microphone to begin the prayer service.

Originally from Congo-Brazzaville, he welcomes the congregation and leads them in prayers that reverberate in the modest setting.

These evangelical Christians do not forget the Morocco that welcomes them.

“You are going to pray for its inhabitants, whether they are Christians or not! Blessed be this kingdom! Blessed also be the king of this country!” Backala calls out, still in rhythm and music.

Hundreds of evangelical “house churches” have sprung up in the last 20 years

From the outside, nothing reveals the presence of the Elohim Church on the top floor of this ordinary building in the working-class district of Yacoub-Al-Mansour, in Rabat.

Led by the Cameroonian pastor Didier Ndjikap, its members are all from sub-Saharan Africa.

“I’ve been coming here for two years,” says Didier Komol, 33, also from Cameroon. “I chose it because it is a Church of the Awakening,” he says in reference to this particular evangelical community. “I noticed that the Spirit of God was with us. I feel the Spirit’s presence and, at the end of the service, I am at peace,” he says with satisfaction.

Elohim Church is one of dozens, if not hundreds, of evangelical “house churches” that have sprung up in Morocco over the last 20 years.

Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa

As Morocco has welcomed students, workers and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, they have been established in the working-class neighborhoods of Morocco’s major cities.

The development of these faith communities is the result of the regularization of migrants in the 2010s, following a period of harsh repression of those who arrived undocumented.

These house churches join the “historical” Churches, which have been present since the protectorate and are recognized by the king: the Anglican Church, the Evangelical Church in

Morocco (formerly composed mainly of reformed Protestants) and the Catholic Church.

“Many people find that these official Churches have a hierarchy that is a bit too strict and that it is difficult to fit in,” explains Pastor Jean Masembila, a native of Congo-Kinshasa.

Their buildings are located in the city centers. And because of transportation costs, poorer Christians – who are quite numerous – have difficulty getting to them.

Training pastors to combat the “dark side” of the phenomenon

Many of these poor believers have experienced racism and exile. The informal house churches offer them something they don't find in the mainstream, traditional Churches.

“They create a real theology of migration,” says Sophie Bava, an anthropologist.

“This Christianity from the roots is a vector of integration. But it can have a dark side, too,” she says. For instance, some pastors hold radical views, especially towards Islam.

In an attempt to address this issue, the Al-Mowafaqa Institute, has created an academic program called FOREM for

the “training of house church leaders”.

This ecumenical institute was founded in Rabat in 2012 by the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Morocco to train their own leaders.

Keeping a low profile and generally tolerated

“The courses address theological issues, as well as aspects of sociology, especially about Moroccan society,” says Pastor Jean Koulagna, the director of Al-Mowafaqa.

“One of the objectives is to prevent intolerant speech,” he points out.

Nearly 150 house church leaders have been trained free of charge since its inception in Rabat and Casablanca.

The house churches are not officially recognized. But they keep a low profile and are generally tolerated.

Religious freedom is not guaranteed in Morocco, a country where Islam is the official religion and the vast majority of the citizens are Muslims. The Moroccan Constitution recognizes only the freedom of worship.

“The house churches are a bit scattered,” says Jean Masembila, who has become one of the FOREM’s supervisors.

“The training compels us to dialogue and we thus seek the universal Church as the body of Christ.”

Photo: Cameroonian pastor Didier Ndjikap, director of Elohim Church, during a preaching session in a working-class neighborhood in Rabat, April 3, 2018. (Photo by MALIK NEJMI/VU)

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