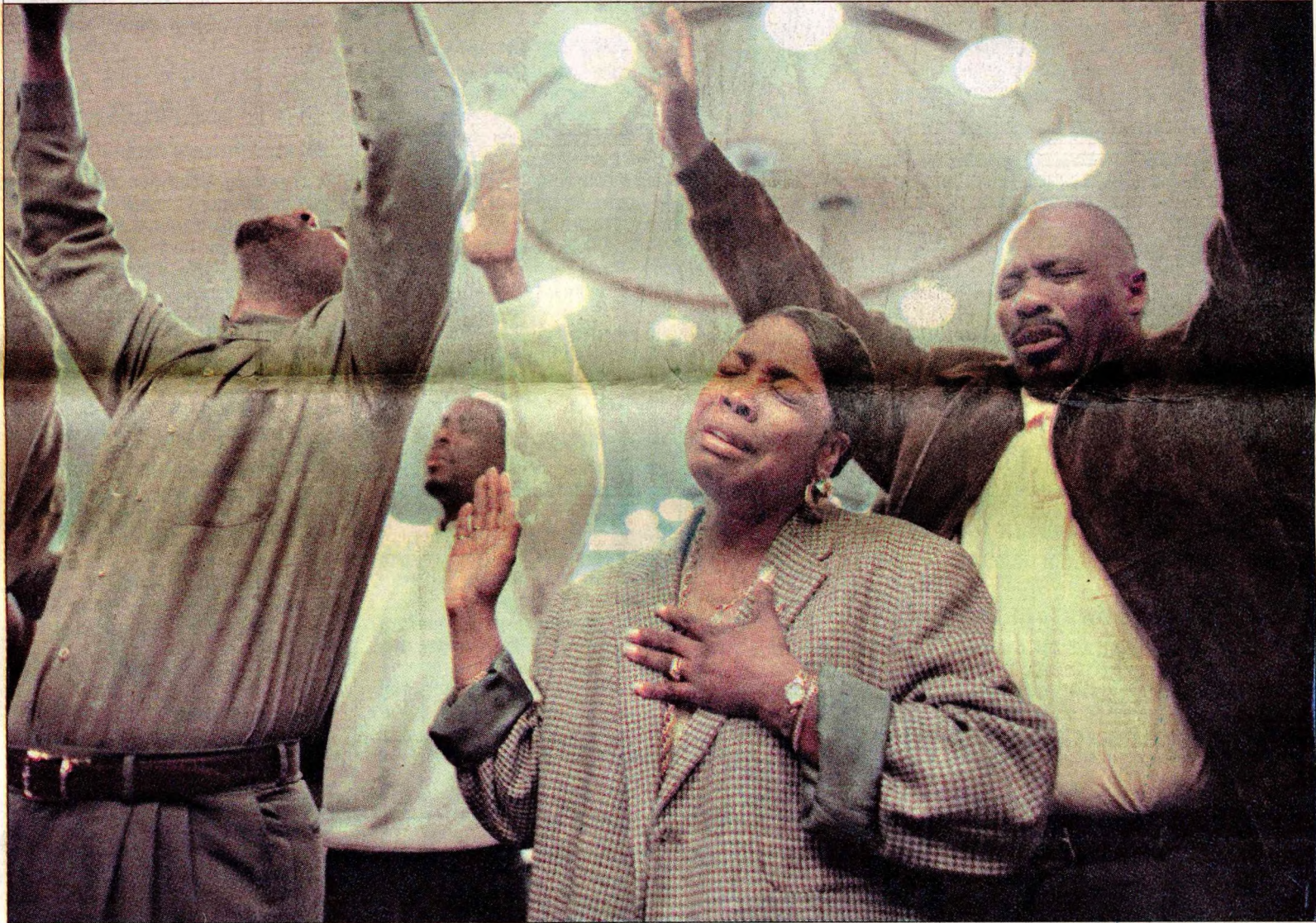


COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Dozens of tiny churches provide a source of solace, strength and togetherness for East Palo Alto residents



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Melissa Macklin-Billingsley, above, prays with fellow church members during a weeklong revival at the New Sweet Home Church of God and Christ in East Palo Alto. Below, the Rev. A.C. Macklin of New Sweet Home Church offers a spirited prayer during the revival.

BY JENNIFER MENA
Mercury News Staff Writer

In East Palo Alto — a vest-pocket town stuck with a reputation for crime and crack — the spirit is on the rise. You can hear it on Sundays: The rhythmic clapping and shaking of tambourines at Spanish-language services. The electric bass guitar resonating from the black Baptist church down the block. The sweet harmony of a Tongan chorus, all dressed in traditional straw aprons. Or the chanting voices of recovering drug addicts praying at a rehab center.

Thank you, Lord!
Thank you, Lord!
Thank you, Lord!

Down side streets, behind houses, in rickety garages that serve as makeshift chapels, the spirit is telling worshipers to fight the temptation of the street, to launch new

lives in America, to not worry about getting by.

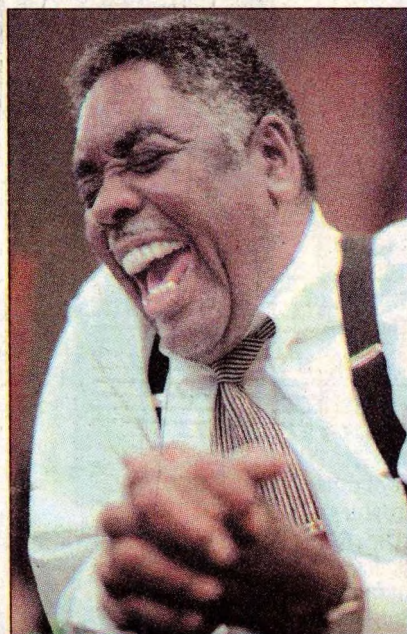
The spirit will provide, ministers like the Rev. Floyd Purdy shout from the pulpit. The spirit will look out for them. *Amen!*

In East Palo Alto, where the population of 25,400 grows more diverse and social problems fester, the city's 50 to 75 churches play the unofficial role of guardian angel.

Some even call it "the city of churches" because it has more congregations than any other city its size in the area.

"The church is the most stable unit in our community," said Myrtle Walker, a member of the city council. "The churches provide worship, but they also provide help and comfort. Many of our people are poor, and this is one way they can pray to the Lord for better days."

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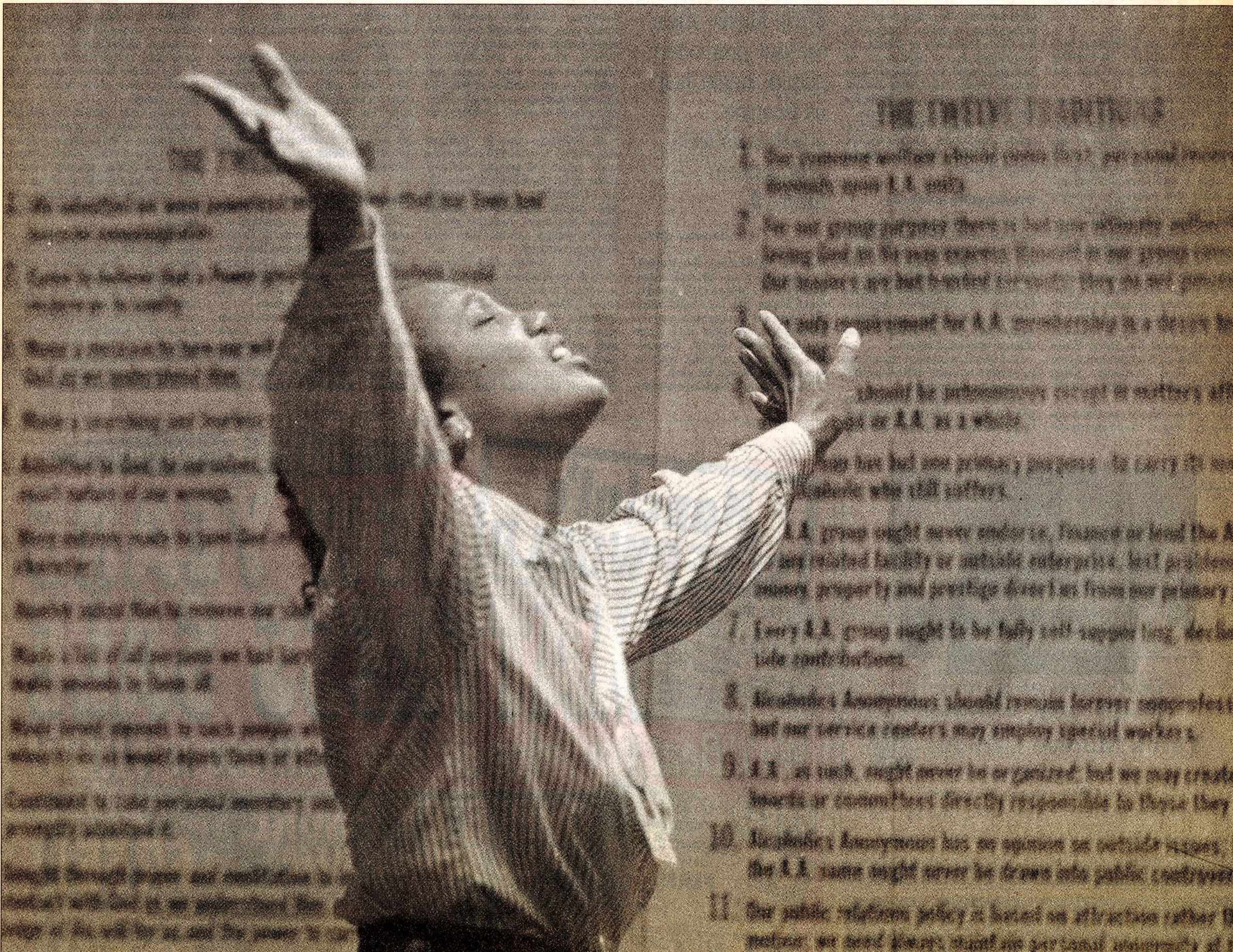
■ A group of Tongan immigrants has re-created a piece of home on a gritty street in East Palo Alto.

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■ At Bread of Life Ministries, almost all of the members have been in drug-related trouble, but they are divorcing themselves from lives of drug addiction, prostitution and incarceration.

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COMMUNITY SPIRIT



THE TWELVE PRINCIPLES

1. The primary mission of the church is to glorify God and to love and serve the community.
2. In our going forward there is no such thing as a free lunch. We are called to be faithful stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us. We are not to be consumed by the world, but to transform it.
3. We should be intentionally diverse in our membership and in our outreach. We are to be a reflection of the community we serve.
4. We are to be a community of care, where every member is valued and supported. We are to be a place where people can find hope and healing.
5. We are to be a community of prayer, where we seek God's will and His blessing. We are to be a place where people can experience the power of God's love.
6. We are to be a community of service, where we reach out to those in need. We are to be a place where people can experience the joy of giving.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, drawing its own contributions.
8. Membership in A.A. should remain forever confidential, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A. as such, ought never be organized, but we may create boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Membership in A.A. has no opinion on outside issues, but the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than on persuasion; we never demand anyone get into A.A.

E. Palo Alto called 'city of churches'

■ CHURCHES

from Page 1A

There's a saying in town: Call City Hall if you want to complain. But if you want an answer, talk to God.

And the answer these days is as tangible as it is uplifting: drug counseling for the city's addicts, child care for its struggling families, drop-in centers for its teens, shelter for its homeless, sustenance for its poor.

What makes East Palo Alto different is that the relationship between church and community goes deeper than just Sunday services. It is rooted in the lives of its residents — many of them African-American, Latino or Pacific Islander. The spirit gives them strength to carry on. It provides a place for them to gather. It gives them arms to link with.

'The power of the spirit'

"I've had to rely on God; I've had to rely on the power of the spirit," said Gertrude Wilks, a community activist who is studying to be a minister and who spiritually counsels neighbors at her kitchen table.

Just about any spot in East Palo Alto can be a place of worship. A counter top fills in as an altar. A row of folding chairs becomes a church sanctuary. Here, "the church is an extended family," said Keith Russell, president of the American Baptist Seminary of the West. "It's a way to be religious and be Vietnamese or be religious and Korean or be religious and fill in the blank. . . . For immigrants, for African-Americans, church is where you celebrate your birthday."

Because the ethnic makeup of the community is constantly changing, the spirit moves quickly, like a breeze that stirs branches in one place, then rustles them in another. Churches crop up and fade so fast, they're hard to count. Most aren't in the phone book, "and they don't put up signs," explains Mayor R.B. Jones, who estimates there are 67 churches in the city — one for every 379 residents.

Peninsula Interfaith Action, a church consortium, counts 52, more than twice the number in area cities with similar populations. CityTeam Ministries estimates East Palo Alto has between 50 and 75 churches.

Motorists can find themselves in holy gridlock. In a two-tenths of a mile strip on Bay Road, there's St. Mark AME Zion Church, the Union Star Baptist Church and El Buen Pastor Episcopal Church, each in small, aging houses. Three-tenths of a mile north lies the large, stone building of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church.

At the corner of Pulgas Avenue and O'Connor Street, three of four corners are

churches: The Open Door Church of God in Christ, Church of the Living God and the Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church. The Calvary Temple Church of Christ and the Unity Missionary Baptist Church share the 1200 block of Jervis Avenue, and around the corner is the Laurel Avenue Church of Christ.

In a short span of Donohoe Street is an evangelical Spanish Church, Vietnamese Buddhist Church and black Baptist church.

CityTeam Ministries staff members say it's hard to find that concentration elsewhere. The organization counts 26 churches in Milpitas, one for every 2,373 people. In San Jose, there is one for every 2,678 people. Neighboring Menlo Park boasts one church for every 1,217 people.

Rudy Busto, a Stanford religious studies professor, sees the proliferation of churches in East Palo Alto as a way for each denomination and cultural group to mark its territory.

"Religious institutions are different than banks. There is something about it that people will respect. It's a way to say, 'we are here,'" Busto said.

The African-American community's first toehold came in 1955, when St. Paul Baptist Church was opened by the Rev. C.A. Morris. After Morris ran into financial problems, the Rev. James Branch and wife Onedia "Mother" Branch took over the building for their St. John Baptist congregation, which had met in garages and halls for more than a year.

Since then, the number of congregations has steadily risen, one congregation begetting another. Yet no one church dominates the city's spiritual life. And no alliance of churches has yet tackled the city's demons.

"You hear people talk and they say, 'Oh my God. They have all those churches!' And then they say we ought to have the cleanest community in the world," said the Rev. Mary Frazier of Bread of Life Ministries.

But there's just so much the churches can do: The congregations are small, and they have few resources. And they do not all work together, much less communicate, she and others concede.

Reaching out

"It's not getting beyond the congregation level yet," explained Jose Aleman, an organizer for Peninsula Interfaith Action. "We are starting to reach out to each other."

‘I’ve had to rely on God; I’ve had to rely on the power of the spirit.’

— Gertrude Wilks, community activist

Some church leaders, such as St. John Baptist Church Deacon Bill Vines, became city council members. But more often than not, church leaders and pastors tend to their members' personal problems — food, shelter, housing — rather than the city's

issues.

This army of do-gooders may seem unusual in the winner-take-all atmosphere of Silicon Valley. Yet here they are: people like Nettie Chriss — or Sister Nettie, as she is known at the Laurel Avenue Church of Christ. Chriss spends each Saturday bringing soup and tidying the home of a member who just had major surgery. On other days, she and a group of six clean the homes of the sick and elderly.

Throughout the city, the churches delve into people's everyday lives. The Rev. Purdy of Missionary Baptist Church reads every student member's report card. And he talks to members about problems in the community.

One recent Sunday, Purdy's voice resonated off the dark wood panels that enveloped the choir members.

Did you know drugs are still doing us in? . . . Crack cocaine is on the corners. . . . Husbands are fighting wives. . . . Children are being abused. . . . Women are abusing men and men abusing women. . . . Murder is running rampant. It's not about the color of your skin. It's about sin. AMEN!

At First Free Wesleyan Tongan Church, male members wearing traditional tuxedo jackets, wrap skirts and sandals come to church to slip into the ways of their native island. The women wear traditional straw aprons over colorful dresses. But even at church, they are immersed in civic life.

This fall, the church conducted leadership workshops to educate a handful of members — many of them janitors or orderlies — about welfare reform, voting rights, housing and how to get better jobs.

Religious potpourri

The Rev. A.C. Macklin of New Sweet Home Church of God and Christ barbecues outdoors each Friday and Saturday and uses the proceeds to fund two homes for 25 recovering drug addicts adjacent to his church. As he cooked one recent day, East Palo Alto Police Chief Wesley Bowling drove up with a potential customer who didn't want to eat. He wanted to go straight.

Longstanding black churches now share the city with newer ones where English is a second language. The mix of cultures and

Tongan immigrants find a link to their homeland in tiny church

BY JENNIFER MENA
Mercury News Staff Writer

Working with traditional props on a new stage, a group of Tongan immigrants has re-created a piece of home on a gritty street in East Palo Alto.

When this group of 30 families opens the door of the First Free Wesleyan Tongan Church, it's as if they have gone back to their island.

The small, two-bedroom house sits on an unkempt back lot. The floor boards are loose and dusty. The walls are unfinished. There are few ornaments.

What their church looks like doesn't matter. A warm spirit overwhelms the ordinary surroundings. The women are wearing long flowing gowns with typical straw aprons. Men wear tuxedo jackets and shirts with traditional skirts called *tupenus* and aprons called *taovala*.

As the chorus sings, there are smiles all around, deep as the Pacific Ocean.

For these people, church is not just an every Sunday occurrence. It is an everyday commitment. There are choir practices, women's meetings, organizational meetings and Bible study. After working for as many as 12 hours, cleaning bed pans, driving buses or fixing cars, members show up at

church. On Sundays, they dress as they did in Tonga.

"This is the only way we can exercise our language and our culture. You have six days of dressing like an American and one day to dress our dress," explained Sinter Uhila, a church member.

The Tongans' commitment is not just spiritual. Part of their struggle to create new lives in America is to build up their church.

The congregation began in 1992 with 10 families in the garage of a single-family home. After it struggled to make a \$77,000 down payment, the church group moved to an aging one-bedroom house on a back lot on Bell Street. The building cost \$197,000.

"We were praying in a garage, but to us it was a window to God. We were struggling, but in his heart, God knows we were praying," Uhila explained.

Each Sunday, they pass a plate to raise money. They also give \$1,500 per family — which is 10 percent of some families' incomes — to the church. The hope is to make the church even stronger, including building a larger facility.

"We manage to do that because this is our church. It is our culture. It is a part of us," said member Siosiana Kata.

colors leads to an unusual religious potpourri.

At the Laurel Avenue Church of Christ, every third Sunday night, a service dedicated to African-Americans is simultaneously translated into Spanish.

Before the English Christmas Eve Mass at St. Francis of Assisi Church last year, there was debate about allowing the Tongans to sing "Silent Night" in their native tongue.

And when members joined to build the Vietnamese Buddhist Church of America, they got unexpected help — African-American neighbors turned out to lend a hand, said member Quinn Yamaguchi.

While the city's popularity with church groups is partly economic — land is still relatively inexpensive — loyalties transcend location. Tongans, African-Americans and other church members who move

out of town often come back each Sunday just to go to the church that helped them get their start in the Bay Area.

Nehmias Moren moved to Redwood City but has remained a member of the Apostolic Assembly of Faith church for more than 20 years. Now he is a church leader. He stands before more than 250 people — girls in fancy velvet dresses and bows, boys in ties and dress pants, the children crammed in spaces at their parents feet — as the electric guitar, drums, bass and piano play. There is incessant clapping. The tambourines shake as if an earthquake has hit.

"In Jesus, there is power," booms Brother Juan Martinez with a microphone in this hand.

Moren, clapping and raising his hands at Brother Martinez's cues, explains: "I don't live here. But this is my home. It's home to a lot of people looking for Jesus."

COMMUNITY SPIRIT



NEW SWEET HOME CHURCH OF GOD AND CHRIST

The visiting Rev. Ricky Montgomery prays with a church member at New Sweet Home Church, left, as pastor A.C. Macklin spreads his arms. Above, clergy members pray over Clyde Frazier, who was overcome with fervor during a revival at New Sweet Home Church.

EAST PALO ALTO AT A GLANCE

Some facts and comparisons.

- Population: 25,400.
- Average number of persons per household: 3.56.
- Average number of persons per household in Palo Alto: 2.3.
- Number of jobs in East Palo Alto: 1,890.
- East Palo Alto mean household income: \$45,900.
- Palo Alto mean household income: \$90,000.
- Number of churches/congregations: 50 to 75.

Source: Association of Bay Area Governments, CityTeam Ministries.

One staple at Bread of Life church: repentance

BY JENNIFER MENA
Mercury News Staff Writer

At Bread of Life Ministries, there's no time for just pious talk.

Almost all of the church members have been in drug-related trouble, and they don't think they should spare the church any details.

"I'm tired of being locked up. I'm tired of doing the things that are not of God," says Vicky Smothers, in a tearful testimonial to the congregation, a typical part of each three-hour Sunday morning service.

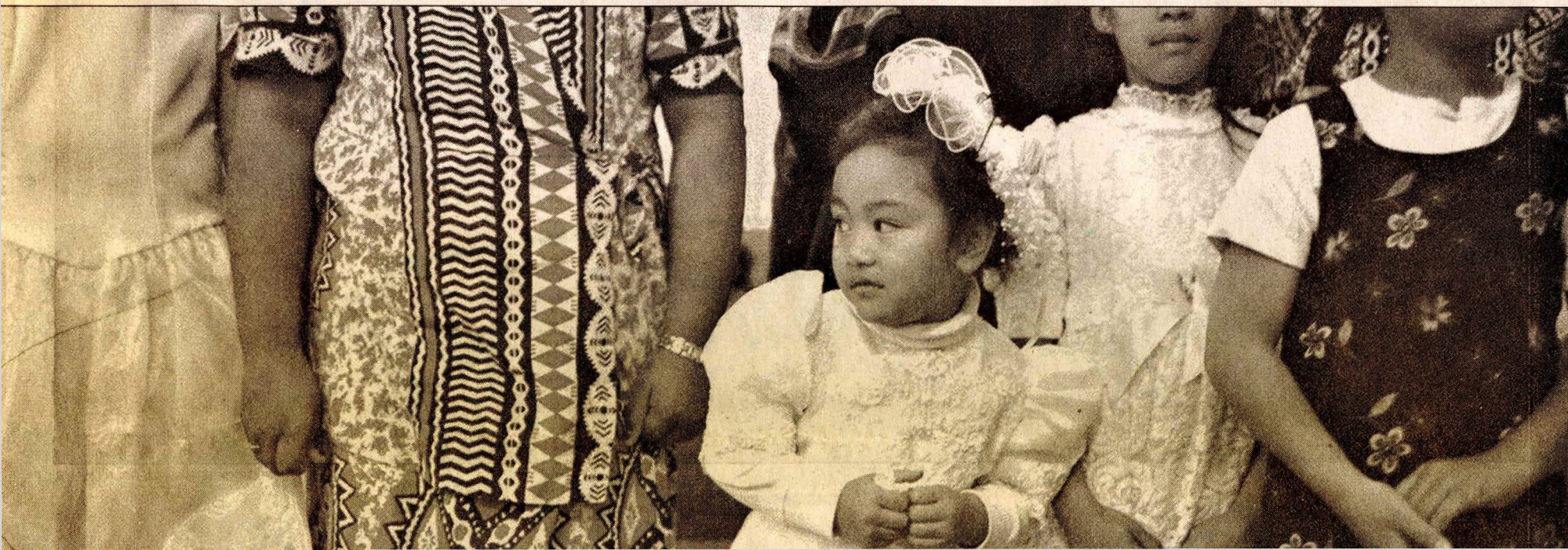
Smothers and others among the 20 or so church members cry, chant, exclaim. They are reaching out for the Lord. They are divorcing themselves from a life of drug addiction, prostitution and incarceration.

Despite that kind of talk, "No one even blinks," says the Rev. Mary Frazier, who founded the congregation after her son, a heroin addict, died of AIDS. "It's OK to say you've relapsed. ... We have people come in here under the influence and we don't kick them out."

Many members are graduates, or participants, at Free At Last, a drug recovery program that lends the church its back room on Sundays.

TOGETHER IN FAITH

PHOTOS BY PATRICK TEHAN - MERCURY NEWS





FIRST FREE WESLEYAN TONGAN CHURCH

Meleana Mataele, 3, and fellow members of the Tongan church attend a Christmas Eve service. "This is the only way we can exercise our language and our culture," said church member Sinter Uhila.



VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST CHURCH

Buddhists worship at a Sunday morning service. In the spirit of community common among churches in East Palo Alto, when members joined to build the Vietnamese Buddhist Church of America, they got unexpected aid — African-American neighbors turned out to help.



ASAMBLEA APOSTOLICA DE LA FE EN CRISTO JESUS

Parishioners bow and kneel in prayer at the Apostolic Assembly of Faith in Jesus Christ church. "The church is the most stable unit in our community," said Myrtle Walker, a city council member. "The churches provide worship, but they also provide help and comfort."

OK to say you've relapsed. . . . We have people come in here under the influence and we don't kick them out."

Many members are graduates, or participants, at Free At Last, a drug recovery program that lends the church its back room on Sundays.

Under a broken light fixture hanging by a thread from a ceiling riddled with holes, each member speaks out spontaneously, voices overlapping:

We thank you Lord for all that you do for us.

Thank you for waking us Lord.

Grant us food for this week father God.

Nobody but you Lord.

Patsy Wagner, wearing her best red dress and red shoes, tells the

group how she was arrested for what she believes were false reasons. The warrant had been cleared but she was locked up anyway until she could get the matter resolved.

A man explains that he's celebrating four years of sobriety as his contracting business grows.

Another says he's spent 22 years in jail and now he's free and a drug relapse will not get him down. "I'm recommmitting myself to this church. I'm going to be the husband I need to be," he explains.

Besides listening and praying on Sundays, the Rev. Frazier appears at the bedside of those who are in the hospital, e-mails devotional messages to some members and gets calls at odd hours from others in crisis.

Frazier began services in a Redwood City Howard Johnson's hotel. Now she meets at Free At Last and on Wednesday at the city's senior citizen center.

Church member Harry Clinton met his wife at the church as both sought to put their lives back together after years of jail time and drugs. When they got married, they went to Reno on Saturday, but they came back for the 9 a.m. Sunday service.

"This is a place where we feel good. Where we feel like things are moving forward," said Clinton, dressed in a light blue-gray suit, with a pink tie and handkerchief.

Many members are graduates, or participants, at Free At Last, a drug recovery program that lends the church its back room.