



Evangelical Churches in Dakar: Urban Implantation, Faith Commodification, and Proselytism



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Abstract

Pentecostal evangelical expansion in Dakar raises a central question about how a religious minority establishes durable social and spatial presence within a Muslim-majority urban environment. Focusing on the interaction between urban implantation, ritual practice, biblical authority, and material exchange, the analysis examines how congregations negotiate restricted access to land while developing practices that attract, organize, and sustain participants. Olivier Roy's framework of deterritorialization and reterritorialization guides a qualitative case study based on nine semi-structured interview and focus-group sessions involving 21 pastors, congregants, imams, and local residents, together with observations in twelve churches conducted in 2016. The findings show that congregations respond to difficulties in obtaining sites and permits by purchasing private property and converting rented houses into worship spaces. Their consolidation also depends on healing and deliverance prayers, thematic Bible teaching, organizational differentiation, social assistance, and offerings framed as acts of worship connected to divine blessing. Rather than treating commodification as the simple sale of religion, the analysis shows how spiritual value and material circulation become intertwined within congregational life. Evangelical implantation therefore emerges as a combined process of spatial adaptation, ritual efficacy, institutional organization, and practical responsiveness through which transnational Pentecostal formations acquire locally embedded relationships in Dakar. The case contributes to debates on religious movements by showing that expansion depends on negotiated infrastructures as much as missionary proclamation.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; religious movements; urban religion; proselytism; commodification of faith; Dakar.

Introduction

Pentecostal and evangelical expansion has become an important subject in the sociology and anthropology of religion because it brings together missionary mobility, organizational innovation, conversion, ritual experience, and competition over public space. These processes are especially visible when a religious movement grows as a minority within a field structured by long-established majority traditions. Dakar provides such a setting. Islam shapes the city's dominant religious landscape, while Catholic institutions also possess a historically established public presence. Pentecostal evangelical churches consequently develop within an environment in which formal religious freedom coexists with unequal access to recognition, land, and urban visibility.¹

¹ Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447–74; Joel Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 117–43.

The Evangelical Fraternity of Senegal describes the evangelical Pentecostal field as difficult to delimit. Congregations may be founded by pastors arriving on mission, emerge from divisions within existing churches, or operate through networks that extend beyond Senegal. The source material for this study identifies a marked presence of foreign pastors, especially from other West and Central African countries, alongside local pastors trained in Bible institutes in Dakar and Thiès. Although the largest concentration is in Dakar, evangelical communities are also reported in Thiès, Mbour, Saint-Louis, Bambey, and other localities. These churches are distinguished less by a single centralized institution than by a shared missionary orientation, charismatic worship, direct engagement with biblical texts, and an explicit commitment to evangelization.

Existing scholarship offers several points of entry into this phenomenon. Historical studies have traced Protestant missions and churches in West Africa, including missionary experiments in Senegal and Casamance. Other studies examine neo-Pentecostal theology, religious practice, church organization, media evangelization, and relationships between religion and money. Research on religion and politics further shows that religious movements cannot be understood only through doctrine; they must also be situated within configurations of authority, state power, citizenship, and public action. These approaches establish Pentecostalism as both a religious tradition and a mobile social formation capable of reorganizing authority, belonging, and everyday practice.²

For Senegal, however, the available literature remains limited in relation to the diversity of evangelical churches operating in Dakar. Samson's study of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God provides an important account of a transnational neo-Pentecostal institution in Senegal, while Fath and Mayrargue place new African Christianities within broader patterns of religious transformation. Yet the interaction among urban implantation, material exchange, ritual healing, biblical pedagogy, and conversion has received less sustained empirical attention. This gap matters because these dimensions are not separate strategies. They operate together: a congregation requires a place in the city, a language of spiritual authority, practices that respond to suffering, and forms of material solidarity capable of sustaining both members and institutions.³

The urban problem is particularly important. The source material records conflicts involving evangelical churches in several districts and towns, including Dieuppeul, Thiaroye, Yoff, Ouakam, and Kaolack. It also records stigmatizing labels applied to evangelicals, such as "communities of dancers," "lost sheep," "sects," and "freemasons." Such descriptions do not merely express theological disagreement; they locate evangelical worship outside the religious forms considered socially familiar or legitimate by surrounding communities. At the same time, Senegal's constitutional framework affirms the autonomy and freedom of religious institutions. The resulting tension is therefore not reducible to a simple opposition between legal permission and prohibition.

² J. Faure, *Histoire des missions et églises protestantes en Afrique occidentale des origines à 1884* (Yaoundé: Éditions Clé, 1978); Céline Labrune-Badiane, "La Société des Missions Évangéliques de Paris en Casamance (Sénégal), 1863/1867," *Histoires et Missions chrétiennes* 5 (2008): 125–53; Sébastien Fath, *Militants de la Bible aux États-Unis* (Paris: Autrement, 2004); M. Aubrée, "Un néo-pentecôtisme brésilien parmi les populations immigrées en Europe de l'Ouest," *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 27, no. 1 (2003): 65–84; B.-I. Jean-Marie, "L'évangélisation par les médias" (PhD diss., Université de Lyon 2, 2008); J.-F. Bayart, "Religion et politique en Afrique," *Études africaines comparées* 1 (2015): 1–23; Jean-Paul Willaime, *Sociologie du protestantisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005); L. Diouf, "Le protestantisme réformé au Sénégal" (master's thesis, Institut protestant de théologie, 2015).

³ Fabienne Samson, "L'implantation de l'Église Universelle du Royaume de Dieu au Sénégal" (paper presented at the colloquium *Néo-pentecôtismes*, Paris, 2014); Sébastien Fath and Cédric Mayrargue, "Les nouveaux christianismes en Afrique," *Afrique contemporaine* 252 (2014): 13–25. Benjamin Soares, "Reflections on Muslim–Christian Encounters in West Africa," *Africa* 86, no. 4 (2016): 673–97; Marloes Janson and Birgit Meyer, "Introduction: Towards a Framework for the Study of Christian–Muslim Encounters in Africa," *Africa* 86, no. 4 (2016): 615–19; Paul Gifford, "Religion and Politics in Contemporary Senegal," *African Affairs* 115, no. 461 (2016): 688–709.

It concerns the uneven translation of formal religious freedom into access to land, administrative information, neighborhood acceptance, and protection from hostility.⁴

A second line of inquiry concerns the relation between religious experience and material life. Healing prayer, deliverance, Bible teaching, offerings, and social assistance are central to the churches examined in this study. To describe these practices as a commodification of faith requires analytical caution. The term should not imply that religious commitment is merely purchased or that all assistance functions as calculated recruitment. Rather, commodification refers here to the ways spiritual value, material giving, promises of blessing, and institutional support become linked within an economy of religious exchange. Offerings may be represented as worship and sacrifice, while churches may redistribute resources through school fees, medical assistance, and support for vulnerable residents. The same practices can therefore be interpreted as devotion, solidarity, institutional reproduction, and proselytizing capacity.⁵

The literature also offers competing interpretations of evangelical expansion. Kepel places late-twentieth-century religious renewal within projects of re-Christianization that may seek transformation from below through disciplined communities or from above through influence over social and political order. Dreyer, by contrast, emphasizes church implantation, the search for adherents, and the adaptation of evangelization to a particular linguistic and social context. The Dakar material is closer to the second emphasis, but it also shows why the distinction is incomplete. Congregations seek converts and adapt to local conditions, yet their departments, social programs, and claims to public recognition also aim to reshape the terms on which evangelical Christianity participates in Senegalese society. Expansion is thus simultaneously missionary, organizational, and public.⁶

Olivier Roy's account of deterritorialization and reterritorialization provides the principal conceptual frame for interpreting these dynamics. Roy argues that contemporary religion can become detached from an inherited cultural territory and subsequently be reconstructed through portable norms, networks, and communities of converts. In Dakar, evangelical churches are deterritorialized through missionary circulation and transnational pastoral networks, yet they are also reterritorialized through rented houses, purchased plots, neighborhood relations, ritual schedules, and locally trained leaders. Territory is therefore not merely the physical site of a chapel. It is produced through the interaction of buildings, congregations, religious authority, and relationships with surrounding communities.⁷

This article asks: how do Pentecostal evangelical churches establish and consolidate themselves in Dakar despite their minority position within a Muslim-majority religious environment? It examines three connected dimensions: access to urban space, ritual and biblical modes of evangelization, and the relationship between offerings, social assistance, and conversion. The article argues that evangelical implantation is achieved through a combined process of spatial

⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Senegal, January 22, 2001, provision concerning religions and religious communities. See also Paul Gifford, "Religion and Politics in Contemporary Senegal," *African Affairs* 115, no. 461 (2016): 688–709; Benjamin Soares, "Reflections on Muslim–Christian Encounters in West Africa," *Africa* 86, no. 4 (2016): 673–97.

⁵ David Maxwell, "'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 350–73; Devaka Premawardhana, "Transformational Tithing: Sacrifice and Reciprocity in a Neo-Pentecostal Church," *Nova Religio* 15, no. 4 (2012): 85–109; Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Pentecostal Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria: Paradoxes of Corruption and Inequality," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 59, no. 1 (2021): 103–22.

⁶ Gilles Kepel, *La revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991), 175; A. Dreyer, "L'implantation et le développement de l'Église Baptiste de Trois Rivières: 1966–2006" (master's thesis, Université du Québec, 2008).

⁷ Olivier Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture* (Paris: Seuil, 2008). For a related account of the mediation of transnational and local Pentecostal forms, see Ruth Marshall-Fratani, "Mediating the Global and Local in Nigerian Pentecostalism," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 278–315.

adaptation and practical religious responsiveness. Churches compensate for restricted institutional access by using private property and rental markets; they generate authority through healing prayer and direct biblical teaching; and they create durable relationships through material support and a theology of giving. These strategies do not eliminate conflict or inequality, but they allow transnational religious forms to acquire local social roots.

Method

This study uses a qualitative case-study approach grounded in the sociology and anthropology of religion. The empirical material was collected in Dakar in 2016 through nine semi-structured interview and focus-group sessions involving a total of 21 participants. The participants included pastors, congregants, imams, and residents living near the churches. Life-history narratives were also elicited where they helped clarify trajectories of religious affiliation, illness, assistance, and conversion.

Fieldwork covered twelve Pentecostal churches located in Yoff, Amitié, Ouakam, Keur Massar, Bargny, Parcelles Assainies, Liberté 1, Dieuppeul, Liberté 6, Grand Yoff, Niary Tally, and Maristes. In situ observation of Sunday services and other church activities was used to document worship, prayer, preaching, offerings, organizational roles, and interactions among participants. The study also drew on statements attributed to the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture and on publicly circulated accounts of disputes involving evangelical churches.

For analysis, the material was organized around four themes that emerged from the research question and the structure of the field evidence: strategies of spatial implantation; administrative and neighborhood constraints; ritual and biblical practices of evangelization; and material exchange through offerings and social assistance. Roy's deterritorialization/reterritorialization framework was used to connect missionary circulation with the production of local religious space. Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence and the literature on sacrifice, emotion, and Pentecostal sociality were used selectively to interpret ritual intensity and giving. The analysis distinguishes participants' perceptions of unequal treatment from independently established administrative facts; where the data record an allegation or interpretation, it is presented as such rather than as a verified institutional policy.⁸

The unit of analysis is the set of practices through which congregations seek durable presence, rather than the individual church as a statistically representative institution. Quotations were selected because they clarify recurring themes in the field material, not because they measure their frequency. The findings should therefore be read as an interpretive account of mechanisms and meanings across the selected sites. They identify how participants understand implantation, healing, biblical authority, and assistance, while leaving the prevalence of each practice for future comparative research.

Results and Discussion

The findings show that the expansion of evangelical churches in Dakar depends on more than missionary preaching. It involves the construction of organizations, the negotiation of urban space, the production of ritual efficacy, and the circulation of material resources. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. A rented house becomes a chapel because a congregation can organize worship within it; healing and Bible teaching attract participants; offerings sustain activities; and social assistance extends the church's relationships beyond its formal membership.

⁸ Olivier Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture* (Paris: Seuil, 2008); Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 5th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003); Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice," *Sociétés* 107, no. 1 (2010): 63–71; Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Françoise Champion, eds., *De l'émotion en religion: Renouveaux et traditions* (Paris: Centurion, 1990).

Transnational Mission and Local Organizational Implantation

The churches examined in this study form part of a wider missionary field linking Senegal with Canada and several West and Central African countries, including Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Foreign and Senegalese pastors work within the same religious environment, while Bible institutes in Dakar and Thiès contribute to the training of local leaders. This combination allows congregations to present themselves as locally rooted churches even when their founders, liturgical styles, or institutional networks are transnational.⁹

Missionary actors often describe Senegal as a field in which Christian evangelization remains incomplete. Their response is to establish new congregations, train pastors, and create programs that address spiritual and social needs. Some missionaries also enter public life through professional activities or development projects. These arrangements provide practical legitimacy and relationships beyond the church, but they also show that evangelization is embedded in wider forms of mobility and service. The religious movement is therefore neither simply foreign nor fully detached from Senegalese society. It becomes local through the recruitment of Senegalese members, the training of national pastors, and the adaptation of worship to the concerns expressed by participants.

Organizationally, the congregations generally include a senior pastor assisted by other pastors, deacons, elders, and an administrator. Church councils oversee departments responsible for evangelization, training, strategic development, gender, youth, early childhood, intercession, communication, reception, protocol, and maintenance. Such differentiation is significant because it converts charismatic initiative into an institutional structure capable of reproducing the movement. The congregation is not sustained by preaching alone: it requires administrative work, leadership succession, ritual scheduling, communication, and care for particular groups. This organizational capacity helps explain how relatively small churches can claim a national mission and maintain regular activities in multiple districts.¹⁰

Sub-regional migration provides both personnel and an initial constituency for this organizational work. The source manuscript associates several chapels with neighborhoods in which foreign students, civil servants, traders, and migrants reside, including Dieuppeul, Ouakam, Keur Massar, Parcelles Assainies, Amitié, and Fass. These mobile populations bring religious practices and networks formed elsewhere, but their congregations cannot survive by serving foreigners alone. Pastors therefore seek Senegalese adherents, teach in the local French-speaking environment, and recruit residents into leadership and service roles. Reterritorialization occurs when a movement carried by migration becomes embedded in neighborhood routines and family relationships rather than remaining an expatriate enclave.

The internal departments also create differentiated points of entry into the church. Women's associations, youth groups, early-childhood activities, training programs, and reception teams enable participants to belong through roles that are not limited to listening to sermons. This distribution of responsibility broadens the social base of the movement and gives lay members opportunities to acquire religious competence and public recognition. It also reduces dependence on a single charismatic pastor, although pastoral authority remains central. In organizational terms, implantation is therefore a process of converting temporary attendance into repeated

⁹ Ruth Marshall-Fratani, "Mediating the Global and Local in Nigerian Pentecostalism," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 278–315; Robbins, "Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," 117–43.

¹⁰ Marian Burchardt, "'We Are Saving the Township': Pentecostalism, Faith-Based Organisations, and Development in South Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 4 (2013): 627–51.

participation, delegated responsibility, and a shared claim that the congregation represents a durable Christian presence in Senegal.

Negotiating Land, Rental, and Urban Recognition

Access to land is one of the clearest constraints on evangelical implantation. Pastors seek sites because a permanent building signifies stability, visibility, and institutional recognition. Yet land in Dakar is scarce and costly, and sites designated for worship are subject to urban-planning rules. The churches studied consequently relied mainly on two routes: purchasing private property and renting houses that could be adapted for worship. Participants interpreted these strategies not simply as market choices but as responses to unequal access to land allocated for religious institutions.¹¹

One participant described the problem in explicitly comparative terms:

To tell the truth, it is difficult because often, when there is a new neighborhood where places of worship are planned, Muslims take the available space. It is therefore not easy to find a building plot. Places for churches are often not provided. That is why many churches are housed in rented houses. (J-M, 59, head of the women's association, Evangelical Church of Amitié 2)

The statement presents rental as a consequence of exclusion from formal channels of religious land allocation. It should nevertheless be read as the participant's perception of the allocation process rather than as sufficient evidence of a uniform state policy. The material attributed to the Department of Urban Planning and Architecture indicates a more complex situation: some applications were rejected because proposed worship sites did not comply with planning standards, particularly where residential property was being converted to collective religious use. The difficulty therefore arises from an interaction among scarcity, regulatory requirements, limited representation, and perceived confessional inequality.

Members of the church council in Amitié 3 similarly argued that evangelical churches lacked representation in the institutions through which information about new development and religious sites circulated:

We see that Catholics and Muslims appropriate the available space, while the evangelical church does not benefit from it. There is no equitable distribution because we are not represented in the bodies where new allocations are discussed. We therefore cannot apply at the same stage, even though the state guarantees that places of worship may be established. Evangelical churches are unable to obtain land on an equitable basis. (Focus group, Amitié 3 church council)

This account connects spatial inequality to informational and institutional exclusion. The central issue is not only ownership but participation in urban decision-making. When churches lack early knowledge of development plans or do not have recognized representatives in relevant administrative networks, the rental market becomes the most immediate route to implantation. Renting also has advantages: it permits rapid entry into a neighborhood and reduces the initial cost of construction. At the same time, it creates vulnerability because houses may not comply with the requirements for public assembly, congregations may face complaints about noise and traffic, and tenancy does not provide long-term security.¹²

The conversion of houses into chapels is also a form of religious reterritorialization. A domestic building acquires a new social function through repeated worship, signs, music, prayer meetings, and the movement of congregants. This produces what Lasseur describes as a pluralization of West African urban religious geography. Evangelical presence may remain architecturally discreet, but

¹¹ Marian Burchardt, "Infrastructuring Religion: Materiality and Meaning in Ordinary Urbanism," *Space and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2023): 180–91.

¹² Burchardt, "Infrastructuring Religion," 180–91.

it becomes socially visible through ritual activity. The city is consequently not divided only among officially designated mosques, churches, and secular buildings. Religious space is continually produced inside properties originally intended for other uses.¹³

A church council described what it regarded as unequal public support:

Most of our land has been bought and monetized, while Muslims and Catholics have easier access to construction sites. We also see other places of worship receiving advantages that we do not receive. Some mosques and Catholic churches benefit from privileges relating to electricity, while we pay our bills. Yet the church undertakes social action in education and health and contributes to the country's development. We feel that the authorities recognize the Catholic entity more readily than evangelical churches. (Focus group, Amitié 3 church council)

The evidentiary value of this statement lies in the experience of administrative marginality expressed by participants. The field material does not establish the full distribution of electricity subsidies or land privileges across Dakar, and the claim therefore requires institutional verification before it can be generalized. Analytically, however, the perception itself matters. It shapes how evangelical leaders understand their minority position and justifies efforts to acquire private property, formalize organizations, and publicize social contributions.

Private ownership can also emerge through individual initiative. A pastor in Amitié 2 explained that the congregation's site had originally been the residence of an earlier pastor, who purchased it through the housing system and later transferred it to the church:

This was the home of the first pastor. I think he bought it through the HLM system. The land became his personal property, and he eventually transferred it to the church. Dakar is fragmented and all available land has owners. It is very difficult for us to obtain a site. (Pastor, 46, Amitié 2)

The transfer converted private property into collective religious infrastructure. It also demonstrates the importance of personal resources and leadership networks in the institutionalization of a movement. Where formal allocation is inaccessible or slow, individual ownership can create a durable base. Yet this strategy may blur boundaries between pastoral property and congregational assets unless transfer and governance are clearly documented.

The consequences of insecure implantation extend beyond inconvenience. The source material refers to threats, closures, and destruction involving evangelical churches, as well as disputes with surrounding residents. Ndiaye argued that administrative and political authorities had failed to respond adequately to threats circulated against pastors and congregations and called for solidarity among Christian institutions. Whether every reported incident had the same causes cannot be established from the available material. Still, the accounts reveal a recurring problem: legal freedom of worship does not automatically guarantee neighborhood acceptance, compliant premises, or effective protection. Evangelical churches therefore negotiate urban space through a mixture of regulation, market access, personal property, public advocacy, and everyday relations with local residents.¹⁴

These everyday relations are especially important when worship takes place in a house. A residence converted into a chapel introduces collective singing, amplified preaching, repeated weekly gatherings, and a flow of visitors into a space shared with neighbors. The same features that make Pentecostal worship attractive to participants may be perceived by residents as noise, congestion, or an unauthorized change of land use. Conflict should therefore not automatically be interpreted as religious persecution, even though religious prejudice may be present. The field

¹³ Maud Lasseur, "Le pluralisme religieux dans la production des villes ouest-africaines," *Géoconfluences* (2016): 1–8. See also Marian Burchardt, "Infrastructuring Religion: Materiality and Meaning in Ordinary Urbanism," *Space and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2023): 180–91.

¹⁴ F.-B. Ndiaye, "Violences contre les chrétiens évangéliques: La Fraternité évangélique du Sénégal réagit," *L'ORACLE* 25 (2011).

evidence points instead to an overlap among confessional tension, urban density, planning compliance, and competing expectations about neighborhood life. Durable implantation requires churches to negotiate all four dimensions rather than relying on constitutional guarantees alone.¹⁵

Healing Prayer and Ritual Efficacy

Healing prayer is one of the most visible ways in which the churches connect religious authority to everyday suffering. The prayer programs observed during fieldwork organized spiritual activity around practical concerns. Different days could be assigned to financial difficulties, deliverance, work, Bible teaching, witchcraft, intimate relationships, and collective Sunday prayer. Such schedules transform broad theological claims into a regular service structure through which participants can present specific problems.¹⁶

Table 1 summarizes a weekly program displayed in one of the churches visited. During healing sessions, pastors invoked biblical language, the blood of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and images of fire to address illness, poverty, family conflict, delayed marriage, and perceived spiritual attack. The following field excerpt illustrates this rhetoric:

Table 1. Weekly Prayer Themes Observed in a Dakar Pentecostal Church

Day	Prayer or Teaching Theme
Monday	Financial concerns
Tuesday	Deliverance prayers
Wednesday	Employment and work
Thursday	Bible teaching
Friday	Prayers against witchcraft
Saturday	Relationships and intimate concerns
Sunday	Major collective prayer

Source: Field survey, 2016.

The language of the prayer constructs suffering as a field of spiritual conflict. Physical pain, economic hardship, and interpersonal discord are interpreted through a shared vocabulary of obstruction, demonic force, and deliverance. The pastor's speech is performative: it does not merely explain the cause of suffering but announces its defeat. This form of authority depends on the congregation's participation through repetition, raised hands, movement, music, and testimony.

¹⁵ Burchardt, "Infrastructuring Religion," 180–91; Benjamin Soares, "Reflections on Muslim–Christian Encounters in West Africa," *Africa* 86, no. 4 (2016): 673–97.

¹⁶ Daniel Wroe, "Miraculous Healing in Rural Malawi: Between 'Grace' and 'Work'," *Africa* 87, no. 4 (2017): 806–31; Birgit Meyer, "'Make a Complete Break with the Past': Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 316–49.

Box 1. Healing Litany at Betel Church, Dieppeul

Who is behind you? Who prevents you from facing your destiny? Is there anyone who opposes your marriage? By the blood of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and by the spirit of fire, the problems of your life must be settled this morning. If there is an altar of serpents around you, it must be destroyed by the fire of the Holy Spirit. If you have the serpent of poverty or the serpent of discord in your family, receive the spirit of fire to deliver you. By the blood of Jesus, I send fire into the head to heal headaches. I send fire against the spirit of evil, delay, and failure to free you.

Source: Field survey, 2016.

A typical session began with a greeting and explanation of the prayer sequence. The pastor then addressed God with raised arms and forceful bodily movement, while the congregation repeated prayers and praise. Participants were asked to close their eyes, and the pastor moved among them, placed a hand on their heads, and invoked deliverance. Music and dance frequently concluded the session. Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence helps interpret the intensified emotional and bodily experience produced when participants gather around a shared action and representation. The concept does not establish the truth or falsity of healing claims; it identifies the social conditions through which confidence, emotion, and collective belonging become mutually reinforcing.¹⁷

Field testimony also shows how healing narratives can become pathways into a congregation. One woman in Keur Massar described longstanding head and back pain after an accident, limited access to medical testing because of financial and family constraints, and an experience of relief during worship. Her account is reproduced below as a statement of religious experience rather than medical verification.¹⁸

The testimony links bodily relief with a renewed capacity to trust God. Its importance for the movement lies in the way a personal experience can be narrated publicly as evidence of pastoral authority and divine action. Such accounts circulate within worship and social networks, making healing simultaneously an individual interpretation and a means of evangelization. Aubrée's work on neo-Pentecostalism similarly shows that churches respond to infertility, depression, marital difficulty, sadness, and despair through ritual and communal forms of care.¹⁹

Healing sessions also connect ritual efficacy to the wider economy of congregational participation. The source material notes that offerings were often collected near the emotional climax of services, after collective prayer, song, dance, and testimonies of deliverance. This sequence does not by itself demonstrate manipulation. It does, however, show that giving is embedded in an atmosphere in which participants experience gratitude, relief, and heightened solidarity. The movement from prayer to testimony and offering links the body, the congregation, and the institution: participants receive attention and hope, publicly affirm divine action, and contribute to the continuation of the church. Ritual and material exchange are therefore analytically distinct but practically intertwined.

¹⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 5th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2003), 308, 553. For comparative discussion of Pentecostal healing, see Daniel Wroe, "Miraculous Healing in Rural Malawi: Between 'Grace' and 'Work'," *Africa* 87, no. 4 (2017): 806–31.

¹⁸ Wroe, "Miraculous Healing in Rural Malawi," 806–31; Harri Englund, "Pentecostalism Beyond Belief: Trust and Democracy in a Malawian Township," *Africa* 77, no. 4 (2007): 477–99.

¹⁹ Aubrée, "Un néo-pentecôtisme brésilien," 65–84. See also Daniel Wroe, "Miraculous Healing in Rural Malawi," 806–31; Harri Englund, "Pentecostalism Beyond Belief: Trust and Democracy in a Malawian Township," *Africa* 77, no. 4 (2007): 477–99.

Box 2. A Congregant's Account of Healing in Keur Massar

For ten years I had pain in my head and back after an accident. Medicine gave temporary relief, but medical tests required money that I did not have while caring for three children. One Sunday I went to church. During the long period of singing, the pastor said, "If you are in pain and you are here, I will heal you." I felt warmth pass through my body from head to toe. I felt relieved and the pain was gone. The experience seemed strange to me, but I felt that God had restored my health without payment.

Source: Field survey, 2016; testimony edited for clarity without changing its substantive meaning.

The churches sometimes claimed that divine healing could address serious illnesses. These claims must be attributed to the religious actors and should not be read as clinical evidence or as a substitute for medical care. Sociologically, their significance lies in the practical expectations they generate. For participants who face economic barriers, delayed treatment, or persistent suffering, the chapel offers an immediately accessible space of attention, explanation, and hope. Conversion may follow not because doctrinal persuasion precedes experience, but because ritual participation creates a relationship with the pastor and congregation. Healing is therefore both a religious end and a mode of incorporation into the movement.

Biblical Authority, Organization, and Mission

Evangelical proselytism also rests on direct access to the Bible. In the churches observed, participants held, read, discussed, and interpreted biblical texts together with pastors. Authority was consequently presented as grounded in scripture rather than monopolized by a separate priestly institution. This orientation corresponds to Willaime's characterization of Protestantism as a tradition combining emotional religion with a capacity for protest against established religious mediation.²⁰

Sermons were frequently organized thematically and adapted to current concerns. Biblical teaching addressed employment, marriage, illness, family conflict, spiritual danger, and personal success. The relevance of the text was therefore produced through its application to ordinary life. Participants could testify, learn to pray, study the Bible, and, within the church's charismatic framework, seek spiritual gifts regardless of social status. This relative accessibility supports the movement's claim that religious truth is available to all believers.

A pastor described evangelization as obedience to a biblical command:

We obey the command of Christ to go into the world and preach to all nations. Our responsibility is to preach the Gospel because Jesus gave this instruction to the disciples. It is therefore obedience to our Lord Jesus. (Pastor, 46, Amitié 2)

The statement frames missionary action as a duty rather than a discretionary institutional program. This matters because it authorizes expansion even where evangelization may generate social tension. The pastor acts not simply as an organizational entrepreneur but as an agent accountable to a divine mandate. At the same time, the movement's capacity to translate this mandate into sustained expansion depends on mundane structures: councils, departments, training, communications, and the regular distribution of Bibles.

Interviews with Catholic participants suggested that some perceived evangelical pastors as providing more sustained biblical instruction than priests in Catholic parishes. The field material also indicates that Bibles were sometimes distributed without charge by evangelical churches.

²⁰ Willaime, *Sociologie du protestantisme*. See also Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447–74.

These practices can attract Christians who seek intensive scriptural study, but the evidence does not justify treating all Catholic-to-evangelical movement as the result of a single strategy. What can be established is that direct biblical pedagogy offers an alternative source of authority. Within the Protestant lineage represented here, legitimacy is produced through the pastor's capacity to interpret scripture in ways that participants regard as immediate, comprehensible, and relevant.

The comparison with Catholic practice must also be handled carefully. The interviews report participants' evaluations of particular priests, pastors, and congregations; they do not provide a systematic comparison of Catholic and Protestant biblical education across Dakar. Their analytical importance lies in the contrast through which evangelical identity is constructed. Pastors present the Bible as directly accessible, thematically adaptable, and usable by ordinary believers, while Catholic authority is portrayed by some respondents as more institutionally mediated. This contrast may simplify both traditions, but it supplies evangelical churches with a persuasive narrative of religious authenticity. Conversion is encouraged not only by disagreement with Catholic doctrine but by the experience of being able to read, discuss, and apply scripture within an interactive community.

Offerings, Social Assistance, and the Commodification of Faith

Money occupies an ambivalent place in the churches studied. Offerings are institutional resources, acts of worship, and signs of commitment, but they may also be connected in preaching to expectations of blessing and success. Field observation showed that offerings were commonly placed in a box or collected in envelopes. The amounts varied greatly. Some participants in relatively secure professions reportedly gave cheques between 200,000 and 500,000 CFA francs, while students, teachers, and less affluent participants gave smaller notes and coins, including amounts of 5,000 or 10,000 CFA francs.²¹

The meaning of these transactions cannot be reduced to payment for a religious service. Aubrée interprets offerings as a type of contract between the believer and the divinity, while Hubert and Mauss provide the broader category of the sacrifice-contract. In the churches observed, pastors emphasized that the offering was not a tax but a voluntary and joyful participation in worship and congregational life. Prayer and song introduced the collection, and biblical passages were cited to connect generosity with grace, sufficiency, and blessing.²²

The scriptural passages used during fieldwork are summarized in Box 3. They encourage giving from personal conviction, identify generosity with participation in divine grace, and present the honoring of God through material resources as a path toward abundance. In this sense, commodification does not mean that faith is openly sold at a fixed price. It refers to a religious economy in which spiritual promises and material acts become mutually interpretable. The believer's gift supports the church, demonstrates trust, and may be understood as opening the giver to blessing.

²¹ Maxwell, "'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?'," 350–73; Premawardhana, "Transformational Tithing," 85–109; Smith, "Pentecostal Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria," 103–22.

²² Aubrée, "Un néo-pentecôtisme brésilien"; Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice," *Sociétés* 107, no. 1 (2010): 63–71. For a comparative analysis of sacrifice, reciprocity, and prosperity-oriented giving, see Devaka Premawardhana, "Transformational Tithing: Sacrifice and Reciprocity in a Neo-Pentecostal Church," *Nova Religio* 15, no. 4 (2012): 85–109; David Maxwell, "'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?': Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 350–73.

Box 3. Biblical Passages Used to Frame Offerings as Worship

“As you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness, and love—excel also in this work of grace” (2 Corinthians 8:7, 9). “Let each one give as resolved in the heart, without sadness or constraint, for God loves a joyful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7–8). “There is more happiness in giving than in receiving” (Acts 20:35). “Honor the Lord by offering a share of your income and the best of your harvests; then your barns will be filled” (Proverbs 3:9).

Source: The Bible; field survey at the Protestant Church of Ouakam, 2016.

The same economy includes redistribution. Interviews indicated that churches provided assistance to people in precarious circumstances, including individuals who were not evangelical. An imam in Amitié 2 reported seeing church representatives give women envelopes containing between 10,000 and 30,000 CFA francs. A pastor described more substantial interventions:

Muslims and Catholics come to us for financial support. People in poverty tell us about their situation. We have paid school fees for children whose parents are Muslim. In another case, a woman needed an operation, and we provided about 700,000 CFA francs for it. (Pastor, 65, Amitié 2)

The account presents assistance as interreligious social action. School fees and medical expenses respond to immediate needs that neither doctrinal teaching nor ritual prayer can resolve on their own. Laurent’s study of Assemblies of God communities in Burkina Faso similarly emphasizes the importance of religious belonging as a resource for survival under social and economic uncertainty. In Dakar, the church may function as a network through which vulnerable people obtain attention, referrals, or direct financial support.²³

Assistance can also expand the church’s relational field. Recipients encounter pastors and members, learn about worship activities, and may subsequently participate in the congregation. This does not prove that every act of giving is conditional on conversion, and the pastor’s statement explicitly includes support for Muslims and Catholics. Nevertheless, social assistance increases the movement’s public credibility and establishes ties through which evangelization can occur. Religious solidarity and proselytism should therefore not be treated as mutually exclusive explanations; the same act may be experienced as compassion by the giver, material relief by the recipient, and an opening for future religious contact.²⁴

Hervieu-Léger and Champion emphasize the priority given in contemporary religious renewal to individual experience and the expression of emotion over inherited and highly organized forms of religious life. The Dakar material adds a material dimension to this argument. Participants are attracted not only by expressive worship but also by the possibility of addressing work, health, family, and financial insecurity within a single religious institution. The chapel brings together prayer, interpersonal support, scriptural interpretation, and practical assistance. This combination contributes to what the source manuscript calls “religion à la carte,” although the expression should not be taken to mean that commitment is necessarily superficial. Rather, individuals encounter a repertoire of practices through which they can seek meaning, healing, belonging, and material support.²⁵

²³ Pierre-Joseph Laurent, “L’Église des Assemblées de Dieu du Burkina-Faso,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 105 (1999): 71–97. See also Marian Burchardt, “‘We Are Saving the Township’: Pentecostalism, Faith-Based Organisations, and Development in South Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 4 (2013): 627–51; Kate Meagher, “Trading on Faith: Religious Movements and Informal Economic Governance in Nigeria,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 3 (2009): 397–423.

²⁴ Burchardt, “‘We Are Saving the Township,’” 627–51; Kate Meagher, “Trading on Faith: Religious Movements and Informal Economic Governance in Nigeria,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 3 (2009): 397–423.

²⁵ Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Françoise Champion, eds., *De l’émotion en religion: Renouveaux et traditions* (Paris: Centurion, 1990).

The movement's expansion across Dakar should consequently be understood as confessional competition grounded in everyday usefulness as much as in doctrinal difference. Congregations such as the Assemblies of God and the Temple of the Nations situate themselves within neighborhoods inhabited by Senegalese residents, civil servants, migrants, and foreign students. Their capacity to endure depends on whether they can transform temporary missionary presence into stable local relationships. Offerings, assistance, and ritual services contribute to that transformation by connecting institutional survival with the practical concerns of members and neighbors.²⁶

The material dimension also helps explain why conversion cannot be reduced to a single moment of doctrinal change. Contact may begin through a prayer meeting, a free Bible, assistance with school fees, a visit during illness, or an invitation from a migrant acquaintance. Participation can then intensify through repeated worship, testimony, and membership in a department or small network within the church. Conversion is therefore better understood here as a relational process in which spiritual conviction develops alongside trust in people and institutions. This does not make belief insincere; it identifies the social conditions through which a new religious identity becomes plausible and sustainable.²⁷

At the same time, the evidence does not establish how frequently recipients of assistance became members, whether offerings were systematically linked to prosperity claims across all twelve churches, or how congregational finances were audited. A strong claim that churches simply purchase converts would therefore exceed the data. The more defensible conclusion is that material practices enlarge the movement's capacity to attract, retain, and care for participants. Commodification names the linkage of spiritual and material value, while conversion remains contingent on personal experience, social relationships, and continuing participation.

Conclusion

This study asked how Pentecostal evangelical churches establish and consolidate themselves in Dakar despite their minority position. The evidence shows that implantation results from the combination of spatial adaptation, religious authority, and material responsiveness. When direct access to designated worship sites is limited, congregations purchase private property or convert rented houses into chapels. They generate authority through healing prayer, deliverance, direct Bible teaching, and a missionary theology that treats evangelization as a divine obligation. They also sustain relationships through offerings and social assistance. Together, these practices reterritorialize transnational Pentecostal forms within the neighborhoods of Dakar.

The findings also complicate a purely negative understanding of commodification. Offerings are linked to promises of blessing and institutional survival, but financial exchange is not one-directional. Churches redistribute resources through school fees, medical assistance, and support for people outside their formal membership. Material exchange therefore operates simultaneously as worship, solidarity, institutional reproduction, and a possible channel of proselytism. The boundaries among these functions cannot always be separated from the available testimony.

The study has several limitations. The fieldwork was conducted in 2016 and covers twelve churches and 21 participants, so it cannot represent all evangelical congregations in Dakar or current conditions without updated research. The participant categories are identified, but the available material does not provide a complete demographic breakdown or a detailed account of the duration of observation. Several claims about land allocation, electricity privileges, and official

²⁶ Soares, "Reflections on Muslim-Christian Encounters," 673–97; Meagher, "Trading on Faith," 397–423.

²⁷ Michal Kravel-Tovi, "Making a Difference: The Political Life of Religious Conversion," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (2023): 19–37; Englund, "Pentecostalism Beyond Belief," 477–99.

inaction reflect participants' perceptions and were not tested through a systematic comparison of administrative records across religious institutions. Healing narratives likewise document religious interpretations of bodily change rather than medically verified outcomes.

Future research should revisit these congregations through longitudinal fieldwork, compare evangelical access to urban space with that of Muslim and Catholic institutions, and analyze municipal records on permits, land allocation, and complaints. Further work could also examine gender and generational differences in conversion, follow the financial circulation of offerings and assistance, and compare Dakar with other West African cities. Such research would clarify how minority religious movements move from temporary urban presence to durable institutional and social recognition.

Generative AI Usage Statement

OpenAI ChatGPT was used to support language editing, paragraph restructuring, citation-format conversion, and editorial preparation. All sources, substantive claims, interpretations, and revisions were reviewed under human editorial supervision, and the authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, argumentation, citations, and ethical integrity of the manuscript. No synthetic or AI-generated research data were used.

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