

Ay-men!

It is Sunday morning and at the Donaldson Young Men's Christian Centre in Orlando East, Soweto, people hurriedly file into the hall. They are members of the Faithways Community Church, started and run by the one-time Urban Bantu Council (UBC) chief and Soweto mayor in the dark 1980s, David Thebehali.

Inside, the stage is crowded with choristers in white, leading the congregation in ecstatic singing. They could have been transported from the rural American south, their style is pure African-American gospel. Their voices are amplified by a microphone and they stamp their feet and raise their hands to the heavens.

Below the stage are Pastor Thebehali and the church elders, also on their feet singing, microphones in hand. One by one, the congregants rise to join the dancing and singing, shouting "Amen!" and "Hallelujah!"

We are very far from the hushed voices, sedentary prayers read out of a book and age-old, structured rituals of the mainstream churches. Everyone seems to be in a trance.

On weekdays, the Orlando community uses the hall for conferences and ballroom dancing. It is also home to the Orlando Pirates Football Club. On Sundays, it is a magnet for people who need Thebehali's hot-gospelling, holy-rolling style of worship. They claim to have found salvation and, although the average age is well over 40, there are plenty of young people too.

Thirty years ago, Thebehali sat on a high chair in the UBC chambers in Soweto. Seen as an apartheid puppet, he was one of the township's most hated figures. Today, he has been more than rehabilitated. His church has branches in Booyens, Randfontein, Kagiso and Magaliesburg, even though most of his followers are from Soweto.

He says his church is founded on the three pillars of the charismatic, pentecostal and evangelical traditions. "It is charismatic because we believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, pentecostal because of the pentecostal spirit in the believers and evangelical because we preach. We are doers of the word, not just hearers."

Thebehali emphasises the joyful, affirming character of the worship. "We are in sync with God because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. The sense of guilt must be done away with."

In Pimville Zone One, the same revivalist upsurge is evident. Here stands the biggest church in Soweto. The Grace Bible Church opened its doors in September 2002 and can accommodate 5 000 worshippers. Despite this, there is hardly standing room left this morning.

The congregation consists mostly of young adults who, judging from the number of flashy cars parked

outside, are well heeled. Following the American example, no contradiction is seen between worship and Mammon—the church has a kiosk where copies of sermons, T-shirts and caps with church logos are sold.

The pastor and founder, Mosa Sono, behaves like the CEO of a major corporation. To get an interview with him, one has to send questions in advance.

The dress code is casual, even Sono is in shirtsleeves, and the choir stands behind the flags of the church and South Africa, informally but decently dressed. Loud “Amen!” punctuate the sermon and the parishioners shout and sing as the spirit moves them.

Said one congregant, a marketing executive who drives a luxury German sedan: “I came to the church when my marriage was on the rocks and I’ve never looked back. I found peace here.”

The worshippers are clearly looking for red-blooded spiritual sustenance and a religious practice they can relate to. Former Soweto high school teacher Nonki Phefo said she left the Catholic Church because she was fed up with the “kissing of pictures and burning of incense”.

“Someone invited me to Thebehali’s church. At first I wasn’t comfortable in a church founded by someone I knew, I felt I was worshipping him. I was dizzy and confused, but gradually I found myself connecting with God. This church teaches one how to pray. You won’t believe that in January we start reading the Bible from Genesis and by December we are at Revelations. We read four chapters a day.”

Dikeledi Mabandla left the Anglican Church to join an apostolic faith church led by a woman pastor. “I left the Anglican Church because I felt my soul was empty; now I’ve found fulfilment. These white churches don’t teach about repentance and they don’t teach a person how to pray.”

Mabandla suggests the egalitarian culture of the evangelical churches partly explains their growing popularity. “I was such an active Anglican, yet, when my parents died, nobody came to the funeral. I saw this happening to other church members who were nobodies, while the elders were at the beck and call of the prominent members of the congregation. I realised one had to be so-and-so to get the church’s attention.”

Mabel Morapeli said she moved from church to church in search of God before joining the Holy Jerusalem Church in Jabulani. “These white churches are cold. You feel it when you’re inside and there’s no connection with God. You sit and listen to some Bible text prescribed by someone in Rome and a prayer composed donkey’s years ago. Where I am, I’ve found spiritual fulfilment. We aren’t taught how to pray through a book; the pastor and the elders show us how to pray.”

The emphasis on repentance and “walking the talk” also appear to be key attractions. “We are taught to repent in the way you feel when you know you’ve done something you’re not supposed to do as God’s child. You live your faith,” said Morapeli.

But not everyone approves. One apostolic worshipper, critical of the charismatic churches, slated “their holier-than-thou attitude”.

“They think they’re the only real Christians. They’re so judgemental. They rebuke other faiths and call them ‘demonic,’” she said.

For Anglican priest Joe Mdhlela, the flight to the charismatic churches is ultimately about the material aspirations and insecurities of black South Africans. “These are people who believe religion will solve all their problems. Their leaders believe in what is termed ‘prosperity theology’, a strong force in American churches.”

But, Mdhlela conceded, the established churches need to address the spiritual thirst of Africans through a relevant liturgy.

Lutheran priest Molefe Tsele, also the South African Council of Churches’ general secretary, said evangelical worship is attractive to younger people, but it is the black middle class in particular which is flocking to them. In part, they are drawn by the American-style gospel singing and the fact that most of the ministers preach in English. But they are also looking for family and career security.