

# Welcoming the Stranger in NYC

From a quiet town near the shore of Lake Erie, Pastor David Hernquist moved his family to the crowded urban streets of New York City to begin a new pastorate at Van Nest Assembly of God in the Bronx. Little did he realize then how God would use this church of strong Italian heritage to bless a vastly different new wave of immigrants reshaping the demographics and modern ethnic mosaic of Metro NY.



**Pastor David & Mary Hernquist**

It began when a few Ghanaian families started attending his church in the early 1990s. After the unfortunate death of one of the Ghanaian women, leaders from her tribal family requested to conduct her funeral service at Van Nest AG. Hernquist explains, "Coming from a small town in Western NY State, I knew nothing of traditional African funerals or tribal customs." Nevertheless, he agreed and gave the Ghanaian's the freedom to conduct the funeral service.

In an overwhelming turnout, 400 people attended the 8-hour long funeral service. From that day on,

the Ghanaian community in NYC gained awareness of and appreciation for Van Nest AG.

Soon after, the general superintendent of the AG Church in Ghana, Rev. Samuel B. Asore, called to thank Hernquist and make arrangements to visit him on his upcoming trip to the states. Thus, an ongoing cross-cultural relationship formed.

Meanwhile, a separate Ghanaian group, gathering in a nearby home for prayer meetings, outgrew their space. They asked Hernquist if they could hold Sunday afternoon services at his church intending to operate as a separate African ministry under their own administration. Since other Ghanaian members already attended the church, agreement was reached to consider the afternoon African service as part of the overall ministry of Van Nest AG. Hernquist especially desired to participate and the Ghanaians received him warmly.

The vibrant African worship and music soon attracted 100 worshippers. In time, two distinct ministry visions emerged from this service. One

group wished to operate as a separate African church. The other group, mostly members with children sensitive to second generation needs, desired full integration with the Van Nest congregation.

Hernquist describes the resulting outcome as a "clumsy split," admitting, "We had to learn what God was saying." In the end, the Van Nest church sent out and financed a group to start a new African church. Ebenezer Assembly of God was the name given to the new planting in 1993,



**Paul & Julie Kraus and Pastor Benjamin & Judith Boakye**

the first fully autonomous African (Ghanaian) expression for the AG in NYC. A year later, Hernquist recommended Pastor Benjamin Boakye as the new pastor and he continues as the pastor to this day.

Boakye calls Hernquist "my white dad" and confides, "He is the first American to make me feel welcome."

Celebrating their 20th anniversary this summer, Ebenezer AG is a vibrant church that supports 3 missionaries. As one of their missionaries, Julie and I were honored to attend the banquet

celebration July 13, 2013. During our years as missionaries in West Africa (1990-2002), we never anticipated that one day African churches in the U.S. would support our ministry call to the diverse immigrant populations here in NYC.

In those early years, Van Nest continued drawing new African worshippers, developing church leaders, strengthening ethnic relations, and spawning new church plants. In time, Ebenezer AG spawned a second church called Bronx Assembly of God. The Bronx AG church spawned a third church named Divine Favor AG. Hernquist provided guidance, leaders, and support to these new endeavors which have now become successful ministries incorporated into the NY District.

Hernquist encourages other NYC pastors to open their doors and host ethnic churches as part of a holistic church experience. He explains, “The key point is to establish a Christian community that does not separate but rather integrates the ethnic group with a stable American church as the best way to plant new churches.” Hernquist believes a multicultural church can better ease the processes of Americanization for those families who so desire and at the same time develop resources and personnel to spawn new church plants.

Hernquist’s ministry to ethnic believers goes deeper than providing “sacred space” for homeless African churches. Van Nest AG successfully took on grueling immigration

challenges facing several individual ministers. For Pastor Benjamin Boakye (Ebenezer AG) and his family, this struggle lasted 10 years finally leading to a successful outcome. Van Nest also sponsored Pastor Samuel Asiedu (Divine Favor AG) and his family — filing multiple forms,



**Rev. Bill and Laura Kirk , Paul & Julie Kraus and Pastor Samuel and Salomey Asiedu at Divine Favor AG**

affidavits, and applications. Asiedu refers to Hernquist “as an African in white skin.” Hernquist personally met the Asiedus at the JFK terminal upon their reentry and encouraged their ministry in New York. With gratefulness, Asiedu says, “Whatever function the Africans are having—be it baby dedication, funerals, services, cultural meetings, and the rest—Hernquist is ready to be there, to identify. He is so supportive and mobilizes all of his church to be supportive. We see him act his heart. We are very grateful to God for raising such a man.” Asiedu serves as an AGUSM missionary and president of the National African Ethnic Language Fellowship.

The powerful ministries and partnerships among ethnic and traditional churches impacts both 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants. Two of Asiedu’s sons, recent graduates of VFCC, minister at Divine Favor and provide worship for the afternoon services at Van Nest. They are among 16 young people from the Ghanaian churches attending colleges for ministry, education, and medical training giving evidence that God is at work in the ethnic youth of NYC.

Hernquist’s words and actions reveal a deeply cherished Christian ethos expressed in terms of welcoming the stranger, ministering reconciliation, overcoming racial divides, countering dehumanization, and acknowledging this scriptural admonition — “In humility think of others as better than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). As the challenges of ethnic ministries increase in NYC with no sign of abating, Hernquist is one pastor in the heart of the Bronx that is making a difference.

*More Ghanaians (100,000 community estimate) live in Metro NY than any other metropolitan area in the United States. Ghanaians are known for their vibrant Christian faith and for starting many churches throughout Metro NY. According to the CIA World Factbook, around 70% of Ghanaians living in Ghana claim to be Christian. (Clayman and Merideth, EthNYcity, 2012).*

**PAUL KRAUS—AGUSM missionary/Director of Intercultural Ministries for the NY district**