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MORRISANIA

At a Poor Mosque, Debt and Dismay

By KATHERINE BINDLEY

EVERY Friday at the Futa Islamic Center in Morrisania in the Bronx, a cardboard box is passed among the West African men who attend worship services.

The money dropped into this makeshift collection basket once went toward mortgage payments, utility bills and renovations for the center, an unmarked red brick building at 166th Street and Third Avenue that serves as a mosque for this immigrant community.

Today, that money goes toward rent. In April, the building was auctioned off at a foreclosure sale for \$500,000 to a developer, BX Third Avenue Associates.

“It was like a wall fell throughout the community,” Ahmadou Diallo, the center’s president, said as he stood outside the building. “People were crying.”

Mamadou Diallo, an assistant imam who was standing nearby, acknowledged that he was among them.

“Ninety-five percent of those people are taxi drivers, working at the gas station, working at the car wash,” said Mr. Diallo, who is not related to the center’s president. “They are the ones who contribute their hundred dollars a week, \$200 a month. So I cannot explain how people felt when we hear that this was taken away.”

Ahmadou Diallo thought that as a nonprofit organization, the mosque was exempt from city property taxes. But the mosque is not exempt, and the property taxes mounted over time until the building ended up in the hands of a Bank of New York trust.

According to court documents, a process server made multiple attempts to track down the owner of the property, which was listed on legal documents as Masjid al-Fay sal. No records of such a person turned up because Masjid al-Fay sal is the mosque’s former name.

Ahmadou Diallo said he never received any notices about back taxes owed or the foreclosure that followed.

“If you simply Google Masjid al-Faysal, it’s going to say that it’s a not-for-profit organization,” he added. “In this modern age, it is hard for someone to believe that if you looked for us, you can’t find us.”

In any event, the mosque now must rent the building in order to hold services there. On a recent Friday, 10 black cars, many of which mosque members drive for a living, were parked out front.

About 150 members gradually filed in, removing their shoes and kneeling on a blue carpet flecked with red and yellow.

Ahmed Baro, an assistant imam, stood at a lectern and spoke — first in the West African language of Fulani and then in English — about the virtue of knowledge.

Mr. Baro said many members of the mosque hold advanced degrees in their own countries but struggle in America.

“Since they don’t know how the system plays, they end up just driving taxis,” he said. “If we really had this place, we would teach G.E.D. here.”

This month, the mosque’s lawyer, William Martin, has asked that the case be reopened, citing cultural insensitivity and a lack of diligence. An Internet search for “masjid,” he said, would have shown that it is Arabic for mosque.

But Bruce Bronster, a lawyer with Dreier L.L.P., which represents the bank’s trust, noted that a guardian had been appointed to protect the mosque’s interests. “We used every effort,” he said. “We followed the letter and spirit of the law.”

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