Building a Church, and Paying Off a Sacred Debt

Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Pastor Danilo Florian with his flock after Sunday service at Ark of Salvation, a storefront church in Harlem. His days are long, he says, but rewarding.

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As his 7-year-old daughter lay near death, Danilo Florian raged. The doctors could do no more. His prayers — a desperate turn to the religion he had abandoned long ago to pursue a successful jewelry business — seemed equally futile.

He had come to New York years earlier from the Dominican Republic with nothing but the desire to prosper as a family man and businessman. Now, as it all fell apart in a Manhattan hospital, he sought a few moments of silence in a dimly lighted room off the intensive care ward.

Then it happened. Out of nowhere, he says, came a voice.

"Do business with me," it demanded.

Sixteen years later, the girl is a young woman, and Mr. Florian is keeping his end of the bargain. The jewelry business is long gone. He abandoned it to heed the call to serve God, plunging into Pentecostalism and founding Ark of Salvation, a shoebox of a storefront church in west Harlem that explodes most nights with prayer and song.

Today, the word "pastor" hardly describes this dynamo who propels a flock of 60 — most of them Dominican immigrants of modest means — round the clock and through the week. Teacher, chief cheerleader and social director, he is even the chauffeur who ferries them to

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House Afire: A Bilingual Multimedia Story
Meet Pastor Danilo Florian, who teaches and counsels his congregation round the clock, even driving them all over the city as he strives to keep his small church growing. A quiet but insistent man, he discusses his approach to the ministry. *Vea esta presentación interactiva bilingüe en la Web.*

House Afire
Mr. Florian's Calling

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This is the second of three articles about a Pentecostal storefront church in Harlem. Yesterday's installment introduced the church's members and beliefs. The last will explore its efforts to keep teenagers in the fold. Read all articles in this series.

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The pastor, Danilo Florian, in a tiny room behind the altar at Ark of Salvation on a day when several other pastors brought their congregations to join in the service.

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Dianne Florian led the congregation in song during a visit to El Gabaon Pentecostal Church in the Bronx. Her father abandoned his jewelry business and devoted his life to faith 16 years ago: As Dianne lay near death with encephalitis, he says, God called to him. She recovered, and Pastor Florian went on to found Ark of Salvation.

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Pastor Danilo Florian is teacher, chief cheerleader and social director; he is even the chauffeur.

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Mr. Florian's wife and co-pastor, Mirian, during a sidewalk prayer service to attract new members. Most times, passers-by don't stop.

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services all over town in a secondhand airport van, usually after eight hours at a factory job making luxury handbags.

To the adults, he is the confidant who counsels them through crises. To the teenagers, he is the surrogate father who praises them and takes them on outings. To the needy, he is the benefactor who slips them a little cash. To all, he is the leader who promises a glorious future in a grand new church, even though they have saved a small fraction of the fortune it would cost.

"Pelea, pelea, pelea," he murmured one night as he made his rounds in the church van, mouthing the words to a hymn. Fight, fight, fight.

The battle is not just for this storefront. In thousands of tiny, sometimes fly-by-night churches around the globe, men like Pastor Florian get things started and keep them going against tremendous odds. Their success or failure may decide whether Pentecostalism continues growing faster than any other Christian group.

They work largely on their own, without the hierarchies or resources that sustain the clergy of other faiths. Many are self-taught and self-supporting. Mr. Florian, 50, who takes no salary from his church, has only a few years of night-school Bible classes, no pastoral training and no ambition to join a larger denomination, as some storefront pastors do.

His ministry reflects the startling intimacy that has been Pentecostalism's essence since it began a century ago: what matters the most — even for a leader of souls — is a transforming personal encounter with God.

Like many storefront ministers, Pastor Florian lives modestly in the same kind of rough-edged neighborhood as his members. But unlike his peers who hurl brimstone or promise miracles, he is cautious and quiet. A serene figure even when worship is frenzied, he can silence the crowd with a raised hand.

He is also human. Disorganized and absent-minded, he loses cellphones, gets lost driving, forgets appointments and would miss even more if his wife and co-pastor, Mirian, did not keep careful watch. At the end of his hectic days, exhaustion tugs on his sturdy frame.

And though he is too private to discuss it much, he struggles with disappointment. Although he believes that the deal he struck with God saved his daughter, his two younger children have drifted away from the faith.

For a man who sees himself in so many ways as a father, that is painful. For a storefront pastor, it is also useful, allowing the people who walk through the church doors on Amsterdam Avenue to see themselves in him.

"It unites us, because he is human," said Lucrecia Perez, who recently spent eight months in a homeless shelter. "He has to work like us. He has gone through need."

Angel Franco/The New York Times

Home services in the Bronx: worshiping at Mary Mejia's home in Morris Heights.

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A service in High Bridge, each week a group from Ark of Salvation gathers at a member's home, inviting neighbors and leading them in prayer. The guests listen intently, and some accept the invitation to join the Ark.

A Business Proposition

Father figures always let him down.

His father was a businessman, making a nice living running cockfights, a taxi service and a bodega in the Dominican towns where Mr. Florian grew up, the oldest of five children. But by his teenage years, he says, his father had squandered it all on bad bets, strong drink and frequent affairs.

The boy thought he had found someone to look up to in Padre Camilo, the pastor of the Roman Catholic church where he was an altar boy. But one day the rumors flew that the priest had gotten drunk in a bar and begun shooting his pistol.

"I didn't believe it because I admired him and loved him," Mr. Florian said. "Whether it was true or not, I still don't know. But it got into my mind."

His faith vanished as the family's tumbling fortunes forced them to a poor neighborhood in Santo Domingo, the sprawling capital, where his mother ran a candy store and a fruit stand. Their comedown was humbling: He had to sell ice cream to his high school classmates at recess.

"They would look at you like you were really poor," he said. "Like we were less."

Like any adolescent adrift, he searched for something or someone to rely on. He found both when a friend invited him to a crusade led by Yiye Avila, a fiery traveling preacher from Puerto Rico who is now one of the most popular Pentecostal evangelists in the Americas. He converted that night.

But his new faith was tenuous. After juggling two jobs to help pay for college, he followed his family to New York in 1979 and found a job at a jewelry factory that consumed his time. He even met Mirian, a Roman Catholic, through a factory friend. They married in 1982 and had a daughter, Dianne, the next year.

His labors began to pay off. After he started a lucrative business making buttons and medals at home, a client in Mexico hired him to set up a factory there, and in 1990 proposed a huge deal: commemorative jewelry that churches would sell for Pope John Paul II's visit that year to Mexico City.

Then Dianne fell ill with encephalitis, an inflammation of the brain, ending up in the intensive care ward at St. Luke's Hospital. For 10 days, her body was racked with convulsions.

One afternoon after Christmas, Mr. Florian said, doctors told him they could do nothing for the little girl who lay comatose, tethered to tubes and surrounded by religious statues his wife's family had brought. That evening, he sought quiet in a room off the ward.

"There's no hope," he recalled thinking. "She's only 7. Who could help? I did everything possible."

Then, as he tells it, came the voice.

"Work with me," he heard.

He looked around. He was alone, and frightened.

"Do business with me," the voice commanded. "Reconcile with me."

He thought of the jewelry business that had consumed him, and of the religious medals

that would make him even more money. Ambition and greed had brought him to this, and he felt shame.

He tried pushing the matter out of his mind. But the voice returned, he said, warning that if he did not agree in 15 minutes, the girl would die.

“It was a strong voice,” he said. “Like a horn. I thought I was going crazy. I cried, I cried and I cried. And in my mind, I left everything.”

Tranquillity washed over him, though it was fleeting as he returned to his daughter’s bedside. A nurse scrambled from the room, and a stench wafted through the air. He thought Dianne had died.

“She was sitting up in the bed,” he said. “She had vomited something black. But she sat up.”

The child recovered and, sticking to the bargain, the Florians searched for a congregation. Mirian felt unwelcome at the local Catholic church, and they faded into anonymity at a busy Pentecostal congregation. Then they found Exodo, a small Pentecostal group near their apartment on Amsterdam Avenue.

Mr. Florian insists he had no intention of becoming a preacher. But his playfulness and patience with young people led to his being named co-pastor. In 2000, upset with how Exodo was being run, he and eight others went looking for a place to pray until they could join another congregation.

One of them, Ramón Romero, discovered a basement room on 134st Street that was crawling with rats inside and drug dealers outside. He and Mr. Florian drove out the rats with a machine that blasted high-pitched noise. The landlady was so relieved to see Christians instead of crack addicts that she provided the space free.

On the street one day, someone called Mr. Florian “Pastor.” He laughed it off, but Mr. Romero did not. “You will be our pastor,” he declared. “We do not need to find another church.”

On the cusp of 2001, they chose a big name for their little sanctuary, befitting the year and their quest: the Pentecostal Church Ark of Salvation for the New Millennium. For Danilo Florian, the work had just begun.

A Home Divided

Sunday is no day of rest for Pastor Florian. On this particular one, he was deep into his sermon, preaching about hope and home life. “If anyone is the enemy of the family, it is Satan,” he said. “Every family has to struggle against the beast in the home.”

A reminder of those trials was slumped in the back row. His teenage son, Danilito, glumly played with his cellphone and held hands with his girlfriend, an older girl who had a baby by a previous boyfriend.

“How glorious it is when a father can say, ‘There is my child,’ ” the pastor continued. “How joyful a child would feel to hear you say, ‘I am proud of you.’ ”

Danilito, chatting with his girlfriend, ignored him.

Family is a pillar of any church’s life, and even more so at Ark of Salvation. The day the Florians converted, their three children joined them at the altar, and went on to sing or play music at services.

But at the Catholic schools they have attended, they have been exposed to different beliefs. As teenagers, they have pulled away from their parents and sometimes their faith.

Dianne, now 23 and fully recovered from her illness, remains the stalwart. Until her student teaching in New Jersey made increasing demands on her time in recent months,

she was a fixture at services, singing with a throaty growl. On New Year's Eve, she was married at the storefront, with her father officiating.

She is not shy. During Bible study at church, she has sparred with her father over women's role in marriage. One summer, she drew her parents' ire for spending too much time at a catering job. She treasures her independent streak, which she credits to the Jesuits who taught her in grade school and at St. Peter's College in Jersey City.

But her assertiveness is tempered by a feeling that because she is the pastor's daughter, the congregation watches her every move. "You try to live your life in the right way," she said, "so people don't say things to other people."

And her life, after all, is intertwined with her father's conversion. She says a big reason she stays in the fold is the debt she owes — and the gratitude she feels — for her recovery.

Her father puts it far more bluntly. "The Lord gave her her life back," he said. "If she leaves, she could die."

He and his wife were less strict with Dianne's 22-year-old sister, Danitza, now a senior at St. Peter's. Last summer she moved in with her boyfriend. Her father now wishes he had kept her at home.

Until recently, Danitza attended church sporadically. One Sunday, she showed up in a tight T-shirt with the word "sexy" emblazoned across the chest. But she respectfully joined the line of supplicants waiting for a final blessing.

As her mother anointed the girl's forehead with oil, Pastor Florian stood to the side and sobbed.

Tearful moments like that are the few public hints that all is not well with his family. One Saturday, as he plopped down on the parlor sofa for an interview at their house in Bedford Park in the Bronx, the quiet was broken by giggles behind the locked door of his son's room.

Danilito, who at 18 looks like a younger version of his father, was inside with his girlfriend, Silka. Although the congregation agreed that Danilito was a gifted drummer and singer, his father had expelled him from the church band.

"Someone who is sinning cannot touch the instruments that are used to adore the Lord," Pastor Florian said, moments after the boy cracked open the door, grabbed his sneakers and dashed off with Silka.

Danilito has since taken up with a new girl, but he has also flirted with real danger. Last summer, he hung out with friends outside a nearby building where neighbors suspected that drugs were being sold.

"It fills me with such shame," his father said. "The image everybody here has of my family is of my daughters going to college with God's help. Now they see him with those boys. It's like he threw everything to the gutter."

The pastor pleaded with him to stay away, but he refused — until September, when one friend was shot dead.

Out of respect, the congregation says nothing about the family's troubles. And though Pastor Florian wishes he could confide in someone besides his wife, he keeps his feelings to himself.

"I can't talk to anyone because there would be gossip," he said, "and that destroys a church."

The children of many pastors, he says, fall away from religion. "Maybe because you do not give them as much time as you should, since you have to spend time with the other children," he speculated. "They could become jealous."

He and his wife take comfort in believing they have done all they could for their children. “They have a foundation,” he said. “God will call them like he called me.”

‘I Don’t Sleep Anymore’

The streets of Bedford Park are mercifully quiet at 6 a.m. when Pastor Florian gets up, pulls on a polo shirt, khakis and sneakers and walks to the D train for the 45-minute commute to the garment district.

He has worked in factories since arriving in New York, spending the last dozen years at Judith Leiber, where he polishes stones and precious metals for intricately jeweled handbags that fetch thousands of dollars. The bags may be delicate, but the work is exacting. When he gets home around 5 p.m., he trudges up the creaking stairs.

Then his real job begins.

He rests for a few moments, grabs a snack and dons a natty suit, tie and shined shoes. His wife by his side, he climbs into the church van to round up the congregation for that night’s services, driving all over the Bronx and Upper Manhattan. Whatever they do, he is with them, even if he is not preaching. He must set an example.

“You can’t say, ‘I go to church once a week’ and leave it closed the rest of the week,” he explained. “When I have a church, it is open seven days a week.”

Ark of Salvation almost meets his ideal: There are no services on Monday. Bible class is on Thursday, youth services on Friday and adult services on Wednesday. Tuesdays and Saturdays, a small delegation conducts a service in someone’s apartment or visits another church, as far away as Queens or Brooklyn. Sunday is the week’s highlight, as the Florians preside over three hours of song, testimony and preaching.

Afterward, the couple linger to counsel people. They help clean and repair the storefront. Intent on keeping the teenagers off the streets during the summer, Pastor Florian leads day trips to the Delaware Water Gap in Pennsylvania or quick jaunts to Yonkers for hot dogs and video games.

The fact is, from the moment he wakes to when he dozes off 20 hours later after reading Scripture or researching sermons, he hardly pauses.

“I’ve always worked,” he said, shrugging. “That’s why I don’t sleep anymore.”

Despite the unending demands, he is calm and cheerful, almost unnaturally so. Annoyance flashes across his eyes when he looks down from the pulpit at a paltry turnout. But if more is bothering him, he seldom lets on. “A pastor always has to have a happy face and be in his glory,” he said.

Yet not too happy or too glorious. While other Pentecostal ministers shake or shout, Pastor Florian prefers to pray quietly. He is careful how he acts in church, especially after visiting revivals where preachers made wild claims.

“If someone says they are going to heal the sick, leave,” he warned his congregation. “For a miracle to happen, people need faith. Their faith heals them. Man does not do miracles.”

And because he knows that some preachers care more about lining pockets than saving souls, his appeals for money are few and understated. Inside his home, he pauses to make something clear: “Everything I have, I had before becoming a pastor.”

The Florians’ boxy house is tucked into a neighborhood whose noisy fringes are plagued by drugs and violence. The pastor has been stopped by the police and questioned, but he says those slights bring him closer to the lives of his congregation.

He dotes on the house, painting or ripping up carpets. Proud of his self-taught craftsmanship, he showed off a new door he had installed.

"Give a Dominican a piece of thread, and he'll make you an airplane," he said with a laugh. "Ever since I came to New York, I was told that if they ever ask you at a job if you have experience, say yes."

His wife and her mother run a day care center in a warren of colorful rooms on the second floor. She is a whiz at multitasking, feeding one child while comforting another and answering her phone.

Small wonder that the pastor relies on her at home and in church, where she is known as Pastora. For years she drove a school bus, and still navigates the city better than he. In those days, she imagined they would be living in Miami by now, easing into a slower and more affordable life.

"I knew if he became pastor, that would be it for Miami," she said. "It's not easy."

Beyond the Storefront

The church van smelled of quickly eaten fried-chicken dinners as Pastor Florian cruised up Amsterdam Avenue with a dozen people crammed inside. As always on a Saturday night, they were visiting another church. As always, something was on his mind besides the traffic and the sermon he was about to give.

Real estate.

"There was a place on 152nd Street for $580,000," he told his wife. "There is another place available on 156th Street. The owner used to have a cafe downstairs and prostitutes upstairs."

As the van passed building after building, he rattled off the history of each one that fit the bill for his ideal church. Mirian's eyes widened when she saw a meticulously restored brick structure on 126th Street. "That would be good for a church," she said. "The first floor!"

He said nothing, but smiled faintly.

This is how he found the Ark's current home: traveling the streets, keeping his eyes open. But today that rented storefront hardly meets the congregation's needs.

Last spring, they were homeless for two weeks after an upstairs neighbor left the bathtub running and the ceiling collapsed. The room is cramped, with no space for all the community services Pastor Florian feels he needs to attract new members and keep the church growing: a soup kitchen, youth programs, immigration counseling and activities for the elderly.

So even as he tackles his overstuffed schedule, he always has one unfinished job, and it is his biggest ever: finding a permanent home where his congregation — not some landlord — can control its future. A place where it can graduate from storefront to institution.

That means money, and lots more than the church has in its anemic savings account. Collections bring in about $2,500 a month, half of which covers the rent. On average, $1,000 goes for insurance, utilities, gasoline and help for people in a pinch. If they are lucky, maybe a few hundred dollars remains.

At that rate, it will take decades to raise the $200,000 down payment Pastor Florian estimates they need to buy a new place. So far they have only $13,000, from special collections and food sales.

Time may be running short. The neighborhood is gentrifying, pushing real estate prices higher. One nearby storefront congregation has already been forced to move in with another.

Even the pastor's own finances are in peril. His employer has told him he will be let go next month, joining dozens of workers laid off since last summer.

Yet that setback and the church's meager finances do not seem to faze Pastor Florian, who reassures his congregation that God will provide. Somehow, faith will trump finances.

"We are not guided by logic," he told them one Sunday. "Having a temple in New York is difficult. We may not have the resources, but we have faith we will get one."

And as strange as it may sound, he harbors a small hope that the storefront will be their last earthly home.

Just as God's voice came to him in the darkness 16 years ago, he lives each day awaiting a second call: the trumpet blast announcing the rapture, the day when most Pentecostals believe they will be summoned to heaven — rising out of their busy factories, church vans and frantic schedules.

The sidewalk outside the Ark was rank and grimy one Wednesday night in May. Scraps of food spilled from trash bags that had been picked clean of cans and bottles to redeem. The usual clutch of men in the bodega argued about politics and baseball.

But inside the church, the walls thumped with music. Several congregations from other parts of town were crammed into the seats, and more people squeezed in through the narrow doorway.

The room was unbearably hot. The noise was deafening. Pastor Florian was beaming.

"I am full of joy," he said. "It does not matter if you are from Brooklyn or Queens, for wherever we are, God has called us to be one people."

He peered over the top of his reading glasses.

"I wish the Lord would come tonight," he said. "After the service is over, I'd love to hear that trumpet sound."

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