

Solace on the Line: Uniting Through a Prayer Call



PASTOR Benjamin Boakye, above and right, leads the call from a storefront church in the Bronx with Ghanaian congregants.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD HEISLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

ON a recent Tuesday at noon, a dozen live-in home health aides — all from the Bronx — dialed a conference-call number. They phoned from their elderly patients' small apartments in Queens and from spacious houses in New Jersey and Connecticut.

Within seconds, they were connected to their pastor, Benjamin Boakye, of Ebenezer Assembly of God Church on Jerome Avenue in the Bronx.

Mr. Boakye sat alone in the large storefront church. "Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah," he said, his cellphone next to his Bible. Then in Twi, he welcomed his Ghanaian congregants to the prayer call: "Yeh mah moh nee nah aquabah." They answered, "Yah, pastor."

Felicia Sam, 54, her voice low and steady, prayed in her patient's kitchen in Belle Mead, N.J. Her friend, Paulina Asamoah, 40 — recently out of work — sang in her Bronx apartment: "Another day is gone. Do something new in my life. Oh Lord, do something new in our lives."

The prayer call, held at least twice a day, is a consolation for Assembly of God's 400 members, many of whom are live-in aides who work for weeks at a time without going home to their neighborhood. Many have spouses and children back in Ghana they rarely see. "The level of loneliness here is much greater than in Africa," said Mr. Boakye, 50, who has led his congregation for 18 years. "The call brings us together."

The call addresses their worries, big and small: "We pray for those in need of jobs," the pastor said, "those who are sick, who have family problems. I try to give encouraging words: A better future is ahead."

Most of his congregants stayed on the line until 1 p.m. "Amen," the pastor said, smiling; he knew they had to return to their patients. "The prayer is good today!" Standing in the church, he waved.

SUSAN HARTMAN



PRAYER Felicia Sam, left, a home health aide, initiated the calls two years ago. "I wanted to pray together," she said, "pray for other people, who get sick, who are homeless." Philomena Mensah, below left, said: "In Ghana, we meet together — not on a call. In this country, because of our jobs, we can't." Below, Paulina Asamoah joined the conference call.

ONLINE: FROM THE BRONX, A HIGHER CALLING

LENS A video of prayer calls between Benjamin Boakye, pastor of the Ebenezer Assembly of God Church in the Bronx, and some of his congregants: nytimes.com/lens

