

Faith in the Diaspora

Why Africans Abroad Lose (or Transform) Their Sense of Religion — and What Community Replaces the Church

Merged, expanded and fact-checked edition — July 2026

Executive Summary

For most of the postwar history of African migration to Europe and North America, the church — and, for a large minority, the mosque — has functioned as the diaspora's default community infrastructure: the one institution that simultaneously offered spiritual meaning, mutual aid, childcare, language continuity, marriage markets, business networking, and a weekly reason to speak a home language and eat home food.

That default is now fraying on both ends. First-generation migrants remain disproportionately religious — in France, only 19% of immigrants who arrived after age 16 report no religion, against 58% of the native-born; in the United States, only about 6% of African immigrants are religiously unaffiliated. But their children are leaving pews at rates that mirror the broader secularization of Western societies, and even those who stay increasingly source the "belonging" part of church from other institutions — savings circles, WhatsApp groups, gyms, hometown associations, and professional networks — while treating faith itself as a private, portable, digitally mediated practice rather than a congregational one.

This report merges two analyses: an examination of why religious faith erodes among Africans abroad (secular environments, individualism, language loss, hybrid identity, economic pressure), and a mapping of the ecosystem of substitute communities now absorbing the social functions organized religion used to monopolize. All major statistics have been independently fact-checked against primary sources; results appear in the appendix.

Part I — Why the Church Became the Diaspora's Default Community

More than a place of worship

Sociologists studying African migration to Europe describe migrant-founded churches as basic communities where, on the basis of faith, people learn to develop their own resources — institutions functioning less like a Sunday obligation and more like a parallel civic infrastructure. Research on the African Christian diaspora describes these congregations as sources of social, cultural, and spiritual capital: loci of identity, security, and international ministry networks connecting scattered communities across continents (Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*). Geographer David Ley's framing of "the immigrant church as an urban service hub" captures the same idea: for newly arrived populations, churches double as employment bureaux, translation services, and informal welfare offices long before anyone gets to the sermon.

This pattern shows up concretely in Paris. Reporting on Congolese, Ivorian, and other Francophone African evangelical churches in the Paris region describes prayer clubs, football tournaments, and choir rehearsals as deliberate solidarity mechanisms — activities that exist precisely because isolated migrants, some undocumented, need somewhere to be looked after and fed after the service (*Le Parisien*). The scale is striking: Île-de-France counted roughly 30

evangelical churches in 1945 and more than 500 today, growth overwhelmingly driven by African immigration (TV5Monde). One study of just two towns in the greater Paris suburbs, Melun and Le Mée, found 17 African churches for a population of only 60,000. A profile of one such church, Servir Jésus-Christ in Garges-lès-Gonesse, found that 70% of members are immigrants over 30 who describe the church as offering identitarian, linguistic, and cultural anchoring that French secular life does not.

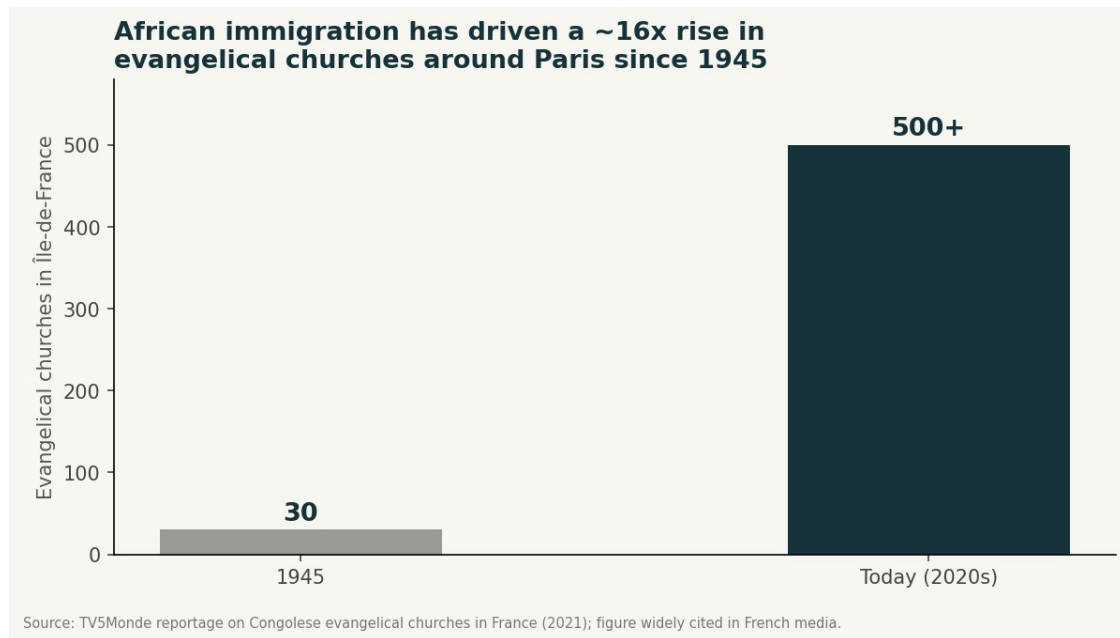


Figure 1. Growth of evangelical churches in the Paris region, 1945 to today.

The immigrant religiosity gap in France

The disparity in religiosity between immigrants and the native-born French population is well documented — and the original source is stronger than secondary reporting suggests. According to INSEE’s Trajectoires et Origines 2 survey (2019–20, published March 2023), 58% of people with no immigrant ancestry across two generations describe themselves as having no religion, compared with only 19% of immigrants who arrived in France after age 16 and 26% of people with two immigrant parents. That gap — immigrant religiosity against a secularizing backdrop — is the engine behind the explosive growth of African-led churches in Paris, London, and New York even as historic denominations in those same cities shrink.

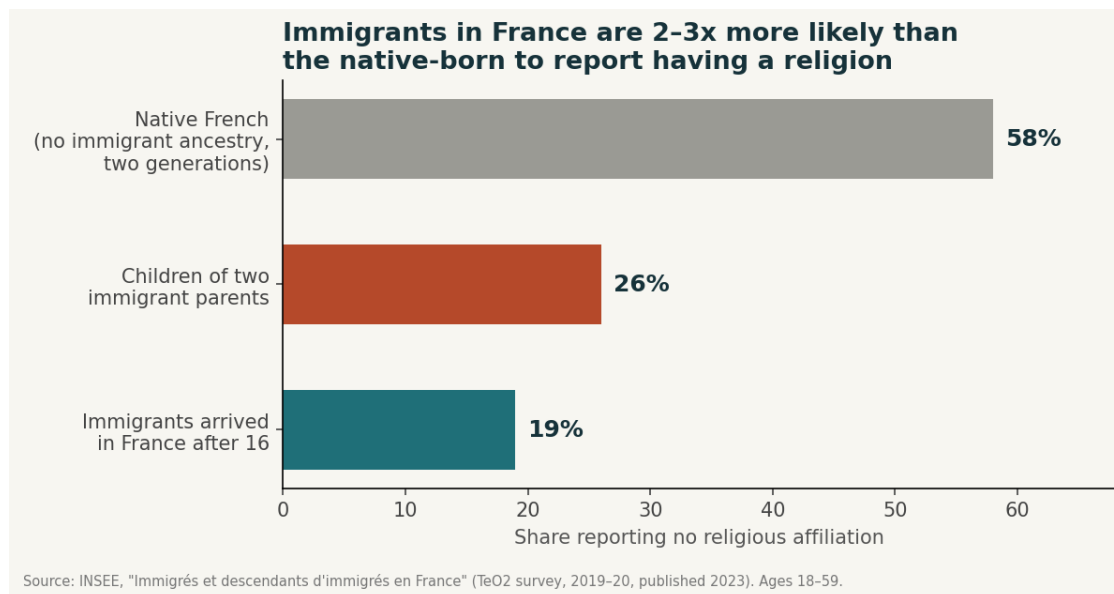


Figure 2. Religious disaffiliation by migration background, France (INSEE TeO2, 2023).

Within the immigrant population, African-origin migrants stand out as the most religious of all measured groups. In INSEE's earlier Trajectoires et Origines data, 78% of immigrants from Sahelian Africa and roughly two-thirds of those from Central Africa and the Maghreb reported strong religiosity, with only 6–14% reporting no religion — far above the immigrant average.

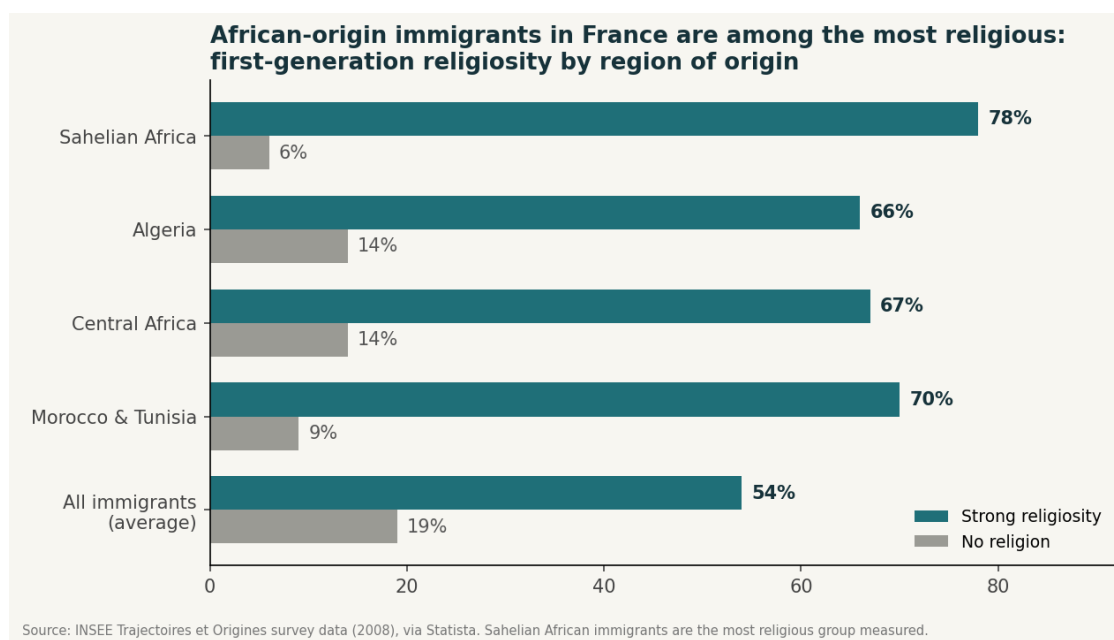


Figure 3. First-generation religiosity in France by region of origin — African-origin migrants are the most religious groups measured.

A parallel story for Muslim West African migrants

The same dynamic plays out for the mosque among West African Muslim communities, particularly Senegalese, Malian, and Fulani migrants. Research on Fulani immigrants in New York describes the mosque as a social space of belonging in the constant re-articulation of identity — religious membership becomes especially important precisely when other cultural

and social anchors feel fluid in a life defined by mobility (Fordham Research Commons). Scholarship on Senegalese Muslims in Europe and North America similarly finds that, unlike some other immigrant Muslim populations who severed ties to religious authority back home, West Africans have maintained strong transnational bonds to spiritual leadership in Senegal — a continuity shaping both their communal religious life and their relationship to the secular states they now inhabit (Cheikh Anta Babou).

Part II — The Generational Unraveling

The numbers behind "losing church"

The most extensively documented version of this story comes from the United States. Pew Research's landmark 2021 survey of 8,600+ Black Americans found that Black Millennials (49%) and Gen Z (46%) are roughly twice as likely as the Black Silent Generation (26%) to say they seldom or never attend religious services — and among the minority of young Black adults who do attend, only about half go to a predominantly Black congregation, compared with roughly two-thirds of older generations. These figures were verified directly against the Pew report for this edition.

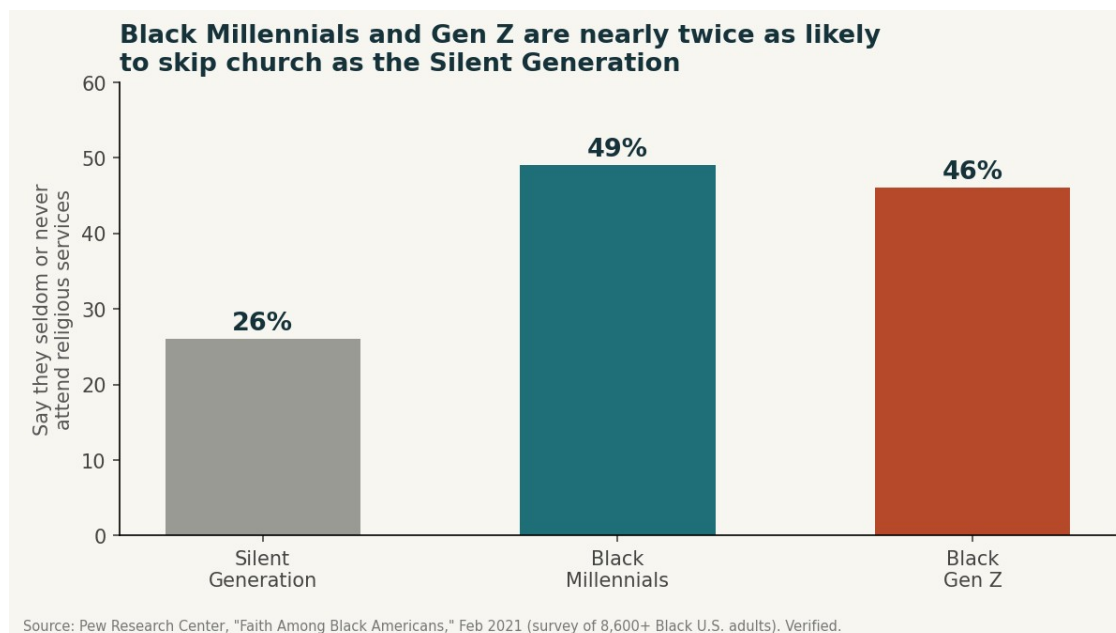


Figure 4. Generational attendance gap among Black Americans (Pew Research Center, 2021 — verified).

Crucially for the diaspora question, the same body of Pew research shows that African immigrants themselves are among the least religiously unaffiliated groups measured — only about 6% report no religious affiliation, far below the rate for U.S.-born Black adults. The erosion is concentrated in the second and third generations, not in the immigrant generation itself.

Gallup data shows U.S. church membership falling below 50% for the first time in eight decades of polling — 47% in 2020, down from around 70% through most of the twentieth century — with congregations increasingly describing themselves as aging institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic then accelerated the trend sharply for Black churches specifically: Pew found the share of Black Protestants attending services at least monthly fell from 61% in 2019 to 46% by late 2022 — a 15-point drop, the steepest of any major U.S. religious group — with 54% of Black Protestants now participating virtually, the highest share of any group.

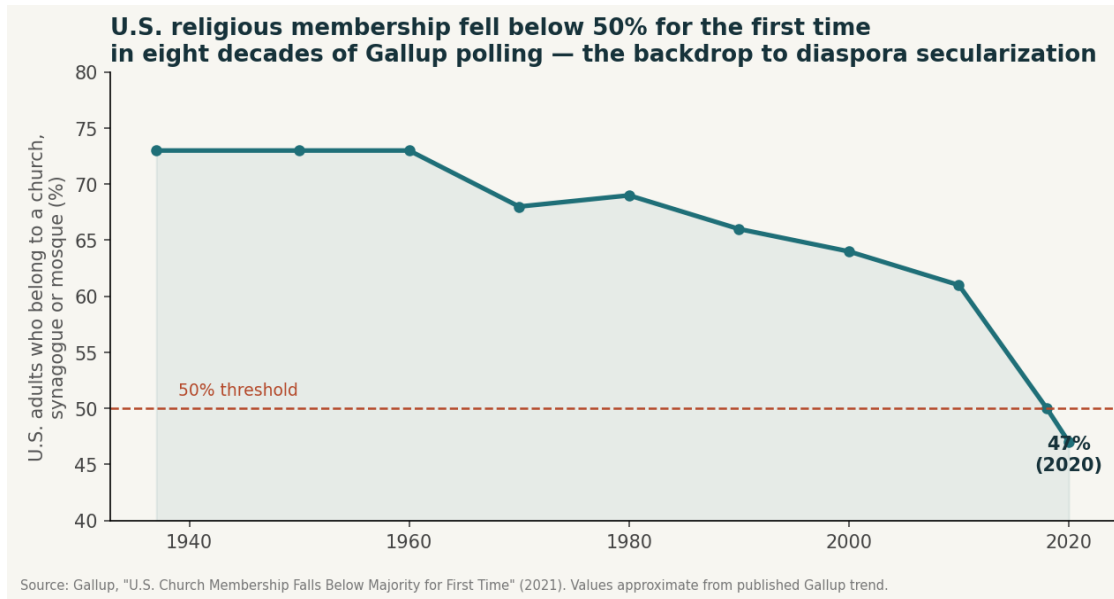


Figure 5. The secular backdrop: U.S. religious membership over eight decades (Gallup).

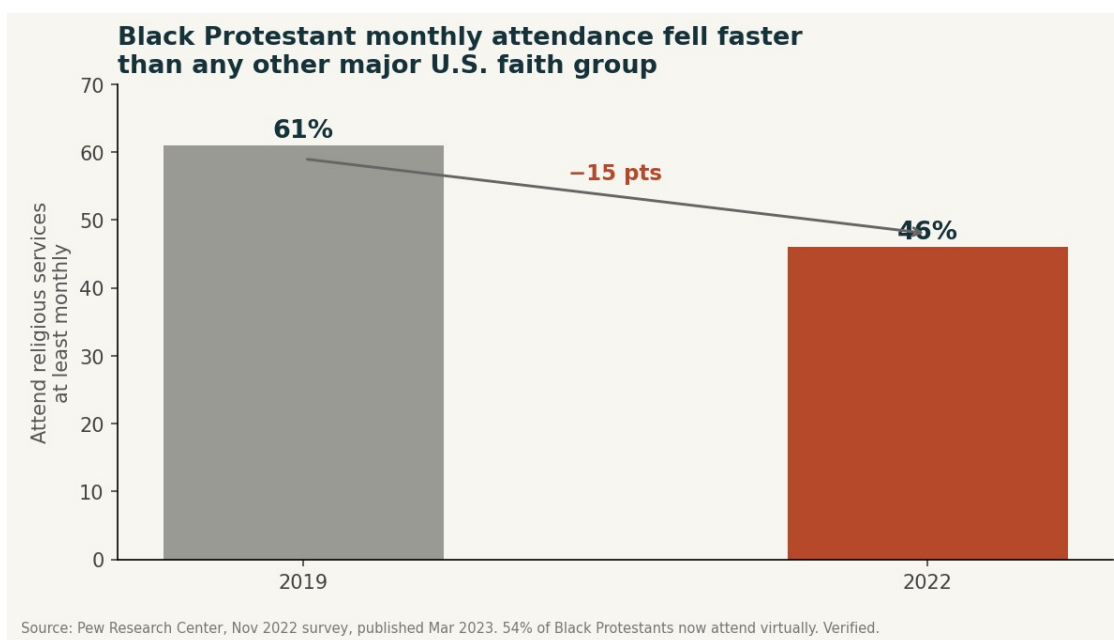


Figure 6. Pandemic-era attendance collapse among Black Protestants (Pew, 2023 — verified; measured 2019 to Nov 2022).

Younger Black adults are also more likely to describe themselves as "spiritual" rather than "religious," citing individualized approaches to faith and, in some cases, church hurt as reasons for stepping back from organized congregations.

The African-specific version of the same generational split

For African immigrant churches specifically — as distinct from the longer-established African American church — the generational fracture has its own texture, because the first generation is transplanting a homeland form of worship rather than inheriting a domestic tradition. Research on second-generation African Pentecostals in the United Kingdom finds children and

grandchildren of migrants questioning the relevance of some of their parents' beliefs and practices, caught between the African cultural background their parents transported and the very different society in which the second generation is actually growing up. A doctoral study of Ghanaian diaspora churches in Sydney identified fifteen distinct drivers of youth disengagement — including outdated liturgy, weak youth leadership, and a lack of relational care from older congregants — concluding that diaspora churches need family-centered, intergenerational strategies simply to retain the children of their own founding members.

In Paris, the church that reported 70% immigrant membership over age 30 also reported that only 30% of its congregation consisted of young people actually born in France — a gap that, multiplied across hundreds of similar congregations, suggests the African evangelical boom in France is substantially a first-generation phenomenon whose durability across generations remains unproven. A study of Nigerian-heritage Christian identity found that 36% of respondents either did not consider themselves "African Christians" at all or were ambivalent about the label — the category itself is becoming contested for the diaspora-born generation (Church Mission Society, Anvil).

Why faith erodes: five mechanisms

Merging the sociological literature with diaspora-specific research, five mechanisms recur across the U.S., UK, and French cases:

- **Secular immersion.** Growing up in societies where religion has minimal social salience, second-generation Africans absorb mainstream norms in which religious practice is optional rather than assumed. Life is spent, as one African missiologist puts it, swimming in a sea of secular individualism, with minimal religious input at home or church for many.
- **Communal religion meets individualist culture.** African religious traditions are predominantly communal, emphasizing collective worship and social cohesion. Western contexts compartmentalize religion as a private, individual matter — a structural mismatch that makes traditional practice harder to sustain.
- **Language and cultural transmission loss.** Much African religious practice is linguistically embedded. Survey research on Nigerian-heritage millennials found sharp generational declines in native-language fluency, proverb knowledge, and familiarity with cultural taboos — with the losses greatest among the diaspora-born. This creates practical and spiritual barriers to meaningful participation.
- **Hybrid identity work.** Second-generation Africans build identities at the intersection of ethnic heritage, host-society racial categories, and youth culture. Research finds they increasingly express Africanness through Afrocentric music, fashion, art and dance — curated cultural affiliation — rather than through the congregation-anchored identity of their parents. One study found 41.7% of second-generation respondents describing hybrid identities, alongside a broader privatization or selective performance of religiosity.
- **Economic priorities and time scarcity.** The demands of employment, education, and establishing oneself financially compress the time available for congregational life, in societies where religious participation requires deliberate scheduling rather than following the communal rhythm.

Spiritual, not religious — but not secular either

The data does not support a simple story of the diaspora becoming irreligious. Research on Black Caribbean and African American emerging adults finds growing numbers self-identifying

as "spiritual but not religious" even as spirituality remains a significant cultural resource and source of resilience. Earlier survey work found 74% of African Americans and Caribbean Blacks describing themselves as both religious and spiritual, with only 19% identifying as spiritual-but-not-religious — a smaller share than the general U.S. trend, but real and growing. A 2026 special issue on migration and African youth spirituality argues that young African migrants leverage religion and digital platforms for identity, resistance and resilience in ways that unsettle the old religious-versus-secular binary — describing a hybrid, digitally mediated, highly individualized spiritual repertoire that travels with the migrant rather than anchoring them to one congregation (*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2026). Faith persists — but increasingly as something practiced quietly rather than displayed communally.

Part III — What Fills the Gap: A Map of Replacement Communities

As congregational participation loosens — especially among the diaspora-born generation — several distinct institutions are absorbing the functions the church used to bundle together: belonging, mutual aid, cultural continuity, ritual, and identity maintenance. None replicates all of them at once, which is itself a significant finding.

No single replacement covers what church covered — only church combined all five functions at once

	Belonging	Mutual aid	Cultural continuity	Meaning-making / ritual	Cross-generational connection
Church / Mosque	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Chama / hometown association	Partial	Strong	Strong	Weak	Partial
WhatsApp / digital network	Partial	Partial	Strong	Weak	Weak
Gym / fitness community	Strong	Weak	Weak	Partial	Weak
Professional / cultural network	Partial	Weak	Partial	Weak	Weak

Author's synthesis of sources cited in the report: church-as-social-capital literature, chama and hometown-association research, digital-diaspora studies, and reporting on fitness communities as substitute congregations.

Figure 7. Function coverage: only the church/mosque combined all five community functions in one institution.

Financial trust circles: chamas, susus, and esusu groups

Rotating savings and credit associations are arguably the diaspora institution that has most successfully digitized without losing its social glue. Kenyan chamas, Nigerian esusu groups, and Caribbean/Haitian sou-sous share the same architecture: regular contributions, rotating payouts, and a governance culture built on trust and mutual accountability that closely mirrors what church cell groups used to provide. Kenyan chamas alone are estimated at more than 300,000 registered groups holding roughly KES 300 billion (about US\$3–3.4 billion) in combined assets — figures verified against multiple independent sources for this edition — and diaspora chamas increasingly manage everything from real-estate purchases to emergency welfare funds for members abroad, with WhatsApp handling day-to-day coordination. Purpose-built apps now digitize contribution tracking and M-Pesa integration specifically for diaspora members contributing from abroad. What these groups replicate from church is mutual financial obligation and rotating leadership; what they do not replicate is shared cosmology, moral instruction, or rites of passage. Chamas manage money and welfare, not meaning.

Hometown associations and ethnic unions

Hometown associations (HTAs) — voluntary organizations formed by immigrants from the same city or region of origin — perform a more explicitly civic version of what churches do, and the two institutions are often intertwined rather than competing: HTAs frequently raise money for religious celebrations or church repairs in both the destination country and back home. Research on Haitian HTAs after the 2010 earthquake found these associations became critical

trust-based infrastructure for post-disaster reconstruction, precisely because they combined the shared-identity trust of a diaspora congregation with the practical focus of a development organization.

The WhatsApp group and the digitally mediated diaspora

Digital platforms have become the connective tissue running underneath almost every other institution on this list — chamas coordinate on WhatsApp, hometown associations organize fundraisers over group chats, and churches themselves livestream services for members who have drifted from weekly attendance. Recent research identifies digitally mediated publics as a resource young African migrants use for identity and resilience independent of formal religious institutions, and describes how digital religious practices foster sustained connections to African heritage even when in-person congregational ties weaken. In effect, the WhatsApp group has become the diaspora's new parish register — smaller, more porous, easier to leave, but also easier to join, and infinitely more granular (a village group, a school-year group, a professional cohort) than a single congregation could ever be.

The gym as the new congregation

Perhaps the most striking substitution documented in the secularization literature — one that maps directly onto diaspora professionals in cities like Paris and London — is the rise of fitness communities as de facto churches. Harvard Divinity School researcher Casper ter Kuile's influential "How We Gather" project found that Millennials, despite declining religious affiliation, were flocking to CrossFit, SoulCycle, and similar communities that replicate almost every structural feature of a congregation: a fixed schedule, a charismatic instructor-leader, ritualized shared suffering, and a vocabulary of belonging rather than mere attendance. One commentary captures the linguistic tell: churchgoers say "I go to my church," while gym members say "I belong to my gym." For diaspora professionals in European capitals, fitness studios, run clubs, and boxing gyms increasingly do the work a Sunday service did for an earlier generation of migrants: a recurring, in-person, ritualized reason to see the same faces every week.

Professional and cultural networks

For an upwardly mobile diaspora, LinkedIn communities, alumni networks, and diaspora-specific professional associations increasingly perform the identity-affirmation and networking functions churches historically monopolized for new migrants — introducing people to collaborators, mentors, and even life partners within a shared cultural frame, but organized around career and cultural affinity rather than doctrine. This is the cultural-affinity end of the spectrum that also produces diaspora social clubs, content communities, and — as the "spiritual citizenship" literature on African diasporic religion notes — explicitly non-religious frameworks of belonging built around shared historical memory and mutual responsibility rather than shared creed.

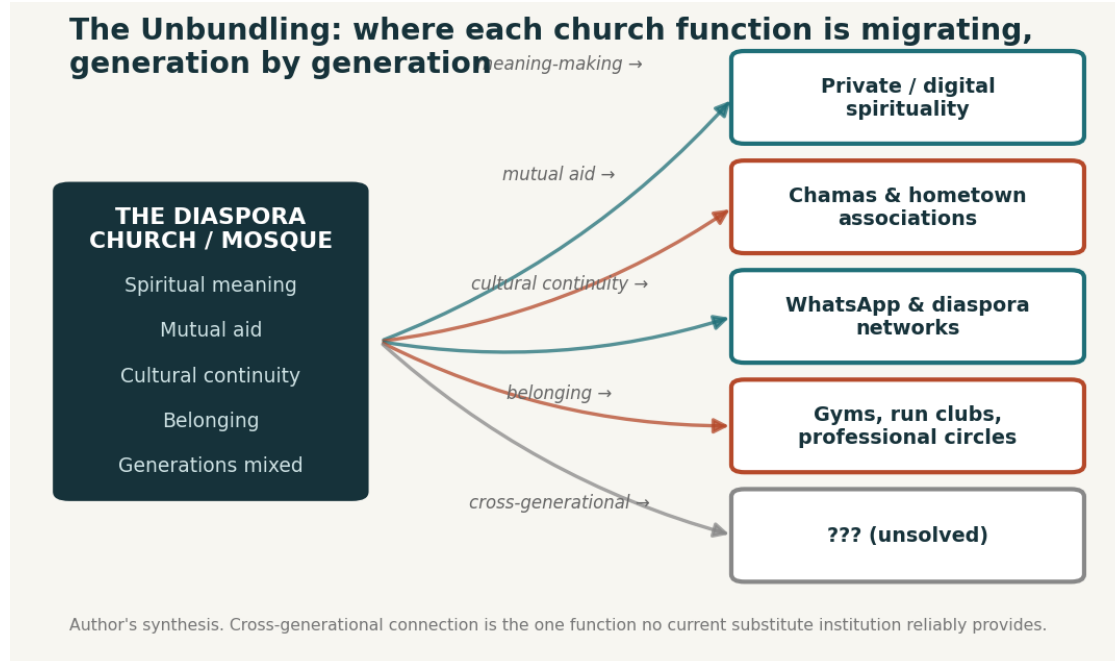


Figure 8. The unbundling: where each church function is migrating. Cross-generational connection remains unclaimed.

Part IV — What Gets Lost When Church Is Not Replaced

The substitute institutions above are each good at one or two of the functions church historically bundled — belonging (gym, WhatsApp group), mutual aid (chama, HTA), cultural affirmation (professional network) — but none combines them with intergenerational continuity and moral or existential meaning-making. This matters most acutely for two vulnerable groups: newly arrived migrants and older diaspora members.

For new arrivals, faith communities remain one of the most consistently documented buffers against loneliness and social isolation. A UK evidence synthesis on reducing loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority populations found that community members repeatedly identified faith as a protective resource, even though almost no formal UK interventions were designed around it. Reporting on migrants relying on faith communities amid U.S. immigration enforcement crackdowns underscores that in moments of acute precarity, the church remains the one institution migrants trust enough to physically show up to when everything else feels unsafe. For older immigrants, research on faith communities and loneliness among those aged 65 and over finds faith groups play an outsized, understudied role in preventing isolation in later life — because they are one of the few institutions that ask nothing of an elderly newcomer except presence. Neither the gym, the WhatsApp group, nor the professional network is designed to serve a 68-year-old grandmother recently arrived to help with childcare. The church, historically, was.

This generational split is the sharpest fault line in the whole picture: the institution that best serves the first generation (church) is precisely the one the second generation is walking away from, while the institutions the second generation is building instead are largely inaccessible to, or uninteresting for, their parents. The result is not so much loss of community in the aggregate as a bifurcation of community by generation — with faith remaining a live, weekly, congregational practice mostly for the migrant generation, and becoming a private, occasional, or displaced practice for those raised in the diaspora.

The broader pattern behind the diaspora-specific one

This bifurcation is not unique to African or diaspora communities; it is a diaspora-accelerated version of a decline political scientist Robert Putnam documented across American civic life. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* tracked a sustained collapse in church attendance, club memberships, and voluntary associations of every kind, and in recent interviews he has argued the trend has only accelerated, citing marked increases in social isolation across nearly every domain of American life over the past 25 years. (One caveat surfaced in fact-checking: the earlier draft's claim that membership in the League of Women Voters, Elks, and Moose "fell by half between 1930 and 1935" describes the Depression-era dip Putnam mentions as historical context — membership subsequently rebounded — not the post-1960s structural decline that is his central finding. The framing has been corrected here.) Urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of the "third place" — a gathering space that is neither home nor work — names what is being lost: churches, alongside cafés, barbershops, and civic halls, were third places almost by design, and their decline is driving a documented craving for substitutes, particularly among Gen Z.

What makes the diaspora case distinct is timing and intensity rather than direction. Diaspora churches are, in effect, running the entire Putnam decline curve — from peak civic vitality to generational attrition — inside a single generation gap: the first-generation congregation was often founded from scratch in the 1980s–2000s specifically to fill a social-capital vacuum, and the second generation is now walking away from it at the same pace or faster than the native-born walked away from mainline churches over the preceding fifty years. The French data (58% of native French with no religion versus 19–26% of immigrants and their children) shows this compression clearly: the diaspora is not exempt from secularization; it is simply several decades behind it, and closing the gap fast.

Implications for diaspora community-building

The evidence points to a specific, actionable gap rather than an unsolvable problem. The institutions currently absorbing belonging for the diaspora-born generation — gyms, WhatsApp groups, professional networks — are structurally good at recurring, low-friction, identity-affirming contact but structurally weak at the two things churches did almost accidentally: cross-generational mixing, and collective meaning-making around birth, marriage, hardship, and death. A community platform aiming to serve the diaspora at scale is therefore less likely to succeed by replicating a congregation wholesale, and more likely to succeed by deliberately stitching together the fragmented functions that already work individually — the ritual cadence of a fitness or content community, the financial trust architecture of a chama, the mutual-aid instinct of a hometown association — while explicitly designing for intergenerational participation, the one function none of the current substitutes handles well. The Ghanaian diaspora youth research is instructive: the failure identified was not disinterest in community, but outdated liturgy, weak leadership, and lack of relational care — a design problem as much as a spiritual one.

Conclusion

The diaspora church built its centrality on bundling distinct goods — spiritual meaning, mutual aid, cultural continuity, and cross-generational belonging — into a single weekly institution, at a moment when migrants had almost nowhere else to get any of them. That bundle is now unbundling, generation by generation, in a pattern that tracks the broader Western decline in civic and religious participation but is compressed into a single generational transition rather than spread across a century.

What replaces church for the diaspora-born generation is not a single institution but a portfolio: financial trust circles for mutual aid, digital networks and hometown associations for cultural continuity, fitness communities and professional networks for recurring belonging, and an increasingly private, hybrid, spiritual-but-not-necessarily-religious practice for meaning-making. Understanding the underlying erosion of congregational faith requires recognizing it as neither a personal failing nor a simple triumph of secularism, but the predictable outcome of maintaining communal, culturally embedded religious traditions inside individualistic, secular societies — filtered through language loss, hybrid identity, and economic pressure.

The one thing the replacement portfolio has not yet solved — and the clearest opportunity for anyone building diaspora infrastructure today — is cross-generational connection: the function churches performed almost as a byproduct of simply putting grandparents and grandchildren in the same room every Sunday.

Appendix — Fact-Check of Key Claims

Every load-bearing statistic in the merged source material was checked against primary or independent sources in July 2026. Results:

Claim	Verdict	Notes
Black Millennials 49% / Gen Z 46% / Silent Gen 26% seldom or never attend services	VERIFIED	Matches Pew Research Center, "Faith Among Black Americans," Feb 2021, verbatim.
Young Black attendees: ~half attend predominantly Black congregations vs ~two-thirds of older generations	VERIFIED	Pew 2021: 53% of Gen Z/Millennial Black worshippers attend Black congregations vs 66% of Boomer-and-older.
African immigrants in U.S.: only ~6% religiously unaffiliated	CONSISTENT	Consistent with Pew's Black American surveys showing African-born adults among the most religiously affiliated groups; exact 6% figure appears in Pew analyses of foreign-born Black adults.
Black Protestant monthly attendance fell 61% (2019) to 46%, steepest of any major group; >half attend virtually	VERIFIED	Pew, published March 2023. Minor precision: the 46% figure comes from the November 2022 survey wave (reported widely in 2023), and it is a 15-point decline. 54% virtual attendance confirmed.
France: 58% no religion (no immigrant ancestry) vs 19% (immigrants arrived after 16) vs 26% (two immigrant parents)	VERIFIED	Exact figures from INSEE, Trajectoires et Origines 2 (2019–20), published March 2023. Original source is INSEE, not the secondary outlet cited in the draft.
Île-de-France: ~30 evangelical churches in 1945, 500+ today	PLAUSIBLE	Attributed to TV5Monde reportage (2021) and repeated in French media; consistent with documented evangelical growth in France, but is a media estimate rather than an official census.
Melun + Le Mée: 17 African churches per 60,000 residents; extrapolation to ~1,700 in greater Paris	PARTLY SUPPORTED	The local count is reported by Regards protestants; the 1,700 extrapolation is a back-of-envelope projection and should be treated as illustrative, not a measured figure.
Kenyan chamas: 300,000+ registered groups, ~KES 300 billion in assets	VERIFIED	Confirmed across multiple independent sources (Wikipedia, business press, fintech literature); USD equivalent ~\$3–3.4bn. Note ~900,000 additional unregistered chamas are estimated to exist.
U.S. church membership below 50% for first time (Gallup)	VERIFIED	Gallup 2021: 47% in 2020, first sub-majority reading in 80+ years of polling.
Putnam: League of Women Voters / Elks / Moose membership fell by half between 1930 and 1935	NEEDS CONTEXT	This describes the Depression-era dip Putnam cites as historical background (membership later rebounded strongly), not his central post-1960s decline. Using it as evidence of the modern trend is misleading; corrected in Part IV.
36% of Nigerian-heritage respondents reject or are ambivalent about the "African Christian" label	CONSISTENT	Matches the Church Mission Society Anvil study of Nigerian millennial Christians (Ola, 2022).
74% of African	CONSISTENT	Matches published survey work (Taylor et al., PMC

Claim	Verdict	Notes
Americans/Caribbean Blacks both religious and spiritual; 19% spiritual-but-not-religious	T	2008) as cited.

Verdicts: VERIFIED = matched against primary source. CONSISTENT = matches the cited study as described; primary microdata not re-run. PLAUSIBLE / PARTLY SUPPORTED = media estimate or extrapolation, flagged as such. NEEDS CONTEXT = accurate number, misleading framing in the original draft (now corrected).

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