“You drive all the way to New York City to attend church services?” Virginia asked in disbelief. She could not understand why we would drive almost sixty miles from Princeton, New Jersey, most Sundays to worship at the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in New York, a predominantly Ghanaian congregation. “How special are the services? Are there many Guyanese (confused with Ghanaians) in New York?” she asked. Virginia’s questions were not new to my wife and me. We had been asked over and over again whenever we told friends that we were members of a Ghanaian congregation in New York. Many of these friends were surprised to learn that there were a number of congregations formed by and made up predominantly of Ghanaians in the United States and could not understand why we would travel such a long distance for a worship service. Virginia’s innocuous questions point to two related and crucial issues which this book addresses. First is the general lack of awareness of the existence of African immigrant religious congregations in the United States and second, the lack of proper recognition and understanding of the importance of these congregations in the adjustment of immigrants to the United States.

African migration to America has increased considerably since the 1990s and has the potential of increasing exponentially even further over the next few years. These Africans, many of them highly qualified professionals, can be found in various sectors of American society yet they remain “invisible sojourners” about whom very little is known. A major reason for this lack of awareness of the existence of African immigrants in the United States is the racialized nature of American society. Africans who enter the United States, particularly those with darker skin, are immediately subsumed under the omnibus and socially constructed racial category “black.” In the eyes of the average American, and more so to American legal and social systems, African immigrants are indistinguishable from all others, such as those from the Caribbean, with whom they share skin color. For these Africans themselves, however, not only are their national identities as Ghanaians, Nigerians,
Kenyans, or Ethiopians important to them but so also are their ethnic or clan identities as Akan, Ibo, Yoruba, and the like. In essence, their understanding of what constitutes their ontological identity is in contrast to the social identity conferred on them by American society.

Like all immigrants, a crucial question that confronts these Africans is, “How should we live (in this new and strange land)?” This is less of an ethical question than it is a philosophical, theological, and sociological one. Not only does it raise the issue of moral goodness—how to live a morally good life—but even more important, it is about how to adjust to the sociocultural life of their new country in order to attain the good they seek both for themselves and their families without losing who they are. The question to a large extent is about survival—economic, social, and cultural. It may be posed thus: “How shall we order our lives and interact with persons and institutions in our new environment so as to attain our goals without losing the very essence of who we are?”

In African cosmology, survival, whether of the individual or the group, largely depends on the maintenance of a good relationship between humans on the one hand, and God and other supernatural forces on the other. When John Mbiti, the renowned African theologian and scholar of African religion, suggested in the 1960s that Africans are “notoriously religious” and that they carried their religion wherever they went—to their farms, parties, examination rooms, parliament, and so on—he was among other things drawing attention to the fact that for many Africans life without religion is unthinkable. To many Africans, their religion is not totally separable from their so-called social lives.

It should not surprise us then that African immigrants have brought their religious practices with them to the United States. This is evident from the numerous African religious communities that have been formed in many cities and towns since the 1980s. During the research for this book, I found stores, old warehouses, and dilapidated buildings renovated and converted into churches and mosques in many neighborhoods in the New York metro area, particularly in the Bronx. Brightly colored sign boards (some with neon lights) which announce their presence display names such as “Pan African Church of God in Christ,” “Redeemed Christian Church of God Restoration Chapel,” “The Holy Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church,” “The Light Mosque of Faith,” and so on. These storefront churches and mosques essentially serve as spaces for the worship and community life of immigrants from countries such as Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigerian, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and many other African countries. Members of the different religious communities use the spaces thus created to build relationships and
network with one another through their worship—singing, preaching, praying, and doing Bible study, among other things—as they struggle with the deeper questions of life regarding their identity, spirituality, community, and generally their sojourn in America.

The current literature on new immigrant religious communities in the United States hardly reflects this reality. To date, African immigrant congregations have received little attention from sociologists and scholars of religion who have written about religion in the United States. The few anthropological studies on African immigrants in North America that take account of their religious lives include Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, *Wanderings: Sudanese Migrants and Exiles in North America*, JoAnn D’Alisera, *An Imagined Geography: Sierra Leonean Muslims in America*, and Paul Stoller, *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City*. Published recently are Jacob Olupona and Regina Gemignani, eds., *African Immigrant Religions in America*, and Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*, both of which deal with various aspects of the religious lives of African immigrants. Other research and publications about African immigrants in Europe such as the work of Gerrie ter Haar, Afe Adogame, and Hermione Harris also help us to appreciate the importance of religious belief and practice to African immigrants.

Yet, there is still more we need to know. This book seeks to help readers realize the growing presence of African immigrants in the United States and the significance of religious congregations in their lives generally, and specifically the role of religion in their process of adaptation. It tries to show how these immigrants make meaning of their sojourn in the United States and also how they deal with the challenges that confront them in their new environment. Indications are that congregations play a crucial role in assisting them in this process. A distinctive feature of this book is that it explores the issues—social, economic, political—that the immigrants face by examining the religious and community life of a single congregation. In doing so, readers are presented with the complexities of the immigrants’ life for which the church becomes important. It is in the church that they express their deepest worries, frustrations, as well as joys; it is in the church that they reveal their dreams and aspirations.

The central argument of the book is that immigrant religious congregations are not merely “ethnic enclaves” that offer members safe havens where their “home” culture, norms, and values are preserved from the onslaught of American sociocultural values. Rather, they are spaces and communities where “home culture” and “host society culture” interrogate one another; where experimentation, innovation, conflict, and cohesion take place. Through worship and
community life, immigrant congregations influence the process toward the maintenance of a balance between (a) the adjustment needed to succeed in America and contribute to the strength of its society and (b) the preservation of immigrants’ cultural particularity and control over their identities.

The importance of religious communities in immigrant adjustment in the United States is not a new subject, though it has received relatively little attention. An important aspect of this theme that is treated by both past and recent literature is religion’s role in the formation and maintenance of identity among immigrants. Religion, it is argued, provides the context for the formation of a cultural community through which an immigrant’s identity is preserved. An influential work first published in 1955 that dealt with the issue was Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Reflecting on the wave of immigrants in the 1920s, Herberg indicated that it was through religion that the immigrants, their children, and grandchildren found an “identifiable place in America.” He argued that religion was the most pronounced and persistent form of identification among the immigrants. To him, the only means by which the third generation of the mostly European immigrants he wrote about could reappropriate fragments of the culture of their forebears was through religion.

Much of the current literature on religion and the incorporation of new immigrants into American society has relied on or at least adopted Herberg’s thesis and made similar arguments. Raymond Williams, writing about Indian and Pakistani religious communities, for instance, concludes that religion is one of the most important “identity markers” in the United States. According to him, religion is the “social category with the clearest meaning and acceptance” in the United States.

Stephen Warner, perhaps the foremost scholar in this area of research in recent times, has also argued that religion provides the main avenue through which immigrants, particularly their children, negotiate their identities. A similar assessment is made by Helen Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz in their edited book, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations*. Based on thirteen case studies of diverse immigrant religious communities in the Houston area they conclude that immigrant religious congregations “provide the physical and social spaces in which those who share the same traditions, customs and languages can reproduce many aspects of their native cultures for themselves and attempt to pass them on to their children.”

One feature common to all these scholars, at least with respect to the particular publications quoted here, and others whose works have been influ-
enced by Herberg’s thesis, is their focus on the social function and structure of religion. In their attempt to show the “role” or “function” of immigrant religious communities within the larger society, these scholars present immigrants’ religious congregations as essentially vehicles for promoting ethnic group interests. This approach has two serious drawbacks. First, it makes immigrants’ religious life merely incidental to their ethnicity and creates an unrealistic dichotomy between immigrants’ religious and ethnic identities; and second, it fails to adequately underscore the very important theological, ethical, and psychological resources immigrant congregations provide their members for their adaptation to American society. My purpose is to show the nature and significance of the congregation’s worship and community life to its members within the context of their status as immigrants adapting to social and cultural life in the United States.

As a way of opening a window into the religious and community life of the post-1965 African immigrants in America and to help clarify the significance of the religious congregation in the lives of immigrants, this book largely presents a case study of the worship and community life of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in New York (PCGNY), a congregation made up of predominantly first- and second-generation Ghanaians living in the New York metro area. Though the congregation does not necessarily typify all African immigrant congregations, it is a good example of such congregations and thus provides helpful insights for the study of others. The book focuses on three important aspects of the life of members of this congregation, namely, identity, spirituality, and community. These rather broad areas of African immigrant life are the ones the immigrants often try hard to conserve, as they are in conflict with mainstream American sociocultural life. In this book, I examine how these aspects of their lives are maintained and reshaped through the religious experiences of members, corporate rituals and the mundane life of this church. I also examine the strength the immigrants draw from the worship and community life of the church in their fight for survival and adjustment to American sociocultural life.

Research Process

Data for this book was collected largely through participant observation, interviews—both face-to-face and by phone—the analysis of church documents, publications, other records, and review of the relevant secondary literature. Though I started the research for this book in earnest in the spring of 2003, my participation in the church and observation of its general community life
began long before then. Between December 1998, when I was first introduced to this church, and the fall of 2002 when I decided to undertake this study, I participated in many of the church’s worship services and special events. I also attended numerous marriage, funeral, naming ceremonies (of newborns), and other “social” programs organized by the church. Within this four-year period I spoke to over one hundred members of PCGNY on various issues regarding their personal experiences as immigrants, and about the church. Some of the information gathered at this time has been included in this research. During the actual research, I interviewed about seventy people at different times. Ten of these, including past and present pastors of the church and other leaders served as resource persons with whom I had several interviews. Throughout the research I was guided by what I consider an important principle of research, namely, if we want to understand why people do what they do, we must ask them first. Much of the information I have presented here was gathered through conversations with the members and leaders of the church. In my conversations with both the leadership and members of the church before and during this research, I tried to find answers to questions relating to the history and the formation of the congregation; the demographic makeup of the membership; the theological orientation of the church; the church’s organizational structure; types of religious services; “social” activities; language usage; relationships among the ethnic groups represented in the church; policies and programs to assist new immigrants; social services organized by the churches; ties between the churches and other Ghanaian religious and social groups; ties, both at church and individual levels, with the home church and the country of origin; differences perceived by immigrants between this church and the home church; status and role of women in the church; relationship between the first and second generations; conflicts and how they are resolved. I also asked members their reasons and goals for migrating to the United States; their experiences as immigrants (and children of immigrants), the reception of the host nation, sociocultural adjustments they have made and continue to make, ethical and theological dilemmas they face, and the ways in which the church has been helpful to them. Another important resource that has aided this research is my own knowledge and practical experience gained as an ordained pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. As an insider and a person who has served with the parent church of PCGNY for many years, my personal knowledge of the structures and workings of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana helped me describe and analyze the continuities and discontinuities between the PCGNY and its parent church. I also gained access to some privileged information from the church head office for the research.
Two important but somewhat opposed concerns which are reflective of the two hats I wear—as a pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the denomination to which PCGNY belongs, and as a researcher and scholar of Religion and the Social Sciences—constantly attended the writing of this book. On the one hand, I wanted to focus on the living faith and story (and stories) of the PCGNY congregation, and on the other I wanted to analyze the congregation’s worship and community life in the light of larger social issues. Both have pitfalls that I have tried to avoid—on the one hand becoming too descriptive, and on the other hand becoming too engaged with the social function of the congregation. The ethnographic method used in this research proved helpful in a number of ways. First, it allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of issues from both the point of view of the Ghanaian immigrants themselves and also through personal observation and assessment. Second, it permitted me to include the actual voices of my interviewees. The names of some of these interviewees are mentioned in the book. But for many who requested varying levels of anonymity, I have used only their first names, and changed or omitted the names of others.

Outline of the Book

This book is organized into eight chapters. Chapter 1 sets the stage by introducing us to Ghanaian migration to the United States within the context of American immigration policies and incorporation theories. It outlines the three main theories of immigrant incorporation into America—classical assimilation, multiculturalism, and segmented assimilation—and their implications for immigrant religious communities.

Chapter 2 provides a general overview of Ghanaian immigrants in the New York tristate area. It gives a panoramic view of Ghanaian immigrants in New York and provides information regarding areas where they are fairly concentrated in this expansive city, their way of life and activities as well as some of the sociocultural challenges confronting them. Additionally, it provides some information about New York City, one of the gateways through which many immigrants enter the United States, and which in our case serves as the proximal host for the Ghanaians of this particular church.

Chapter 3 focuses on Ghana, the homeland of these immigrants and its people. Specifically it provides a brief historical and geographical overview of the country; a brief description and explanation of the dominant Ghanaian ethos and worldviews; religions, and religious life in Ghana, with particular focus on Christianity.
Chapter 4 traces PCGNY’s history and examines the reasons for its formation, its organizational structure, demography of membership, and general ethos. A crucial aim of this chapter is to locate this congregation within both the structure and culture of its parent church on the one hand, and in the religious and cultural context of the United States on the other. PCGNY is clearly an example of a transnational religious community and therefore helps us to see some of the continuities and discontinuities between the congregation and its home denomination. Additionally, the chapter reveals some of the structural and cultural adaptations taking place in the congregation.

Chapter 5 examines the community life of the church. It looks at the various ways through which the church tries to engender communality among its members, through, for instance, its welfare services and informal networking. It also examines the institutional role of the congregation in promoting opportunities for the celebration of important epochs in the life cycle of its members such as birth (naming ceremonies), confirmations, birthdays, marriages, and deaths (funerals).

In Chapter 6, I examine the relationships between the first- and second-generation members of the church, and also gender roles and relationships. This chapter brings into focus some of the difficult intergenerational and gender related problems that threaten the spiritual and community life of the congregation.

Chapter 7 deals with the relationship between immigrants’ spirituality and their identity within the congregation. It examines some of the theological and ethical beliefs that underpin the church’s communal life.

Chapter 8 provides a socioethical analysis of some issues, and concludes the book. The chapter also makes a case for the importance of immigrant congregations, even a monoracial one such as PCGNY, helping its members achieve a fair balance between the retention of their identities and adaptation to their new environment. It argues that a religious congregation possesses agency, and generates the needed spiritual and social capital for keeping this balance.