

Taking back the night: All-night prayer services

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

My Kenyan friend made an understandable mistake. Not long after arriving in the U.S., he was pleased to find a church advertising “Prayer Service, 12-1.” But the timing puzzled him. The length, he thought, seemed grueling, but perhaps ordinary Americans were very devout. But why was the service starting so inconveniently late? Only then did he realize that it was not in fact scheduled to run from midnight to 1 p.m.

That in turn raised the question of why so few Euro-American churches offer the kind of all-night services of prayer, worship, preaching and testimony that are standard across Africa and in many parts of Asia and Latin America. In the global South, at least, such vigil services have become a signature of emerging Christianity.

For many African churches, the all-night vigil is a centerpiece of devotion and is not limited to any particular season. The event commonly begins at 9 or 10 p.m., usually on a Friday, and runs until four or five the following morning. Particularly among the AICs—the independent or African-instituted churches—prayer is accompanied by acts of healing and exorcism. These services commonly draw thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of people. Night vigils also flourish among the booming evangelical and Pentecostal churches of South Korea, where hundreds of thousands pass their Friday nights in prayer and praise. In terms of timing, endurance and mass appeal, the closest Western parallels to these Christian celebrations would be found among dance clubs and rave parties in major cities. Western gatherings supply ecstasy in chemical form; churches seek theirs through other means.

The rise of all-night Christian devotion is partly a matter of happenstance: evening prayer meetings and revivals grew longer and longer, and soon spilled over into the small hours. In some societies too, night may be the only free time available to poor people who work very hard during the day.

The ability to take back the night also offers sweeping psychological rewards. Rejecting sleep is a potent form of self-denial, even more powerful than abstaining from food and drink. In both cases, believers learn to control the most pressing bodily needs, and sustained practice teaches self-discipline. And they are not left alone to suffer this denial. A vast night vigil allows them to share their times of greatest weakness and vulnerability with other members of the church. As believers draw on that collective strength, the night vigil becomes an effective means of building community.

Theological agendas are also prominent. As they come together at night, African and Asian Christians are consciously imitating both the form and the timing of gatherings from older, primal religions. Christian churches appropriate the night hours that previously served the purposes of pagan societies, including secret and occult groups. Night services carry special weight in communities where Christianity exists alongside primal religions that abound in spirits, curses and all forms of evil and harm. Often, in the old order, night was the preferred time of the dark forces, and a time to be feared. When they pray and sing through the darkness—when they rage together against the dying of the light—Christians are, week by week, asserting their triumph over these ancient enemies. Night-time activism extends into daytime struggles against manifestations of darkness—violence, discord and social dislocation.

Believers are also consciously re-creating some ancient Christian beliefs. Looking at modern night vigils makes us look afresh at all the many references to night and darkness in the Gospels, especially in John. The light shone in darkness, and as African readers often note, much of the pivotal action in the Gospels takes place at night. When Judas leaves Jesus to betray him, the evangelist comments, tersely, *en de nux*, “And it was night.” From earliest times, Christians have celebrated Christ as the light that dispels darkness. Around 110, the Christian congregation investigated by the Roman magistrate Pliny assembled weekly in the somber hours before dawn.

The modern world has learned to regulate or suppress night: in fact, the rise of the artificial lighting that we take so much for granted is a key token of the rise of modernity. But that change comes at a cost. With few exceptions, churches have discarded the mission to redeem the night, although the Orthodox and others faithfully maintain their Easter vigils. Vigils and night services might yet spread among other denominations as global-South churches become more active in North America and Europe and import their worship styles. Night prayer, after all, is not a

childish response to being afraid of the dark. Rather, it is a rediscovery of the symbolic, sacramental thought world that pervades the New Testament.