The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/03/nyregion/new-york-black-families-affordable-housing-church.html

Black Families Are Leaving New York. Can a Pastor's Plan End the Exodus?

In the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn, a pastor is devoting his time to building affordable housing for his congregation.

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By Eliza Shapiro

June 3, 2025

On one of the coldest mornings of the year, David K. Brawley stood on the roof of a new home for seniors he had helped create, his coat fluttering in the wind. He surveyed his domain.

He pointed to the left, toward the hazy outline of the Manhattan skyline, to the rows of rental apartments below that he had helped develop. He pointed to the right, toward Jamaica Bay, to the mall and the rowhouses, built on top of landfill and overgrown fields, whose construction he had championed.

Squint, and you could almost see it: his vision of 10,000 more apartments, in new buildings stretching into every undeveloped corner of a neighborhood once known as the murder capital of New York City.

Mr. Brawley, 56, is not a real estate developer. He is the pastor of one of Brooklyn's most storied Black congregations, St. Paul Community Baptist Church in East New York.

But at a moment when Black families are leaving the city in droves, there's no way to lead a church like his without having a keen — in his case almost obsessive — interest in building more affordable housing.

It's the only way he can keep his flock intact.

This corner of Brooklyn, at the edge of one of the most expensive cities on the planet, has long been an epicenter of New York's Black civil servant class, the people who drive buses, administer food stamps, work with children with disabilities.

But they are being priced out of the city they have helped power, and where they continue to have enormous influence by showing up to vote en masse.

New York has a lot to lose if they leave.

So does Mr. Brawley. "There's an unspoken grief" every time another one of his congregants decides they can no longer keep up with the cost of living here, he said.

"There's a part of your soul that gets affected."

The Rev. David K. Brawley in his office. His family left East New York for the Long Island suburb of Deer Park when he was a child. He now lives in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

Today, many of St. Paul's members want to stay in the neighborhoods they have lived in for decades, close to their church. But with each passing year, it feels harder to maintain a decent quality of life. They want homes they can be proud of, that they can pass on to their children, not just the first rental they can find.

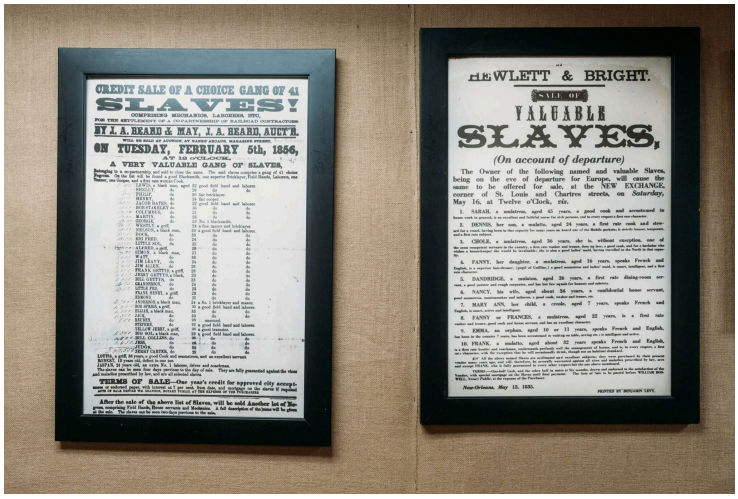
They want to enjoy the occasional night out, and to have enough savings to help their kids if they need to.

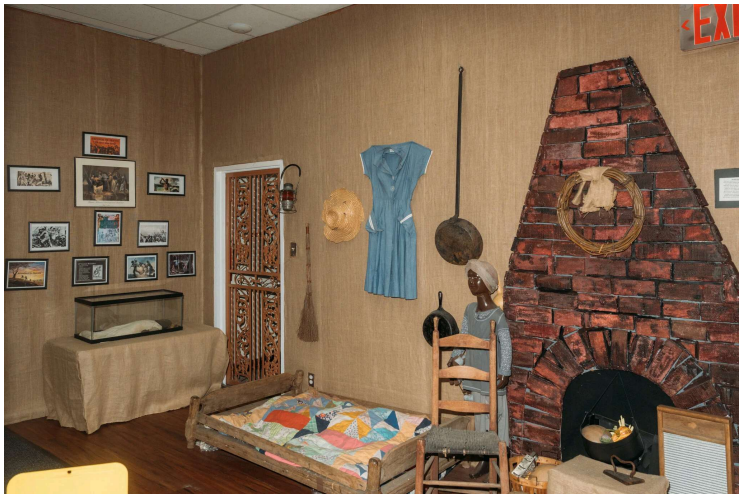
For some congregants, that kind of life is now possible only outside of New York City.

'The City That We Helped to Build'

One Sunday a few weeks before Easter, Mr. Brawley was gearing up for St. Paul's 8 a.m. service, the week's marquee event.

Hundreds of people filed through the building, passing hallways covered in zebra-print wallpaper and a miniature museum depicting the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade.





Black history is woven into every aspect of worship at St. Paul, including the church building itself, which houses a miniature museum that depicts the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade.

Congregants filled the chapel, taking their seats under ornate chandeliers and rippling white curtains that looped across the ceiling like clouds.

As Mr. Brawley looked out, he saw a congregation divided.

There were those who had won the lottery, which here meant getting a subsidized home that the church had helped develop. Then there were those who were watching their rents climb in public housing or crummy walk-ups and worrying about how long they would be able to stay put.

When he took the pulpit, Mr. Brawley acknowledged a third group, for whom it was already too late: the St. Paul members who had left the city and were joining the church service online.

Linda Boyce, who was recently named an elder in the church after being a member for 49 years, took her usual seat up front. She had driven just a few blocks from her spotless three-bedroom rowhouse, purchased through the church's neighborhood development project.

Pia Horton, who has been a member for 11 years, greeted friends as she walked in, wondering if this would be the day she finally told them that she was thinking of moving to Atlanta.

Ayanna Watts, who joined the church when she was 12 years old, logged on from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., where she had moved after her mother died a few years ago and she couldn't pay the rent by herself.

In Brooklyn, the congregation was on its feet for much of the morning, swaying to the hymns and shuffling to the front of the chapel to deliver their tithes, sealed in white envelopes.

Mr. Brawley's sermon on this day was about political power.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, St. Paul held three Sunday services, starting at 6 a.m. After the pandemic, the church dropped to two services, at 8 and 11 a.m. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

He described Jesus returning to Jerusalem from Galilee to take on the establishment, and he encouraged the congregation to do the same.

"It's important to make sure we feed folks and we clothe folks," he said, "but it's also important to raise the question: Why are people poor in the first place?"

The way that his church could flex its influence, Mr. Brawley said, was to demand that elected officials make their constituents' lives better, easier and more affordable.

The church would not endorse a candidate in the upcoming mayoral election. Instead, St. Paul's members would create a list of priorities that they would ask the candidates to respond to.

"Turn your face toward Jerusalem for the city of New York," Mr. Brawley said, to raucous applause. "The city that we helped to build."

One of the Lucky Ones

After the service, a 911 dispatcher, a school safety agent and a hotel housekeeper pulled their chairs together in the church basement and started to tally the indignities of living in New York these days.

They compared notes on the time of day they had to pay their credit card bills to avoid late fees — 6 p.m., 8 p.m., midnight. A 24-pack of eggs was now $20.89 at the nearest supermarket. One member, recently displaced in a fire, had applied to 11 affordable housing lotteries and come up empty.

How could they keep this up?

St. Paul members gathered in small groups during a series of house meetings to vent their concerns about the state of the city. Lack of affordability was the most common concern. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

That was the question bouncing around the room — and the room across the hall, and the chapel upstairs — during the morning's house meetings, a St. Paul tradition in which members vent concerns about the state of the city. The community organizing group East Brooklyn Congregations arranged 100 similar meetings at churches across the city over the past several months, and affordability was by far congregants' top issue.

Ms. Boyce watched her neighbors radiate with anger as they talked about their absentee landlords and rising bills.

She tried to strike an optimistic tone. "The work gets harder, the work gets heavier," she said. "We can do it because we are people of God."

Linda Boyce, an elder at St. Paul, is among the church's most dedicated members. She has been a member for nearly 50 years. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

But Ms. Boyce knew she was one of the lucky ones.

A few months earlier, standing in her home, with its dark wood floors and electric fireplace, she described how she came to be a part of one of New York's most ambitious affordable housing developments.

The enterprise started soon after Ms. Boyce, the daughter of sharecroppers in North Carolina, moved to Brooklyn and joined the church in the 1970s.

Mr. Brawley's predecessor worked with community organizers and developers to create Nehemiah, an affordable housing project named after the prophet who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

The goal was to revitalize one of the city's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods.

Now, as St. Paul's members scramble to find places to live, Mr. Brawley sees expanding Nehemiah as a crucial part of his job, as important as preaching and praying.

The Nehemiah rowhouses, available for purchase, allow families in East New York to build equity. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

A new Nehemiah building under construction in East New York. Mr. Brawley hopes to oversee the construction of an additional 10,000 units before he retires. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

Ms. Boyce and her family watched the first Nehemiah houses go up from their rental unit in Linden Plaza, a hulking apartment complex nearby that was beginning its descent into disrepair, when she and her husband joined the waiting list for a rowhouse in the early 1990s.

"I started to pray, I asked God, 'Where should we live?'" she said. "And with God, sometimes it takes him forever to answer."

Sixteen years later, after considering a move back to North Carolina, the Boyces got the call.

Their home cost $230,000, and the couple put down 5 percent, the minimum required by Nehemiah.

The cost of building rowhouses like the Boyces' is covered by subsidies from the city, the state and the homeowner's mortgage from a traditional lender; if the owner holds onto the home for at least 15 years, the subsidy is forgiven.

Since the early 1980s, Nehemiah has grown to over 5,000 affordable units in Brooklyn; the latest project drew 78,875 applications for 200 units.

Mr. Brawley's predecessor, the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, left, toured a Nehemiah construction site with the project's construction manager, Ronald Waters, in 2001.
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Prefabricated portions of some early Nehemiah homes were delivered on trailers to plots of land in East New York in 1997. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

After the Boyces moved into their new home, they painted every room a different color, one a soft yellow, another a pale orange.

They decorated it with photographs of their family — their daughter, who is an art teacher for children with profound disabilities, and their son, a manager for the city's Department of Social Services, the same agency where his mother worked for 41 years, distributing welfare benefits.

As Ms. Boyce spoke about how bright her future felt in this home, Mr. Brawley listened from the entryway. He was thinking, he said later, about another longtime congregant, who he had expected would become an elder like Ms. Boyce, helping him lead the congregation.

But that member had recently confided that she did not think she could afford to stay in Brooklyn.

"There's a lot of Lindas in my church," he said. "Every Linda you lose, you lose something."

'Little Paris'

Olivia Wilkins never got to travel much. But her new apartment on Schenck Avenue in East New York gives her a feeling of being in a whole new world. That's why she calls it her "little Paris."

"You are waking up every morning to a whole new scenery," said Ms. Wilkins, a St. Paul member of 23 years who works part time at Kennedy Airport, giving travelers directions.

Olivia Wilkins never wanted to return to the South, where she was raised, and where she often felt stifled and bored. "New York has five boroughs," she said. "There's a lot to know." Jordan Macy for The New York Times

Before this, Ms. Wilkins lived for 50 years in a public housing development.

As she got older, and her children moved away, she found herself in a big apartment she didn't need, but with nowhere else she could afford to go, all while the public housing wait list grew.

The solution to Ms. Wilkins's problem ended up being right across the street, on the site of a city-owned parking lot that she had avoided since it became a place for kids to make trouble.

The opportunity was obvious to Mr. Brawley.

He worked with East Brooklyn Congregations, which helped create Nehemiah, and a supportive housing nonprofit to create 80 units for low-income seniors, with rents capped at 30 percent of a tenant's income.

Redwood Senior Living would become Ms. Wilkins's new home, and her old apartment went to a young mother and her children who had been living in a homeless shelter.

Ms. Wilkins and the family often pass each other in the street, and they always stop and hug.

Now, Ms. Wilkins never has to think about leaving New York. It's where her anchor is, her church.

"Through the snow, the rain, the storms, I'm there," she said of St. Paul.

Ms. Wilkins loves her new apartment in Redwood Senior Living. "When I come in here, I'm feeling good," she said. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

'What About Us?'

St. Paul was created in 1927, when about 15 South Carolinians moved to Brooklyn in search of opportunity and created their own place to worship.

For many decades, the story of the church was one of a steady migration of Black families from South to North. By the 1980s, the church had affinity groups for people whose families came from North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

Now, they are going back. About 100 people log on to St. Paul's Sunday services each week from Charlotte, N.C., and a similar number from Atlanta. Dozens of people join from Greensboro and Raleigh, N.C., and Richmond, Va.

Many St. Paul members live in Brooklyn, but some occasionally drive in from New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware, Mr. Brawley said. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

They are part of a steady stream of Black New Yorkers who have left town, well over 200,000 since 2019, according to census data.

Ms. Horton, who has lived in Brooklyn for 52 years, has so far resisted her daughter's pleas to join her in Georgia, where her grandson still wears a Yankees cap most days.

But Ms. Horton's rent in public housing is now close to $2,000 a month, roughly double her daughter's mortgage outside of Atlanta.

To Ms. Horton, New York has become a place where you have to be very rich or very poor, able to survive on public benefits.

"But the middle class, where I would consider myself, we're like, 'What about us?'" she asked.

Ms. Horton is in a growing class of New Yorkers who can afford to cover the costs of moving elsewhere but are struggling to keep up with the costs of staying put.

She is finishing a master's degree in social work, and hopes to provide mental health services to her neighbors in Brooklyn.

"The choice I'm making, I'm being forced to make it, because I want to stay here," she said.

Pia Horton works in administration at East Brooklyn Congregations, the community organizing group co-founded by St. Paul. Her rent in public housing has been increasing, and she is considering a move to Georgia. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

During a house meeting at St. Paul, Ms. Horton decided it was time to reveal her quandary. As she spoke, Mr. Brawley stood in the back of the room, arms crossed. He nodded when someone shouted, "It's getting expensive in Georgia, too, Pia!"

Mr. Brawley knows he can't persuade everyone to stay. But some departures still hurt.

Linda Bracey-Patterson, a member of St. Paul for 22 years, was supposed to become an elder, the pastor said.

But after she retired from her job as a special educator, she and her husband, who worked at Chase Bank, realized their retirement savings wouldn't last long.

They moved from Jamaica, Queens, to a three-bedroom townhouse in Hampton, Va., with a mortgage considerably less than their rent.

But Ms. Bracey-Patterson barely knew anyone, and she missed her church. She sank into a depression for a few months, and then tried to shake it off.

"Now that I'm used to it, I'm sort of glad," she said. "Because we're not going to be put out in the street."

She joined another church, but she hasn't found the same camaraderie she had at St. Paul, when she and her friends held a weekly wine and wings night on Zoom during the pandemic.

"I'm just hoping the price of housing in New York does come down, and people could stay there, especially people like myself who were born and raised there," Ms. Bracey-Patterson said.

In the meantime, she has been fielding phone calls from friends at St. Paul who are wrestling with whether they should leave. She recently spoke with a dear friend, really more like a sister, who is worried that her rent could soon rise to $3,000 a month.

"I already told her that we have an extra room," Ms. Bracey-Patterson said, "if you need to come on down here."

Mr. Brawley said he was committed to staying in New York for the long run. "I'm going to do everything I can do to make sure I can stay, but also make sure my people can stay," he said. Jordan Macy for The New York Times

Eliza Shapiro reports on New York City for The Times.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section MB, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Seeking to End Exodus of Black Families