

Balcony church gains popularity in Kenya amid pandemic

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Rev. Paul Machira preaches and sings to residents in an apartment block in Nairobi, Kenya. The Kenyan pastor has taken his church service for children on the road due to coronavirus restrictions and preaches from parking lots outside apartment buildings while kids and their parents dance on balconies above. (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)

Kenya: A groovy rendition of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" blasts from speakers outside an apartment block in the outskirts of Kenya's capital, Nairobi.

Children, some in diapers, dance on the balconies above, accompanied by their parents, to the tunes bellowed out by Rev. Paul Machira and a supporting band.

Coronavirus restrictions don't stop Machira in a country where traditional church services have been suspended. The man who calls himself a "children's preacher" calls out Bible lessons between songs.

Machira has taken his "Balcony to Balcony" service on the road since Kenya's first case was found in mid-March. It has become quite popular, the preacher at the All Saints Cathedral of the Anglican Church of Kenya said.

"When corona opened its floodgates to Kenya and the world, one of the things that was quickly cut off is the fellowship of believers," he said on a recent afternoon.

Residents sing from an apartment balcony as Rev. Paul Machira preaches and sings to them below, at an apartment block in Nairobi, Kenya, Sunday, May 17, 2020. The Kenyan pastor has taken his church service for children on the road due to coronavirus restrictions and preaches from parking lots outside apartment buildings while kids and their parents dance on balconies above. (AP Photo/Brian Inganga)

"But I also think this is the greatest opportunity that has ever arisen to the church, reason being we have got reason to go out on the streets. Jesus sometimes would go to the temple but his main ministry was out in the fields, out in the streets," he added.

Many children in Kenya do not have access to church services online, he said.

Machira said the idea for the mobile service came from Lilian Mbere, a Sunday school teacher who had tried get children to sing hymns from their balconies to reduce the monotony of staying at home.

Mbere said she found the response overwhelming and invited Machira to conduct a service.

"I have seen a lot of growth in the children," she said. "When I sometimes delay and I am not in my balcony by 2 p.m., they usually come asking if they are having a service today. It's like a way of life for now. Sometimes

when I am in my house I can hear them singing the songs we have taught them.”

Kenya has reported more than 1,000 virus cases. Restrictions have been uncomfortable for many, especially those who must work daily to feed their families.

Machira said the “Balcony to Balcony” service has visited 16 locations so far, and his team has two requirements before arriving. The housing should have balconies so social distancing measures can be observed. And everyone at the compound must consent to the service’s presence.

“It has been beautiful, children coming together worshipping God, praising God, and of course that does not happen until all those members of the neighbourhood have agreed to invite us over,” Machira said.

At least once they have been invited to a neighborhood only to find a member of that community has not consented and they had to leave, he said.

The other challenge has been the weather. Kenya has been experiencing heavy rainfalls that have led to floods and the deaths of more than 200 people in recent weeks.

One resident, Wanjiru Mbiriri, said it’s been difficult for her 2-year-old to adjust to staying at home on Sundays but the “Balcony to Balcony” service has restored some normalcy.

Mbiriri would love for the visits to continue because “they have helped dilute the fear”.

- AP