The church downtown: Strategies for urban ministry

by Jason Byassee in the March 11, 2008 issue

The city is changing. For decades white people with money fled the city for the suburbs, leaving behind a mostly brown and black population that was often bereft of resources. But recently, in many cities, patterns of gentrification have reversed this trend. People with money have moved back to the city and rehabbed old housing stock, seeking to live where they work and play. As housing prices and property taxes go up, lower-income people are often driven out.

How is the church responding to this most recent change and ministering to the new set of urban dwellers? Chicago offers the examples of several churches that have responded to the swell of new urban elites who began coming in the 1980s and have not stopped.

Chicago once had a number of downtown “First Churches.” Almost all of them packed up and left in the wake of urban changes in the late 19th and early 20th century. But First United Methodist did not.

First United Methodist Church began at a meeting in a blacksmith’s log-cabin shop in 1832—six years before the city of Chicago was incorporated. It thrived amid the 19th-century urban scene through the clever idea of having a mixed-use building: the church built more space than it needed for worship and rented some of the space to businesses.

That concept was expanded audaciously in 1922 when the congregation decided to build a skyscraper, putting the sanctuary and church offices on the first two floors, commercial space on floors 3 to 24 (Clarence Darrow’s office was once on the sixth floor) and the parsonage in the loft. The church called itself the Chicago Temple—an odd usage of the term by Methodists, perhaps a sign of the grandness of their vision. The skyscraper, diagonal from City Hall in the Loop, Chicago’s downtown, is almost indistinguishable from the buildings around it. Commuters can walk by it for years and never know it’s a church.

Pastor Philip Blackwell calls it “a cathedral church” that serves two very different populations. It has a Sunday crowd of about 1,000 worshipers who come from every zip code in the city and 80 suburbs. But the multiple staff would be busy if they had no regular congregation at all. The Chicago Temple offers midweek services for downtown workers (90 percent of whom are members of other churches), and it has a ministry to the many homeless people who spend days and nights in the Loop. Claude King, the pastor who leads the ministry to the homeless, looks like he could handle himself in a fight—and indeed while I visited the church he was called to the lobby to pacify a brewing confrontation.

One simple, powerful ministry of the Temple is its open-door policy: it leaves the air conditioning or the heat on in the sanctuary and keeps the sanctuary open for prayer. Homeless people are almost always in the pews, surrounded by wooden angels, stained glass and oceans of dark wood. Many of them eventually join the church, or at least come forward for communion. “They’re pretty hungry,” observes Blackwell, who has a quick wit and a young, impish face under a white crown of hair. His ministry is of an intellectual bent. He is proud of the church’s new science and theology study group that will be part of a citywide program, sponsored by the Museum of Science and Industry, called “Science Chicago,” meant to enhance appreciation for the discipline.

Churches like the Chicago Temple don’t thrive unless they improvise. The Temple’s most recent innovation is a theater. When the time came to renovate the church basement, the church spent a few hundred thousand dollars to create a venue for the Silk Road Theater Company, which uses the space for free.

Silk Road Theater was founded in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in an effort to engage the cultures of the East with sympathy rather than rancor. Its founders are a Muslim and a Syrian Orthodox Christian. Some 1.5 million people with origins in the Silk Road region live in Chicago. The theater has received glowing reviews for its staging of such plays as *Merchant on Venice*, which turns Shakespeare’s play about Christians and Jews into a story about Muslims and Hindus, and *Golden Child*, by David Hwang, about the cultural clash between Christian missionaries and the Chinese. “Christianity is a Silk Road story,” Blackwell said, “and we need a Middle Eastern context to understand the Bible.” The theater recently was honored by the Chicago Commission on Human Relations for its “achievements in promoting cross-cultural interaction.”

Silk Road is not an evangelistic effort, though there is a notice in the playbills welcoming patrons to the “historic Chicago temple” and a few people have migrated from the theater to the pews on Sunday. The theater company has complete artistic freedom. The point of the church hosting a theater is simply to host a first-rate company.

Silk Road director Jamil Khoury says the church trusts his company to take on such sensitive subjects as homosexuality and the clash of civilizations. “Theater people often have baggage with the church,” Khoury says, so they’re pleasantly surprised to find a church taking theater so seriously and making space for it so generously. Chicago Temple’s hospitality to the theater may suggest a way to reach a population that is new to the city and is hip to the cultural scene but not to the faith. And what do old downtown churches have, in many cases, but plenty of underused, aesthetically pleasing space?

A few blocks west of the Temple, across the Chicago River, is another old downtown church—the oldest public building in Chicago. When Father Jack Wall arrived at Old St. Patrick’s in 1983, the church had only four parishioners. Its heyday as a harbor for Irish immigrants was long gone. An expressway built in the 1950s had lopped off half its property, and not even the West Loop’s once famous flophouses were around anymore. His parish was filled with warehouses. “My parents were worried for me,” he recalled. “But it was the safest police district in the city. There were simply no people.”

When Father Wall retired from Old St. Pat’s last year, the church had 3,500 families on its rolls, and it counted 5,300 more people as affiliated with the church.

What happened? Some of it had to do with being in the right place when gentrification occurred. Another element is the building’s stunning beauty—Celtic art runs through the statue of St. Patrick in the front and across gorgeous green and gold walls, in mazelike patterns that flow even under the water of the baptismal font. It is a Celtic Christian “thin place,” especially after extensive renovation in the late 1990s.

But part of the turnaround is clearly due to Wall’s own charisma. He’s dashingly handsome, with an intent gaze and laugh marks around his eyes. As a young priest at another parish in the city, he used to wonder about the nearly moribund Old St. Pat’s: “Could this church start all over?” When he saw the church’s unusual twin

spires, one a steeple in the Western tradition, the other an onion-shaped dome recalling the styles of the Christian East, he was reminded of a crossroads. He imagined a church that would draw people back to the city, a church based not on ethnicity or neighborhood but on intentional outreach. (The church's recent history is told in several places, including Lowell Livezey's *Public Religion and Urban Transformation*, New York University Press.)

The church eyed busy professionals who would be attracted by programs that had definite start and end times and that would fit around commuters' schedules. These programs had to be good. A glance at the church's monthly calendar indicates the kind of programs the church developed: bike-to-church Sunday; wine tasting at a trendy restaurant; an Oktoberfest gathering; a stress-reduction program.

The church tapped into the Midwestern tradition of the block party and started what it billed as the "world's largest block party," a several-day party and fund-raiser. Though it has now become more of a secular event, the block party still brings in major revenue with the help of terrific bands and loads of kegs. Stories circulate about how many couples in the parish first met at the block party.

Wall found that young professionals "wanted to know how what they did mattered." They were also thinking about marriage. Wall recalled that at the beginning of his tenure, when people would call the parish to ask about getting married there, "The first response would be, 'Are you a member?'—not [a word of] congratulations or celebration." The church decided to make weddings the occasion to do evangelism and formation.

A wave of children soon followed. St. Pat's responded by opening the first new Catholic grammar school in Chicago in 25 years. From its storefront beginning it has grown to a school of 700 children on two campuses.

Developing the programs and the sacramental and educational emphases was not a matter of meeting needs, according to Father Wall. "When you're down to four parishioners, the last thing you do is ask them their needs so you can meet them." The church reoriented itself around mission. People do not want to be members of institutions that will meet their needs, Wall said, but they do want to be part of a mission, to have an experience of the church in action. Wall was surprised to find that it wasn't just young urban professionals who were coming to Old St. Pat's; the yuppies were bringing their parents, who were disaffected with their suburban

parishes or with Catholic life altogether. “They were re-creating the sabbath,” Wall says.

One of the parishioners who wanted to know how what he did mattered was Tom Owens. Inspired by the example of Mother Teresa, he started using his connections to get work for the unemployed and health care for those who needed it. Out of that effort was born the Cara program (the word *cara* in old Irish means “friend”), which moves some 200 people a year from the streets into jobs with benefits. Since its founding in 1991 some 1,900 people have benefited from the Cara ministry. This is Vatican II ecclesiology at its best—the ministry of the baptized, rather than of the clergy.

When I asked Wall to explain the church’s success, he said that Old St. Pat’s is rooted in “communion with God—discipleship—and so we’re moved to create communities.” The church is not a club, it’s a mission, an event that takes place as it reaches out to others. “God only tells us who we are as we are a gift beyond ourselves and as we receive gifts from others,” he said.

LaSalle Street Church in the Near North neighborhood looks like a venerable downtown First Church, but it actually began in the 1960s when evangelicals from institutions like Wheaton College and Moody Bible Institute sought to create a grittier, more streetwise form of church life. (The building was bought from another congregation.) The church certainly doesn’t feel like the average evangelical church—it has none of the suburban sleekness one would find at Willow Creek, and no narrowness in doctrine. The senior pastor is a woman, Laura Truax, and the congregation is scruffy around the edges, attracting members from the nearby housing projects as well as from the wealthy Gold Coast and many other parts of the city. It is notoriously difficult for white do-gooder churches of any stripe to be more multicultural (Old St. Pat’s has struggled with this problem mightily). LaSalle has done it. Though predominantly white, it includes African Americans and Latinos.

One sign of its character is its homeless ministry, called Breaking Bread. In 2003 someone in the church office saw a homeless man sleeping in the bushes beside the building. The staff member opened a window, offered the man coffee and a roll, and proceeded to learn about the man’s mental illness, lost job and drug problem. Pastor Truax used the incident to challenge the congregation: Could church members let homeless people sleep right underneath their noses and not do something about it?

Breaking Bread is meant to be more than a soup kitchen. It aims to “invite strangers as family to the table,” creating community with the homeless, serving them with dignity. Pastor Oreon Trickey, director of Breaking Bread, describes the ministry with a line from Psalm 68:6: “God puts the solitary into families.” Evangelical enthusiasm and a streetwise sensibility radiate through her 6’4” frame and spikey hairdo.

Breaking Bread offers a restaurant-style meal to 70-80 homeless people once a week. Salad is on the table when guests come in. Full plates are brought out by volunteer waiters. Real silverware and plates are used. Many of the volunteer workers are themselves homeless. When they come in each Wednesday they “visibly relax,” Trickey says. Some will get up and sing, “and no one tells them ‘Sit down! Shut up!’ They can be themselves.”

Keith Richardson, Breaking Bread’s cook, was himself homeless for 13 years. He is summoned if there’s a dispute in the dining area because he can “talk folks down,” Trickey says. Richardson describes his work as “giving back to people I used to hang out with. I understand, I’ve been there, I have a bond with them.” Richardson also knows how they like to eat: “I blackify everything,” he says. “You can’t just make what’s in the Kraft box, you got to put eggs in the macaroni.”

Breaking Bread is keen to not try too much more. The temptation, Trickey says, is to think, “This is great, let’s make it bigger!” She worries that professionalization would set in and the church’s role would focus more on grant-writing and paperwork. “You can compromise your intimacy and depth. Just because you can do more doesn’t mean you should. We prefer to do this one thing well.”

Urban ministry has changed even in the four and a half years of Breaking Bread’s life. The nearby public housing project towers have come down, replaced by mixed-income housing. There are fewer visibly poor people in the neighborhood now. Those who remain are under pressure from the city not to sit on front porches lest the neighborhood seem less safe for the professionals who are moving in. But the poor are still there. “And as long as we offer services, they will come,” Trickey says. “The poor we will always have with us.”

And some will come to church. Trickey, who is also the church’s outreach coordinator, tries to integrate visitors on Sundays into church life. She spots several guests from Breaking Bread at each service. Trickey hopes a volunteer from Breaking Bread will also be there on Sunday to greet them. “Those in the homeless

system have heard enough sermons," Trickey says. "What they need is relationship."

Nothing suggests suburban ministry like Willow Creek Community Church, the influential megachurch that attracts 20,000 people each weekend to its sprawling campus in South Barrington, Illinois. But after years of insisting that people who come to church should have their own needs met, founder Bill Hybels sings a bit of a different tune, learned from friends like U2's Bono: Christians should serve the needs of people outside the church. Willow Creek Chicago is part of this new effort to advocate for social justice and extend "a sense of true community," as the Web site proclaims, to Chicagoans in the quickly gentrifying south Loop area.

Renting space in the magnificent Auditorium Theater, with its golden mosaics and turn-of-the-century opulence, Willow Creek Chicago has about 1,200 attenders after only a year of operation. A greeter told me, "We visited 150 sites and this one worked the best. It seats 4,500—so we have room to grow." A Hollywood-quality video montage celebrating the church's one-year anniversary boasted of 51,000 church attenders, 9,000 worship hours, 312 songs, 40 baptisms, 440 people in small groups, community care for 50 people, 5 relief trucks sent to Louisiana, 850 prayer requests responded to and 320 converts made after services.

Willow Chicago certainly feels different from Willow Barrington. For one, it has been intentionally multiethnic from the start. The music when I visited had an African-American or even Caribbean vibe, not the laced-up guitar sound of most megachurches. I counted 20 choir members, six lead singers, a six-piece string section, four guitars, two synthesizers and two bongo drummers. The lead singers constituted such a multiethnic combination that I wondered if quotas were in place. An unusually rhythmic version of the evangelical mainstay, "Lord, I lift your name on high" was followed by a couple dancing the salsa.

The pastor, Steve Wu, was CEO of two companies before he quit to go into full-time ministry. He projects humility and a sense of confidence, and his comic timing is flawless. He is also an example of the church's ability to weave multiple ethnicities into community. Drawing a stick figure on a marker board to make a point, he drew slanted, Asian eyes, and then feigned surprise when the congregation started laughing. "They're just eyes!" he said. I'm surprised to learn from a church spokesperson, MaryBeth Morehouse, that Wu is divorced. "He can relate to those who've been through that," she tells me, "and help them to be equally yoked next

time.” The hundreds around me seem undisturbed when Wu’s sermon ticks past 45 minutes.

A common criticism of Willow is that it’s a show more than anything and that its studied nonuse of Christian symbols or liturgical gestures is a too-easy accommodation to modernity, the market and individualistic Christianity. But at Willow Chicago there is no effort to hide that this is, indeed, a church, if an unusual one.

Another common criticism is that visitors to Willow can’t possibly hope to get involved in the worship ministry—who expects to go from being an audience member to part of the cast of a Broadway play? But when I mentioned this problem to lead singer David Thompson, he dismissed it. He said he had tried several Presbyterian churches when he moved to Chicago, and only Willow asked him to use his talents in worship.

Willow Chicago makes a clear effort to reach the city. When I tell Morehouse I’m interested in gentrification, she replies, “We’re against it!” She goes on to talk about Willow’s intention to “transform the city a bit at a time.” The chief problem the church sees is loneliness. Evangelicals can’t stand to live in buildings where they don’t know their neighbors—how could they ever evangelize someone they’ve not met? So Willow has launched “Neighborhood Life,” a social outreach program that allows Creekers to meet their neighbors—“not to convert anybody,” a greeter assured me, but just to get to know them.

Given Willow’s effort to be city-savvy, I almost swallowed my gum when I heard where the one-year anniversary party would be held: the Congress Hotel. Workers have been on strike for four years at the Congress, seeking better wages and health benefits. Hotel owners have steadfastly refused to negotiate. Religious groups have been among those supporting the strike. Every Sunday, Creekers were crossing the picket line to enter the hotel, using it as a fellowship hall. (Willow Chicago has since stopped using the hotel, though Morehouse described the strike to me as “a pretty pathetic situation” and said, “These people need to either find better counsel to argue their case or move on to employment elsewhere.”) A church purporting to care about social justice and to be sensitive to the needs of the city might start with a willingness to stand up for workers.

Wicker Park is a working-class neighborhood a few miles northwest of the Loop. Its proximity to downtown has made it ripe for gentrification. New bars, coffeehouses and restaurants have popped up as young professionals have moved in and rehabbed the housing stock, which in turn has raised the cost of renting or buying housing.

Ministering in this neighborhood is Wicker Park Grace, which is part of the Emergent church movement. Grace is explicitly reacting against the slickness of the megachurch style and against the theological smugness that it detects in much of the evangelical world. Pastor Nanette Sawyer put off my initial request for an interview, saying, “It seems like you want a story about all the beautiful people. We’re more like the island of misfit toys.”

Once I talked her into meeting with me, she urged me to come soon so I wouldn’t miss a neighborhood art show. The art council building that the church uses was hosting an exhibit of an Ecuadoran artist’s work. The exhibit was just beside the coffee shop that the council opens for special events and which the church uses for services. The whole vibe was crunchy and welcoming, like entering a familiar old garage with someone else’s cool stuff in it.

If Willow Chicago matches Steve Wu’s personality as a former CEO, Wicker Park Grace matches Sawyer’s mystical and artistic streak. It holds worship on Saturday evenings either with a Taize-style prayer service or with a jazz vespers. Sawyer teaches more than she preaches, and the service is mostly filled with directed prayer and silence.

The key mark of the church for her is hospitality (her book on the topic, just out from Skylight Paths, is *Hospitality*: *The Sacred Art*). Her ministry is shaped by her experience at a little Presbyterian church in South Boston that welcomed her while she was a student at Harvard Divinity School. The church “made me feel safe and valuable and free to be honest and authentic—on the spiritual journey I was on,” she recalls. So she now invites others.

About 30 people gather for vesper services, and about 140 are on the church’s e-mail list. When it comes to numbers, Sawyer is a bit less ambitious than Willow Creek: “We’d like to have 100 or so.” She has no interest in buildings, only in art.

Her church is made up of the artists who moved into the neighborhood when it was still cheap to live there. Funky shops followed, and then came the trend-following

gentry. Condos are going up right outside Sawyer's office, and the arts council is being displaced from its building—the owner is looking to raise rents above what artists and churches can pay. The church will be moving to a space above a Target store. "Don't worry, we'll artify it!" Sawyer promises.

Sawyer sounds like she has Willow in mind as her negative example when she describes Wicker Park Grace's philosophy: "Don't create a show for worship to be purchased by consumers. We want to create a community for participants."

The way artists have contributed is most obvious in Wicker Park's Stations of the Cross exhibit during Holy Week. These artistic renderings of Jesus' steps on the way to his death have brought the neighborhood out and captured local media attention. Jesus' trial is portrayed with the iconic image of early- 20th-century lynchings in the American South. A rendering of Veronica's veil has a papier-mâché hand reaching out to the viewer. Jesus' burial scene includes what looks like an actual death shroud over a face. The resurrection is portrayed as a glorious montage of eyes and flowers and light, in an Eastern Orthodox iconic vein.

The use of art is not a method for church growth at Wicker Park—if anything it seems designed to keep things small. Poetry fills the services, with poems by Christian saints like St. John of the Cross ("'What is grace,' I asked God. And he said, 'All that happens'") and the Indian philosopher Sri Chinmoy ("Yesterday I lived inside My mind's disastrous uncertainty-sea. Today I am living inside My heart's rapturous divinity-ocean"). Wicker Park Grace is a good, small, delicate thing, riding the tides of gentrification and gathering up refugees from other churches, promising a more peaceful, gentle way—even perched above Target.

Meeting these churches and their pastors leaves one impressed with the enormous, diverse intellectual energy needed to minister in the changing city. No one church can do everything in response to massive and various human needs. The successful ones concentrate on doing a few things—connecting to people through hospitality, art, companionship, theater, food or service. Theological distinctions seem to fade amid the challenges of the city. Mainline pastors, Catholic priests and evangelical ministers are all improvising, trying new things, risking failure, scattering seed and seeing what fruit might spring up.