

Back to the future: Fourth-century style reaches Bay Area seekers

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

A half hour before the Sunday morning service begins, St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco already displays the holy chaos that characterizes its worship. In the domed entrance hall a choir is practicing motets. In the rectangular “synagogue” area, where worshipers’ chairs face each other across a long raised platform, the liturgist is rehearsing readers for the service. Worship leaders in brightly colored Liberian vestments hand out spiral-bound songbooks and welcome newcomers.

Visitors are sure to be struck by the visual power of the scene as well. Circling the dome above the altar are vivid representations of saints, not all of them Christian. Gandhi, Malcolm X, Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Buddha and Muhammad are among the figures who form the two-tier line dance, along with Fyodor Dostoevsky and Ella Fitzgerald, Isaiah, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther, Elizabeth I and Iqbal Hasih, a Pakistani murdered at age 13 for speaking out against child labor. Above the saints, who were painted by Mark Dukes, is a text from St. Gregory: “The one thing truly worthwhile . . . is becoming God’s friend.”

On one wall, below the icon of a dancing Christ, is a framed rubbing of a tablet from a seventh-century Eastern, or Nestorian, church in western China. On the opposite wall, at the entrance to the synagogue area, the lectern is draped in African cloth and surrounded by Ethiopian ceremonial standards. Above the preacher’s seat, which is a wide howdah from Thailand (a canopied seat for riding on an elephant), is a floor-to-ceiling icon depicting the marriage of the soul with Christ.

At ten o’clock music director Sanford Dole calls everyone to gather around the altar and announces that the service will be sung a cappella. “Sing the melody in unison during the first stanza,” he instructs, “then break into parts for the rest of each hymn or chant.” He leads the congregation in rehearsing two verses of each selection.

Then comes the biggest surprise for newcomers. The leaders demonstrate the steps of a line-dance that worshipers will use to process to their seats. Everyone practices the step. Then, books opened to the processional hymn, the singing and dancing congregation follows the candle, the cross, the rector, worship leaders carrying colorful ceremonial umbrellas, and choir members beating tambourines, ringing bells and clanging cymbals until everyone finds a seat.

Worship then settles into a more expected pattern. Each reading is followed by the tones of solemn Asian gongs and ample silence for reflection. The rector, seated like a rabbi in a first-century synagogue, preaches on the texts. Then another surprise: the rector invites worshipers to share a personal experience that illustrates the theme of the sermon. Several people do. It becomes clear why members of the congregation sit facing each other—so they can easily engage each other in the storytelling and the bidding prayers that follow.

After the service of the word it is time to move to the table to share bread and wine. The music director teaches another dance step. Singing a hymn, people move to the altar, right hand on the shoulder of the person in front, left hand holding the song book—right foot forward, left behind, right forward, kick left, kick right, right forward again—until all the verses are sung. Encircling the altar and the host, worshipers sing and chant the Great Thanksgiving. Leaders offer the bread and wine and the choir sings.

After a final hymn and blessing, worship moves seamlessly into fellowship. The altar becomes the serving table for coffee and juice. Carts of pastries and bread appear beneath the Christ icon. Visitors are invited to tour and learn more about St. Gregory's. People in need of prayer are invited to come forward for anointing and spiritual support. Over the next half hour the crowd gradually thins.

Most of the people who join St. Gregory's have not belonged to or attended any church for three years or more. Many have had no church experience at all. Most have no denominational affiliation. The average age of the adults in the congregation is between 34 and 45—which is 20 years younger than the average Episcopal congregation. About half of St. Gregory's members are families, the other half singles, gay and straight.

Those who pass through St. Gregory's welcoming doors on Sunday mornings come from the same group targeted by "seeker" churches: the growing number of people

who report that they have no religious affiliation at all. In the San Francisco Bay Area and parts of the Pacific Northwest, that number is 90 percent of the population, according to the latest census. This means that among the people who gather to worship on Sunday morning some would call themselves Christian, but others might invoke some other faith or spirituality, and many would have no allegiance to any tradition.

In serving this eclectic mix of worshipers, say rectors Donald Schell and Richard Fabian, St. Gregory's is like a church of the fourth century—the era of St. Gregory of Nyssa. As Christianity became the newly adopted faith of the Roman Empire, the rectors note, the church attracted faithful Christians, curious pagans, adherents of various schools of philosophy, devotees of mystery religions, and many who came only because their social position encouraged it.

In fact, John Baldwin, a professor at Weston Theological Seminary, said after visiting St. Gregory's: "I have just had the closest possible experience of what worship was like in the fourth century." A visitor from Africa commented: "The church service here is the closest thing I've experienced in America to a village worship service in Africa."

For Fabian and Schell, however, St. Gregory is designed with American seekers in mind. But whereas most seeker churches work with the models of the shopping mall and the television audience in designing their space and worship service, Fabian likens worship at St. Gregory's to a rock concert, which he calls the modern secular experience that most closely resembles the divine liturgy. He seeks a worship that is an intense participatory experience of movement, singing, dancing and bonding. Schell adds another analogy: "We also follow the model of a dinner party in how we welcome people. We ask, 'How can we invite people in?'"

"We want the people who come to St. Gregory's to sense that they're part of a worldwide culture and a worldwide religion," Fabian says. "That's the way the Bay Area is—it has great diversity. Many people choose to live in California for the kind of life they can have together here. They would be more affluent if they lived elsewhere, but they want to be here."

Fabian admires the intentionality shown by the two seeker churches with which he is most familiar, Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral and the Lutheran Church of Joy in Phoenix. But he does not wish to emulate them.

Schell tells of growing up in sermon-centered evangelical services, which left him feeling dissatisfied and spiritually hungry. “Even when I was only 12 or 13 years old, I had the sense that there was more we could be doing together at worship to bring us closer to the sense of mystery, to move us. There could be more beauty and challenge.” That sense led him on the quest that has culminated in St. Gregory’s.

“There’s a great opportunity now for doing powerful, participatory worship,” Fabian says. “People love it. We do this because it’s a powerful spiritual, emotional and experiential resource.” Schell adds, “Over 30 years as a priest I’ve seen what can happen for people who are gathered together and making something holy of whatever anyone present has to offer. I’ve seen how transforming it is for people’s lives and how it opens them to an experience of God.” Worship of this kind “takes people who are first touched in a human or an aesthetic way and moves them toward genuine religious conversion, to a passion for God, a love of Jesus.”

In describing their conception of worship, Schell and Fabian point to the example of Jesus and the practice of the early church. Jesus brought a community into being by feasting with strangers and sinners, actions that served “to inaugurate and enact God’s work of welcoming all, pouring the Spirit out on all flesh.” Following that example, St. Gregory’s invites all to join in the eucharistic feast, to participate actively in worship, and to worship in a space that includes folk art from many traditions.

In its approach to building community, the congregation is again doing something different from most seeker churches, even if the goal is similar, the rectors say. “My impression is that seeker churches build community because they think people need it,” Schell says. “We think that the building of community around Jesus’ table is our central calling. The first [approach] is at a certain level the same kind of thinking that says we need to have surplus parking. ‘Community’ can simply be fit into a checklist of what people are looking for.”

By contrast, he says, Jesus created community for its transforming power, “calling people out of their loneliness, isolation and alienation and into communion—both in the literal sense of the community of the table and in the extended sense of communion, fellowship, friendship, mutual support and the challenge to work together.”

Fabian adds that the seeker churches with which he's familiar do invite people to get involved, but they don't do it through the liturgy. "It's an issue of design. Do you design the participation to be during the liturgy, or do you design it to be in other places—in small groups, for instance." One reason St. Gregory's does it through the liturgy is because that was the practice of the early church. "What we call traditional worship was originally highly participatory, and it's been hugely popular through the centuries. It is the foundation for all liturgical traditions,"

As the name of the church suggests, worship at St. Gregory's is heavily influenced by traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church, Schell says, "offers a 2,000-year history of popular liturgy in the vernacular. And early on, in the fourth through the sixth centuries, it was also a church dealing with large popular gatherings of half-converted people. It's a good model for today's situation of people wandering into the church with open minds but without being sure what they believe or why." Fabian and Schell also find in the Orthodox tradition a spiritual and aesthetic element to which they resonate, and they have drawn on the material it offers—visually, musically and liturgically.

But the congregation is firmly Episcopal, happy to be a contributing partner of the Episcopal Diocese of California. It is Orthodox in the sense of believing that the liturgical tradition of the Eastern Church belongs to all Christianity. "It's part of the Christian storehouse of treasures," Fabian says.

The church's worship practices, says Schell, "are aimed at taking people out of the constraints of having to be a certain way in church. They move people into a much more spontaneous, direct, immediate engagement with each other and with the word and sacrament." Paradoxically, spontaneity requires careful preparation. "To create a setting in which people feel safe enough to speak, dance and share in the sermon one needs a very well-rehearsed vehicle. Only then will people feel secure enough to try something new."

Dance is incorporated into the service because "dancing is one of the most profound and ancient parts of worship. Its association with Jesus didn't vanish until the 19th century." The rectors admit that people new to the church aren't always comfortable with the dancing, but they feel that it's important to "push people's comfort level at church in the way that anything exciting and creative does. We don't say to people, 'Do this if it's comfortable.' We simply invite. Staying comfortable doesn't push people into new territory." They are convinced, as Fabian puts it, that "movement,

touching and breathing together create a more complex, profound community. The things that we do together are the most profound way of changing who we are.”

Fabian and Schell began envisioning a church like St. Gregory’s while both were chaplains at Yale University in the 1970s. Fabian’s family wealth enabled them to set up a foundation, All Saints Company, that would seek and provide funding for the church they imagined. St. Gregory’s came into existence in 1978 as an experiment in the renewal of liturgical and parish life. Fabian and Schell’s dream came to full fruition 20 years later when, after years of sharing space in other church buildings, the congregation moved to its own new structure in the Prothero Hill area, a light-industrial section of the city.

A micro-brewery stands across the street from the church on one side, a teddy-bear factory on the other. By Midwestern standards, both the lot and the church are small, but in San Francisco’s inflated housing market the church was almost prohibitively expensive. Only a \$1 million gift from Fabian’s family enabled the congregation to complete the project. But once in its own, spacious quarters, the congregation quickly grew, doubling in the first few months and doubling again in the following three years.

The building is built in the style of Siberian Orthodox churches, mixed with some elements of Japanese fortress architecture. The design began with a floor plan Schell and Fabian had in mind from early on—a plan taken from pre-fifth-century Syrian synagogues at a time when Christians and Jews used similar buildings. The Syrian synagogues provided space “defined not by a sacralized event, but by the gathering and shaping of a fluid community of people,” Schell says. St. Gregory’s floor plan began with two architectural principles: that “what the Christian community does when it gathers creates and contains its holy space,” and that “architectural spaces for Christian community will support welcoming and belonging and giving and receiving of grace-filled gifts.”

To show how this kind of space helps break down barriers and to welcome people, Schell tells the story of a parishioner who wanted to share with the hungry the blessing she felt when first welcomed to the altar table. Her response led eventually to a food pantry that is located around the table. The program gives away bags of groceries to the poor every Friday and has enrolled a hundred volunteers. “Each week our congregation of neighbors and friends who need groceries is as big as our combined Sunday liturgical gatherings. Some who first came to us for groceries now

are attending liturgy and have become members.” The holy table around which the congregation gathers to share the sacred meal shapes a eucharistically inspired ministry.

St. Gregory’s has a large staff for a moderate-sized congregation. But only the two rectors serve full-time. The music director, assisting presbyter, director of pastoral care, director of family and children’s ministries, parish administrator, event coordinator and executive director of the All Saints Company (the foundation supporting the church) are all part-timers. Talented volunteers also bring their expertise to the congregation, producing St. Gregory’s videotapes and designing and maintaining its exceptional Web site (www.saintgregorys.org).

Does something distinctly Christian emerge from St. Gregory’s open and religiously diverse congregation? Without creedal consensus, can one build a community patterned on Jesus’ community of disciples? The rectors and the congregation struggle with these questions. They are trying, Schell wrote recently, to find “a way to be truly christian that does not exclude, condemn or marginalize experiences that are not christian.” (Schell says he uses the small “c” for “christian” to suggest that “we don’t mean to claim exclusive right to that identity.”)

Fabian sees Christian identity emerging as part of a conversation that God is carrying on with humanity—a conversation that we don’t define, limit or direct. “What we have seen in Jesus allows us to recognize what God is doing everywhere,” he says. “The whole plan is shown clearly in Jesus, and it’s a plan for the whole world.”

According to Schell, the congregation is trying to meet and embrace Jesus while also embodying Gregory of Nyssa’s discovery: “By the grace of God, all humanity is already one.” The church patterns its preaching and practice on Jesus’ teaching and its sacramental practice on his ministry. Instead of focusing on each person’s individual faith, the congregation tries to imitate what Jesus did. Instead of asking people to assent to a particular set of beliefs, the community listens to all the ways in which its people perceive Jesus.

“Among our many voices, some skeptical, some deeply committed to Jesus the teacher, some mystical . . . , one faith emerges,” Schell said. “That faith lives in the chorus of our many questions, intuitions, experiences and simple certainties, our sorrows and joys, our compassion and love and desire to serve others. Something

whole emerges from the many different ways we hold Jesus.” Fabian sums up the ministry this way: “What makes us Christian is all that we do together. The people are participating in the great acts of worship, and that participation is what makes them Christian.”

In the course of a year many more people than St. Gregory’s 200 members attend worship services at the church. Because one of St. Gregory’s main missions is to model a new way of doing ministry, the parish provides a rich array of resources for those who visit the church and for other church leaders. The support of the foundation allows the congregation to have a huge program for its size and to engage in outreach and mission through videotapes, CDs and workshops.

Though nonmembers are always welcome at worship and at parish events, St. Gregory’s is very careful in defining the meaning of membership. It took the congregation three years to work out its criteria for membership, Fabian says. The members themselves developed those criteria, and each year they got simpler and less demanding.

“If you’re reaching for unchurched people, you don’t make the first step the biggest step,” Fabian says. But St. Gregory’s is clear about what it asks of members. “For example, members can pledge any amount they wish, but they must pledge—that’s clear.” Only members are part of the congregation’s decision-making process. Being open and formal about membership requirements “keeps members from having to defer constantly to those on the boundaries,” Fabian says. It keeps power among those who are truly committed to the church.

St. Gregory’s highly participatory worship may not be for everyone, but it would be hard not to be moved by this congregation’s way of continuing the long conversation God has had with humanity.