



PASTORS RANDY ASHCRAFT, BRETT FULLER AND ARLIE WHITLOW (FROM LEFT) ARE LEADERS IN A CONTEMPORARY CHURCH MOVEMENT.

following the

spirit

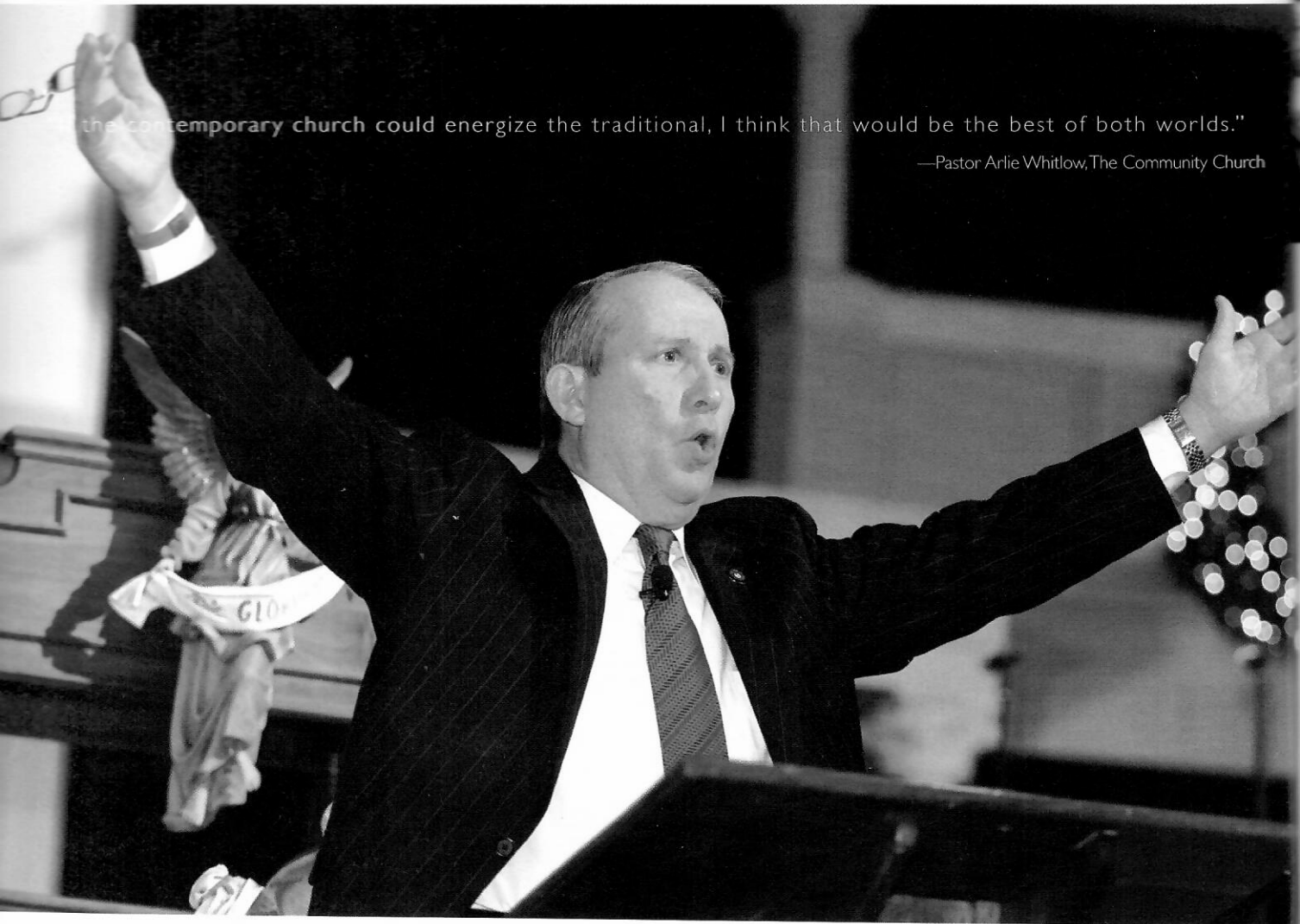
BY JEFF COWART



Before noon on any given Sunday,

a full band and a half-dozen worship singers will have performed—and sometimes rocked—through two services at the Leesburg Community Church. Senior Pastor Randy Ashcraft will have delivered two passionate sermons, complete with read-along notes projected onto video screens. Ashcraft's words will have reached an average of 700 worshippers in this sanctuary that also doubles as an all-purpose gymnasium.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID GALEN



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—Pastor Arlie Whitlow, The Community Church

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Also before noon, down the long hallway from Leesburg Community Church's gymnasium-turned-sanctuary, the smaller but equally dedicated congregation of the Leesburg Baptist Church will complete its traditional service in another sanctuary with fixed pews and a baptism pool. Its Loudoun roots date back to the founding of the Leesburg Baptist Church in 1881. Its music will be drawn from the classical Broadman Southern Baptist hymnal to the accompaniment of an old familiar church piano.

Undoubtedly, the Rev. Charles T. Herndon might not today recognize the Baptist church he helped found before the turn of the 20th century. The building that both congregations now use has separate entrances, one for each worship style, and each entrance is fronted by its own parking lot. Despite the two distinct names and worship formats, the two sanctuaries are connected by

a long hallway and by 125-year-old roots as a Baptist church—and as one family of God.

Welcome to the contemporary world of today's church.

Across Loudoun County, as in cities and counties across the United States, new styles of religion have taken root and realigned old-fashioned and traditional notions of the Christian church. With its upbeat, popular music sound and its more relaxed worship atmosphere, the contemporary church movement, as it is categorized, is reaching out to thousands with a message of comfort, community, and salvation. From the fundamental to the evangelical, from mainline denominations to independent congregations, church worship styles are changing to meet busier, more stressed, and less connected audiences.

"I think that in Loudoun County, with its transience, with its age, with the variety of places from which people come, a contemporary format

for doing church might have easier accessibility than what it might take to come into our community and relate to more tradition-bound churches," says Ashcraft. "We talk about and try to create as many open doors as possible. We talk about being on a journey together."

While there are no hard facts and figures confirming how many churches incorporate contemporary themes and methods into their worship services in the U.S., sociologists of religion, theologians, and church pastors agree that the movement is widespread and growing. There is general agreement among those who study trends and issues in the Christian church that what defines the contemporary movement has more to do with the tools of communication than with any kind of change in theological beliefs. The tools generally reflect the churches' efforts to recognize and accept the nature of the culture around them and to adapt worship styles



“We talk about being on a journey...”

in familiar and inviting ways.

In contemporary churches, congregants will find diverse elements in the worship experience. Newly written songs or traditional hymns are presented in popular musical styles with musical support ranging from acoustic instruments to what look and feel like rock bands to what seem like full-blown orchestras. Multimedia technologies, particularly large screen video presentations that sometimes include clips from popular movies or television shows, envelop congregations in the

high tech. Dramatic skits or performances are woven into the worship service. And, for many, the opportunity is provided to worship in a more casual style, including being encouraged to “come as you are.”

“Because of my Pentecostal background, we always had guitars and we had drums,” says Pastor Arlie Whitlow of The Community Church in Sterling. Whitlow says the music is part of the church’s heritage. “What is different is that we used to sing hymns and now we do contemporary

music; some of the band members even write our music. Somewhere along the way we will sing a hymn, but it is not our momma’s hymn. The lyrics are the same, but the style is different.”

Whitlow and his congregation are building a massive new church fronting on Route 7 near Lansdowne, and his congregation will relocate to a sanctuary designed to accommodate up to 1,800 worshippers in a single service. Membership is currently about 1,000, but Whitlow’s church has grown dramatically from its modest



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—Pastor Randy Ashcraft, Leesburg Community Church

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—Pastor Brett Fuller, Metro Morningstar Church



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foundations and tent meetings in the 1960s to one of the largest and most vibrant congregations in Loudoun County.

"We are getting a lot of Christians who come to us because of that building," says Whitlow. "But they don't stay because of that building. They stay because we are firmly grounded in the long tradition of the gospel and because we recognize the environment around us and are not afraid

elementary and junior high schools, he learned a great deal about the hopes and dreams of the human condition. The congregation he leads is one of the county's most ethnically diverse, an almost equal mix of African-American and Caucasian worshippers, with a healthy following among Hispanics and Asians.

"When I was born again, I said 'God, I want to produce a church that is so ethnically diverse and so unified that it looks a lot like heaven,'" says Fuller. "Somehow, God has graced us with exactly that."

As in Ashcraft's and Whitlow's churches, the stage at Dominion High School on Sunday morning vibrates with high energy and the Holy Spirit through the Metro Morningstar worship band and

presence of the Father."

One of the hallmarks of successful contemporary churches is a deep dedication to the Bible, even as efforts are often made to remove the traditional symbols of Christianity, right down to the Cross. Contemporary churches often reach out to the "unchurched," who may be looking for the fellowship and sense of place that churches can offer, but who may be put off or intimidated by the trappings of the traditional church. So the sanctuaries are designed to be softer and less threatening, and the music more like what might be playing on the radio.

But, that is also where contemporary churches sometimes come under criticism from denominations fearing that modernizing the church and spending too much time "producing" the worship services might lead to losing the way.

"...so unified that it looks a lot like heaven."



to build contemporary things into our worship service to meet the needs of the people."

The same idea holds true for Pastor Brett Fuller and the Metro Morningstar Church he helped found in the 1980s. Not yet in its permanent location, the congregation of some 800 members meets in the auditorium of Dominion High School in eastern Loudoun.

An African-American, Fuller grew up in Kansas City, shaped by Baptist tradition, the racial tensions of the 1960s, and a loving family that worked hard to teach him about the pitfalls of hatred. Having broken the color barrier at his

singers. The congregation rises to its feet, claps and sways to the beat, and celebrates. And, like his contemporary counterparts, when the music stops, Fuller's teaching dives deeply into the Bible.

"We have tried to fashion a church with a nontraditional style of worship and song and a nontraditional style of pulpit ministry that is much more communication-based than style-based," says Fuller. "If I could, I would get down in the audience, but where we are we have a stage that makes that difficult. We do our best to try and produce the atmosphere of family with the living

"There is a concern that the church could sell out to the culture, and a criticism of the contemporary church is that it is a sellout to entertainment or to the show or to gospel light or to hot tub theology," says Ashcraft. "There always needs to be a critique running alongside of any new expression, asking the hard questions. We have to be concerned that we are not just about building a bigger church or a bigger crowd, but more about building a truly Biblical congregation."

Both Whitlow and Fuller agree.

At one point, Baptist, Methodist, Presby-

terian, and other churches were contemporary, too, when they just started, Fuller notes. "Contemporary to us is not just what kind of music we play, it's not just a PowerPoint presentation, but it is making sure that we are keeping up with the trends of our culture that are not anti-Biblical. When I say contemporary, I mean I am trying to figure out what in my society today can I address in a relevant fashion without compromising the message."

Fuller says the challenge for contemporary churches, just as it has been for traditional churches, is not to become so steeped in tradition because "that's the way we like it that we now brand ourselves as contemporary when we are really 20 years old in our style."

Whitlow, whose roots are deep in traditional Pentecostalism, says the tools of contemporary worship can indeed be dangerous if they become more important than the foundational message.

"When I come to the pulpit, I have my Bible in my hand," says Whitlow. "When I talk, I open my Bible, and when I teach from Romans, that passage from Romans will be on that screen for people to see. The problem is not that screen or the musical instruments on the stage, but what we do with them and how we use them."

"If you really want to know my fear, or my preoccupation," says Whitlow, "it is my concern that the traditional church has so much to offer, but that it has sold itself out in theology, it has sold itself out in passion, and it has become ecclesiastical instead of vital. If the contemporary church could energize the traditional, I think that would be the best of both worlds."

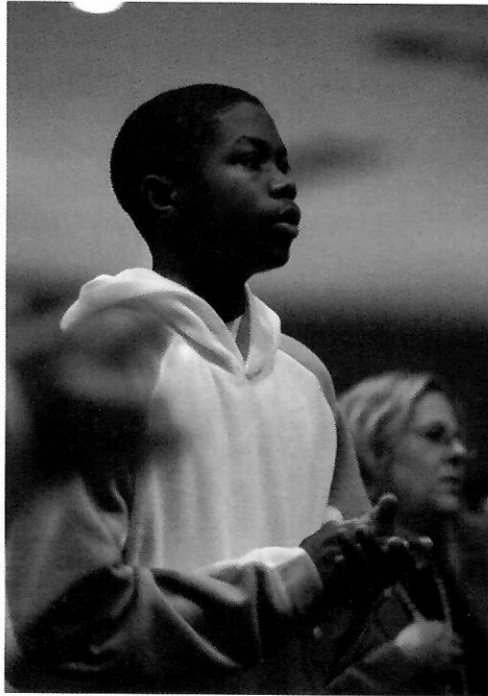
Fuller says he believes that the contemporary movement reflects the best of what Jesus intended for the church.

"What some people describe as Biblical is simply tradition, and they don't want to jettison their tradition because it is comfortable to them and therefore hard to accept something that might be new," says Fuller. "I'm convinced that Jesus was real vague about how to do church. If you look in the New Testament, the four Gospels, there are very few things telling us how church should be structured. And, I think Jesus did that intentionally so that everyone could figure out in their generation, with their people, in their culture, in their language, with their music—to fit it however you want it as long as the Biblical essentials are there."

Ashcraft points out that the Sunday School movement was a modern trend of the 1920s and

1930s that was widely criticized by some. But the innovation and risk then fueled the growth of churches in the 1950s and Sunday School today is considered a tradition.

Churches that grow and sustain themselves are the ones willing to reach out and experiment, fulfilling the Christian mission to reach others with the love of Christ, notes Ashcraft. "Jesus did exactly that in his day, interpreting the Scriptures with common day experiences of agriculture and seeds and brothers that don't get along. And, he was highly criticized for that, but he was creative



and risking and sustaining."

Ashcraft says that history clearly shows that the survival of the church has always been linked to adaptation to the culture of the day.

"Martin Luther took common German bar tunes and turned them into hymns which we now consider to be traditional hymns," he says. "For Martin Luther those were very contemporary songs, and he was highly criticized for taking commoner tunes and using them in the life of the church. The contemporary church is sometimes criticized along the same lines, but anywhere the church has ever had a breakout and has had the opportunity to thrive, it is because there are pioneers who are willing to push the edge of the envelope."

Ashcraft says that there is clearly a surge of growth in Loudoun's churches, fueled in large

part by population growth, but also fueled by the contemporary church movement. He observes that most of the churches in Loudoun, especially new church starts, almost all center around a contemporary format for worship and music, even if they follow more liturgical or more Pentecostal styles.

And part of the equation centers on the Washington area culture itself, where lives are busy, time is scarce and sometimes newcomers and old-timers alike sense a lack of community and fellowship. Contemporary churches are trying to find ways to fill that gap.

"The church faces a tremendous challenge in going countercultural in regards to the inhospitality that is Washington," says Fuller, adding he is not being critical but factual. "One of the weaknesses here is that people don't really seem to care much to know one another, through lack of interest or lack of time or some other reason. So, we have an intentionality about not just producing a sense of community but about producing a family."

Contemporary churches realize, says Ashcraft, especially in areas like Loudoun, people come here from all over the world. "Our goal would be not to have just two styles of worship, but to have maybe four or five—all with the same mission of leading others to understand abundant life in Christ."

Ashcraft is quick to say that different styles also mean that people can begin to honor and respect different kinds of worship. "In the life of the church, there have always been different avenues or expressions that are historically rooted from Pentecostalism to Catholicism, the mainline Protestant movement, the charismatic movement—so different means of expression are nothing new."

Ashcraft says that what is new in the contemporary church is that within one church people can now find many expressions—part of what the contemporary movement is all about. "The notion that church has to be just one style of worship is probably a thing of the past."

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