

ONE BIG CHURCH

Parkview Christian among fastest-growing churches in U.S.

November 11, 2007

By Isaac Wolf, Staff writer

The Rev. Tim Harlow's about to introduce a massive, multimillion dollar fundraising drive to his congregation. Like any other salesman, he needs to tiptoe delicately into the pitch.

What he wants Parkview to do, he preaches, is to "reach, raise and release."

Reach by going into the world, finding new church-goers. Raise by making new disciples. Release by sending the new disciples back into the world, fortified by their newfound relationship with God.

Next, Harlow introduces a metaphor: A stone breaking the surface of a pond. "As God hits here in Orland Park," he tells a Sunday morning crowd of about 1,500, "it ripples out."



Harlow's congregation, Parkview Christian Church, located in the southwest corner of Orland Park, is one of the nation's fastest-growing churches - 86th fastest, to be precise, according to Outreach magazine's compilation of fastest growing churches in 2007. The church has been listed in the 100 most-quickly growing churches three of the last four years, and, as Harlow detailed in Sunday's sermon, he envisions it enjoying more grand growth.

But with Parkview's explosive growth - its membership has increased about 30 percent each year in the last decade, Harlow says - a question looms: How much larger can it grow? At what point, if ever, does Parkview's size start to impede on congregants' religious and social experiences, causing them to splinter into new congregations or simply lose interest in church?

As good as a nightclub

Parkview's service isn't the church experience you remember being forced to sit through as a child. Their prayers begin with the 12-person rock band - seven instrumentalists and five vocalists. It's easy to think you're in at a professional music venue. The band's excellent, and they play on a stage bathed in a modern purple and blue lighting scheme.

"We've got a really kickin' live band," Harlow said. "It's as good as what you'd find in a nightclub."

Like a professional sports stadium, the auditorium has massive television screens displaying a real-time video feed of the band. And the seats in the upper deck are soft and cushiony, similar to those you'd find in a multiplex movie theater.

The service is structured like a televised variety show, such as "Saturday Night Live." After the opening music, Harlow blesses several children who have had health problems.

He's wearing jeans and an untucked shirt unbuttoned at the top. He looks like he could have come straight from a night of clubbing.

Then, a four-person comedy troupe takes the stage. They perform a skit about a caricature of an overbearing, obnoxious soccer dad that looks to another soccer dad for guidance. How is he so calm and collected? The lesson, congregants are made to see, is that pushy soccer dads can learn to relax by going to church.

Harlow attributed Parkview's success to its "culturally relevant message and methods."

"We preach the Bible just as other churches should, but we make it in such a way that people understand it," he said. "And, it's fun. When I was growing up, church wasn't fun. It was boring. It was dull."

Having fun, Harlow insisted, is OK. "I think Jesus wants us to have fun," he said.

His happy-go-lucky demeanor doesn't diminish his effectiveness as a religious leader, he said. "People want to be challenged," he said. "You can still deliver a hard message if you're not condescending, if you're not condemning. It's in the attitude."

Worthy of celebration

According to its editors, Outreach magazine has been criticized for focusing on mega-churches, which it defines as having at least 2,000 attendees. "To be sure, we understand that the average church in America has an estimated 90 attendees," they write in a note accompanying the list of 100 fastest-growing churches.

They estimate that 1,300 churches in America qualify as mega-churches, less than half a percent of U.S. Protestant churches. "While you may not fully relate to the experience of these churches," they write, "we believe that God's Kingdom work is worthy of celebration in churches of all sizes, including mega-churches."

Bubbly and effusive, Kay Coppens, 63, of Flossmoor, first came to Parkview for an Alcoholics Anonymous group then decided to attend its Sunday service. At the service, she was nervous but not shy. "I started hugging people," she said. "They hugged me back."

Coppens, who was raised Catholic, used to attend Deer Creek Christian Church in University Park before she joined Parkview.

How does she make friends at Parkview? "Pastor told us to form small Bible study groups. That's how you get to know people."

Parkview has dozens of small Bible study groups and other communities, and these overlap. "They end up connecting," Coppens said.

During Harlow's sermon, he detailed Parkview's behemoth new campaign: Give a million dollars to charity, buy property to enlarge the Orland Park location, add a chapel for weddings and funerals, create a satellite church in Lockport in conjunction with Lockport Christian Church, and plant churches in New York City and Chicago's Loop. "Parkview starts to become a brand," Harlow said. "Other churches are looking to us."

Defecting from a congregation is a two-way street, according to Deacon Joe Stalcup of St. Stephen Catholic Church in Tinley Park. "We get a number of members from these churches as well," he said of mega-churches. "It goes back and forth."

Growing Parkview isn't Harlow's only goal. "It's not just about filling up an auditorium," he said. "You want to get people into a relationship with Jesus."

Harlow described the church's growth as a paradox. "Being a rapidly growing church, in some people's eyes it's a great thing," he said. "In other people's eyes, it means you're doing something wrong." He admits that Parkview sometimes draws congregants away from other churches, but says the church is focusing on attracting unaffiliated.

Harlow estimates the Orland Park area is about 80 percent Catholic.

"Most of the time, he says, people aren't looking at him anyway. "They have a better view of me on the screen," he said. "We're the TV generation. We look at the screen. Nobody has a problem with that, as long as the personal touch is there."

Harlow admits he's not sure how much larger Parkview can grow. "The human connection has to be there for each other," he said, describing his inner circle as an intimate bible study group he shares with neighbors.

"Sociologists tell us you're going to know 60 or 70 people," he said. "If you're going to a church that size, the good news is you're going to know everybody. The bad news is, you're going to know everybody."

As Parkview grows larger, it's also growing smaller. "We're constantly pushing people into smaller groups, where they can have community together," he said.

But how thinly can a community's religious leader be spread?

During an introductory class about Parkview's religious tenets, Harlow rushes through the material, mentioning that he needs to catch a flight to New York. During the half-hour class, none of the 50 or so adults ask a question.

"I don't know how big gets to be too unhealthy," he said. "I don't think that can happen."

Because of current logistical restrictions - road and parking capacities, for example - Harlow doesn't think Parkview can grow larger than 10,000 members.

"The real question," Harlow said, "is, in the 21st century, if people want to go to such a large church."

Mind boggling

Through church, Coppens became close friends with Mary Neforas, of Orland Park. Neforas used to belong to a Catholic parish and came to Parkview two years ago.

Two weeks ago, Coppens helped baptize her.

"It's a joy-filled church," Neforas said. "When I come here I'm singing and my heart is full of joy."

Coppens thinks that many Parkview congregants come from a Catholic background, though she wouldn't venture an estimate.

Neforas, meanwhile, has no idea how much larger Parkview could grow. "It's mind boggling," she said.

Coppens thinks that Parkview could grow indefinitely. "It's not our plan. We're always going to the lord in our prayer to look for ideas," she said.

The real source of Parkview's growth, Coppens thinks, is from up above. "He's leading it," she says, raising her hand skyward.

Isaac Wolf may be reached at iwolf@dailysouthtown.com or (708) 633-5973.