

COVER STORY

The church downtown

Strategies for urban ministry

Mar 11, 2008 by Jason Byassee

An excerpt (pages 5-6)

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.

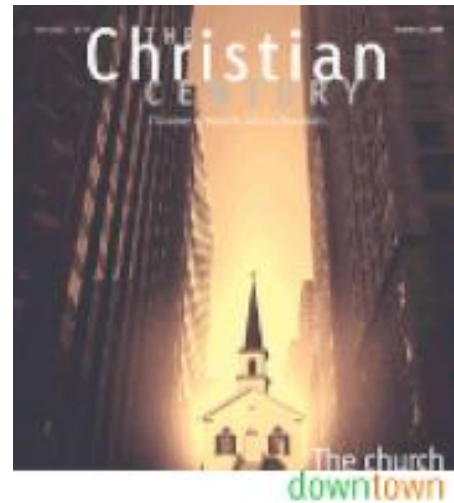
Ministering in this neighborhood is Wicker Park Grace, which is part of the Emergent church movement. Grace is explicitly reacting against the slickness of the megachurch style and against the theological smugness that it detects in much of the evangelical world. Pastor Nanette Sawyer put off my initial 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.