

## BELIEFS Values

## Church changes awaken 'some sleeping spirits'

BY RENA FULKA  
SPECIAL WRITER

Embrace today's culture with its fast-paced style, contemporary music, casual setting and communication media. And since making its debut in September, this newly developed worship service has been an immediate success. "I think it has awakened some sleeping spirits," said the Rev. Dr. R. Bruce Meyer, who noticed an increase of 100 individuals at the first service. "You can feel the snowball effect rolling."

The contemporary service replaced one of two traditional services offered at the Beverly Hills church on Sunday mornings. The worship team designed the format to be sensitive to the unaffiliated, while still including the five major elements of the liturgy described in the Presbyterian Church's "Directory for Worship."

"It evolved out of the congregation and staff coming to grips with who we are today, and wanting to meet the needs of our culture," said Meyer, who leads the worship at both services. "We're revitalizing our own church family, but we're also being inclusive and reaching out to those who wouldn't feel comfortable coming to a traditional service."

More than a dozen individuals work continuously to plan the informal services — which draw on drama, art, role playing, videos

and mime to interpret the Christian faith.

"Because it's a creative process, you need people to bounce things off of," said Sherrell Heinrichs, a Beverly Hills resident. "We're always looking for new ideas, and we get them from everywhere."

To formulate their own program, members of the Northbrook worship team visited contemporary services, attended workshops and seminars and read books on the relatively new concept in worship. And though the principle elements of the new service remain constant, the format continues to evolve.

"People come every Sunday morning saying, 'I wonder what's going to happen this week,'" said Heinrichs, who practices with the worship team every Thursday night. "It's fun to have that little surprise there. It provides a lot of thought for conversation."

Every step of the new service is explained in simple, everyday language, which appeals to both the children and the unchurched alike. Children and youth are encouraged to participate in the first two segments of the five-segment service before breaking away for educational programs.

Heinrichs has been a member of Northbrook Presbyterian Church for 15 years and currently serves as director of Church Education Ministries. She sees the contemporary service as a step in the right direction.

"We're not taking anything



DAN DEAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Upbeat worship: Contemporary music plays a major role in Northbrook Presbyterian Church's new service format.**

away, we're adding something new," she said. "There's a place for you at Northbrook wherever you are in your faith journey."

As director of Music Ministries, Dan Broner divides his time between the calm and peaceful setting of the traditional service and the casual, upbeat atmosphere of

the contemporary one.

He says that members who prefer traditional church hymns tend to gravitate to the 11 a.m. service, where tunes are played on a pipe organ and sung by a chancel choir.

Those wishing to participate in the singing of modern music are

attracted to the 9:30 a.m. service, where upbeat praise choruses are led by a digital piano and an electric guitar.

"Praise choruses have a style that is more in tune to today," said Broner, a Beverly Hills keyboardist who joined the church staff eight months ago. "They're harmonic and simple, musically, and they have a more contemporary feel. People can learn them quickly and get into them."

While Northbrook's traditional service continues to maintain its average of 220 members, the contemporary service is now drawing up to 250 individuals each week — 80 of which are new faces in the crowd.

Though members of the 35-year-old congregation have different worship preferences, they share a sense of openness each week when they mingle over coffee and rolls in the fellowship hall between services. Their unity is intensified as they carry their faith to the community through a myriad of mission and service programs.

The congregation at the Oakland County church may be large, but it is also close-knit. Meyer helps maintain the family-oriented atmosphere by making himself available to those struggling with their faith.

The son of a minister, Meyer earned a bachelor's degree in history from Carroll College in his home state of Wisconsin. He later completed a Master's of Divinity

degree from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kentucky and a Doctor of Ministry degree from McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

During his 24-year pastorate, Meyer served churches in Wisconsin and Indiana. The Bloomfield Township resident and his wife, Barbara, have four grown children: Todd, Kristen, Thomas and Michael.

Meyer did not assume his fourth pastoral role at Northbrook 18 months ago with the intention of starting an alternative worship service.

But through a leadership characterized by consensus building, he worked with the congregation to ready them for the future. And the response exceeded expectation.

"It's the biggest success that I can look to in my ministry," said Meyer, of the contemporary service. "And it's being divinely led. Our God is leading us into the next century."

**Northbrook Presbyterian Church, at the corner of Lehigh and 14 Mile Roads in Beverly Hills, offers a contemporary worship service at 9:30 a.m. and a traditional service at 11:00 a.m. For more information, contact the church office at (810) 642-0200.**

## There's strength to be found in holy presence

## FOCUS ON THEOLOGY



PASTOR RONALD P. BYARS

Muehl tells a story about the Christmas program at a nursery school. As they were leaving, the teachers made sure that each child had collected the gifts they had made for their parents. Walking out of the building, one little boy lost his grip on the carefully wrapped present he was carrying. With a definite ceramic sound, it shattered all over the tile floor. The child immediately began to sob as though his heart would break. His dad, trying to comfort him, said something like, "It's OK. It doesn't matter." This didn't help. The mother bent down to him and said, "Oh, yes, it does. It matters a lot." Then she held the boy while he cried.

Muehl told this story to make a theological point. The point is

that sometimes there are no words that can "fix" a broken situation, or make it less painful. The only thing that can be done for someone who is hurting is to sit with them and, in one way or another, hold them in the grip of love. This is what Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are all about. Christian theology affirms that God has come to be with us in this world, where important things very often get broken.

The big question for us is not just, "Is there a God?" The bigger question is, "If there is a God, what kind of God?" I can think of Gods whom I would prefer not to exist. It would be no comfort to me to believe in the existence of a God who was entirely indifferent to the world. It would be no consolation to believe in the existence of a God who watched our human struggles like some kind of heavenly voyeur, simply for entertainment's sake. Who wants to believe in the existence of a God who cares nothing for justice?

Who makes no distinction between the efforts of Adolf Hitler and those of Mother Theresa? With respect to such a God, I must be an atheist.

It seems commonplace among people of every religious background to picture God as an all-powerful force whose job it is to "fix" what's gone wrong. The Biblical point of view does not rule out such an image of God. In fact, Christians and Jews share the expectation that, in good time, the Messiah will appear to "fix" the broken world and set it right. In that day, according to the prophet Isaiah, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Jewish people wait for the coming of the Messiah; Christians wait for his coming again. God sees the afflictions of the world, and will come to mend and heal the whole creation.

In the meantime, why doesn't God "fix" people's cancer? Why doesn't God "fix" Bosnia, Nigeria, Northern Ireland? Why doesn't God "fix" the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians? Why doesn't God "fix" the problems of the homeless? Or "fix" the desperate situation of the person suddenly "downsized"? Christians and Jews agree that God is somehow working along with us as we all struggle to "fix" what's come apart. Still, we know from

experience that not everything gets "fixed" — or at least, it doesn't get "fixed" fast enough.

The message of Christmas is not so much about angels, shepherds and remarkable stars as it is about the God who bends down to be with us and even hold us when things become broken. This God does not console us by brushing aside our disappointments as though they were of no consequence. This is a God who does not magically "fix" things — we

don't know why. This is a God who takes our tribulations seriously enough to weep with us and share the burden. Until the summation of history, when the sum of all things will be healed, there is strength to be found in this holy presence.

**Ronald P. Byars, Ph.D., is pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham. To leave a voicemail message, dial (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1851, from a Touch-Tone phone.**

## COMMUNITY MESSENGER

**Community Messenger features spiritual announcements involving Oakland County religious institutions. Write: Community Messenger, Beliefs & Values Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Our fax number is (810) 644-1314.**

**VOLUNTEERS RALLY**  
The Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit based in Bloomfield Hills says more than 600 volunteers from the Jewish community will team up for Volunteer Extravaganza on Dec. 25.

Volunteer Extravaganza enables employees of area agencies to spend Christmas Day with their families while volunteers take over their work at Metro Detroit shelters, hospitals, homes for the elderly and other agencies.

The annual volunteer outing is sponsored by the Jewish Federation and its Young Adult Division, Business and Professional Women, Women's Division and Community Outreach and Involvement Department.

Agencies that need volunteers on Christmas Day should call Susan Langas at the Jewish Federation by Dec. 22: (810) 642-4260, ext. 142.

**HANUKKAH CELEBRATION**  
Yeshiva Menachem Mendel Lubavitch, a rabbinical college in Oak Park, hosts a Hanukkah celebration. "Let There Be Light," 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 21, at Orchard Mall, on Orchard Lake Road north of Maple Road, West Bloomfield. Included is music and dancing, games, hot latkes, arts and crafts and other activities provided by rabbinical students.

Students also will visit homes for the elderly and schools during the holiday season. A kit and traveling olive press for the children are also available. A mobile filled with menorahs, candles and gifts for children will travel, throughout the community.

**NEW PASTOR**  
George Fortico was installed as the new senior pastor and head of staff at University Presbyterian Church, 1385 S. Adams Road, Rochester Hills. He joins the church from the Long Island Presbytery of New York.

University Presbyterian offers two Sunday services, 9 and 10:30 a.m., with Sunday school during each service. Nursery and toddler care is available. In addition to regular services, there will be candlelight services at 7 and 10 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 24. The children's choir is featured at 7 p.m.; the chancel choir, bell choir and a string quartet is featured at 10 p.m.

For information, call (810) 375-0400.

**FARMINGTON HILLS CHURCH OF GOD**  
The winter schedule for Farmington Hills Church of God, 28717 Power Road, between 10 Mile and 11 Mile roads, includes Sunday School for all ages at 10 a.m. and the Morning Worship Service at 11 a.m. For more information, call 477-9144.

**NORTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**  
North Congregational Church, 36320 12 Mile Road west of Drake, have Sunday services at 10:30 a.m. Sunday school and

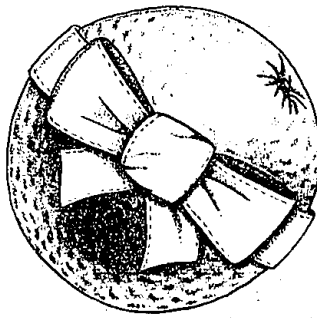
many other activities are also available to foster faith and fellowship. For more information call 848-1750.

**NORTH FARMINGTON COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
North Farmington Community Church, 32500 W. 13 Mile, between Farmington and Orchard Lake roads, has services at 10 a.m. every Sunday. Religious education for children sixth grade and younger, as well as nursery care, are provided during services. Various activities and small group meetings are held during the week. Everyone is welcome. For more information, call 626-6900.

**UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF FARMINGTON**  
Universalist Unitarian Church of Farmington has Sunday services and Sunday school at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. Sunday, Dec. 24 will be a Christmas Eve service at 7:30 p.m. There will be no morning services. The church is at 25301 Halsted, one-half mile north of Grand River.

**ST. JOHN LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
St. John Lutheran Church, 23225 Gill Road, has worship services with holy communion at 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. every Sunday. Sunday school classes are available for people beginning at age 3 to adult and they meet at 9:40 a.m. A supervised nursery is provided during worship and Sunday school. A play group for parents and their preschool children meets at 10 a.m. Wednesdays. Call 474-0584 for more information.

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