



<http://www.baltimoresun.com/features/lifestyle/bal-to.minister27apr27,1,6705694.story>

Fire without brimstone

Brian McLaren preaches tolerance and environmentalism, making him one of the country's more unusual yet influential evangelicals.

By Abigail Tucker
Sun Staff

April 27, 2005

This is an especially happy church. Laughing congregants arrive in jeans, clutching small children and gigantic coffee mugs. When the children are comfortable and the coffee finished, and the rock band that opens the Sunday morning service finds its groove, the swaying people reach their hands upward, as though expecting a high-five from on high.

At the very least, they might get a bear hug after the service from Brian McLaren, the man at the center of Cedar Ridge Community Church's ebullience, and, some would say, one of the most powerful evangelical preachers in America today. He stands in the middle of the sanctuary, his bowed head bald as a monk's, a smile on his face.

The people in the audience smile back -- even though they know their pastor is leaving them.

This winter, McLaren announced that he is stepping down as senior pastor for a more minor role in the Montgomery County church that has grown so large that off-duty police officers direct traffic flowing out of the parking lot most Sundays. Instead of preaching the gospel almost every week, the North Laurel resident will be traveling to seminaries and religious summits across America and the world, explaining his vision of Christianity in the new century.

The church he founded will have to learn to survive without him.

McLaren's celebrity loomed large even before February, when Time magazine named him one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America, alongside the likes of Billy Graham and Rick Warren, who wrote *The Purpose-Driven Life*. At 48, McLaren is the unofficial leader of the "emergent church" movement, which emphasizes environmentalism and racial and sexual tolerance, while distancing itself from the social conservatism of the religious right.

The author of seven books and the co-author of two more, McLaren is modest about his role.

"I'm having some influence over younger leaders and future leaders," he admits.

"He's the guru," says Tony Campolo, a professor of sociology at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pa., who co-authored a book with McLaren. "Word got around that there was a guy with something new to say who was interesting and easy to understand. A lot of evangelicals who do not buy into the politics of the religious right said, 'Hey, we've got a spokesperson here.'"

But many Christians object to McLaren's message, particularly his permissive attitude toward issues like abortion, which -- in an evangelical landscape where a pro-life stance is practically a given -- McLaren opposes but doesn't openly condemn. More generally, conservatives complain that this feel-good faith drains the content out of Christianity.

"If you take his theology to its logical conclusion, it would destroy the Christian church, or Christianity as we understand it," said Mark Galli, the managing editor of Christianity Today.

Some evangelical groups have rejected McLaren's liberalism. Recently, the Kentucky Baptist Convention withdrew its invitation to him to speak at a February conference because his position "diverges too greatly to be appropriate," the convention's director said.

More often, though, McLaren's views incite curiosity and debate -- which even critics like Galli say is a good thing -- and his schedule is packed. Almost every week brings a speaking engagement.

But long before he led a movement, McLaren led a church.

The seeds of Cedar Ridge were planted in his College Park apartment in the early 1980s, when he was a graduate student and aspiring English professor at the University of Maryland.

By his early 20s, McLaren had already dabbled in Christian formats as disparate as the hippie-dominated Jesus movement and the traditional Episcopal church. Raised in Rockville in an extremely conservative church, he started questioning religion as a young man.

His doubts had as much to do with Joni Mitchell and James Taylor as Jesus Christ. A consummate musician, McLaren found it hard to love a God who didn't even like rock 'n' roll. After late Saturday nights spent at teen dance halls, he fidgeted in the pews on Sunday mornings, thinking, "If this stuff about God is true, I'm getting in a lot of trouble," McLaren recalled. "And if it's not true, who cares."

But he couldn't stop caring.

"It just mattered to me," said McLaren. "I prayed a lot. I'd be praying, 'Are you there? Are you real?' It mattered to me."

He was still praying years later when he started his living room Bible study in College Park with a few dozen people, mostly fellow students. These were young intellectuals dismayed by the mounting conservatism of the evangelical community, who wanted a close relationship with God without the constant threat of condemnation.

"We just tried to create a kind of a safe space," said McLaren.

Soon that safe space wasn't big enough. The nondenominational group moved to a larger living room, where it started meeting on Sundays, then to a Hyattsville middle school and progressively larger auditoriums. The church was itinerant throughout the late '80s and early '90s.

"If you could find us, you could worship with us," McLaren said.

By 1995, the church had enough support to buy a 63-acre farm in Spencerville, which opened its doors a few years later and now, on an average Sunday, attracts close to 1,000 members and visitors.

In starting the church, McLaren -- who is not an ordained minister -- targeted "people who are spiritually searching but don't get the whole church thing," he said. "I felt we could develop a church for the people who feel alienated," or, as he calls them, "the unchurched." His evangelism is infused with progressive politics because, he said, "being anti-homosexual, pro-war, pro-rich and anti-environment is a very disturbed reflection of Jesus."

Instead, McLaren preaches a feel-good Christianity far removed from his fire-and-brimstone upbringing. To the horror of many evangelicals, he questions the idea of hell and claims that, through human love, heaven can be lived on earth.

The growing church generated interest in Maryland's 12-step world, and the unusual number of recovering alcoholics who attend is the reason Cedar Ridge offers Communion with grape juice instead of wine. The church is ethnically diverse and draws Republicans and Democrats in equal measure. Purple hair and piercings are not frowned upon.

Shannon D. Brown of Dundalk started attending two years ago. The 28-year-old, who uses a wheelchair, was frustrated with her previous church, where members trumpeted the Golden Rule but didn't offer her a ride to services. Although Cedar Ridge is farther away, she said, it's a much more accommodating community.

"And not just physically," she said. "It's the people, and how accessible they are. It's Brian, and how open he is."

Yet McLaren never intended to be a pastor, particularly of a congregation approaching megachurch proportions. His first love was academia, and after he got his master's degree from the University of Maryland in 1981, he taught technical writing and other classes at his alma mater and elsewhere.

But by 1986, the church that would become Cedar Ridge blossomed under his leadership, and he abandoned his academic career for full-time ministry. Much of the next decade was devoted to developing the church.

In the late 1990s, though, with the congregation secure in its new home, McLaren's intellectual life came full circle, and he began writing books. In 2001, his *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* became a surprise best seller among evangelicals.

The book was a hit because "it was completely unoriginal," McLaren said. "It put into words what people had already been thinking, and they were relieved to learn they weren't the only ones."

A New Kind of Christian also articulated the philosophy of the "emergent church," a term that McLaren and others use to describe a network of young church leaders who, in the late 1990s, became concerned about the lack of religious participation among 18- to 35-year-olds.

McLaren and the others decided that the Gen-Xers weren't lazy but rather represented a cultural sea change. Coming of age in the aftermath of the Cold War led this generation to question moral absolutism and dogmatic religion, the emergent gurus argued. Most evangelical churches weren't feeding their hunger for a nontraditional Christianity, creating an opening for pastors like McLaren, who believe that a more relaxed theology addresses the ambiguities of modern life while remaining true to the gospel.

McLaren's critics are skeptical.

McLaren is "more into asking questions than charting a positive path," said Galli, of Christianity Today. "All his ideas are experiments, forays, just ideas."

Yet some of those ideas have found concrete expression at Cedar Ridge, in the Sunday services that embrace popular culture by synthesizing rap music with Bible readings, and on the church property itself, which is scattered with beehives and bluebird houses that speak to the congregation's burgeoning environmentalism.

And, although McLaren, in his new role as teaching pastor, will still preach some Sundays, perhaps the strongest testimony to the success of his ministry is church members' belief that they will be able to survive without his constant presence.

"We love Brian, and we will miss him as a person, his intellectual aspect, how smart he is, his ability to cut through to the heart of things," said Betsy Mitchell Henning of Laurel, who joined the church in 1991 and is now the director of liturgical arts. "But if the Martians abducted him tomorrow, Cedar Ridge would find a way to love people and glorify God."

And McLaren isn't alone in reaching out to help the larger world. In recent days, ailing churches -- a Methodist congregation in Baltimore, a Baptist church in Bethesda -- have requested help from Cedar Ridge, and delegations have been dispatched to boost attendance and energy levels. Apparently, not only are members feeling strong enough to share their pastor, but they're ready to share themselves.

Copyright © 2005, [The Baltimore Sun](#)