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The Soul of the New Exurb

By JONATHAN MAHLER

In the spring of 1996, Lee McFarland quit his high-paying job at Microsoft, sold his house and drove his Jeep Cherokee from Redmond, Wash., to Surprise, Ariz. He had come to build a church. McFarland, who was 36 at the time, knew little about leading churches and less about building them: he wasn't even halfway through the correspondence classes he was taking to become an evangelical pastor. Nevertheless, he'd been hired by a small group of Christians in an adjoining community to do just that. And so a few days after he arrived, he put on a pair of slacks and a polo shirt, said goodbye to his wife, Sandy, and their two kids, who had come to Surprise several weeks ahead of him to get settled in their new house, and set out to find believers.

For decades, Surprise, which is about 45 minutes northwest of downtown Phoenix, was mostly scrubby cotton, rose and citrus fields, with a small grid of streets where migrant workers lived. In the early 90's, developers discovered the town. By the time McFarland and his family arrived, its population had climbed past 15,000, and more, many more, were on their way. Most of Surprise's new residents were young white families drawn to affordable homes and jobs within commuting distance. Many of them hadn't gone to college but no doubt hoped that their children would.

These were the people McFarland was seeking when he started knocking on the doors of one light brown stucco tract home after another. Applying a lesson he learned a month earlier in a church-development seminar in Orange County, Calif., he introduced himself to the locals as the pastor of a new church that he was calling Radiant. From there he expected to begin long, probing conversations about their lives -- what was missing, what their kids liked to do in their free time and so on. But the mothers and fathers who greeted him were barely civil. "This was," as he put it to me not long ago, "a radically unchurched area." No wonder Surprise's three existing churches were struggling.

After a few days of trekking through identical streets and cul-de-sacs under the hot Arizona sun, McFarland figured he had better try a different approach. He traded in his business-casual attire for a T-shirt and blue jeans, bought a clipboard and posed as the representative of a secular organization. He limited himself to two questions: "What's your favorite radio station?" and "Why do you think people don't go to church?" The conversations grew longer, and McFarland's mission became clear. People in Surprise listened to rock music. And they didn't go to church because they didn't have any fancy clothes, didn't like being asked for money and didn't see how any of the sermons they had

heard in the past related to their lives.

McFarland pledged to change all that. By the following August, he had hired a direct-mail company to send out fliers to everyone in Surprise -- or at least everyone but the Spanish-speaking farm workers who lived in the town's original square mile -- inviting them to Radiant. "You think church is boring and judgmental, and that all they want is your money?" it asked. "At Radiant you'll hear a rockin' band and a positive, relevant message. Come as you are. We won't beg for your money. Your kids will love it!"

On a Sunday in early September 1997, 147 people showed up for Radiant's first service, which was about twice what McFarland had expected. Until construction on the church was finished, services were being held in the auditorium of a public elementary school. McFarland wore an untucked Hawaiian shirt, blue jeans and sneakers. The air-conditioning wasn't working; it was 114 degrees outside and 92 degrees inside. As he talked about how to build better relationships with friends, family members and loved ones, McFarland looked out over his wilting congregation and started thinking that his first sermon might very well be his last. But the following week more than 100 people returned, and the church has been growing steadily ever since.

When attendance for Sunday services at Radiant hit about 350 in 1999, McFarland tried to apply the brakes. No more fliers, billboards or newspaper ads. A few hundred felt like the perfect size -- big enough to be vibrant, but small enough that he still knew everyone's name. But then one night McFarland woke up in tears. "I felt like God was saying: 'Oh, so that's it, huh? You don't care?' " McFarland remembers. "I said to God, 'I will never decide how big this church should be.' "

And so a year later, when Radiant moved into what would be its first permanent quarters, weekend attendance was approaching 800. Two years later it hit 2,000, the generally agreed-upon threshold for megachurch status, and McFarland started planning to build a new worship center. Weekend attendance is now about 5,000. To accommodate them all, McFarland leads several services, beginning on Saturday afternoon and continuing through Sunday morning. For Easter, the busiest day of the year, Radiant is expecting 15,000.

All of this has come as a big surprise to McFarland. "When we started Radiant, I thought it would be cool if we got to 200," he said when I first met him in January. McFarland, a big guy, a little soft around the middle, was wearing a blue T-shirt and black Tommy Hilfiger jeans, and we were sitting in his office, where a wooden baseball bat autographed by Garth Brooks -- "Pastor Lee, may God guide you, pal" -- is displayed more prominently than the only thing that passes as religious iconography: a soft-focus painting of a contented-looking bearded man in a white robe. "I tease people and I go, 'This is my rookie season, this is my first church,' " McFarland told me, "and they go: 'Shut up, dude, you're sickening. You're pastor of a church that has grown like a weed.' "

One of the more striking facts to emerge from the 2004 presidential election was that 97

of America's 100 fastest-growing counties voted Republican. Most of these counties are made up of heretofore unknown towns too far from major metropolitan areas to be considered suburbs, but too bustling to be considered rural, places like Lebanon, Ohio; Fridley, Minn.; Crabapple, Ga.; and Surprise, Ariz. America has a new frontier: the exurbs. In a matter of years, sleepy counties stretching across 30 states have been transformed into dense communities of subdivisions filled with middle-class families likely to move again and again, settling in yet another exurb but putting down no real roots. These exurban cities tend not to have immediately recognizable town squares, but many have some kind of big, new structure where newcomers go to discuss their lives and problems and hopes: the megachurch.

This is not the megachurch of the 1980's, where baby boomers turned up once a week to passively take in a 45-minute service -- "religion as accessory," as Tom Beaudoin, an assistant professor of religion at Santa Clara University, has described the phenomenon. In a sense, the new breed of megachurches has more in common with the frontier churches of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which served as gathering places for pioneers who had gone West in search of opportunity. In sprawling, decentralized exurbs like Surprise, where housing developments rarely include porches, parks, stoops or any of the other features that have historically brought neighbors together, megachurches provide a locus for community. In many places, they operate almost like surrogate governments, offering residents day care, athletic facilities, counseling, even schools. Taking the comparison one step further, there's even a tax, albeit a voluntary one: members are encouraged to tithe, or donate 10 percent of their income to the church. At Radiant, McFarland says, about one-quarter of the members do.

It's hard to imagine a more effective method of religious outreach, which is, after all, the goal of evangelical churches like Radiant. As McFarland told me: "I'm just trying to get people in the door." To that end, Radiant has designed its new 55,000-square-foot church to look more like an overgrown ski lodge than a place of worship. "For people who haven't been to church, or went once and got burned, the anxiety level is really high," McFarland says. "Is it going to be freaky? Is it going to be like what I see on Christian TV?" So we've tried to bring down those visual cues that scare people off."

In fact, everything about Radiant has been designed to lure people away from other potential weekend destinations. The foyer includes five 50-inch plasma-screen televisions, a bookstore and a cafe with a Starbucks-trained staff making espresso drinks. (For those who are in a rush, there's a drive-through latte stand outside the main building.) Krispy Kreme doughnuts are served at every service. (Radiant's annual Krispy Kreme budget is \$16,000). For kids there are Xboxes (10 for fifth and sixth graders alone). "That's what they're into," McFarland says. "You can either fight it or say they're a tool for God." The dress code is lax: most worshipers wear jeans, sweats or shorts, depending on the season. ("At my old church, we thought we were casual because we wore mock turtlenecks under our blazers," Radiant's youth pastor told me.) Even the baptism pool is seductive: Radiant keeps the water at 101 degrees. "We've had people say, 'No, leave me under,'" McFarland says. "It's like taking a dip in a spa."

When the church was under construction, people would occasionally ask McFarland if it was going to have stained glass or a steeple. "No!" he'd answer. "We want the church to look like a mall. We want you to come in here and say, 'Dude, where's the cinema?'"

The spiritual sell is also a soft one. There are no crosses, no images of Jesus or any other form of religious iconography. Bibles are optional (all biblical quotations are flashed on huge video screens above the stage). Almost half of each service is given over to live Christian rock with simple, repetitive lyrics in which Jesus is treated like a high-school crush: "Jesus, you are my best friend, and you will always be. Nothing will ever change that." Committing your life to Christ is as easy as checking a box on the communication cards that can be found on the back of every chair. (Last year, 1,055 people did so.)

McFarland's messages are light on liturgy and heavy on what he calls "successful principles for living" -- how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, how to reduce your debt, even how to shake a porn addiction. "If Oprah and Dr. Phil are doing it, why shouldn't we?" he says. "We should be better at it because we have the power of God to offer."

In his recent book "The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith," Alan Wolfe, a professor of political science at Boston College, writes that "American faith has met American culture -- and American culture has triumphed." Radiant seems the embodiment of this assertion. And yet not exactly. McFarland's long-term plan for his congregants involves much more than playing video games and eating doughnuts. He says that his hope -- his expectation, really -- is that casual worshipers will gradually immerse themselves in Radiant's many Christ-based programs, from financial planning to parenthood and education, until they have eventually incorporated Christian values into every aspect of their lives.

This is the vision of the new megachurch, and it's far more expansive than those of yesterday's megachurches and today's smaller churches. "The larger church expects a much higher level of commitment," says Dave Travis, who runs Leadership Network, a strategic consulting firm for megachurches. "The larger church expects you to be a more passionate follower of Christ, not just in the church, but in your community, your workplace and your home."

As an evangelical strategy, it seems to be working. Weekly attendance at most American churches has either plateaued or is declining. But megachurches continue to expand -- and multiply. (According to John Vaughan, who runs the Megachurch Research Center in Bolivar, Mo., there were 10 non-Catholic megachurches in America in 1970. Today there are 282.) McFarland is clearly doing something right. There are now 27 other churches in Surprise, but none of them are growing at anything approaching the pace of Radiant. One day in Surprise, I met a pastor who moved there four years ago with his wife and children from Kalamazoo, Mich., to plant a church. After drawing fewer than 10 people for about a year, he folded up shop. When I ran into him he was auditioning for a part-time job with Radiant's band.

lee mcfarland first heard the call to ministry one Sunday morning in 1995 at his church outside Seattle. As he tells the story, the pastor was sermonizing about the importance of volunteering free time to the church. "And then he said: 'But God sometimes takes people and taps them on the shoulder and says, "I want you to do this as a vocation.'" Sometimes this happens in high school, so you go into a Bible college. But sometimes God waits until your career is developed in another area and then calls you into the ministry as a second-career pastor.' And then he said something really strange: 'Tonight, I think there's someone here that God is calling to do that.' As soon as he said that, I knew. I just felt like God was going, 'It's you, it's you.'" Within a matter of weeks, McFarland had enrolled in correspondence classes to become a pastor and started arriving at his office at 5 every morning to study for an hour or so before his day at Microsoft began.

McFarland had lived outside Phoenix while working for Honeywell in the early 1990's. When he came back to Arizona on a business trip shortly after deciding to join the ministry, he had lunch with his former pastor. McFarland told him he was planning a career change, and the pastor asked him for a resume, in case he heard of any openings.

A few months later, McFarland received a call from a group of Christian seniors who lived in Sun City, a retirement community that abuts Surprise. They could see that Surprise was about to take off and had tried luring some of the newcomers to their church, a more traditional place with formal attire, hymns and wooden pews, but they hadn't had much luck. It was clear that if these young families, many of whom had either fallen away from religion or had never attended church regularly, were going to be saved, it would require a very different kind of church led by a pastor who could relate to them. After raising \$450,000 to buy a 15-acre plot in Surprise, the retirees received McFarland's name from his former pastor and offered him the job, which paid \$26,000 a year. "I was like: Surprise? I've been to Surprise," McFarland recalled during one of our conversations. "It's a spot on the road that you pass on your way to get gas. It was a miracle that I was willing to come, and it was a miracle that they were willing to hire me."

Surprise was still little more than a spot on the road, but waves of construction were rippling out from Phoenix. Having started the second half of the 20th century as the nation's 99th largest city, Phoenix had become the sixth largest and was busting out of its own skin. Once most of the land in the nearer suburbs -- Glendale, Mesa, Peoria -- had been built out, developers started moving deeper and deeper into the exurbs, and Surprise was soon expanding in every direction. The process worked something like this: A developer would buy land from a farmer and then ask Surprise to annex it. This guaranteed the developer municipal amenities like police and fire protection; for its part, with each annexation Surprise became more populous.

The seemingly endless supply of desert land kept housing costs low, and young families were soon pouring in. During the 1990's, the population of Surprise doubled to 30,000. Commercial development was still ramping up. In 2000, Applebee's was the only sit-down chain restaurant in town, and the wait for a table on a weekend night could be as long as an hour and a half.

Then the real boom began. The population of Surprise is now more than 80,000 and is expected to be close to 100,000 by the end of the year. And the city anticipates that there are still more than three decades of furious growth to come. Surprise won't be fully built out until 2040, at which point its population is expected to reach 650,000. There will no doubt be plenty of turnover along the way. According to Robert Lang, an urban expert who studies exurbs at the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, "If you live in a new community, you will also change communities."

Ask people at Radiant what first brought them to the church, and you will almost never hear a mention of God. It might have been a billboard: "Isn't It Time You Laughed Again?" Or the twice-a-week aerobics class (with free child care) called Firm Believers. Or one of their children might have come with a friend to play video games.

For Joe and Jodi Garcia, who moved to Surprise nearly two years ago from Orange County, Calif., it was a flier advertising a sermon series about marriage, "Sex, Lies and Second Looks." Unlike many Radiant worshipers, Joe and Jodi were not new to evangelical Christianity. In 1995, right after Joe had finally defeated a long-running addiction to alcohol and cocaine, both he and his wife (who have been married for 15 years) were saved at the Harvest Crusade, a Christian revival that took place over several nights at Anaheim Stadium. For a while, they listened to Christian radio and attended a nearby megachurch. But by the time they came to Surprise, they'd drifted away from religion. They were also having some problems in their marriage.

That's when the flier from Radiant arrived, promising to make their lives better. "Talking about sex in church -- are you kidding?" it began. "Nope." They went to Radiant and have been going back ever since. McFarland's sermons reminded Joe that he needed to cut out potential sources of temptation, like many Hollywood movies. "If you don't prune, you start absorbing all of that stuff, and then take it into your marriage," Joe, a slight, intense-looking man with narrow eyes and a goatee, told me one night at Radiant. "You start saying things like, 'Hey, my wife doesn't dress like that.' "

The Garcias came to Surprise with their two children because they were barely managing to make it in Orange County. They had a lot of debt, and had outgrown their modest home and couldn't begin to afford anything bigger in the area. Some friends told them about Surprise, and they decided to take a look. Phoenix's economy was expanding, so Joe, a network engineer, would probably be able to find work. In July 2003, they sold their Orange County house and bought a bigger one in Surprise. Within a few months, Joe had been hired by a health-care company in Phoenix. (He now works as a computer technician at Radiant.)

Soon after the Garcias started attending Radiant, Joe, who was having trouble finding an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in Surprise he liked, volunteered to help the church start a branch of Celebrate Recovery, a popular Christ-based program for recovering addicts. Praised by President Bush, Celebrate Recovery was founded by a recovering alcoholic frustrated that he didn't feel comfortable talking about Jesus in A.A. meetings. A.A. has 12 steps; Celebrate Recovery has eight principles, based on Jesus' sermon on the mount.

"A.A. is the higher power of your own understanding, which can be a doorknob," says Joe. "Here our higher power is our lord savior Jesus Christ. He's the one who gives us the strength we need in recovery."

Joe now leads Celebrate Recovery at Radiant, which is held on Friday nights at the church. The evening begins with a free dinner, after which about 100 people -- alcoholics, drug addicts, co-dependents -- filter into the worship center behind ushers in maroon shirts with "Follow Me to Recovery" printed on the back. The Radiant house band plays loud, uplifting Christian rock, and nearly everyone sings along: "I'm trading my sorrows, I'm trading my shame, for the joy of the Lord." Once the offering has been collected, Joe gives a short sermon and then the attendees split up into small groups for their individual recovery meetings before reconvening for dessert at the Soul Cafe.

Celebrate Recovery is what church-growth experts refer to as a side door. Before the rise of the megachurch, evangelism was done primarily through the front door -- the Sunday-morning service. Today, large evangelical churches try to offer the yet-to-be-saved as many different entry points as they can. Almost invariably, these side doors lead people into more intimate gatherings, which are intended to keep megachurches from feeling too large and impersonal.

The arrival of the small group represents the maturation of the megachurch. Big churches took off in the 1980's precisely because they didn't ask much of the baby boomers who represented the bulk of their congregants. The stage lighting, surround-sound and theater-style seating turned worshipers into audience members. By the late 1990's, it was clear that this formula was no longer working. Slick, performance-oriented churches were drawing people, but they weren't always keeping them. National studies revealed that boomer attendance was dropping. Just as some megachurches had only recently repurposed empty strip malls and multiplexes to accommodate their growing crowds, they were now in danger of being repurposed themselves if they didn't adapt.

At the same time, some megachurch pastors began to worry that they weren't really reaching people. Rather, they were producing what the theologian Sally Morgenthaler has called "a generation of spectators, religious onlookers." In order to transform lives, they needed to find a way to deepen involvement -- to encourage people to integrate the church into their everyday lives and build relationships with other Christians. Polls have since confirmed this hunch. Most Christians who say they have been changed by their church attribute it not to their pastors' sermons but to their small groups, where people can share, in the words of Dave Travis, who runs the megachurch consultancy, "their deepest hopes and hurts." This was, after all, the model of Jesus and his disciples: What I've done with you, you now do with other people.

Small groups are an important part of McFarland's plan to convert what he calls "baby Christians" into "mature Christians." Radiant has groups for everyone: singles, couples with children, couples without children, divorced women, married men, stay-at-home moms, widows. Many use a Christian DVD study kit, "Life Together: Connecting With God's Family." Some groups involve Bible study; others are built around subjects like

Christian parenting. Whatever the theme, the goal is always the same: to build what Travis refers to as "authentic communities."

Getting casual worshipers to take this next step isn't easy. Only about 800 people, or a little less than 20 percent of Radiant's weekend congregants, participate in any of its 80 small groups. Such numbers are not uncommon. It's rare for small-group participation at a megachurch to break 30 percent, says Eddie Gibbs, a professor of church growth at the Fuller Theological Seminary in California.

That said, 800 people do orient their lives around Radiant. Brett and Cristina Bergstrom are two of them. Brett's first encounter with the power of fellowship at Radiant came a few years ago on the church's basketball court. He and Cristina had just been to Sunday services at Radiant for the first time -- their 9-year-old son had been going on Saturday nights with a friend for months -- and Brett, who played basketball in college, noticed that the church held pickup games on Tuesday nights. Brett came back a couple of days later to play and blew out his Achilles' tendon. His 6-foot-7-inch, 280-pound frame toppled like a redwood. "One of the guys I was playing with asked me if I was a Christian," he told me one afternoon in the hot-tub dealership he owns and operates in Surprise. "When I said yes, they all got down on the floor and prayed with me until the ambulance came."

For several months, Brett and Cristina attended a Christian parenting class at the church, where they discussed things like how to help their kids handle science class in public school. ("If the teacher is up there teaching evolution as fact," Brett told me, "there's nothing wrong with you asking very pointed questions, and it's a great opportunity to share your faith.") Brett and Cristina attend a potluck dinner every other Saturday night with couples from the church. On Tuesday nights, Brett leads a Bible study class at the church; on Friday mornings he has breakfast with a group of Christian contractors. "Now I know what it means to have brothers in Christ -- seeing guys, giving big hugs to each other, just that feeling," he told me, explaining the transformative effect that the church's small groups have had on him. "It's not Radiant magic dust, but Radiant encourages you to let the spirit grow inside you and take down the wall you build up around yourself."

As soon as he arrived in Surprise, McFarland could see that the city didn't have the infrastructure to support an influx of young families. He sensed opportunity. "From Day 1 we were going to be a church that was going to really impact our community and provide something very tangible that would solve a problem," he says. "Just helping the community opened a lot of doors, made people feel like we weren't just a church."

The first problem McFarland set about solving was that of the public schools. The newly arriving parents told him they were terrible. So in the summer of 1998, less than a year after he'd started offering Sunday services, McFarland rented a trailer, strung up a banner and began signing up children for an as-yet-unbuilt charter school, Paradise Education Center; C.E.O., Lee McFarland. "We had nothing to show them," he told me. "Literally there was just land here."

It was a measure of just how desperate parents were for an alternative to the public schools that the parents of 225 children turned up, vaccination records in hand, and registered them. Today the school, a ring of single-story white stucco buildings directly across the street from Radiant's massive worship center, is thriving. It has more than 1,000 children, and a waiting list close to 200.

Because the school relies on public funds, teachers are required to follow state-approved curriculum guides, but Paradise nevertheless provides free advertising for Radiant. "To this day parents will come by here and go, 'We just moved to Surprise and my kids go to school here, so tell me about this church,'" McFarland said. "We usually say it's a real positive church, real upbeat, kind of a community feel. A great place to get to know people. And they go, 'Great, I'll check it out.' That story has happened hundreds of times."

Today the problem with Surprise's public schools isn't merely one of quality, it's one of quantity. The city builds two elementary schools every year and a new high school every other year, but parents still complain of overcrowding.

Commercial development has started catching up with the population growth. Surprise's main thoroughfare, Bell Road, is now a traffic-choked avenue lined with strip malls filled with all of the usual suspects (Target, Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Wendy's, Chick-fil-A, etc.). But it's the affordable homes that draw people to the city. The appetite for houses is so strong that most developments have a lottery system; if there is no lottery, people camp out overnight whenever new properties are about to be released. Demand is pushing up prices. At one development I visited, Legacy Parc, homes are climbing between \$5,000 and \$15,000 every month. But even with these steady increases, the average house in Surprise goes for \$175,000.

It's an attractive price for many families who are either trying to make the move into the middle class or remain there in the face of mounting debt and growing expenses. Which explains why the typical Surprise resident, as in many fast-growing exurbs, is a young, white, married couple of modest means.

These are people that the Republican Party has always run well with -- it's conventional wisdom among political analysts that young, middle-class couples raising children tend to be conservative -- and in 2004 the G.O.P. made a strong play for exurbanites. Megachurches were a key part of the strategy. Supporters were asked to supply the Bush-Cheney campaign with church directories so it could make sure these churchgoers were registered and planning to vote. "For the first time we didn't just engage businesspeople or Second Amendment supporters; we engaged people who said they were motivated first and foremost by their values, and these people were often churchgoers," Gary Marx, a liaison to social conservatives for the campaign, told me recently. "We asked them to reach out to their community, and their community is the megachurch."

Marx also went directly to megachurch pastors, not for endorsements, he says, but to encourage them to help get out the vote. More often than not, he was well received. "An

old-line pastor who went to seminary in the 60's is not going to be open to something like Citizenship Sundays when you pass out registration cards to everyone at the church," Marx said. "But many of the pastors of these megachurches are in their late 30's, early 40's. They were teenagers during the Reagan years, and that's when conservatism and engagement by evangelicals began to become mainstream. So they would be more willing to do voter drives and things like that, more tuned into citizenship and engaging the community beyond soup kitchens."

Maricopa County, where Surprise is situated, voted 57 percent for Bush to 42 percent for Kerry. In the run-up to the election, Radiant published nonpartisan voter guides in the church bulletin, and McFarland gave a sermon about the importance of voting, though he was careful not to express support for either candidate -- "God isn't a Republican or a Democrat," he said. Still, the very fact that McFarland's sermons are intended to feel "relevant," as he likes to say, means he at times takes on issues like abortion and homosexuality, both of which he believes are sinful. McFarland's views are rooted in his faith, but congregants may, no doubt, draw political conclusions.

One Sunday in the middle of February, McFarland jammed with the Radiant band as it warmed the crowd up for his message. When he's in the mood, he sometimes plays the keyboard, but this morning he was just slapping a tambourine against his hip and smiling. McFarland's spiky black hair was standing straight up, and he wore the same basic Jimmy Buffett outfit -- jeans, sneakers and an untucked red Hawaiian shirt -- that he's been wearing for seven years now. The effect was both festive and dorky, like that of a goofy but endearing uncle.

Most of the congregants swayed to the music and sang along; some had their eyes closed, their hands raised toward the sky. The leader of the worship band, Pastor Tony, brought things to a climax -- shouting, "We love you, Jesus!" over his band's last lingering notes -- and McFarland settled in behind his plexiglass podium to deliver his sermon: "How to Enjoy Valentine's Day . . . Whether Single or Married." He spoke casually, though his sentences all felt scripted, and there was a hint of self-consciousness about his body language -- not so much that he appeared awkward, but enough so that he seemed a little uncomfortable in his role as religious leader.

Within minutes, McFarland was talking about his own marriage, and how his chronic failure to properly sort lights and darks led to his banishment from the laundry room. A half-hour later, McFarland instructed the congregants to lower their heads in a brief prayer, and the sermon was over. "Fire it up, Pastor Tony!" McFarland said as he retreated to the back of the worship room, parked himself by the door and doled out bearhugs to exiting worshipers.

McFarland works under the assumption that people don't want to be intimidated by their pastors, that modernity has punctured the myth of the morally superior religious leader. He is replacing the sinner-be-damned fundamentalism that once characterized much of evangelical Christianity with forgiveness. McFarland never talks about transforming your

life through struggle, surrender or sacrifice; he talks about being happier by accepting Jesus -- into your office, your kitchen, your backyard, your marital bed, everywhere. "People aren't looking for the elevated holy man who's got all of the answers," he told me one afternoon. "They want someone to be real with them."

He has a knack for this, in part because he has the perfect back story for the leader of a church that aims at middle- and lower-middle-class 30-somethings who are looking to improve their lot. McFarland studied engineering at the University of Colorado, and before starting Radiant, he had worked his way up to a \$160,000-a-year (plus stock options) job at Microsoft. He often alludes to his first career in his messages; it's a clever evangelical technique, a subtle way of letting people know that he once had what they're aspiring to and gave it up to work for the Lord.

McFarland frequently refers to himself as a mail-order pastor. In fact -- and he readily acknowledges this too -- he never finished his pastoral coursework. He can lead Radiant anyway because the denomination to which Radiant belongs, the Assemblies of God, doesn't require its pastors to be ordained. This is not a mere quirk in the bylaws. The Assemblies, a Pentecostal movement that grew out of the preapocalyptic revivalism of the early 20th century and counts John Ashcroft (the son of an Assemblies minister) among its more prominent members, has historically been skeptical of all institutional education, seminaries included. The movement now has its own seminary in Springfield, Mo., but it continues to hew to tenets that most other denominations consider radical. Among other things, the Assemblies treats the Bible as fact and believes in miracles, faith healing and speaking in tongues.

The only cue that there is any relationship between Radiant and the Assemblies of God is a small, discreetly placed plaque in the foyer of the main worship room of the church. McFarland never mentions the Assemblies in his sermons for the simple reason that he's afraid it will turn people off.

It is only when casual worshipers are considering getting more involved at Radiant that they learn about the Assemblies affiliation, and even then McFarland handles the issue carefully. At a recent three-hour Saturday-morning orientation class for "new believers" who want to learn more about the church, he poked fun at the movement -- "What they're known for is being real Holy Ghost: speaking in tongues, swinging from the chandeliers, all that kind of crazy stuff" -- and assured his audience that Radiant is "the most different Assemblies church."

McFarland grew up in a Lutheran family in St. Louis. He discovered the Assemblies through his wife, Sandy, whose family belonged to the denomination, when they met in Colorado. Before Sandy's parents would allow him to take her out, they insisted that he come to church with them on a Sunday night. McFarland nearly freaked out. "There was a band up on stage," he said, "people were dancing, and then the pastor comes out. He's 6-foot-6. He's mad at everyone. He's pointing at people: 'You are a sinner!' And I'm like, Gosh, I'm sorry." McFarland continued, "People are flopping around like fish, going, 'Yak, yak, yak,' speaking in tongues, and I'm like, 'What's next, snakes?' "

The service lasted two and a half hours; McFarland was exhausted by the end. Sandy asked him what he thought. "I said, 'It was cool, but just so we're clear, I will never do that again,' " he told me. "Well, don't ever say never to God, because he will rub your nose in it."

After McFarland and Sandy married, they joined her family's church. He gradually grew more comfortable there, though he never felt fully at home. Eventually, he and Sandy went shopping for another place of worship and wound up at a different Assemblies church, albeit one with less overt spiritual fervor.

Radiant's desire to keep the Assemblies at arm's length notwithstanding, McFarland is an unapologetic believer in the movement's doctrines. He even says he speaks in tongues, though when he tells his worshipers the story of how he came to "exercise the gift" it sounds as mundane as such a thing can. He was on his lunch break, driving around in his brown Trans Am, listening to the tape of a sermon that a pastor had made for him, when he found himself on the steps of his house speaking a language he had never before spoken. "I received the Holy Spirit through a cassette tape," as he put it.

The Assemblies of God has a complicated view of Radiant and other user-friendly churches like it. Some ministers are thrilled with their success; others worry about the cost of trying to appeal to everyone. "There are people in the Assemblies who are quite concerned that when you have a pastor who says we don't want the vocal gifts of the spirit expressed at weekend services, then the question is raised: 'What's going on here, is this really a Pentecostal church?' " Gary McGee, a professor of church history at the Assemblies of God seminary, told me. "My personal opinion is that it's more important to lead someone to Christ than it is to fuss over which method of church worship is being used."

McFarland says he has heard his share of complaints from fellow Assemblies pastors about "watered-down" preaching. "I had one guy from the Assemblies say to me, 'It's easy to fill a room.' And I was like: 'Oh, yeah? Show me, dude, because we're finding that it takes a lot of work.' "

Expanding the flock through evangelism is a core principle of Christianity, but the modern church-growth movement traces its roots to Donald McGavran, a Christian missionary who worked in India during the first half of the 20th century. What McGavran discovered and articulated in his 1955 book, "The Bridges of God," was that churches can't operate like mission stations, rigidly insisting upon their ways and inviting people to come to them on their terms. Rather, they had to go into villages and make followers of Christ. There was simply no other way to build a dynamic Christian community, which McGavran considered a prerequisite for reaching the unchurched.

McGavran's words were written for overseas missionaries who would be encountering people who knew nothing about Jesus, but they resonated powerfully in America. As the 60's progressed, a new generation came of age, one that felt increasingly alienated from

the churches in which they'd been raised. At the same time, more and more families were relocating from the cities to outlying areas. It was clear to church leaders that if they wanted to capture these new suburbanites (and a little later, exurbanites), they were going to have to go after them on their turf. The problem was that most pastors had been taught plenty of theology at seminary, but very little about how to actually build a church. So church leaders turned to McGavran for guidance. A nascent industry of church-growth experts adapted his model, encouraging pastors to engage their local communities by treating potential worshipers as consumers.

The modern master of church growth is Rick Warren. In the early 1980's, Warren, a fifth-generation Southern Baptist, applied McGavran's philosophies to his Orange County church, Saddleback. Warren's community was cut from a very different cultural cloth than his own family's; things like altar calls, a Southern Baptist staple in which worshipers are exhorted to come to the front of the church and accept Jesus, would never play in the wealthy suburbs of Southern California. Instead, Warren set about building a profile of "Saddleback Sam"; once he had a sense of his average worshiper's likes (i.e. contemporary music) and dislikes (preachy, guilt-inducing sermons), he built Saddleback to accommodate him. A result was the so-called seeker-sensitive church.

Saddleback is now one of the largest churches in the country, with a congregation of more than 15,000, and Warren, a cuddly-looking middle-aged man with a retreating hair line, is no longer just a church pastor. His 2002 book, "The Purpose-Driven Life," which lays out a 40-day program to discover God's purpose for us, has sold more than 20 million copies. Less tangible though no less significant has been Warren's role in influencing more than 100,000 pastors through Saddleback's conferences, Web sites and prepackaged purpose-driven kits.

McFarland is an unabashed acolyte. The church-building seminar that McFarland attended before he moved to Surprise was led by Warren, and nearly all of the techniques he has used to build his church -- the informal marketing study; the communication cards; the self-deprecating, Everyman persona; even the untucked Hawaiian shirt -- are taken straight from Warren's playbook. This is not plagiarism. Warren doesn't copyright anything, and he describes his purpose-driven formula as an Intel chip that can be inserted into the metaphorical motherboard of any church. Some 30,000 churches across the denominational spectrum now define themselves as "purpose-driven."

As his fame has grown, Warren has come in for plenty of criticism from other pastors. Should churches really be chasing popular culture? Isn't preaching only positive messages a reductive, if not distorted, approach to the Gospels? Shouldn't true believers be in natural conflict with the secular world? "There's a healthy reaction here against a legalistic religion of dos and don'ts," says Gibbs of the Fuller Theological Seminary, referring to the purpose-driven approach. "The danger, though, is that you end up with a Gospel that endeavors to meet your needs without challenging your priorities."

Similar criticisms can be made of Radiant. By modeling his church after a mall, McFarland is, deliberately or not, desanctifying it. While his self-helpish sermons clearly

resonate with transient exurbanites looking for ways to improve their lives, they can be seen as subverting the real purpose of worship. "Worship is designed not to make people feel good about themselves . . . but to make them holy," Gibbs writes in "Church Next," his book about the future of Christianity in America. Gibbs also wonders about the ultimate effect of the steady diet of sentimental praise songs at places like Radiant: "Intimate worship that degenerates into a casual overfamiliarity is both presumptuous and embarrassing to those who see God from a transcendental perspective."

Tom Tunget, a bearish ex-cop in his early 40's, greeted me at the door of his home in Surprise, wearing a T-shirt with a silk-screened image of Jesus, his arms outstretched on the cross. Underneath it were the words "I love you this much." It's a fitting motto for Radiant, where love invariably trumps judgment.

Tom led me into the living room, and he and his wife, Cathy, who is also a former cop, told me the story of how they found their way to Surprise. When they retired from the Los Angeles police force several years ago, the Tungents bought a couple of horses and five acres in Colorado. The idyllic small-town life they had imagined turned out to be cold and lonely. Tom's brother lived near Phoenix, so they went to Arizona last summer to look for a piece of rural property. Driving through Surprise one afternoon, however, they noticed a billboard for Radiant and decided to check it out. Within weeks of attending their first service, they sold their land in Colorado, gave their horses to a friend and bought a tract home in a development just a few miles from the church. Now their weeks are packed with Radiant-related activities.

McFarland's emphasis on love struck a particular chord with Tom and Cathy. Tom opened up a small binder -- Radiant passes out fill-in-the-blank outlines at every service that worshipers are encouraged to keep -- to help him explain. " 'Whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so he'll let me tell him about Christ and let Christ save him,' " he read, quoting one of McFarland's recent sermons. "Having been deputy sheriffs, we have tended to judge people from what we see them do -- we had to because that's how we stayed alive in that job -- but now it's about not judging people."

When you ask people how Radiant has changed their lives, they will almost invariably talk about how it helped open their hearts. But there's a kind of narrowing going on here as well, which became clear a few minutes later, when Tom flipped to another passage from a recent sermon. " 'Some seed fell among the thorny weeds, and the weeds grew up with them and choked the good plants,' " he read, quoting Luke 8:7. Then he added his exegesis: "We've had friends who were not Christian, and for me they were like the thorny weeds," he said. "We've had to commit ourselves to friends who could help us grow spiritually."

The following night I heard this same message, communicated more explicitly, at Radiant's youth service. "If I asked how many of you have close friends who are unbelievers, a lot of you would probably raise your hands," the pastor told the crowd of about 150 teenagers, most of whom looked dressed for a rock concert. "I'll tell you right

now, if one of you is a believer and the other is not, your relationship is doomed."

Such occasional admonishment notwithstanding, at Radiant, almost everything is expressed in positive terms.

When McFarland makes his pitch for tithing, he avoids guilt trips, assuring his congregants that if they give 10 percent of their income to the church, God will make sure that the remaining 90 percent will go further than the full 100 percent ever would have. Even when he tackles a subject like homosexuality, an issue about which the Assemblies is unambiguous in its condemnation, he frames his message as one of compassion, entitling the sermon "What to Say to a Gay Friend." This happens to be something McFarland has personal experience with. His younger brother, who lives in Southern California, is gay. When I asked McFarland to repeat the gist of his sermon about homosexuality, he told me it was the same speech he's given to his brother at least 20 times: "I don't believe you were born gay. I was your brother; I grew up with you. I was there. I see that you got involved with a tennis pro who was gay when you were 18, and that's when everything switched."

With his easygoing approach to saving souls, McFarland couldn't be more different from the television evangelists of the 1980's. This is not to say that he's less committed to the ultimate cause. As McFarland sees it, Radiant must continue to add members. "Churches that have stopped growing," he says, "have stopped hearing the screams of people being sent to hell."

What remains to be seen is how many of the congregants McFarland is adding are just passing through evangelical Christianity the way that many of them are, no doubt, just passing through Surprise -- in short, whether the exurban megachurch represents the future of Christianity in this country or whether it is just another chapter in the evolving story of the American seeker.

For his part, McFarland is already talking about moving the church again to accommodate the ever-expanding crowds. His hero is Joel Osteen, the handsome and charismatic 41-year-old pastor of America's biggest megachurch, Lakewood Church, in Houston. Lakewood has grown so big that Osteen decided to move the church to a former sports arena that seats 16,000. "I keep saying the growth is going to level off," McFarland said. "Then I think, Well, maybe Joel Osteen said that, too -- and then he decided to lease the Compaq Center."

Jonathan Mahler, a contributing writer for the magazine, recently wrote about teenagers and antidepressants. His book, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning," will be published next month by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.