

# How local churches are reinventing themselves to suit the times

## This Way Forward: Prayer Service

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**by Myrna Kostash**

You drive by these buildings all the time, the ones that advertise their contents with a big cross on the roof and a generic name: Assembly, Community, Ministry, Worship Centre, occasionally even Church. Sometimes they are very large and purpose-built, and sometimes they are more modest.

Lost among the auto mechanic shops, the Burger Baron and the parking lots on 99th Street, the Church on 99 announces itself by the very large turquoise sign and cross perched dramatically on top. It was once a car dealership and before that a pair of Quonset huts where Imperial Oil stored core samples. The auditorium – sanctuary – inside has the dimensions of a curling rink. There are no windows but there is a full-sized stage, data projector, comfortable chairs and a very impressive sound system that pumps out the Christian rock music with which the worship service begins the Sunday morning I attend (I can choose from three).

The music, performed live by a full-piece band that is backed up by a light show and lyrics projected onto screens, also opened the Saturday evening service I attended with the congregation of the Church of South Edmonton. The two churches are sharing the building until the Church on 99 moves to the Nicholson Chevrolet building on Argyll Road next spring. The style of the services is similar, and clearly tailored to the crowd of young people and young families who congregate and worship with great enthusiasm.

I am a cradle Orthodox and a member of a Ukrainian Orthodox parish in east Edmonton named after a prophet. Orthodox churches are full of imagery – think icons – and Byzantine ritual, a hierarchy of deacons, priests and bishops, all in sumptuous vestments . . . and with rows and rows of half-empty pews on Sundays. But here I stand among these hundreds of clapping and swaying worshippers – the vast majority of them under 40 – in their non-denominational churches, not a religious image in sight, who are waving their arms and pointing their index fingers up to the heavens, while babies and toddlers are taken care of in the nursery at the back. After 35 minutes of music, the lights come up, everyone sits down and the preaching begins, conversationally, with humour, and I wonder: OK, what is their secret?

I ask the question twice, of Pastor Jackson Hoolahan of the Church of South Edmonton and Pastor Dennis Varty of the Church on 99. I've scrolled around their websites where they ask you

to follow them on Twitter, like them on Facebook, check them out on YouTube and sign up for their digital newsletter. It's very contemporary, and appealing to a certain demographic: a "church for the unchurched," according to the two pastors. On the Christian evangelical landscape of Edmonton, they saw a lack of a meeting place for young people, children and grandchildren of boomers who never took them to church, and graduates of schools that never mentioned the Bible, but who are curious about "churches" and even feel attracted to the idea of them. "A friend brought me," they tell Pastor Dennis, "and I stay because I've made friends." And because, he adds, "the truth is being preached here." According to Pastor Jackson, "Google has brought us most of them."

I noticed two yellow school buses parked outside the church on Sunday: these belong to the "bus ministry" that brings parishioners to services and youth to the RIZN (teaching and a dance party) Friday nights. You can register your kids, kindergarten to Grade 6, in Alpha Kids. You can join Celebrate Recovery in "Christ-centred" steps away from addiction. Through the Church at South Edmonton you can read "The Book of James Interactive Content." And meet monthly in a Breakfast Club. Volunteers are key.

Neither church has a paid membership base. "We just depend on generosity, and we teach tithing – the Biblical principle of giving – but we leave it up to them and God," Pastor Jackson says. The Church on 99 also gives them an online donation option. Its new building is secured by bank loan, mortgage and "dedicated gifts."

I'm impressed: these are oversized buildings suited up with the latest IT running a score of programs – none of this comes cheap. But then I – a churched Boomer – remember the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.