

Protagonist Corner

Preaching the Kingdom of God in the Shadow of the Magic Kingdom

Nancy Graham Ogne and Patrick H. Wrisley
Community Presbyterian Church in Celebration, Celebration, Florida

When we poll Christ-followers about the presence of a Presbyterian (U.S.A.) congregation in the town of Celebration, Florida – the new urban development at the geographical hip of Walt Disney World – we rarely encounter Laodicean lukewarmness. Instead, enthusiasts gush and naysayers fret – both, ordinarily, basing their perspectives on long-cherished sentiments or presuppositions.

Celebration's real and imagined ties to the Walt Disney Company typically give rise to the strong opinions – and frankly we have discovered (on both sides of the opinion divide) that people often seem more concerned by who sketched the blueprints for the *town* than Who issued the commission to the *Church*.

Celebration is a nationally scrutinized experiment in new urbanism – planned communities that feature pedestrian-friendly town centers, easily accessed on foot or by bicycle, a business district, and community gathering places. Emphasizing opportunities to work and play in the community of residence, new urbanism minimizes grueling commutes. Apartments sit above restaurants and shops downtown, and foot trails and small parks interlace the streets and residences.

Though new urbanism – like sub-urbanism and the re-gentrification of inner cities – faces its social critics, many adherents say they are drawn to the concept after years of hiding behind the “moats” of expansive front lawns in the suburbs. In Celebration and other new urban developments, homes and front porches sit close to the street, where neighbors more readily encounter each other. As observers note, the concept appeals in many ways to the “Main Street U.S.A.” image of Disney World – and thus, Celebration wins its friends and foes.

The entertainment conglomerate Walt Disney Company brainstormed, developed, and marketed Celebration in the 1990s, hoping to squeeze a profit from thousands of uncultivated acres of swampland at the edge of its property – formerly the dumping ground for alligators that appeared uninvited into its theme parks. After winning national recognition for the development,¹ Disney sold its interest in the town in 2003, seven years after the first residents set up housekeeping and the church launched worship services.

During Celebration's brief history, some seemingly credible journalists have described it with mix-and-match combinations of fact and lore.² In keeping with such falsehoods, critics often suspect that the Presbyterian church within the town has gullibly stitched together an ecclesial puppet of the entertainment giant – one that obscures the Christian gospel.

If the church were to deny its Founder and his mandate or to subsume its message to a variation of the “If you can dream it, you can do it” gospel according to Disney, critics would be justified in their concerns. But Community Presbyterian Church in Celebration, chartered in 1997, does not feature stained glass Mickey Mouses kneeling at the cross. Nor does it house cosmetic facades or introduce worship preludes of “It's

a Small World After All.” We preach the Kingdom of God in the shadow of the Magic Kingdom...just as any self-aware preacher proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a culturally averse circumstance.

We embrace the wisdom of leaders like Yale educated pastor and racial justice pioneer Will D. Campbell, an Anglo-American, who describes developing friendships with black radicals and Ku Klux Klansmen,³ while stepping back to critique both ideologies. He has immersed himself in sociological environments with which he does not personally align in order to establish relationships and to advocate for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

His witness, for example, as a friend to active members of the Ku Klux Klan while challenging the organization’s premises raises an important question: Where *shouldn’t* the church of Jesus Christ be active? And what does the church have to say in this unlikely environment?

The universal Church encounters such challenges not only in the deep South or in Celebration, Florida, but also in Washington D.C. – where it must engage those in the halls of power without becoming too cozy with the arrangement...in Los Angeles and Hollywood, where it similarly calls residents from the realms of fantasy to the eternal ...and in New York City, Beverly Hills, and throughout North American culture, where it calls persons of privilege to stewardship of possessions, opportunity, and the earth – to love God and others preeminently.

We have considered these issues with regard to our own roles in Celebration, where some residents may have arrived with visions of utopia and discovered that utopia *really is* “no place”...at the edge of a make-believe universe. Because we join our dynamic session in believing Jesus Christ to be the locus of reality, the church offers the *real* in the midst of the hyperreal.⁴ The *real* we extend is surely tainted by our own depravity, but it stands in stark contrast to the “known” hyperreality of Disney-created order and the “unconscious” pseudo-reality of U.S. culture.

In the midst of a generally middle-class to affluent congregation, sermons and multi-sensory forms of proclamation detail *responsibility within the world* and the real-time challenges of following Christ. With the leadership of the session and the pioneering efforts of a visionary elder for service and mission, the congregation has especially embraced the role of service in response.

Church members have not only routinely served lunch at a downtown Orlando soup kitchen and provided tutoring to inner city children, they have warmly embraced at least one homeless congregant, who was loved and active in the life of the church and whom the church helped significantly while attempting to avoid “enablement.” In its seven-year history, Community Pres has sent sixteen congregants and one short-term missionary to the Heifer Ranch in Perryville, Arkansas – embracing Heifer International’s ideal of helping Third World families become self-sustaining. In December 2003, the church filled three “arks” for Heifer International – providing “two of every kind” of animal available through the organization, three times over. Community Pres sent thirty members in July 2004 to work aboard a houseboat on the Amazon River in Brazil, carrying medical supplies and the Gospel to people who live along Amazon tributaries. It has also worked hand-in-hand with a sister congregation and a Two Cents A Meal partner in Puerto Rico.

Locally, among other things, the church has coordinated a medical symposium and also partnered with a cancer awareness program and an AME congregation in

nearby Kissimmee to help educate African-American women – statistically the most vulnerable segment of the population – about methods and advantages of early breast cancer detection.

By engaging the needs of the world – going out “into” the world and inviting others into the church community – Community Presbyterian seeks to keep our largely-comfortable congregation “wholly uncomfortable,” as Patrick frequently reiterates.

While some observers consider Celebration to be euphemistically “gated,” though not literally so, the church within Celebration opens its doors wide, without “admission tickets,” regardless of class or race. Community Presbyterian celebrates a growing contingent of racial-ethnic members – African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and numerous speakers of English as a second language. Nearly forty percent of the church’s membership and five of its ten-member staff live outside the town proper. Members include teachers, physicians, postal workers, architects, clerks, homemakers, accountants, ticket takers, financial planners, wait staff, hairdressers, and security guards.

Amidst our culture’s “virtual reality,” the church has something important to say. In the words of sociologist Jacques Ellul, “The only successful way to attack these features of our modern civilization is to give them the slip, to learn how to live on the edge of this totalitarian society, not simply rejecting it, but passing it through the sieve of God’s judgment.”⁵

Those of us who lead within the church in Celebration must seek continuously to recognize the siren-song of hyperreality and culture – and continuously to speak Jesus’ piercing reality. Christ-followers who live or worship in Celebration may, after all, possess a slight advantage over other North American communities: while many congregations never consider the possibility about their own surroundings, our congregation functions consciously in the shadow of the “unreal.”

Notes

1. Including the 2001 award from Urban Land Institute as Best New Community.
2. We have actually read, for example, wild fabrications that Disney “hires actors to walk dogs in Celebration to give the town a more homey feel,” “pipes in birdsong from the trees because the native birds are insufficiently tuneful,” and that the town is “crime-free.” An examination of police blotters for Osceola County reveals that Celebration, like every other community in the world, is home to abusers, addicts, and other violators of the civil code. Critics accurately note, among other things, the presence of “musical mushrooms” along the strand of shops in the town center, lending a theme park feel to shopping.
3. See the fascinating “Oral History with Will D. Campbell,” 22 February 2002, website of University of Southern Mississippi, <<http://anna.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/oh/campbell.htm>> (28 January 2005).
4. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12f.
5. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 46.