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HEADLINE: ON ROADS LESS TRAVELED, SPIRITUALITY TAKES FLIGHT
EVEN AS SOME CATHOLIC PARISHES CLOSE, OTHER HOUSES OF WORSHIP THRIVE

BYLINE: By Christine McConville, Globe Staff

BODY:

Pastor Anthony Milas has a big problem: his parish in Salem, N.H., keeps growing.

Every Sunday morning, he preaches to overflow crowds at four services of the Granite State Baptist Church.

The 30-year-old church on Sand Hill Road can no longer handle the growing congregation of about 700 people, and after shopping around in vain for a larger place to worship, Milas has decided to raise \$1.4 million to build a church that's big enough for the entire flock.

At a time when headlines are dominated by the closing of Catholic churches, and community leaders are wondering about the toll that Sunday morning athletic contests are taking on religion, Milas and other religious leaders say they are in the midst of a religious revival.

"It's been phenomenal," Milas said of his church's growth. When he joined the church almost nine years ago, he said, a good service would draw 70 people.

Edmund Gibbs of the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., said similar revivals are occurring in pockets across the country. In his travels over the past year interviewing religious leaders in the United States and United Kingdom, Gibbs said he found that growing churches focus more on human relationships and less on rituals.

"They are more relational. They have more of a folk Mass atmosphere," he said.

"This is representative of a search for an authentic community and relationships," said Gibbs. "The younger generation [especially] sees their life in a world of uncertainty, and their spiritual search is a

search for security, and authenticity."

That search is taking many different forms, according to the **Pluralism Project**, which has been studying the diversity of religions in Boston. In its report, *World Religions in Boston*, the Harvard University-based researchers said that thanks to the immigrants who arrived in Boston in the late 20th century, "religious life of Boston [is] far more complex and textured than ever before."

The trend applies to the suburbs northwest of Boston, as well. In the past few years, such religions as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism have established roots in the region.

Gathering places

These groups aren't always readily noticed, however, because they often inhabit structures that are a far cry from the white steeples and broad lawns of traditional New England churches.

"These [mostly] younger leaders see church not just as a weekly gathering, but more of a community," Gibbs said. "It's about the people, not the place, so they tend to go to highly functional, highly accessible locations."

In East Medford, for example, the Kurukulla Center, a Tibetan Buddhist temple, opened in 2002 in a former nursing home in the middle of a residential neighborhood.

The Glory Buddhist Temple has been located in a former office building in Lowell since 1989. Many of the temple's members are Cambodian, and every day between 11 a.m. and noon, the members offer specially prepared food to the Buddhist monks, then chant and meditate.

A group of Dawoodi Bohra Muslims last year built a \$15 million religious complex in Billerica. The complex includes a mosque, a religious school, and a home for the group's leader. It serves about 300 families, most of whom live in the region.

Harvard's **Pluralism Project** reports a Hindu group has been worshipping in Concord, and a Zen Buddhist group began by holding its services at a bookstore in Arlington in 1990. As the group grew, the meetings were moved to a private residence.

Even Milas, at one point, considered expanding his church by moving into a former Marshall's department store on Route 28 in Salem. But none of the spots he and others looked at seemed right for redevelopment, and he later decided to expand the church by building on the current campus.

Reaching out

Other church groups are holding their services in older, established churches. Often, these groups are revitalized by recent immigrants from countries where Christianity is thriving, and they bring that excitement to their congregations.

Catholics in Africa, for example, applaud at the point in the Mass when the priest consecrates the Eucharist. American Catholics, meanwhile, remain silent during that portion of the service.

At Eliot Presbyterian Church in Lowell, part of the group's core mission is to welcome new immigrants, and to offer them a place to worship. A typical Sunday at the hilltop church includes an English-language service, and celebrants include Cambodians, West Africans, and Hispanics.

Later on Sunday, the church hosts a service for Kenyan Presbyterians, and another for recent Brazilian immigrants.

The diversity makes Eliot church an interesting and exciting place, said the Rev. Dr. Ted Zaragoza. "Because it is not homogenous, there's always something unexpected happening.

"It makes Eliot exciting, and fun, and terribly, terribly interesting," he said.

Some of the church's 250 members have left more traditional churches to worship at Eliot, Zaragoza said. "They see how hopeful it is that all different cultural groups can live and pray together."

Period of adjustment

The shuttering of Roman Catholic and other traditional churches in recent years has been heartbreaking to many of the faithful, who see an important piece of American history deteriorating with each closure. But in the faith communities that are thriving or growing, people are focused on the future.

At St. Patrick's Church in Stoneham, which celebrated the opening of a new, larger church in late July, there's a cornerstone with a simple message: Rebuild my church.

"It reminds us that our faith lies in the future," said the Rev. William Schmidt, the pastor at St. Patrick's.

"The growing churches are preaching not man's opinion, but God's word," said Milas. "Instead of trying to preserve the past and living for tradition, they are focusing on where people are now."

He added, "Church shouldn't be boring. If you have to go, you might as well enjoy it."

To accomplish that, Milas incorporates bits of popular culture into his spiritual messages. In a recent sermon, he spoofed the television show "The Apprentice."

In the popular reality program, people compete for a prized job with real estate mogul Donald Trump. Each week, Trump sends one minion home, with what's becoming as much a trademark as his strawberry-blond comb-over: "You're fired."

So in looking for a fitting way to make his sermon contemporary, Milas set up a mannequin of Trump on the altar, then told his congregation that the Bible says the life they are living now is a temporary one.

"The Bible says that there is coming a time when we are going to come before God, and everyone needs to be prepared . . . you don't want to hear, 'You're fired.'"

"So the question is, how do you get that blessing?" Milas said. "And that's when I get into my message of the day. People get juiced about that. They understand that."

Gregg DiCecca, a 27-year-old Wilmington resident, was raised in a traditional church community in the Merrimack Valley, but it wasn't until he arrived at Granite State Baptist Church 2 1/2 years ago that he found his spiritual home.

"They don't focus on things that aren't important at the end of the day, like the clothes you wear or the kind of music you listen to," he said. "They focus on real-life situations that everybody goes through, and what the Bible and God has to say about it."

For DiCecca, Granite State's small study groups cemented his connection to the church. "That's when I really started building the deep relationships," he said.

So deep, he said, that in May, DiCecca quit his management job to take a full-time job at the church, where he directs and organizes the music for the worship services.

Milas says the small prayer groups allow people in the same church to really get to know one another.

"Eight years ago, we had six Sunday school classes," he said. "Now we have 60 home groups, so that every night of the week, we've got people eating dinner together, praying together, and studying the Bible together."

"People are going to churches where they can be loved; they want to be somewhere they can be

transparent, authentic, and vulnerable," he said. "God wired people for relationships."

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