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Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice

By MICHAEL LUO

In the twilight of the biggest snowstorm in New York City’s history, the pews of a rented Baptist church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan were packed for the Rev. Timothy J. Keller's fourth sermon of the day. The 600 or so who braved the snow for the evening service got what they had come to expect — a compelling discourse by Dr. Keller, this time on Jesus’ healing of the paralytic, that quoted such varied sources as C. S. Lewis, The Village Voice and the George MacDonald fairy tale "The Princess and the Goblin." It was the kind of cogent, literary sermon that has helped turn Dr. Keller, a former seminary professor whose only previous pulpit experience was at a small blue-collar church in rural Virginia, into the pastor many call Manhattan's leading evangelist.

Over the last 16 years, Dr. Keller's church, Redeemer Presbyterian, has swelled to 4,400 attendees, mostly young professionals and artists who do not fit the prototypical evangelical mold, spread out across four different services on Sundays. Although Dr. Keller, 55, is hardly a household name among believers outside New York — in part because he has avoided the Christian speaking circuit — his renown is growing in pastoral circles and in the movement to establish or "plant" new churches, a trend among evangelicals these days.

Pastors from around the world are beginning to come in a steady stream to New York City to glean what they can from Dr. Keller and Redeemer. Their goal is to learn how to create similarly effective churches in cosmopolitan cities like New York, which exert outsize influence on the prevailing culture but have traditionally been neglected by evangelicals in favor of the suburbs. "We're not giving them a turnkey template," said Dr. Keller. "What we're saying is, 'There's lots of overlaps between our big city and your big city. Some of these things you will use. Some of these you will discard. Some of these you will adapt.'"

Believing new churches are the best way to produce new Christians, evangelicals are making a major push to start new churches around the world, said Edmund Gibbs, a professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary outside Los Angeles. But only recently have some evangelicals begun to turn their focus to urban centers. Dr. Keller "has grasped the strategic significance of the city, of the urban culture and the need to engage that very diverse culture at every level," he said. "Our culture is urban-driven."

In New York City, Redeemer has become the central training ground for anyone planning to start a church in the metropolitan area, whether among Guyanese immigrants in Queens or streetwise youths in the Bronx.
Since 2000, when it established its own training center for "church planters," as they are called in evangelical parlance, Redeemer has helped start more than 50 churches in the city, from faith traditions and denominations as diverse as Assemblies of God, Lutheran and Southern Baptist. In addition, it has helped found 17 "daughter churches" of its own Presbyterian denomination in communities like Williamsburg and Park Slope, Brooklyn; Astoria, Queens; and Hoboken, N.J. Meanwhile, so-called city-center churches modeled on Redeemer — also attracting audiences of professionals and creative types — have sprung up in places like Boston, Washington, San Francisco, Berlin, London and Amsterdam. The churches emulate much of Redeemer's approach, including its attitude of embracing the city and its focus on the Christian message of grace and redemption, which Dr. Keller argues has been muddled in many churches. The Rev. Stephen Um, whose church in Boston, Citylife, began four years ago and now attracts about 500 people every Sunday, said he and other pastors had embraced Dr. Keller's emphasis on delving into the prevailing culture almost as much as into the biblical text. Along these lines, Dr. Um is just as likely to cite a postmodern philosopher like Richard Rorty or Michel Foucault in his sermons, as he is, say, Paul's Letter to the Philippians. "This is Tim's thing," said Dr. Um. "He said, 'You need to enter into a person's worldview, challenge that worldview and retell the story based on the Gospel.' The problem is evangelicals have always started with challenging the worldview. We don't have any credibility."

Redeemer meets in three facilities: the Ethical Culture Society and the First Baptist Church on the Upper West Side, and Hunter College on the Upper East Side. Unlike most suburban megachurches, much of Redeemer is remarkably traditional — there is no loud rock band or flashy video. What is not traditional is Dr. Keller's skill in speaking the language of his urbane audience. On the day of the snowstorm, Dr. Keller tackled a passage from the Gospel of Mark in which the friends of a paralyzed man carry him to Jesus. At least initially, however, Jesus does not heal the man but offers him a puzzling line about his sins being forgiven.

"Part of the point, said Dr. Keller, is people do not realize that their deepest desires often do not match up with their deepest needs. "We're asking God to get us over that little hump so we can save ourselves," he said. "It doesn't occur to us that we're looking for something besides Jesus to save us."

Observing Dr. Keller's professorial pose on stage, it is easy to understand his appeal. While he hardly shrinks from difficult Christian truths, he sounds different from many of the shrill evangelical voices in the public sphere. "A big part is he preaches on such an intellectual level," said Suzanne Perron, 37, a fashion designer who is one of many who had stopped going to church before she discovered Redeemer several years ago. "You can go to Redeemer and you can not be a Christian and listen to that sermon and be completely engaged."

Dr. Keller shies away from the label evangelical, which is often used to describe theologically conservative Protestant Christians like him, because of the political and fundamentalist connotations that now come with it. He prefers the term orthodox instead, because he believes in the importance of personal conversion or being "born again," and the full authority of the Bible. An important lesson that Dr. Keller said he had tried to convey to other pastors is that the hard sell rarely works in the city. Becoming a Christian in a place like New York, he said, is more often the product not of one decision but of many little decisions. "One decision might be Christianity is more relevant than I think," he said. "Or, here's two Christians that I don't think are idiots."

It was the Rev. Terry Gyger, an official with the church-planting arm of the Presbyterian Church in America, an Atlanta-based evangelical denomination, who persuaded Dr. Keller to come to the city to start a church in the late 1980's. At that point, Dr. Keller was a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and the part-time head of the Presbyterian Church's mercy ministries. His only previous pastoral experience was at a Presbyterian church in Hopewell, Va., a struggling factory town. Under Dr. Keller, the congregation grew from 90 to roughly 300 in nine years, but that was in the Bible Belt, of course, not New York City. "I just saw in him the raw ingredients," Mr. Gyger said. "I felt he had the inquisitiveness. He had the intellectual capital. He was very articulate, even though he had not had a lot of preaching experience in the big pulpits of our denomination."

Even so, Dr. Keller was offered the post only after two other candidates turned it down. Within a year of its founding in 1989, however, Redeemer had grown from 50 people to more than 400. By the end of 1992, the church had swelled to more than 1,000 people. Since then, it has continued to grow steadily, all while renting space in several locations. Sept. 11 proved to be a defining moment for the church. On the Sunday after the terrorist attack, more than 5,000 people showed up. So many people packed the church's Sunday morning service that Dr. Keller called another service on the spot, and 700 people came back to attend. While attendance returned to normal in other churches after several weeks, Redeemer kept attracting about 800 more people a week than it had drawn before the attack.

"For the next five years, I would talk to people about when they joined the church, and they said right after 9/11," Dr. Keller said. After the attack, the church also began to increase its training for those working to found churches. His church's main goal, Dr. Keller said, is to teach pastors how to truly love the city, rather than fear its worldly influences. Unlike many evangelicals, Dr. Keller advocates an indirect approach to change.
"If you seek power before service, you'll neither get power, nor serve," he said. "If you seek to serve people more than to gain power, you will not only serve people, you will gain influence. That's very much the way Jesus did it." As a result, one of Redeemer's hallmarks has always been its focus on charity, something it emphasizes in its training of urban pastors. It operates a program called Hope for New York that arranges volunteer opportunities for people from Redeemer with 35 different partner organizations. Last year, 3,300 people from the church volunteered their time.

A looming question for Redeemer, though, is how much of what Dr. Keller and his team have built can be maintained when he ultimately exits the stage. When he was out for several months in the summer of 2002 while undergoing treatment for thyroid cancer, attendance dipped noticeably. For now, the faithful of Redeemer do not have to contemplate that situation. Dr. Keller continues to preach nearly every Sunday, dashing back and forth to its different rented facilities and putting in unrelenting 80-hour work weeks.

On the night of the snowstorm, Dr. Keller closed his monologue with a moving riff on Jesus' love in spite of humanity's flaws, and a quote from C. S. Lewis, one of his favorite writers: "The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and his compulsion is our liberation."

And then he prayed for his congregation and his city.