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Man creates church that fuses two

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Archbishop P. Gregory Schell preaches in front of an Orthodox painting in the People's Cathedral in Denver, Sunday, January 31, 2010. Schell's spiritual journey has taken him all over the map. Raised Catholic, he would leave the church and become a Pentecostal pastor with an Assembly of God Church in Louisiana before circling back to a sacramental, liturgical and mystical form of religion -- the Eastern Orthodox version of ancient Christianity, except he has formed his own American expression of this brand of faith, which he calls the Christian Orthodox Church of America. He calls it convergent Christianity because he fuses Eastern Orthodoxy, American culture and Pentecostal (Protestant) worship forms. There are a handful of parishes and missions scattered from Pennsylvania to Texas. Judy DeHaas, The Denver Post 11 (THE DENVER POST | JUDY DEHAAS)

There is cafeteria Christianity — selecting this doctrine and that rite but leaving those

others off the tray — and then there is St. Isaac Church, where worship is more like a smorgasbord.

Archbishop P. Gregory Schell is not leaving much off the table at his feast of faith in northwest Denver.

"This is a place where East meets West, and Christ is in the center," says Schell, founder of the 10-year-old Christian Orthodox Church of America, a fusion of ancient Christianity and contemporary evangelical worship.

St. Isaac and the five other churches in Schell's national network were inspired by Eastern Orthodoxy and likewise claim an apostolic tradition reaching back to A.D. 52 and St. Thomas.

Yet,

it is in many respects a modern American faith offering — what Schell calls "convergence worship": sacramental, liturgical, evangelical and charismatic.

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"There is a hunger for real experience of God," Schell says. "There's a new generation looking for substance."

He is not daunted that the Eastern Orthodox establishment does not recognize his "orthodoxy," which means correct or accepted practice. His network of churches — scattered from Rome, Pa., to Pasadena, Calif. — is not part of the Eastern Orthodox fellowship.

"We deeply love and respect the Orthodox faith and Roman Catholic Church. We're one body in Christ," Schell says. "As a native American Orthodoxy, we humbly seek to build relationships with them."

Reverence and relevance

At St. Isaac, the first of two hours of Sunday service is celebrated with classic Eastern Orthodox liturgy, similar to a Catholic Mass — clerical procession, chiming bells, rattling fans, wafting incense, lifted icons, flickering candles and Holy Communion. It is said in English.

The second half is loud contemporary music, band, waving hands, swaying bodies and fiery preaching in the charismatic tradition.

"Don't

let these robes fool you — I can preach," Schell says as he and his long purple vestment take center stage with booming voice and kinetic style. "We have to be both reverent and relevant. There's a time to be quiet and a time to party with Christ."



Father Jacob Givens preaches at St. Isaac Church in Denver. (THE DENVER POST | JUDY DEHAAS)

St. Isaac's congregation of 250 to 300 includes some displaced Catholics and is home to some evangelical Christians seeking the richness of early Christianity.

Bryan Ruth, a young father, says he grew up in a nondenominational Christian church but came to feel something was missing.

"What attracted me to this were the ancient roots, 2,000 years of history," Ruth says. "I had gone through a phase where Christianity had seemed almost shallow."

As a young man, Schell, now 56, left his Longmont home and the Roman Catholic

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faith he'd grown up in for a spiritual journey that took him all over the map.

By the time he hit Baton Rouge, La., he was attending an Assemblies of God church, a Pentecostal faith.

In 1989, he and his wife started a nondenominational church in a north Denver neighborhood.

"We held worship services right in a crack house," Schell says.

His continuing exploration of faith traditions led him to Eastern Orthodoxy — something familiar to the former Catholic, yet imbued, he says, with more mysticism.

No orthodoxy rooted in U.S.

Eastern Orthodoxy is a tradition that formed in the 5th to 13th centuries as a slowly widening rift divided the bishops of Rome and Constantinople. Through the "Great Schism," Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism developed distinctive identities.

Eastern Orthodoxy allows married clergy and rejects universal papal authority.

"I thank God the sacramental roots were strong in me," Schell says. "There were already Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches, with ethnic and cultural ties to those countries, but there was not what you call an American-grown orthodoxy."

He wanted to grow one, establishing the Christian Orthodox Church of America, or COCOA, in 1999.

His churches celebrate seven sacraments: baptism, chrismation (confirmation), Holy Communion, marriage, holy orders, reconciliation and anointing of the sick. Teachings on sanctity of life and homosexuality are traditional and conservative. However, Schell ordains female deacons and priests.

Schell was ordained by Archbishop Joseph Mar Narsai, head of the Federation of St. Thomas Christians of America, a Santa Cruz, Calif.-based network of independent Catholic jurisdictions founded in 1963. Its membership is estimated at several thousand. That federation and Schell's Christian Orthodox Church of America are in full communion or fellowship.

Authenticity judgments

Schell says COCOA also has two Texas parishes, in Andrews and Menard, and others in Rome, Pa.; in Las Vegas; and near Pasadena, Calif. He estimates total COCOA membership at several hundred and projects it will reach 1,000 by 2012.

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Being outside mainstream Eastern Orthodox Christianity doesn't faze Schell or the several priests he ordained. They counsel against Christians judging the authenticity of other Christians.

"I'm the church. You're the church," Father Jacob Givens thundered in his homily one Sunday. "We're the church."

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