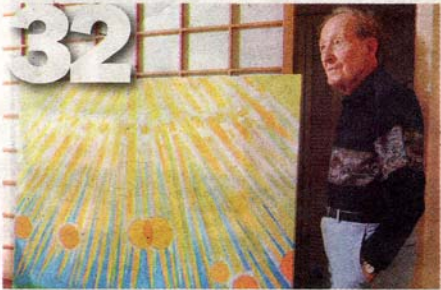


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Cosmic painting



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Bare bones theatre

Vol. 20 No. 40 • Friday, Oct. 16, 2009

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THE VANCOUVER DOWNTOWN EDITION

Courier

Spreading the word

Despite Kitsilano's high rent and irreligious reputation, Tenth Avenue Church, an evangelical church led by Pastor Ken Shigematsu, has moved into the neighbourhood—story by Mark Hasiuk



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COVER

Tenth Avenue Church has grown into Mount Pleasant institution

Evangelical church moves into Kitsilano

By Mark Hasiuk
Staff writer

At the corner of West 10th Avenue and Ontario Street, under a bright late-summer sun, a steady stream of people filter into Tenth Avenue Church for the 9:30 Sunday morning service.

Free of steeples and stained glass, the brick and glass building blends nicely with the refurbished heritage homes that line 10th Avenue. Inside, roughly 500 casually dressed people of various ethnicities and generations settle into plain brown pews. After a half hour of praise music, led by a piano/guitar/drum ensemble, senior pastor Ken Shigematsu steps onto a slightly elevated stage to deliver his sermon.

Dressed casually in a light green collared shirt and beige khakis, and speaking into a tiny headset microphone, the 43-year-old Japanese-Canadian looks more like a motivational speaker at a corporate retreat than a preacher.

But as verse 2:42 from the Book of Acts appears in giant black font on a projection screen behind him, the crowd listens intently to what he has to say.

Tenth Avenue Church was founded in 1935 and joined the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a conservative Evangelical Protestant denomination.

Once considered the CMA's flagship church in western Canada, Tenth attracted more than 1,000 worshippers each Sunday

during its heyday in the 1940s and '50s. However, beginning in the 1970s, as Vancouver's cultural landscape began to change, Tenth experienced a steady decline in membership.

In 1996, when Shigematsu arrived on the scene, Tenth staged only one Sunday service averaging roughly 175 souls.

But over the next decade, under Shigematsu's guidance, Tenth transformed from a shrinking community of aging white folks into a vibrant congregation representing all social, cultural and economic backgrounds, including this reporter who sometimes attends Sunday services. Two more services were added to the Sunday schedule. And last month, in an audacious move fraught with uncertainty, Tenth launched a fourth Sunday morning service in the amphitheatre at Kitsilano secondary school.

According to Canadian census figures, Kitsilano ranks among Canada's most secular neighbourhoods. In North American popular culture, the term "evangelical" is often equated with right-wing political activism and intolerance.

Considering these realities, does Tenth's Kitsilano expansion have a prayer? Or will prayer and worship contribute to a religious resurgence in Vancouver's West Side?

Despite months of planning, Tenth's Kitsilano expansion hinges on Shigematsu's ability to deliver half hour sermons at all



Tenth senior pastor Ken Shigematsu delivers a sermon in the amphitheatre at Kitsilano secondary school. photo Raymond Shum

four Tenth services—9:30 at the church building on Ontario Street, 10:30 in Kitsilano, and 11:30 and 7:30 p.m. back on Ontario.

Following his appearance at the first service, Shigematsu disappears backstage. Clutching his sermon notes and Bible, he reappears in the back parking lot where Ken Nixon, an 81-year-old longtime congregant, waits in his weathered grey 1986 Oldsmobile.

With an excited smile, Nixon—who looks 20 years younger than his age—updates the situation. "We're running a few minutes late."

As Nixon's Oldsmobile floats down 12th Avenue, Shigematsu gulps down a sports drink and unwraps a granola bar. In between bites, he admits to being a little nervous. "I went for a run about 8:30 last night," he says. "So I slept pretty well, I think. We're hoping for between 100 and 200 people, but we'll see."

Thanks to light Sunday morning traffic, eight minutes later Nixon's Oldsmobile stops abruptly on Larch Street outside the rear entrance of Kitsilano secondary, a large yellow building nestled

among the neighbourhood's parks and tree-lined streets. Shigematsu steps out quickly and Nixon speeds off to a reserved parking spot on nearby Trafalgar Street. With notes and Bible in hand, Shigematsu strides towards a doubled-doored rear entrance and the faint sound of singing, which grows louder as the doors swing open.

Shigematsu was born in Tokyo and moved with his family to Vancouver when he was seven years old.

He studied economics and philosophy at Wheaton College in Chicago before joining the Sony Corporation where he used his business acumen and fluent Japanese to help assimilate Japanese businessmen into western culture. "I was teaching English, cross-cultural studies, business presentations, stuff like that," says Shigematsu, during a weekday interview inside his small office at the church building on Ontario Street.

While working in Japan, Shigematsu volunteered at a church and got a taste for ministry. Despite his rising star in the corporate world, he left Sony and enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary north of Boston.

In 1995, he helped establish a predominantly Asian church in Southern California before moving back to his home province and into the senior pastor position at Tenth—then a stagnant church known for a high turnover rate among pastors.

Continued on page 5

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Pastor helped transform Tenth into more diverse church community

Continued from page 4

"When I began at Tenth, the church secretary walked into my office and said, 'I just wanted you to know that if the church sinks now, everyone will blame you since you were the last person at the helm,'" he remembers with a chuckle. "This church was full of white Anglo-Saxon senior citizens. As a Japanese Canadian, at the age of 29, I thought I was too young and too ethnic to lead Tenth Avenue."

But Shigematsu remained at Tenth and eventually helped it grow into a Mount Pleasant institution, which regularly attracts up to 1,600 people to three Sunday services. Shigematsu gives all credit to God, and is quick to note the hard work and dedication of Tenth's pastoral staff and the many volunteers who help run Tenth's community programs.

The church operates an after-school program for kids from low-income families. Meals for homeless people are prepared and served in the church hall, and Tenth operates a temporary homeless shelter during the winter. The shelter program, which has rankled nearby residents, grabbed headlines in 2006 after city officials said Tenth required a permit to deliver services to the poor. Tenth resisted city hall's decree and eventually retained the

right to shelter and feed people without a permit.

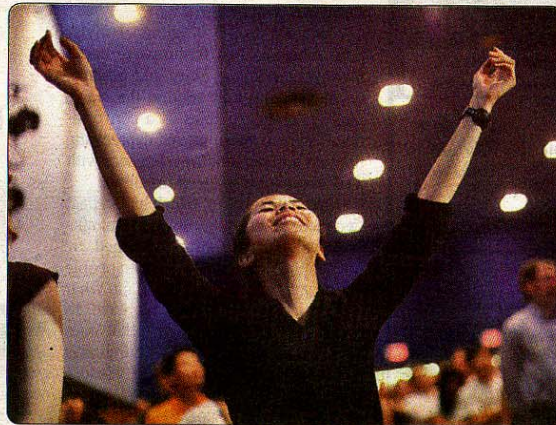
So considering Tenth's many commitments in Mount Pleasant, why expand to Kitsilano?

The answer, says Shigematsu, lies in the church's mission. "There is spiritual hunger, I believe, in the city," says Shigematsu. "Tenth has emerged as a place where people who are curious about God, interested in exploring a spiritual journey, can come and experience connection and community regardless of their background."

That may be true. But thanks to the American evangelical movement, the denomination has an image problem.

American evangelical leaders frequently and publicly weigh in on hot-button social issues such as gay marriage and abortion, and have formed allegiances with Republican politicians like former president George W. Bush. Many political observers credit the evangelical vote for Bush's two presidential election victories.

Shigematsu is acutely aware of pop culture's dim view of evangelicals. Shortly after he arrived at Tenth, to distance the church from its denomination and avoid any association with the now defunct Canadian Alliance political party, the term "Alliance" was dropped from the church name (formerly known as Tenth Avenue Alliance



The first Tenth service in Kitsilano includes a half hour of praise music. photo Raymond Shum

Church). Tenth also excludes the word "evangelical" from its official title.

"This particular church is much more centrist than other evangelical churches and we're also very inclusive," says Shigematsu. "Part of our mission is to include people of every background, every stripe. We don't want the term evangelical to get in the way of that."

Shigematsu rejects the melding of politics and religion south of the border. He'll never endorse a political party or candidate, nor

will he instruct his congregation on political issues.

"I think it's very dangerous for a Christian leader to align himself or herself too closely with any one political movement or political figure," he says. "You're going to have Christians on various sides of an issue. If a Christian leader aligns himself, for example, with a right-wing political agenda, then people of a more liberal persuasion may be unnecessarily disenchanted by the message of the gospel. The message of the

gospel isn't the right to own guns, or lower taxes or no government involvement in medical care."

Inside the dimly lit amphitheatre at Kitsilano secondary, a six-piece band of twentysomethings, fronted by a bearded electric guitarist in a white T-shirt, leads a packed house in the stirring anthem "How Great is Our God." The turnout is unexpectedly high, thanks to a neighbourhood mail and phone campaign aimed at Tenth congregants from the West Side. Most of the 300 attendees have attended past Tenth services but church organizers hope word will spread to the larger Kitsilano community.

Music is an important part of Tenth's worship service. The songs, a mixture of contemporary praise music and traditional hymns, are well known by most Tenth regulars. Some congregants raise their hands in praise. The uninitiated can read lyrics karaoke-style off a large projection screen.

Shigematsu—fresh from Nixon's Oldsmobile—enters unnoticed, grabs a wall seat in the front row and bows his head in prayer. As the music ends, the amphitheatre grows silent. He climbs the stage steps and smiles into a harsh spotlight. "Thank you for being part of this historic day for the Tenth community."

Continued on page 6

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COVER

Evangelicals often associated with U.S. politics

Continued from page 5

Whatever your religious convictions, Shigematsu's sermons are undeniably entertaining. Wiry and athletic, he moves gracefully around the stage, rarely referencing notes in a conversational style, combining self-deprecating humour and pop-culture references with a scholarly knowledge of the Bible.

During his sermon, which he'll repeat two more times today, Shigematsu talks about the early church described by Luke in the Book of Acts. "When people first visit Tenth they often ask me what church model we follow. We have an ancient model here at Tenth that goes back 2,000 years. The early church was passionate about God and the wisdom of Jesus Christ."

Despite Tenth's commitment to charity work, public suspicion of evangelicals remains.

As Shigematsu preaches about the first Christians, across the street in the parking lot of the Kitsilano Community Centre an eclectic crowd of Vancouverites stroll around booths of tomatoes, pumpkins and artwork at the Kitsilano Farmers Market. While the market attracts folks from around the city, it's a pretty good representation of Kitsilano proper.

So, what do they think about when they hear the word evangelical?

"I think about something flamboyant—the stereotypical televangelist," says Sarah Van Snellenberg, a 28-year-old brunette who lives two blocks from Kits high school.

Van Snellenberg, who teaches at a North Vancouver elementary school, was raised Protestant. She's surprised to learn of Tenth's Kits expansion but her religious upbringing, she says, grants her greater insight into the evangelical world. "So the term doesn't necessarily scare me like it might some people."

Her friend and fellow teacher Donné Torr, 26, is more skeptical. "I think of the movie *Jesus Camp*," she says, noting the 2006 Hollywood documentary about a Pentecostal summer camp for children. "I initially get terrified and scared but I'm uneducated about what an evangelical service is because I've never been to one. So maybe I shouldn't judge something I've never seen."

However, like other folks interviewed at the farmers market, Torr wondered about Tenth's stance on homosexuality.

In a dramatic break from the Christian

"I THINK ABOUT SOMETHING FLAMBOYANT—THE STEREOTYPICAL TELEVANGELIST."

Sarah Van Snellenberg

and Missionary Alliance, which prohibits homosexuals from church membership, Tenth welcomes gays into the congregation. The church also allows women to assume senior pastoral roles, contrary to CMA doctrine.

Carolyn Wong, one of the worshippers singing and praising inside the amphitheatre, isn't interested in condemning anyone. She understands the damage done by American evangelical leaders who "blend faith with politics," but believes criticisms of her church are based largely on ignorance. "There are a lot of misconceptions spread by word or mouth or whatever," says Wong, a 22-year-old recent UBC microbiology graduate. "We believe certain things but we're not trying to force our views on anyone."

Jayne Cline, a 24-year-old wardrobe specialist in Vancouver's theatre industry, has attended Tenth for two years. Christian fellowship, she says, is an important part of her life. "I like that I'm not the only single person or the only person my age here," says Cline. "I wanted a sense of community with people who are going through the same life stages as me, and Tenth has been great for that."

In a neighbourhood known more for clothing stores and beaches, Kitsilano churches face stiff competition for local souls. But a quick Google search identifies 10 churches operating in the area and there may be more.

Jon Boyd, senior pastor at Westpointe Christian Centre, a non-denominational charismatic church two blocks west of Kitsilano secondary, says UBC students and young adults dominate his congregation.

The lone Westpointe Sunday service averages 70 attendees—the lowest numbers in Boyd's 20-year association with the church. Boyd, a jovial fellow with a shaved head and soul patch, blames the

transient nature of many Kits residents and Vancouver's high cost of living. "There's really nobody in our church that can afford a home in this neighbourhood," he laughs, adding that he often loses congregants to the cheaper real estate of the suburbs.

To generate neighbourhood interest, Boyd's organized mail-out campaigns and block parties, which have attracted few new members. Although Westpointe and Tenth share many theological similarities, Boyd's unsure how Tenth's expansion will affect his Sunday numbers.

Conversely, Tenth's congregation includes many affluent young professionals who own homes in Kitsilano, a contributing factor in Tenth's expansion decision. The neighbourhood's rich real estate market, however, weighed heavily on the minds of expansion planners. "This is something we moved on despite the financial challenges of renting in Kitsilano," says Shigematsu, noting the Sunday morning weekly rent in Kitsilano costs up to \$1,800 each week. "We're hoping to break even, and that the service will be financially sustainable [through tithes and donations] in a year or two."

Although Tenth's congregation is multicultural, the church's popularity among young white people separates it from other churches in Vancouver, which have witnessed a mass exodus of white faces over the past 30 years. The *Courier* reported in 2007 that Vancouver's two big denominations—Catholic and Anglican—owe their survival to Filipino and Asian immigration.

Shigematsu concludes his first ever Kitsilano sermon, leaves the congregation with a final prayer, and heads for the door and Ken Nixon's waiting Oldsmobile.

Back on Ontario Street, while another large crowd of worshippers sings God's praise at the 11:30 service, Shigematsu takes a seat in the front row and waits for his cue. His sermon, again, focuses on the Book of Acts—an appropriate subject for a church expansion.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common," the text reads on the white projection screen, "...praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

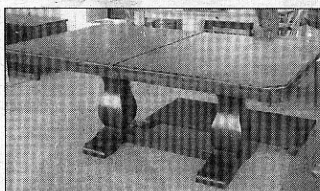
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