

## faith+values



JONNY HANSON • Houston Chronicle via Associated Press  
Sarah and Mark Retzliff walked toward Tallowood Center, formerly a Circuit City store in Houston, to attend services at Tallowood Baptist Church.

## Amazing space

• In strip malls across the country, spaces formerly used to sell merchandise are being used to sell a different, less tangible type of commodity: messages of love and salvation.

By THADDEUS HERRICK  
Wall Street Journal

Several years ago, when leaders at the 5,000-strong Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston realized they needed more space to expand their congregation, they considered building a new church on the outskirts of the sprawling city. Instead, they opted for a less conventional site: a strip mall along a freeway.

Last year, Tallowood began services in a renovated 32,000-square-foot building that was formerly a Circuit City store. In addition to a 300-seat auditorium, the location now boasts 30 offices, a conference room that doubles as a day-care center and a Christian bookstore. "Not everyone comes to church for the architecture," says Larry Heslip, Tallowood's minister of education and administration. "Some people just like to be in a space that's usable."

A growing number of church-

es with huge congregations are growing so large that they need unconventional spaces in which to expand. Such churches — typically Protestant with regular weekly attendance of more than 2,000 — have doubled in the past five years to about 1,200, with almost a quarter of them in California and Texas, said Scott Thumma, professor of sociology of religion at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research in Hartford, Conn.

To make room for members, many churches are moving into commercial and retail spaces such as strip malls, big-box locations and corporate campuses. Though often less spectacular in design than conventional churches, these buildings tend to be cheaper than new construction.

Large churches also see such properties as more desirable because they might attract potential churchgoers who are shopping at a retailer next

door or across the street. And plenty of suburban property is available, thanks to a commercial and retail push to both the fringes and downtowns of large urban areas.

Lakewood Church in Houston, which says it has the nation's largest congregation, last year relocated to the former Compaq Center, the 16,000-seat arena that was once home to the National Basketball Association's Rockets.

But not everyone is giving thanks. The moves have sparked controversy, much as store-front churches did when they began popping up in cities years ago. Though protected by a 2000 federal law designed to shield religious institutions from discrimination in land use, churches acquiring commercial and retail property still find themselves under fire. Thumma says communities are often distrustful of large congregations trying to expand. They are reluctant to cede potential business real estate to nonprofits and leery of increased traffic and the demand a church might have for city services.

# The roots of our faith

◀ ARMSTRONG FROM E12

### THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION: THE BEGINNING OF OUR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

By Karen Armstrong,  
Knopf, 496 pages, \$30.

**Q** In the wake of 9/11 and all the terrorism we see around us, are you sensing an Axial-Age response now?

**A** Well, we have to work at it, and I don't think people are really working at it. Buddha and Confucius and the Taoists worked really hard at it — as hard as scientists work today at finding a cure for cancer. You have to be innovative and creative. The Axial sages didn't just tamely inherit their traditions; they changed them radically. They did a lot of work testing their theories, agonizing about them, and that's the kind of effort that is required.

**Q** Are there people in our own time whom you think of as sages and prophets of Axial-Age caliber?

**A** I think there are iconic figures at the moment: the Dalai Lama is one, Desmond Tutu another. Nelson Mandela, I would say. And Gandhi. They all stressed these ideas of benevolence and compassion and looking at your own failings before you point the finger at others — and peace and forgiveness.

**Q** It's interesting that, in the Axial Age, when religion took this big jump, the catalyst was the violence around them. And here we are in a very violent time. Do you think there will be another big evolution in religion?

**A** As I say, only if people work at it. They (the people of the

Axial Age) worked systematically — like those Indian sages who, over 200 years, took all the violence out of the liturgy. We have no idea how they implemented this, how they persuaded the warriors to give up their war games, but it was a long process.

In a similar way, we need to all look at the violent texts in our own scriptures instead of just saying, "Other people's texts are violent." For example, saying "the Qur'an is a violent text" without looking at our own violent texts in the Bible.

**Q** You say in your book that religions are at their weakest when they become the most dogmatic. What do you think is the impulse behind the creation of dogma?

**A** Egotism. When people propound their opinions, it's "me, me, me" that they're talking about. When we think we're right and everybody else is wrong, it sounds like ego. And ego is the thing you have to transcend if you want to get in touch with God or nirvana or Brahman or the sacred. Compassion is the main keynote of Axial-Age religion. But people don't want to be compassion-

ate; they want to be right.

**Q** You've referred to yourself as "freelance" in matters of religion, finding inspiration in all the faiths. Do you ever miss the sense of "belonging"?

**A** No, I don't, really. Because wherever I travel 'round the world, I find likeminded people. And belonging is all very well, but that again can lead to a sense of chauvinism and exclusivism and "us and them." So I quite like my solitary status. I find my studying enthralling. And as I study these faiths, I really am inspired by them.

**Q** What's your next project?

**A** A book called "Incarnation" — a way of looking at all of these faiths we've been discussing. After the Axial Age, they started to see the divine in a human being. You see the beginnings of this in the last chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita, where the man Krishna is suddenly seen as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. And later Confucius would be regarded as divine, the Buddha was revered, and then there were all these bodhisattvas. What does this mean? And then Jesus, alongside these other incarnations and avatars. What does this really mean, beyond the slogan, "Jesus is God." That's what I'll be exploring in my next book.

Barbara Tuttle is at barbara@earthlink.net.

## Love, not fear, is the basis of salvation

◀ CRELLY FROM E12

For Crellly, one rider in particular brought back memories. Like her, David Coleman, 23, of Delano, had wrestled with his sexuality at North Central. He said that last year, after he revealed he is gay, he was asked to leave the college.

In January 1992, Crellly decided to stop trying to have her "gay tendencies" counseled and prayed away and to stop denying her sexuality to herself and others. But "the danger of expulsion kept me in the closet a while longer," she said.

In the meantime, she read scientific studies on homosexuality and wrote a paper about ministering to gays.

"I visited [Twin Cities] churches — All God's Children, St. Joan of Arc [Catholic Church], Wesley United Meth-

odist, University Baptist — and saw there wasn't just one way to deal with this issue," she said. "It gave me hope that I would find my way."

In May 1992, she graduated from North Central with honors. She began work at a pharmaceutical company and came out of the closet for good, finding "spiritual places of refuge" at St. Joan of Arc and Lyndale United Church of Christ, both in Minneapolis.

"Fear of hatred and rejection drove me from my Assemblies of God church, not, as some of my old friends said, a desire for 'the gay lifestyle,'" she said. "It was way too painful to see my friends look at me with such disdain, as if I were some morally corrupt person, so as soon as the news broke, I left my church rather than face an onslaught of rejection."

What followed was "a wonderful, healing time," she said. She enrolled at United Theological Seminary in New Brighton, where she earned her master of divinity degree in 2001. In 2003, she was ordained in the United Church of Christ, and for the past five years she has served Parkview, "a loving and caring congregation that has accepted me for myself, not just as 'the lesbian minister,'" she said.

### A look back

Despite her painful passage at North Central, Crellly said, she still "loves and cares about that school."

"North Central gave me the tools to discern scripture and skills around how to relate to other cultures," she said. "But the atmosphere of intolerance there squelches the spirit of God and is demeaning to people who are struggling."

Susan Detlefsen, communications director for North Central, said that the college would not comment on Crellly's experience there because student issues are kept private. She said the college does not expel students for being gay and that everyone's faith journey is private and personal.

Crellly said, "Jesus accepted people that the religious authorities of his day rejected as unfit," she said. "His love and acceptance gave them hope that God still loved them. ... Jesus cared about people, while the Pharisees cared about moral purity."

"If I call myself a Christian because I fear eternal damnation, then I have missed the point of the Gospels," she said. "I desire to dispel fear and spread the word of God's love."

Pamela Miller • 612-673-4290

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# Calvary

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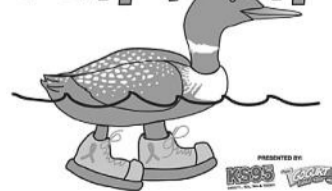
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