Bell's appeal: Ministry to young adults

by Debra Bendis in the March 24, 2009 issue

When Rob Bell walks on stage at Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, the 38-year-old sports chic black glasses and black jeans with a wide, white 1970s belt. His geeky, affable presence and energized speaking style warm up the room quickly and signal a seasoned performer. After you hear Bell speak, it's not surprising to learn that his childhood hero was David Letterman or that when he was a student at Wheaton College in the 1980s, he was lead singer in a band called "__Ton Bundle" (the blank space allowed band members to change the band's name by adding various adjectives).

As a student at Fuller Seminary, Bell found that his preaching style never quite fit the mold. As he told *Willow* magazine,"I didn't get very good grades in preaching class because most understandings of preaching/teaching have a whole bunch of fundamental assumptions about how it's done. You are fitting truth into a prescribed format—generally, a person standing behind a podium, reading the Bible and talking. And so the deepest truths of the universe then are going to need to get run through a very narrow funnel. For me, the issue is how do I most clearly communicate the truth of this text."

He says Letterman isn't a bad example for pastors, since he's been on television every night for 20 years, engaging the culture. "What's my job again?" says Bell. "To engage our culture!"

There's plenty of evidence that Bell's been successful at engaging the culture. He's been written up by *Time* magazine and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which calls him "the next Billy Graham." His 2006 book *Velvet Elvis*: *Repainting the Christian Faith* created a following of diehard fans who eagerly awaited *Sex God*: *Exploring the Endless Connections Between Sexuality and Spirituality* and his latest book, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*: *A Manifesto for the Church in Exile* (written with Don Golden of World Relief). His NOOMA videos have sold 1.2 million copies in 80

countries (NOOMA is a phonetic spelling of the Greek *pneuma*, or “spirit”). In 2007-2008 he visited 22 cities as part of “The Gods Aren’t Angry” tour.

Bell has come in for criticism as well as adulation. Conservative evangelicals like blogger Eric Rung think Bell’s approach to ministry is “out of step with scripture” and that his philosophy will “erode true biblical faith.” Another Web site—one of many—notes that while Bell is packaged as Christian, “nothing could be further from the truth,” and calls Bell “a New Age evangelist.”

What is Bell doing to earn so much attention? For one thing, he can preach. As Bell warms up a congregation or audience to hear “the truth of the text,” he drops jokes based on pop music, references to favorite cheap wines or the quirks of cell phone technology, a mainstay of the 20-somethings among his listeners. In his sermons, he prepares the congregation by announcing that he’ll be teaching for 80 minutes. (Some of the visitors thought that he must be kidding. He wasn’t.) Several times during the 80 minutes he stops in the middle of exegeting a Bible passage when he senses a lull in listener focus and shouts, “Are you tracking?” After a resolute yes from the congregation, he dives in again.

Bell’s style is also on display in his NOOMA videos, a series of 12-minute monologues that are popular in mainline churches as discussion starters. He establishes rapport with the viewer by musing about an everyday situation, then introduces a spiritual theme. The video *Trees*, for example, begins in a deserted industrial zone of a city, where Bell is pulling a small tree out of a pickup truck. The camera moves in closer and Bell makes eye contact with viewers. As he gets ready to plant the tree in a parkway, he muses aloud about the space between a tree already planted and the new one. That space, he says, reminds him of the interval between life and death.

We tend to think, he continues, that “there’s this chunk of reality and another chunk out there after this place. . . . We end up falling into this belief that somehow we’ll just start over, get a new driver’s license. . . . This Christian radio preacher . . . was saying that Jesus is going to come back and . . . is going to fix this place and that some great things are going to happen some day. . . . Are we just hanging around until some future date? I need a God who’s *now*, who teaches me how to live *now*. I need a faith that’s about *today*.”

Bell’s video audience, like the people who come to hear him at Mars Hill, tend to have been raised in evangelical churches, and many are graduates of evangelical

colleges. They are restless with the Christianity they've inherited and come to Mars Hill eager to hear someone who knows their tradition and claims core truths of the faith, yet challenges other givens. As Bell says in *Velvet Elvis*, they want to paint a new canvas:

> The painting works for their parents, or it provided meaning when they were growing, but it is no longer relevant. It doesn't fit. It's outdated. . . . It's not that there isn't any truth in it or that all the people before them were misguided or missed the point. It's just that every generation has to ask the difficult questions of what it means to be a Christian here and now, in this place, at this time.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Neela Banerjee describes these young adults as part of a movement of evangelicals who are tired of politics being at the center of faith and who want "to broaden the traditional evangelical anti-abortion agenda to include care for the poor, the environment, immigrants and people with HIV." Mars Hill fits this description. Its members are pushing away from the institutional church and embracing social justice, not in political activism, but in practical ministries. They're eager, as Bell says in *Trees*, to be Christians *now*.

After nine years Mars Hill now has 11,000 worshipers, but it still meets in the shopping mall where Bell began holding worship services in 1999. Everything inside and outside the building has a warehouse functionality; it's practical, spacious and ugly. Wide hallways lead to a huge auditorium that not too long ago was a catalog showroom. A small, square stage is visible from all four sides of the auditorium; above it hangs a cube with four sides of video screens. A freestanding wooden cross is brought out on communion Sundays.

If not much attention is paid to the aesthetics of worship space at Mars Hill, a lot of attention is paid to the church's Web site. In a sense, the church is most visible on the Web. When one visits its home page, one finds not a photo of a building or a lineup of staff members, but a full-screen image related to the congregation's life and ministry. Recently the image was a black-and-white close-up of a Burundian man holding some cash in his hand. The caption read: "Burundi francs repay loans . . . $45 helps take a family out of poverty." A link led the visitor to "find out more" or to sign up online for the next mission trip.

At a time when many churches are still mailing newsletters and trying to find someone to maintain a Web site, Mars Hill offers immediate online access to service and learning opportunities. You can download a podcast of a sermon and check out who is preaching next Sunday. You can ask church leaders a question via e-mail, buy a video, listen to music and order CDs. Bell and staff members offer book recommendations (which include works by Parker Palmer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, novelist Susan Howatch, Henri Nouwen, Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Rodney Clapp and Tony Campolo). Want to discuss what you're reading or find a support group? You can do that online too.

The Web site also spells out what membership involves. The church summarizes its theology in a covenant with six dimensions: roots, journey, wholeness, community, serving and celebration. Regarding wholeness, the covenant says: "We believe that God wants to bring out a new humanity by redeeming every part of us. . . . We believe that all of life is spiritual life, and that all of our fears, failures, and brokenness can be restored and made whole. We value the inner journey, because we want to be fully integrated people—mind, body, and soul, emotions and experiences all offered together to God."

Every year people are invited to sign the covenant, and the congregation often reads covenant excerpts during worship.

The church clearly expects members to get involved in ministry. Here are words from the mission statement: "We have the opportunity to make a difference. That's why we leverage both our resources and our selves in pursuit of tangible results."

And from the covenant response statement that addresses mission values:

> We covenant to go outward because Jesus calls us to serve the world. What can you do? Would you consider picking up trash on one block of your street every week? Getting involved in our shared mission (XYZ)? Helping your neighbor? Finding out who your neighbors are? Just showing up? What are you doing to live out your commitment to Serving?

The opportunities listed on the Web site include service teams to Rwanda; walks and dinner events to call attention to HIV/AIDS; Habitat building; mentoring (after training) in class work, financial budgeting, premarriage counseling; becoming certified to preside at marriages; leading a neighborhood small group and

volunteering with local service agencies. Although the scope of opportunities attracts thousands of volunteers, the administrative work is enormous and, by Bell's own admission, is often chaotic, as the staff and organization race to catch up with expanding networks of ministries.

On the Sunday I visited, the 80-minute teaching sermon provided a base for on-the-ground ministry. Bell included a strong critique of Christians who, he said, proselytized in Rwanda, saved souls and then took off. These missionaries were wrong to tell people that "if they were saved they'd go to heaven when they died," he said, for it led to a devaluation of life on earth and possibly smoothed the path for the country's genocide of 1994. A Left Behind theology is an "evacuation theology," warned Bell. It is lethal to believe that one can live apart from the world in some kind of "spiritual neverland."

These remarks convince some that Bell has strayed from evangelical orthodoxy. Critics accuse him of "repackaging mainline liberal humanism" and call him a "punk rock–appreciating pseudo pastor," a "poser," an aberrant heretic guilty of "leaving out the blood."

Bell challenges those who insist on a literal approach to scripture and believes people can get caught up in the details of the text instead of plumbing the meaning of a passage. When he thinks aloud with his listeners, he carefully paraphrases some passages and avoids technical words and doctrinal terms. Sermon topics often focus on the basics of outreach: how to be a neighbor; how to be a church.

The service that surrounds the sermon time may include a recording of classical music as a prelude, followed by boisterous participation in Maranatha and Vineyard favorites, and then by a solemn unison reading of a psalm or excerpt from the Mars Hill covenant. The amplifiers are kept under control so that worshipers can hear others in the congregation—an intentional deviation from performance music in other megachurches, with the goal here of emphasizing the worshiping community.

The church's evangelical roots are clear in one section of the service, focusing on the "roots" or tradition part of the church's covenant. Songs in this section include old-time hymns that are accelerated and energized with banjo and drums. Here the patriarchal language of "All Hail the Power" and the promise of a "home in glory land" are a jolt after the imaginative and creative wording of other songs and writings. This part of the service could persuade the visitor that Mars Hill is a clone

of other evangelical megachurches.

But then consider the altar call, a capstone moment in conservative evangelical worship. Bell uses it as a “time of commitment and recommitment,” inviting every person in the congregation to acknowledge his or her trust in Jesus.

Mars Hills draws 11,000 worshipers each week—surely a sign of vitality. But what about the next generation? Churches that reach out to only one or two generations may find out that the next generation wants nothing to do with their way of being culturally savvy. What happens when Bell and Mars Hill are 40- and 50-somethings? Will the church gracefully transform itself into the next generation’s new painting, with a new cultural frame of reference? Of course, such worries can be found in any church.

Meanwhile, Christian convictions are vibrant and healthy at Mars Hill. The church shows evidence of passionate commitment, compelling artistry and intellectual curiosity—all of which are evident in Bell’s sermons too. No wonder young adults are paying attention.