Praise at Celebration: Churchgoing in Disney's town

by Lauren F. Winner in the January 19, 2000 issue

When most Americans think of small towns, say Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, they think of churches: "Each of us carries a mental map of the perfect small town. Whether or not we are of religious temperament, this exercise in mental cartography invariably includes churches." Frantz and Collins know whereof they speak. They have spent a lot of time pondering the nature of the perfect small town, having lived for a year with two of their children in Celebration, Florida, the town outside of Orlando developed by the Disney Corporation. They wrote a book about their experience: *Celebration, U.S.A.: Living in Disney's Brave New Town*.

Celebration, which opened to residents in 1996, has garnered much attention, earning both encomium and excoriation. It is consumer capitalism gone crazy, detractors say—a place where wealthy baby boomers bid to buy community (and a house tucked away from poor folks). Nonsense, say Celebration's cheerleaders: Celebration is a place you can be proud to live in, a place where you don't have to panic if you forget to lock your door, a place where you can stroll the streets at night and where residents know one another by name. It is not an exercise in nostalgia, but a realistic effort to create neighborliness.

There is much to be said for Celebration. It is a living example of the New Urbanism, which planners have been musing about for years. Spatial relations, these visionaries believe, shape social relations. So if you live in a suburb in which you have to drive everywhere, and where houses are set acres and acres apart, you are less likely to get to know your neighbors and develop that sense of community Americans seem to be thirsting for.

Imagine, instead, that you live in a town where the houses are close together, where the sidewalks are spacious, where front porches invite visitors to sit a while, where there is a charming downtown area in which to walk, not drive. Imagine that the schools and other centers of civic life are in the heart of downtown. Imagine a place

where pedestrians run into their neighbors on the way to the grocery, where residents throw block parties and townfolks turn out for events like the annual pumpkin carving. You have imagined your way into Celebration.

Disney believed that a church would be one of the civic buildings at the heart of Celebration. In fact, the two-acre lot that Disney designated as church property is prime land—one of the first sites to see when driving into Celebration from the Irlo Bronson Highway.

The Disney people imagined that there would be only one church in town. A sort of bidding war began among denominations. Who would get to build what might become the most-watched church in America? The Presbyterians won, and a church affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) moved in.

Patrick Wrisley, who is in his late 30s, seems to have been groomed for the task of pastoring Celebration's Presbyterian church, which is meeting in the movie theater until the building is finished (ground-breaking was in October). Before moving to Celebration, Wrisley was a pastor at the country's largest Presbyterian church—Peachtree, in Atlanta. In his spare time he is finishing a doctorate at Drew University, where, under the tutelage of Leonard Sweet, he has become savvy in all things postmodern. His congregation, he says, embodies not only New Urbanism but postmodernism, too.

Some pieces of the Celebration church's story are neither "new" nor "post," but entirely familiar: friction, faction, dissension. Disney imagined that Celebrationites would worship together, and the church would help cement the town's community spirit. Indeed, Collins and Frantz suggest that the PCUSA won the bid for the Celebration church not only because it came up with the money for the land but also because Disney was impressed with the Presbyterians' "ecumenical heritage" and the church's "thesis of inclusion." (The church also agreed to use a Disney-approved architect and to provide a building that meets the Celebration aesthetic.)

But the Protestants couldn't keep together very long. A nondenominational church sprang up. "There is schism even in a piece of heaven," sighed one Celebrationite, who stuck with the Presbyterians. In Advent 1996, four weeks after the Presbyterians' first worship service, one member demanded (unsuccessfully) that Wrisley resign, saying that he had no right to foist his Presbyterian beliefs on everyone else.

Still, more than 300 people cram into the movie theater each week, and many of those 300 are not Presbyterians. Andrew Ross, who, like Frantz and Collins, lived in Celebration for a year and wrote a book (*The Celebration Chronicles*) about the town, sums up the role of the Presbyterian church. It “aims to be the community church: It aims to be representative. It is not interdenominational, but in effect it is.”

Wrisley begins to glow when asked what it means for a church to be postmodern. “A postmodern church takes seriously the culture in which it lives. It is not that we want to be untraditional; it is that we don’t want to be nostalgic. Nostalgia is rooted in modernity.” Singing is traditional, but devotion to a particular hymnbook is nostalgic. (This is actually an old example: John Wesley offered it, and and so did William Booth and others.)

Wrisley has been something of a dissident in Celebration. He helped organize the display of pink flamingos that started turning up mysteriously in backyards. This display of kitsch was a humorous protest against Celebration’s firm aesthetic code. Ross reports that Wrisley called the flamingos an “anchor for prayer” to remind residents of people around the world who were persecuted for their faith.

“A postmodern church will take the best of the old. We don’t want to get rid of what works.” Wrisley seeks a blended worship: praise music and Bach, Vineyard choruses and handbells. He wants synthesizers and computers, and the Lord’s Prayer broadcast on a screen where an altar used to be. He wants the old wine in new wineskins.

When you meet Wrisley, your eyes go straight to the gold ring of a Star of David in a cross. The ring underscores “an incarnational understanding of God,” he explains. Wrisley preaches a strong gospel message. “The Presbyterian Church,” he says, “has lost the passion for telling the story of Christ. We have focused our passion on social ministry and done a great job. But we cannot do that at the exclusion of telling the story.”

Wrisley is particularly concerned about sharing that story with “our pre-Christian friends.” “One of my roles is evangelist. But I don’t want to save you; that’s God’s business. I want to tell you the story. That’s evangelism.”

Wrisley does face some challenges when it comes to figuring out what it means to be a Christian in Celebration. He is preaching, after all, to a congregation of people who had the several hundred thousand dollars needed to purchase property in

Celebration. He is preaching to a group of boomers who have tried to purchase happiness and community. Wrisley admits that sometimes it is a challenge to remind them that Christianity is not another thing they can simply purchase.

Other Christians offer more damning assessments of Celebration. Mark Gornik, founding pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore and now part of Harlem's New Song Community Church, argues that Christians need to think very critically about Celebration and the way New Urban planning is playing out. New Urban communities like Celebration, Gornik suggests, are merely another incarnation of white flight. Towns like Celebration do nothing to renew existing urban centers; instead, they create alternatives for rich folks.

"The things New Urbanism is based on—streetscapes, walkability, porches—all of these things are still in the cities," says Gornik. "We don't need to create new towns to have walkable sidewalks. The community sense of place that people are trying to find in Celebration is in cities."

And Christians have a special obligation to care about cities, says Gornik, who points to the calls for urban shalom in Jeremiah 29, and says that "incarnating oneself in the city for the well-being of the city is a dominant theme of the Pauline epistles. The early church was effective because it was in cities."

"People of faith should have esteem for the themes of New Urbanism," Gornik says, "but they then need to think of cities, rather than picking up and moving to Celebration."