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The Enterprise

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LAKE LIVINGSTON -- From the catahoula barrens, the big blue heron flapped its wings and sailed outward over the lake, followed by a snowy white egret. By sundown, even in August, the breeze rustling through the droopy Spanish moss was crisp and cool.

Across from Pelican Point lies Holy Trinity Wilderness Cathedral. Its ceiling is formed by a leafy hundreds-years-old diversity of nature, and its choir by a bevy of cicadas that do not overstay their brief performance. The small gathering of worshipers Saturday evening -- with no hymnals, no collection plates and no sermon -- is typical of a young, but vibrant movement across America in search of God or peace or both, away from traditional church settings.

This emerging worship style favors a meditative environment over stridency, a chance to be in touch with oneself, to be a participant, not just an onlooker, and, very often, to be one with nature.

If the Wilderness Cathedral's founder George Russell, 59, has a sermon, it's about protecting the earth, what he sees as a sacred trust to mankind, and one that many are defiling.

"I'm obsessed with saving the world," Russell said following the brief evening service of sharing a communion, a reading and prayer for a dying neighbor. "'Thou shouldst destroy them that destroy the earth.' Revelations 11:18. Not many people know that."

Holy Trinity Wilderness Cathedral is a Universal Ethician Church, but has no church structure, just an office.

Russell says that no records are kept of who attends the weekly services that begin at 7 p.m., or just before sundown, when the sky turns to a deep orange and purple clouds hang low. Attendance ranges from a low of half a dozen to a high so far of "about 20," he said. Last weekend it was all the Russells, including son Andrew, 21, several regulars, and two visiting couples, one for the first time.

Jack and Diana Spurling, retirees, have attended three times, and have a home nearby as well as in Houston.

"Houston churches are huge -- huge! Some of them with 20,000, 30,000 members," Jack Spurling said. "One took over a former basketball stadium. I know there's some place for everybody, but that's just not my cup of tea at all. I think the more spiritual the environment we become involved in, the better it is for our bodies and our lives."

Baptized and raised a Presbyterian, Spurling said as a young man he joined and was very active in the Disciples of Christ. About 20 years ago he became "very inactive," and now he and his wife are looking at different styles and sizes of worship services.

Kristi Zeltner, 32, has been attending the wilderness gathering since the first service three years ago.

"I attended churches before, but I always had to wear dresses and dress up," Zeltner said. "You feel more at home out here. You can get more in tune with God. If you have something to say, you can say it -- You can't just sit and talk openly like that in a church."

Russell is passionate about preserving the 2,800 acres he, his wife Sue, and his parents Kenneth and Marjorie Russell own

around the lake, including the 737 acres surrounding Wilderness Cathedral.

Besides the outdoor cathedral, the family set aside 10 acres on the other side of the lake for the Chapel of the Nativity, which remains open 24 hours a day. "Like churches used to," said George Russell when showing the rest of the Russells' properties.

The chapel is a tiny log cabin they took apart and brought from Moscow, Texas, and put back together, log by log. A gigantic 1891 bell hangs outside that once called worshippers to services at the First Baptist Church of Huntsville.

Shelton Simmons, an 80-year-old retired Baptist minister, reflected recently about the changing times from his home in Nederland. Simmons still reads daily, mainly from the Bible and Leaves of Gold, which he once mined for succinct quotes and inspiration.

"In today's worship service, are you experiencing the holy hush of reverence? Is there a stillness and silence of minds in contemplation of the Infinite One?" he asked. "In my judgment it is a great disservice to applaud a sincere Christian singer. And the Christian singer does a disservice if he appears without his soul having been bathed in secret prayer and preparation."

Simmons' life experience in churches throughout Southeast Texas was a world removed from many today, and his observations reflect the distance, but also modern reality.

"The greatest need today is to escape from the hustle-bustle of life to be alone in seeking God," he said. "Seeking God in private worship is often more beneficial than in public."

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### **Shifting Values in Worship Services**

#### **Modern Church (seeker sensitive)**

- \* Worship "services" include preaching, music and programs served to those attending.
- \* Services are designed to reach those who have had bad or boring experiences in a church.
- \* Services are designed to be user-friendly and contemporary.
- \* Exhibits a need to break the stereotype of what "church" is.
- \* Lit up and cheery sanctuary valued.
- \* Focal point of the service is the sermon.
- \* Preacher and worship leader lead the service.

#### **Emerging Church (post-seeker-sensitive)**

- \* Worship "gatherings" include preaching, music, etc.
- \* Gatherings are designed to include and translate to those who have no previous church experience.
- \* Gatherings are designed to be experiential and spiritual-mystical.

- \* Exhibits a need to break the stereotype of who Christians are.
- \* Darkness is valued as it displays a sense of spirituality.
- \* Focal point of the gathering is the holistic experience.
- \* Preacher and worship leader lead by participating in the gathering.

Source: The Emerging Church, Dan Kimball, Zondervan .Also from Zondervan, Kimball's Emerging Worship: Creating New Worship Gatherings for Emerging Generations

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