

Old faith opens new chapel
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By Neal Ross

The first thing a visitor notices on entering Sonoma's new Eastern Orthodox Mission is the chapel's other-worldliness.

The walls and high ceiling of the tiny, one-time office above a Broadway storefront are painted a deep, dark blue -- "the color of uncreated light," in Orthodox tradition. Golden "icons" -- paintings depicting saints and early Church events -- adorn the sanctuary walls; an oriental rug covers the refinished redwood floors; red and gold embroideries are draped over two lecterns before the curtained altar space, patterned on the ancient Temple at Jerusalem.

It's easy to forget that there's another world just outside. But that's part of the tradition of Orthodox Christianity, which traces its roots past the rise of Roman Catholicism to the origin of the early Christian Church.

"We're monastic in our flavor, but we're here in the world," said Father John Schettig, who ministers to the eight-member congregation. "...Our mission is to bring otherworldly, mystical Christianity to America."

Schettig, a 14-year Sonoma resident who was ordained as a priest last year, said the group has been holding lay services in the Broadway space since 1992, but only recently opened up to the public with the chapel's near-completion over the past two years.

"This used to be my office," Schettig said, laughing, "but as time went by, the chapel slowly pushed the office out the door. It's been a real labor of love."

Orthodox Christianity was part of the undivided Christendom that prevailed until the so-called Great Schism of 1054, when churches in the western half of the old Roman Empire granted the bishop of Rome sovereignty over their affairs, leading to a split between the eastern and western churches.

"The Western Church went their way, and we continued on," Schettig said, adding that autonomous eastern churches soon sprang up in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) and Jerusalem, working eastward from a "historic and geographical dividing line" to other countries such as Russia and Syria.

Today, Orthodox Christianity counts 200 million members throughout the world, with approximately three million in the United States. American churches are organized along various national and ethnic lines such as Greek, Russian, Romanian and others.

"(In the U.S.), there's many different churches because of the different reasons people ended up here," Schettig said. Of the local congregation, affiliated with a Russian Orthodox church in Santa Rosa and monastery in Forestville, he adds that the group -- all

religious converts -- combines the traditional ascetic ideals of living "outside the world" with the practicalities of modern life.

"We feel that as far as Orthodoxy goes, we shouldn't be so separate," Schettig said. But he added that as far as interdenominational unity goes, the mission prefers to keep a respectfully friendly distance from other Christian sects. "We're very traditional (and) conservative in that way."