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Lutheran Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo Is Reaching Deep

He's Innovative and Inclusive in Trying to Add to His Steadily Dwindling, and Aging, Congregation

By Derek Kravitz

Like many church leaders in the new millennium, New York City's top Lutheran bishop faces a steadily dwindling, and aging, congregation. And like others of his ilk, he is watching the tweeting, tolerance-minded new Roman Catholic pope with both interest and admiration.

But Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo may be the only spiritual leader trying to rebuild his flock with giant crossword puzzles in the subway and interactive art projects involving dye-filled soap bubbles.



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"New York is different from the rest of the country," said Bishop Rimbo, 63 years old, in an interview from his expansive office near Columbia University, complete with Hudson River views. "The younger demographic wants a religion that won't divide," he said, referring to social issues like gay marriage.

"Look at Pope Francis, he's so humble and he's removed the trappings of the papacy and made it more inclusive," Bishop Rimbo said. "We need to find the places where we're not present and reach out...whether that's on social media or elsewhere."

To that end, Bishop Rimbo has made a point of speaking his mind on several hot-button social issues and has worked with area pastors to create alternative church services throughout the New York City area.

At St. Paul's Lutheran Church and Parables in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, for example, the Rev. Benjamin McKelahan encourages churchgoers to use paint and clay to tell personal stories and "unleash your theological imagination" as part of a twice-monthly art service. St. Lydia's, in Brooklyn's Gowanus neighborhood, calls itself a "dinner church," where Sunday and Monday worship consists of making and sharing a "sacred" evening meal.

Bishop Rimbo now oversees a congregation of about 66,000 worshipers in 200 New York-area churches. But with the loss of nearly 20% of the city's Lutheran flock—nearly 14,700 baptized members—over the past decade, he has been on an ambitious campaign to draw in more diverse churchgoers, including Latino and Asian immigrants and millennials.

Roughly 75% of the New York Lutheran church's members are white, according to church statistics.

Mainline Protestant religions are "in a period of restructuring and downsizing," said Euan Cameron, a professor specializing in Reformation church history at New York's Union Theological Seminary. It is "inevitable that these

churches will become economically, socially and ethnically more diverse," he said.

Indeed, most Protestant religions—including Anglicans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Pentecostals and Presbyterians—have seen their numbers fall drastically since the 1980s, according to the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project.

Bishop Rimbo, the son of a Dutch Reformist mother and Roman Catholic father, has styled himself as the right man to reverse that trend. He said he fell in love with the church as a child, in part because of the music.

After attending divinity school in Indiana, he spent 23 years as a bishop and pastor in Michigan before moving to New York with his wife, Lois. He was elected to a six-year term as bishop by a razor-thin margin in 2008 and is seeking re-election in May, when he could face as many as six opponents.

Churches under Bishop Rimbo's purview are trying some unorthodox measures. In Williamsburg, Mr. McKelahan organized a life-size crossword puzzle inside the Lorimer Street/Metropolitan Avenue subway stop, where topics included Mexican art and nuclear physics, along with a few biblical questions. (Clue: Hebrew name meaning "He will laugh." Answer: Isaac.)

Another interactive art project used giant dye-filled soap bubbles on foam at an event on Governor's Island. Mr. McKelahan said that, while not explicitly religious, soap bubbles carry a spiritual message in that they must burst "if they are to leave a lasting impression"—referring to a passage in the Book of John.

"Did most people pick up on this spiritual message? Probably not," he said. "But hopefully they see that the church is inviting them to work together in bringing joy and beauty into the world."

Mr. McKelahan, who at 28 is one of the New York metro area's youngest ordained Lutheran ministers, said it was Bishop Rimbo's idea to send him to Williamsburg.

"I met with Bishop Rimbo and explained to him, 'I'm really interested in making art as worship, all my friends are atheists,'" Mr. McKelahan said. "Bishop Rimbo said, 'There's this neighborhood in Brooklyn called Williamsburg where lots of young creative people are moving. We are trying to figure out how to minister to them. Would you like to do something with them?' Even though I'd never heard of Williamsburg, I couldn't say yes fast enough."

Such programs aren't without detractors. "It's very hard for some of the traditional churches to adapt," said the Rev. Ruben Duran, director of new-congregational development for the Lutheran national church organization. He specifically cited Southern churches that find the idea of church meetings at yoga centers or coffee houses "hard to swallow."

As for Bishop Rimbo, he hasn't exactly been afraid of stoking controversy: He came out for the practice of intercommunion, in which Christians of different denominations can receive Communion at one another's services. And several years ago, he lent his support to a proposed Islamic cultural center near the World Trade Center site that had drawn criticism, arguing that the branch of Islam preached by the proposed center's imam is "in my opinion, the most tolerant and pluralistic."

But it is the gay-marriage issue that has sparked the fiercest debate.

After the national Lutheran church organization amended its marriage stance in 2009, voting to allow individual congregations to bless same-sex unions, the New York Lutheran church lost four congregations—particularly among conservative Asian congregations, Bishop Rimbo said. He himself went through a "complete reversal" on same-sex marriage in the late 1980s after working with a fellow church official who is lesbian, he said: "It took lots of soul searching and conversion but I got there."

He will officiate his first same-sex wedding this June in Manhattan.