

Kingdom Come

Bishop Jay Ramirez and his Kingdom Life Christian Church are building an empire in Milford and beyond. How do they do it?

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By Carole Bass

Bishop Jay Ramirez has been roaming the stage and the aisles of his Kingdom Life Christian Church in Milford for 40 minutes, preaching into a hand-held microphone. He compares God's love for humanity to a parent's unconditional love for a "little one" who spills Kool-Aid on the white carpet. He challenges his congregants to "bless God" — not only in church, but also in the way they treat their families, conduct themselves at work and serve their communities.

Except for some scornful asides about other churches' "Taiwan wafer" and "Stop & Shop grape juice" communion services, and about congregants who put "crumpled-up \$1 bills" in the offering basket, Ramirez delivers a fairly thoughtful, low-key sermon. Now he seems to be winding down.

Wrong.

"Hey, I've got a sermon to preach!" Ramirez unexpectedly exclaims. He bounds over to center stage, strikes a pose behind a clear plastic lectern, and asks loudly and gleefully: "Are we on tee-vee?"

It's show time at Kingdom Life.

Suddenly, Ramirez adopts the booming voice and strutting postures of a TV preacher. As he warms to his chosen topic, "The Character of a Christian," his rhetoric becomes bolder, his tone more mocking, his stand-up comedy shticks more frequent and less subtle.

"Waaaah!" he bleats, imitating the baby to whom he's comparing people who have not yet developed Christian character. "I'm hungry! Come feed me! Waaaah!"

He half-crouches, screws up his face. "Oops! Something in my pants! Waaaah!"

His congregation — white, black and Latino; young, middle-aged and elderly; wearing suits and dresses, slacks and sport shirts, shorts and shiny athletic jerseys — laughs, though not uproariously. Ramirez clearly aims to entertain as he teaches. But I get the sense that it's not primarily his performance skills fueling the growth of Kingdom Life.

Since Ramirez founded the church "literally with nothing" in 1991, the congregation has outgrown a rented motel room and then a school gym. He now holds two services every Sunday

morning in Kingdom Life's 2,000-seat sanctuary, and says he anticipates they'll need a third service by next spring.

The August morning that I visit Kingdom Life, the auditorium-style sanctuary is maybe half-full. It's an attentive group. A young woman to my left takes notes on a tablet. Someone behind me occasionally punctuates Ramirez's remarks with an "Amen!" or a "Praise the Lord!" When I leave at 12:55 p.m. — nearly two hours after the service began — Ramirez is still talking. And his flock is still listening. Thousands of other people will watch his *Voice of Vision* show on channel 61 and public access or hear it on the radio.

And this weekend, Sept. 23-25, Kingdom Life expects 5,000 to 6,000 members of affiliated "K-NET" churches in Connecticut, South America and Africa to gather for an annual conference, featuring leadership training and church-growth workshops as well as services.

Why?

What brings 2,500 people a week to this non-denominational house of worship, making it one of Connecticut's few megachurches? What moves them to contribute enough money to enable Kingdom Life to buy roughly 25 properties in the Devon section of Milford, worth an estimated \$20 million? What inspires them to volunteer hours each week to help run the ever-expanding church?

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The answer has something to do with breakfast, and a lot to do with Ramirez. The 46-year-old pastor looks like a TV preacher: a tall, broad-shouldered man whose thick, dark hair sweeps away from his high forehead and covers the back of his collar. You notice the hairdo right away, and the big, black mustache, too. You also notice Ramirez's broad white smile and his penetrating gaze beneath low brows. If you can't see these features from where you're sitting in the sanctuary, you can get a close-up on one of the big projection screens overhead.

But Ramirez is not your ordinary TV preacher.

He does get a chance to feed his ego by preaching — and, it's fair to say, performing — to an audience of congregants and cameras. But he aims to feed the audience as well. Wrapped inside his batter-fried stand-up routines are some chewy morsels of criticism; Ramirez hopes the humor makes them easier to swallow.

With the food for thought comes food for the stomach: fresh-cooked breakfast, served after Sunday services in the Kingdom Life Café. The volunteer-run cafe raises \$500 a week for the church's youth group, while nourishing the congregation as a community, giving families and friends a place to spend time together.

Pick a stereotype of the TV preacher. There's the flashy egomaniac, warning of fire and brimstone in the next life while living large off congregants' donations in this one. There's the rock 'n' roll minister whose only goal seems to be getting more and more people to come to a

bigger and bigger church — regardless of what they do outside of church. There's the conservative crusader, buddy-buddy with Republican politicians, railing against the "homa-sek-shal agenda" and trying to ban *Harry Potter* from the public schools.

You can find elements of Ramirez in some of those stereotypes. But none truly fits him. He does cut a flashy figure, pairing his dark suits with bright purple shirts and a big purple ring. But he doesn't preach hellfire and damnation. While he won't reveal his salary, he says it's about half of what pastors of similar-sized churches make elsewhere. (A 2003 survey of large churches, averaging around 3,500 attendees weekly, pegged the median salary and housing allowance of their senior pastors at \$118,000 a year.) He lives in a house donated to the church in Devon, Milford's most down-at-the-heels neighborhood.

Kingdom Life does use music as a draw. The day I visit, a six-piece electric band backs up a six-member vocal group with a bouncy, contemporary pop sound. There are no musty hymnals; song lyrics appear on the overhead screens. Like many megachurches, Kingdom Life dispenses with traditional liturgy and ritual, aiming instead for an easy, comfortable experience that's accessible to people from a wide range of Christian backgrounds. Unlike some megachurches, though, Kingdom Life asks a lot from its members. Money, yes. But Ramirez also asks them to change their lives — and the world — for the better.

The conservative-crusader stereotype comes closest to fitting Ramirez. In the past two years, he has become one of Connecticut's most visible anti-gay-marriage clergymen. He has asked the Milford Board of Education to "audit" books for sexual and occult content and complained about in-school Halloween celebrations (because of the holiday's Pagan roots). Most famously — or infamously — he spurred the church to become landlord to a neighborhood porn shop, so that it can evict the shop when its lease expires in December 2006.

At the same time, Ramirez says, he abhors abuse and harassment of gay people and (reluctantly) accepts Connecticut's new civil union law, which gives same-sex couples all the legal rights and protections of marriage without calling it that. He also calls himself an environmentalist and a feminist, telling stories about how he has butted heads with other evangelical ministers about the way their churches stifle women.

And he sat with me for nearly four hours in his office, answering tough questions. Never once did he become hostile. Never once did he criticize the Weekly for promoting sex, drugs and profanity. Never once did he try to proselytize me.

Call him a thinking person's holy roller.

Growing up in Ayer, Mass., a small town north of Boston, Ramirez went to some not-so-free-thinking churches: Baptist, Pentecostal, non-denominational. It was a formative experience.

"Men would preen in their \$600 suits," he recalls, while women were forbidden to wear makeup or pants. "There was a guy who tried to come in the church with a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket. The ushers picked him up by both arms and carried him out. I challenged that — and I

was hit across the face and then locked in a car in the parking lot for the rest of the service.”

That atmosphere “totally” turned Ramirez away from church. He stopped going for about a decade. But “I always knew that’s not how God is,” he says.

A career change brought him back.

Ramirez’s parents, who came from Puerto Rico and never graduated from high school, made sure their kids got educated. Several siblings, he says, have degrees from Yale and Harvard, and Jay went to UMass, where he studied marketing and management.

He started a business career at Eastman Kodak. Then, deciding he “wanted to help people,” he became an emergency medical technician. Working with dying people reminded him that “faith is an enormous issue that mankind simply cannot ignore.” In East Texas, where he worked as chief of emergency medical services, Ramirez got a master’s in theology, joined a church, and volunteered as youth pastor.

Two things happened there that changed his life. One was that he had to make a speech.

Traumatized in his early teens when a teacher interrupted Ramirez’s classroom presentation by grabbing the boy’s hair and flinging him into his seat, Ramirez had developed a terror of public speaking. (Kodak signed him up for a Dale Carnegie course once. He called in sick.) Now, he had to make a presentation about emergency medical services. He felt literally sick with fear. Then he heard a message from God: “If you make this speech, I will use you for public speaking.”

The presentation went unbelievably well, Ramirez says. And since then he has never had qualms about speaking in front of big groups.

The second thing that happened was a vision — like a dream, Ramirez says. The church he attended in Texas was virtually all white. “They wanted to open up, but you just couldn’t sell it. That’s when I looked around and became frustrated by the segregation in the church and the lack of effectiveness in the community. I had a vision in my head that I interpreted as being from God. I saw a church that was multicultural, that was engaged in its community.”

And he saw it here, in his native Northeast.

“When we talked about coming to New England, people said, ‘Forget it. People up there are cold.’ But I just refused to believe it.”

In reality, white-bread Milford did give Kingdom Life a chilly reception in its early days. There was the New Englanders’ suspicion of non-denominational churches, especially big ones. “Up in this part of the country,” Ramirez notes, “if you’re not part of a regular church, you’re seen as a cult.”

And there was the outright bigotry. Ramirez pegs his congregation’s racial and ethnic make-up

as “pretty close to 50-50: 50 being white, 50 everything else.” The influx of black and brown worshippers into Milford “originally was traumatic,” he says. Tires were slashed during church services. Someone painted NIGGERS AND SPICS GO HOME in red paint on the church door. But as people have gotten to know the church, that hostility has evaporated, he says.

There’s nothing cold about the greeting I get when I arrive at Kingdom Life on a hot Sunday morning. (A little creepy, maybe, but that’s just me.) It’s no surprise that the CEO studied marketing and management. A huge sign spans the driveway leading to the parking lot, where smiling men in orange reflective vests are directing traffic and offering blessings.

The church — or “cathedral,” as they call it — is a clean-lined pastel building with the Kingdom Life name emblazoned in enormous gold letters above the entrance. I learn later that it was the old Sante’s Manor banquet hall. The lobby reminds me of a suburban multiplex, with its plush carpet and puffy couch. There’s a visitors’ desk with tapes for sale, a literature rack, a carpeted stairway leading down to the café. Peeking downstairs, I see people sitting at big round tables, relaxing with coffee and breakfast after the 8:30 a.m. service. It smells good.

The sanctuary is straight ahead. Can’t miss it — white-lighted signs above the doorways spell out SANCTUARY, just like the multiplex marquees that tell you what movie’s playing where.

The people in the lobby are friendly. So are the ushers inside the sanctuary. I’m cautiously friendly in return, but not too friendly: I’m not a liar, so any conversation might lead me to tip my identity as an undercover visitor, a reporter, a Jew.

Settling nervously into my seat, I look at my left forearm. There, still visible from my own worship a couple of hours earlier, is the imprint of the straps on my tefillin, the leather contraptions that traditional Jews wrap around head and arm during morning prayers. A slender woman in a blue floral blouse and white skirt — Ramirez’s sister, Leticia Ramirez Hashem, he tells me later — takes the stage and reaches out to the crowd: Can you hear me in the back? Do you feel connected back there?

She talks about God as a helper. How amazing it is, she says, that the Almighty, the All-Knowing, should offer help to us little human beings. She reads a psalm:

“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.... He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow.”

I recognize the words: Two hours earlier, I recited the same psalm in Hebrew. As far as I’m concerned, the point of the psalm is not to look around at society for proof or disproof of its words, but to try to live those words. As Gandhi put it, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Kingdom Life seems to agree. Through its ministries, it tends to prisoners, sustains the fatherless, gives food — or at least nonperishables like furniture — to the impoverished. The Kingdom Life Family Resource Center, a separately incorporated nonprofit organization, offers social services ranging from adoption to weight loss, finance classes and tutoring to addiction counseling. Joseph's Storehouse, the church's charitable warehouse operation, collects and distributes household goods to needy people in Connecticut, in Haiti, and in Africa. As of Sept. 11, the congregation had raised \$14,500 for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

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These facilities are all part of Kingdom Life's 20-plus-building, 70-acre kingdom in Devon. Along with the 75,000-square-foot cathedral and the 36,000-square-foot office building, there's the charity warehouse, the family resource center, a performing arts school, rental houses, and commercial buildings — including the infamous porn shop and a not-so-famous bar, the Red Arrow. Whenever the church buys a building, Ramirez says, it renovates, improves the appearance, improves the neighborhood. (Noting Milford's well-documented aversion to affordable housing, Ramirez says slyly: "We don't call it affordable housing. I call it fair housing. We just lower the rent, fix up the property, give people more value for their money.")

Ramirez is a member of the Devon Revitalization Committee, co-chaired by Milford's most powerful politician, Speaker of the House of Representatives Jim Amann. Amann has procured millions of state dollars for spiffing up the neighborhood. "We founded the revitalization committee right here," Ramirez says, gesturing at his conference table.

So when I call Amann, I'm expecting a glowing report about his chum Ramirez, maybe some stories about how they play golf together. Amann does offer praise, but he's a bit reserved.

"I've seen what he's done, and it's all positive," Amann says. But there's a limit to how much property he wants taken off the tax rolls and out of commercial use. "The bishop has to understand that it's important for us as a city to maintain a tax base. He's got a vision. As long as it fits into Milford's vision, that's OK. But we still want to be known as Milford, Connecticut, not Kingdom Life, Connecticut."

Ramirez's vision collided with Milford's last year, when the church tried to buy the long-vacant Milford jai alai fronton for a new, bigger cathedral. At the last minute, the city bought it out from under him, saying it wanted the property to produce taxes. It quickly made a deal with a developer who plans to build big-box retail.

"I think," Amann says, "the bishop would like to be the next Crystal Cathedral," which claims 10,000 members in southern California.

It ain't necessarily so, according to Ramirez.

Ask him his vision for the church's growth, and he responds: "I'd like us to build a larger cathedral, one that seats 4,000, 5,000. Beyond that, I don't know. It seems dangerous to do that. You get caught up in numbers, caught up in pride and kingdom -building, empire-building. You

lose your focus on serving the people who are already there.”

He’s much surer about expanding Kingdom Life’s ministry overseas. On a trip to Ghana this year, he traveled for hours to preach to people who rarely get to see a minister. “I get a lot more excited about that,” he says. “The need is greater. They’re a dime a dozen here — preachers on TV. When you’re dealing with nations where people have been told that woman are five steps behind men, where governments are keeping people oppressed,” he feels he has more to contribute.

He does see growth as an imperative, though. Not willy-nilly: Big churches need “structure in that growth, like small groups that minister to an individual,” so that people don’t feel lost or swallowed up. But a bigger church can have a bigger impact outside the doors of its sanctuary.

“It’s one of the things that puts Christianity in conflict with the rest of the world — because we’re required to evangelize,” Ramirez notes. “I don’t believe in an evangelism that sticks its foot in people’s faces. The first instance of evangelism is living a life” that’s exemplary.

He challenges his congregants to do the same: Don’t get angry that people hold Christians to a higher moral or ethical standard, he tells them. That’s as it should be. Uphold those high standards. If you screw up, admit it. That’s the character of a Christian.

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Ramirez sounds so reasonable. He says he *is* reasonable. Is he spinning me? I ask about the book-banning attempts in the Milford schools. He says they were “blown out of proportion” by reporters. That happens sometimes, but I’m skeptical: When people say “blown out of proportion,” they often mean “reported in a way I couldn’t control.”

Ramirez says he asked for a book “audit” after coming across references to oral sex and “vicious, vicious satanic murders” in books at his daughter’s middle school. He says he doesn’t remember a reported incident in which he labeled certain Hardy Boys and Berenstain Bears titles as occult. Turns out that was his brother, Randy Ramirez, who’s also active in the church.

Jay Ramirez says he’s completely unfamiliar with the sleuthing Hardy brothers and the moralizing picture-book bear family. The material he objected to was not “trivial” like that, he says. “We can’t get nutty about it, or we lose credibility.”

“What’s wrong with dialogue on these issues?” he asks. “I don’t believe in overt censorship, as such. I do believe that reasonable people ought to be able to come together and decide what’s appropriate for a child.”

And if the reasonable people don’t agree? “Then it’s up to the professionals and the Board of Education,” Ramirez says.

Superintendent Greg Firm tells pretty much the same story. He knows Ramirez well and considers him an ally. When Ramirez asked for an “audit” of books in the schools, Firm turned

him down.

“Any material that someone thinks is controversial, we have a system for them to challenge it and have it reviewed,” he says. The district stuck to that system, and Ramirez let it go. “It died a natural death.”

Even Mike Taylor, a parent and PTA activist who has publicly criticized Ramirez for trying to interfere with the schools, tempers his critique when he hears what Ramirez and Firm have to say. The system worked as it should, he says.

But he still worries. “I don’t believe someone’s personal religious beliefs should be forced on my children.

“I feel fortunate,” Taylor says, “that the school superintendent and the Board of Education haven’t rolled over and played dead. But he’s a powerful guy in town. Our city went and bought the jai alai fronton because it was rumored that he was going to buy it. That’s pretty powerful. The Board of Aldermen acts based on his actions. I want to make sure the Board of Education doesn’t also act based on his actions.”

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Joan Raia thought Ramirez was spinning her. “My first trip here was to see if my daughters had joined a cult,” she recalls.

It was about seven years ago. Raia was living in New Hampshire. Her daughters were “so exuberant” about their new church, their new pastor, that “it was like, Whoa!” She drove down to Milford to check it out.

She went to a new members’ class. Ramirez went around the room, asking people what brought them to Kingdom Life.

“I thought, I’m in church, so I can’t lie. What am I going to say when he gets to me?”

When Ramirez got to her, Raia remembers, “He smiled and said, ‘You think it’s a cult.’”

True, she admitted.

“He laughed and said, ‘Honey, you’re not the first and you won’t be the last.’”

After two visits, Raia says, “I was hooked. I was perfectly at ease” because of Ramirez’s “honesty, his openness. It’s not about the money. He so believes in what he’s doing.”

Raia also appreciates Kingdom Life’s “absence of quote-unquote religion,” by which she means absence of dogma and ritual. Dogma got her in trouble at her Catholic high school: “My question was, if Christ died on the cross for our sins, why did people have to go to Purgatory? And it was, Get out!”

Now, Raia and her family spend 15 hours a week running the Kingdom Life Café: shopping, cooking, serving, cleaning. They're among the hundreds of volunteers who make the place run, along with a staff of 30.

And she has developed a "personal relationship with God," she says. That means "eventually giving up smoking, because the body is a temple. It means not swearing anymore; my lead foot coming off the gas pedal; being kinder, less critical. I was a gossip."

John Mendoza says Ramirez changed his life in far more dramatic ways.

Mendoza was in jail in Bridgeport 10 years ago when a guard suggested he check out Kingdom Life Christian Church. Mendoza's life was a mess: family problems, drug problems, a nervous breakdown.

"I was in the pit of hell in Bridgeport, as most Puerto Rican men were," he says. "I never liked this God thing. I thought, 'They're just after your money.'" But Ramirez, he says, is "not based on the dollar. He's based on helping folks."

In Mendoza's case, the help took the form of getting off drugs, learning how to handle himself at work, learning how to deal with an abusive boss. Now, he says, he's married to a wonderful woman, works for a successful accounting firm and is acing his community college courses. He credits Ramirez and Kingdom Life for helping him at every step.

"People get intimidated by the strength that he has," he says of Ramirez. "He gets up in your face." But one on one, "He never yells, never screams, never gets angry. The way he handles conflict is nothing but love."

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Nothing but love. OK, what about the love between two men or two women who want to get married?

For all his modern marketing techniques and modern approach to women in the church, Ramirez holds some decidedly non-modern views. Couples not living together before marriage, for instance. The religious importance of speaking in tongues.

Of all his non-modern views, Ramirez's vehement opposition to gay marriage may be the one with the widest popular support. But it's the one I have the most trouble with.

It's not just that I vehemently disagree, that I see marriage as a civil right and same-sex couples' love as every bit as valid as the love between, say, my husband and me. It's also that I can't figure out where Ramirez is coming from on this issue.

He starts and ends with the biblical prohibitions on homosexuality. But in between, he's all over the place.

God loves everyone, and so must the church, he says. “A heterosexual couple who has sex before marriage — I don’t tell them they’re going to hell. I tell them it’s not God’s best plan.” God’s “Plan A,” he says, is “a man and a woman raising children.” He bristles at the idea that that belief makes him “narrow-minded” or a “hate-monger.”

Ramirez is savvy enough to understand that a political debate in civil society has to go beyond “the Bible says....” So he musters sociological and genetic arguments. If people are born gay, he says, why are there so many who call themselves “ex-gay”? “You don’t become an ex-black person.” He acknowledges that science has found a genetic predisposition toward homosexuality, but argues that it’s the way a person is raised that triggers the predisposition. “How do we explain the fact that so many in the gay community come from backgrounds of abuse or neglect?” Scientists have also found a genetic predisposition to violence, he says. Does that mean violent criminals shouldn’t be held accountable for their actions?

Ramirez seems genuinely unaware of how hurtful these arguments must sound to gay people: portraying them as damaged goods and comparing them to violent criminals.

Ramirez says homosexuality is not at the top of his list of important social issues. But Greg Firm, the Milford schools superintendent, calls gay marriage “the only thing I know of on which [Ramirez] was really willing to mobilize” his church. The superintendent says Ramirez asked his view on what implications a same-sex marriage law would have on the public schools. Firm says he told Ramirez that if such a law passed, legislative requirements to teach about same-sex marriage would inevitably follow.

Ramirez critiques the way he spoke at an anti-gay-marriage rally at the Capitol in Hartford last year: “I sounded too angry, taking cheap shots with a friendly crowd in front of me.” He says he wrestles with his desire to reach out to gay people. He wants to meet them with love, but he doesn’t want to send a mixed message about his religious teaching.

“There’s a part of me that almost hopes I’m wrong,” he says. “I’d like to find the Scripture” that permits homosexuality. But then he compares same-sex couples to polygamists and incestuous lovers.

So what does Love Makes a Family, Connecticut’s leading pro-gay-marriage group, think about that?

Anne Stanback, the group’s director, says she doesn’t know Ramirez personally. “It’s disappointing,” she says, “that so much effort is being put into excluding individuals from not just an important legal institution but such an important cultural and religious institution.” As for the minister’s fears about gay marriage being taught in school, “The schools don’t teach about marriage now,” she notes. “But certainly I would expect that schools would continue the efforts that they have already begun in welcoming all kinds of families, including children who are being raised by gay and lesbian couples. Public education is about making everybody feel included.”

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Making everybody feel included is one of Kingdom Life's goals. But that's not the same as making everybody feel comfortable about the way they live. Ramirez doesn't believe in "coddling" his congregants.

A typical riff from a Ramirez sermon: "Don't be always talking about 'my last church, my last church,'" he belts out, adopting an African-American inflection. "If I hear one more 'my last church,' we're gonna have two ushers drive you to your last church and drop you there. In Jesus' name, of course. In love!"

What sounds to me like mockery, Ramirez calls "provocative."

"Provocation, in a healthy context, makes people think," he tells me. "You have to confront them." Sometimes they take offense. But more often, he says, they take responsibility.

And if that doesn't work, Ramirez has another suggestion for what people can take from his preaching.

On a shelf behind his desk sits a doodad shaped like a hand grenade. The pin on the grenade is labeled NUMBER 1. The grenade itself reads: COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT. TAKE A NUMBER.

Ramirez explains that the grenade was a gift.

"In a church setting, you get so many opinions and complaints. One day I was up there, running my mouth about it. And somebody went out and got me this hand grenade."

Ramirez's work as an emergency medical technician may have taught him about the fragility of life. But he doesn't mind tossing a few verbal grenades to shake things up. Even if the joke might blow up in his face sometimes. After all, you don't build a megachurch without taking risks.