

Interbay Covenant Church member Liz Howell, right, is greeted by Rachel Ellis of Quest Church at the first united service for the congregations. Ellis is engaged to Interbay member Karl-Peter Hammersborg, left.

# COMPANIONS IN Seattle

How two very different Covenant churches became true partners in ministry | RICK LUND

**W**hy would a church with a long rich history of ministry give a relatively new church its building and land and agree to take on the new church's name?

To answer that question, you have to go back six years, when a young Korean American pastor, hoping to start a church in Seattle, knocked on the door of Interbay Covenant Church in Seattle. That first meeting between pastors Eugene Cho of Quest Church and Ray Bartel of Interbay Covenant marked not only the beginning of a partnership between two vastly different congregations, but also set into motion a friendship between two pastors from different generations and backgrounds who were single-minded in mission to serve Jesus Christ.

The culmination of that six-year journey came on June 3, when the

two congregations—which voted this spring to merge—held their first combined worship service as Quest Covenant Church.

## Late-night dates

At first glance, Cho and Bartel are an unlikely pair. Cho, thirty-six, wears chunky-framed glasses, dresses fashionably, and as pastor of an up-and-coming multiethnic emerging church made up of twenty- and thirtysomethings, he's been quoted often in Seattle's two newspapers, the *Times* and the *Post-Intelligencer*.

Bartel, sixty-one, is a pastor-shepherd in the truest sense of the word. A strong but gentle leader, he serves a

congregation that includes many older, longtime Covenanters.

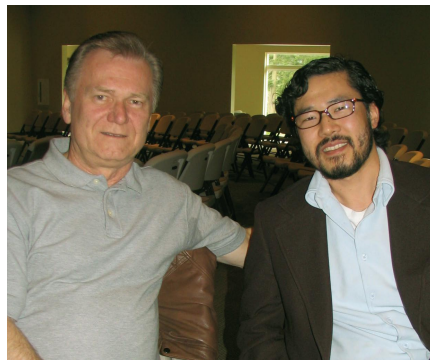
Make no mistake about it, however, Cho and Bartel are tight. They have spent many hours in prayer and conversation over the decision to unite their ministries. They speak in almost reverent tones of each other. It is clear in an interview in May that they enjoy each other's company.

"We've been dating way too long," says Cho. "My wife is a little jealous of Pastor Ray. I did tell her, though, that when the merger happens in June, we're not kissing."

Bartel laughs, and deadpans: "Let's just call it a sacramental embrace."

## Giving themselves away

Before starting Quest Church, Cho had been associate pastor at the large Korean American Onnuri Multicultural Church in Lynnwood, a north Seattle suburb. He left there in 2000 with dreams of starting an urban ministry in Seattle. Eight people showed up for the initial exploratory meeting in Cho's home. The congregation met for several months at a church in the city's university district before setting out to



Ray Bartel and Eugene Cho

look for a permanent meeting place. During that process, Cho talked with Don Robinson, associate superintendent of the North Pacific Conference, who referred him to Interbay.

The welcome that Interbay gave to Quest led that new church to join the Covenant. It also led the two congregations to an even closer partnership.

After renting Interbay's sanctuary for a year, Quest asked about the possibility of renovating a 4,500-square-foot warehouse the church owns. In the past, the building had been used for youth ministry, but it had since been closed down.

Interbay took out a \$285,000 loan from National Covenant Properties to renovate the property and gave its new neighbors free rein to design and renovate the building. Quest members also raised funds for the project.

"We had been praying what to do with the warehouse," Bartel says. "And almost immediately, Eugene comes to our door. Sometimes when you're praying, the answer stares you in the face."

On weekdays, the remodeled warehouse, only fifty feet from Interbay's sanctuary, served as a non-profit coffee shop and community center. On Sunday, Quest held services there.

Walk into what's called the Q Café today and you can recline on comfy sofas while sipping fair-trade coffee to the beat of indie rock music. The blue building with the brightly lit letter "Q" on the front also features a small stage for local musicians, along with sandwiches, pastries, salads, and free wireless Internet connections.

"One can call this evangelism, but we're not here to convert people," Cho told the *Post-Intelligencer* in 2003. "Our desire is to be a presence, to serve people."

Known simply as "Q," the church grew from a group of 30 in 2001 to 450 by this May. Most Quest worshippers are in their mid-twenties, and 78 percent are single. Most live within five miles of the church.

A little more than two years ago, Bar-

tel raised the idea of an Interbay-Quest partnership. "We had lived together in harmony for more than five years, and I was very impressed with what I saw at Quest," Bartel says. "Eugene's leadership impressed me. His enthusiasm, vibrancy, and passion was infectious. It was a quality that I desired for Interbay as well.

"From our standpoint, it was never a sense of envy or jealousy. We were touching lives. They were touching lives. At the same time, we were having a holy discontent. We wanted more of the kingdom of God, to be part of

at least initially, preach at two of the three Sunday services, held at 9:30 a.m., 11 a.m., and 5 p.m. Bartel will begin by preaching at least twice a month at the early service, the one the majority of Interbay's people are expected to attend.

Bartel said it took a while for Interbay's leadership to warm up to this idea of "giving themselves away" for the greater kingdom. After some initial resistance, Bartel said the final vote was 92 percent in favor of joining Quest.

Still, change is not easy. Worship services will be held in Interbay's sanc-



The warehouse home of Quest church, with Interbay Covenant Church in the background

something fresh, energetic, and vibrant that we saw in Quest."

Bartel's idea caught Cho by surprise. The idea "went underground" for a while, says Bartel, before eventually resurfacing with both churches' leadership. Along the way, Bartel said, the decision to unite has been "bathed in prayer and tears."

"We're more than humbled by this," says Cho, who says the thought of a merger had not occurred to him before. "But when Ray came to me and asked about the possibility, I was pretty giddy. It seemed like a surreal conversation, like, 'Has Ray had too much to drink this morning?'"

Looking from the outside, in this age of corporate mergers, maybe.

Quest assumes Interbay's building and land. Cho will be senior pastor and,

tuary, where there are plans to replace pews with chairs for increased seating capacity.

"Letting go of some of the familiar things... is painful," Bartel says. "But it's been a very slow, deliberate, prayerful process—not forced. This is God's timing, not ours."

Bartel says that the two congregations complement each other. "We're really partnering with Quest to enhance what they already do well," he says, "not to diminish the momentum they already have, but rather to add our gifts, resources, and experience to what they already have. It's the two coming together and producing something on

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**Rick Lund, member of Bethany Covenant Church in Mount Vernon, Washington, is editor of the North Pacific Conference News, and an editor at the Seattle Times.**



behalf of the kingdom that is unimaginably beautiful.”

### **Life-giving wisdom**

Interbay began as a church plant of First Covenant Church in Seattle and was chartered in 1954 with fifty-one members, many of whom were in their twenties and thirties. Some of those members are now in their seventies and eighties and are preparing to do what First Covenant did for them more than fifty years ago. “It is in the same spirit now that we have the opportunity to do what they did,” says Bartel.

Cho says that many younger members of Quest have been hoping their church would develop into a multi-generational congregation. “One of the main reasons people leave Quest,” he says, “is they tell me, ‘You guys are too young. I’ve been dying for some older people who can speak their life wisdom to me.’ They long for this generational experience. You can’t fabricate that.”

Cho is brimming with optimism about the church’s future in reaching Seattle, and is amazed by where the partnership between Quest and Interbay has led. He remembers vividly the day he knocked on Interbay’s door and Bartel walked out and said, “How are you? Have you seen the warehouse?”

“The lessons learned here for our church have been stunning,” Cho says, “Granted, we’re excited, but this is probably more meaningful than any seminary class or conference I’ve ever attended. It has been the most practical exercise in missional thinking a church can do. I really think it’s a synthesis of merging and giving ourselves away.”

Mark Novak, superintendent of the North Pacific Conference, says he “can’t say enough about the pastoral and lay leadership of both churches for entertaining unconventional thoughts and showing courageous leadership.”

“This truly expresses the heart of the Covenant at its best,” says Novak, “leveraging every advantage possible to make a lasting impact in people’s lives, their communities, and the world with the transforming love of Christ.” □