

The Church of the Undignified

Written by Julian Lukins

Friday, 31 October 2008 08:00 PM EDT

In the heart of Seattle, the Church of the Undignified has become a refuge for ex-drug addicts, prostitutes and gangsters living in an ‘anything goes’ neighborhood.

The bizarre-looking cross at the front of the church is made up of McDonald’s cartons, beer cans and drug vials. At first glance, it might appear sacrilegious. But this is Church of the Undignified, where the “rules” of conventional church do not apply.

Fashioned out of chicken wire, the three-dimensional cross forms a cage in which people literally drop their addictions and their burdens—cigarette packets, fast-food wrappers, confession notes, even dollar bills.

“The beauty of the cross [of Jesus] to us is that it takes away all our junk,” explains the church’s 32-year-old pastor, Benji Rodes. “Addictions and destructive habits are left at the cross.”

Visual acts of obedience and worship are important to those who are part of Seattle’s Church of the Undignified—an eclectic band of spiritual seekers, many of whom have been dragged through the filthiest mire of life.

Located in a former trapeze gymnasium that adjoins a yoga studio, the church meets in the Capitol Hill district of Seattle—a downtown neighborhood renowned for its artistic bent, extreme liberalism, prostitution, gay clubs and drug culture.

“Anything goes in this neighborhood,” Rodes says. “The other day I saw a guy in leather shorts wearing a leash. I mean, this is not the Bible Belt.”

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The Church of the Undignified actually fits well in this rebellious environment. The hallmark of the church is freedom of expression, and their “undignified approach” draws those who would otherwise be unlikely to set foot inside a church.

As word has gotten out, even self-professed atheists have been coming regularly to check it out. Others come to place their burdens in the garbage-eating cross—and then slip out the back door.

The church takes its name from 2 Samuel 6:14-22, which records that King David leaped and twirled, dressed only in a thin cloth, as he danced before the Lord. The unstately public display caused his wife Michal to despise him.

In response, David said: “I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes” (vv. 21-22, NIV).

“We believe that God wants us to worship Him in total freedom, that we should not worry about appearing foolish in the eyes of others,” Rodes explains.

He adds: “This is not about trying to act cool. It’s about not being afraid to be whatever God wants you to be, no matter how silly you might appear.”

The ‘Undignifieds’

Worship services are characterized by freedom to express oneself before God through dance, African drums, poetry, watercolors—by any manner in which the Holy Spirit leads. The experience is something to behold.

As a former witchcraft practitioner beats an African drum in rhythm to the worship, an insurance actuary—an occupation normally associated with the most reserved and dignified of people—stomps in a most undignified jig, arms held high before the cross.

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“Some people would probably say it’s a bit chaotic, especially if they have an image in their mind of what church is,” Rodes admits. “To me, our services seem quite normal.”

The “Undignifieds,” as they call themselves, do not want people to judge their church on its style of worship, unusual cross, unorthodox venue or peculiar mix of people. “Look at the fruit,” they say, speaking of the lives transformed by the Holy Spirit’s power.

From its origins three years ago, the Church of the Undignified has focused on humble service to the poor, addicts, social dropouts and other inner-city “undesirables.”

“We’ve always felt that the poor are the chosen,” explains 29-year-old Abbi Rodes, Benji’s wife. “They were the ones that Jesus was near to, and it’s a privilege to be with the poor.”

Several of the church’s young professionals choose to rent in shabby apartment complexes so they can live among the poor and give more money to missions. The Rodeses do not receive a pastoral salary but support themselves through their own photography studio. The missionary mind-set permeates the church.

“Why is this church here?” asks Greg Jones, a 28-year-old Canadian who says his connection with God has been electrified. “We’re not just here to wait for Jesus to come back, but to hasten His return. We’ve got to go.” This year, Jones plans to move to Turkey to be a tentmaker missionary among Muslims.

Other Undignifieds, such as Hannah Chung-Cornman, 26, say they feel God’s call to full-time ministry. Her own story is a remarkable testimony of the Holy Spirit’s restorative power.

A pastor’s kid raised in a Southern Baptist church, Chung-Cornman rebelled against her strict evangelical upbringing and the pressure she felt to conform. “Being a pastor’s kid, I felt everyone in the church was always watching me [and wondering]: *What’s she wearing? What’s she doing?*” she recalls. “I saw hypocrisy in the church, and it made me feel sick.”

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While in her early 20s, Chung-Cornman moved to Capitol Hill, where she dabbled in drugs, alcohol and witchcraft. She became a drug dealer linked with a mafia-style group.

She hit rock-bottom while having a relationship with a married man who supported her financially in return for being his mistress. Living “like a prostitute,” she says, drove her to attempt suicide on several occasions.

“I was looking for love, but in all the wrong places,” she says, adding that all she wanted was “just to be loved and accepted.”

In desperation, Chung-Cornman entered the Church of the Undignified. Overcome by the sense of love and acceptance, she says the Holy Spirit whispered to her: “You are OK now. You are Mine.”

Two years later, Chung-Cornman radiates the joy of the Lord, is newly married to a fellow Undignified, and plans to attend seminary in Seattle and become a chaplain. The Church of the Undignified, she says, continues to draw people like her because its love and acceptance is real.

“Recently, a man came soaked in urine,” she says. “Immediately, people went to talk to him and invite him in for coffee. This is what Jesus wants. He wants us to be undignified for Him!”

The faith of her husband, Aaron, has also taken on a dynamic new dimension since he met the Holy Spirit at the church. Strolling home from work in Seattle’s business district, Aaron came across a homeless woman. Instead of ignoring her like everyone else was doing, he invited her to dinner at a restaurant where he talked to her about Jesus.

Meanwhile, gang member Chauncy Moylan had been dropping into the church on and off for months. At Thanksgiving last year he was in a vehicle with other gang members when a high-caliber gun was discharged by accident. Moylan was struck in the side of the head at

point-blank range.

The bullet entered through his ear and passed out through his nose. Moylan was rushed to the hospital, where doctors were astonished that he not only had survived but also had suffered relatively minor injuries. The bullet caused loss of hearing in one ear and partial paralysis in his face but, amazingly, no life-threatening damage.

“It should have blown my face off,” he says. Answering the prayers of the church, God restored Moylan’s hearing. The ex-gangster has done a U-turn, and God has removed his thirst for violence. “He’s totally exuberant for God,” Benji Rodes says.

A House of Hope

Stepping out in faith, the Undignifieds took out a mortgage on a \$510,000, three-story fixer-upper in Capitol Hill for use as a “healing house.” Through sacrificial giving, the small congregation came up with \$100,000 for the down payment. “Some sold their stuff and gave the money; others gave their savings; and others [gave] the little they could,” Rodes says.

A neighboring church donated another \$20,000, and volunteers from Rodes’ denomination, the Church of the Nazarene, renovated the basement. The house provides a home for Undignifieds in transition who have been sober and off drugs for at least a year—recovering addicts such as 43-year-old Tim Jeffs.

Rebelling against his experiences as a youth in the Methodist denomination, Jeffs plunged into a downward spiral. His life culminated in chronic alcoholism and drugs.

“I had no friends,” he recalls. “I lived on beer, cocaine and frozen pizzas. Every day I would wake up ridiculously hung over and in a lot of pain. I was such a wreck that I didn’t even want to leave the house. I would just sneak out to buy beer and then come home to drink.”

Sometimes Jeffs would think about the things he learned in church years before. “In my mind, it was like I was in a prison,” he says. “I didn’t have the strength to overcome what the enemy was telling me. I just wanted to hit ‘pause’ so it would stop.”

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In dire straits, Jeffs stumbled into the Church of the Undignified because someone at the church was giving free haircuts. Drawn by the church's hospitality and openness, Jeffs returned.

Battling overwhelming anxiety, the alcoholic poured out his heartache before God. "All the anxiety suddenly left me," he says. "I knew that Jesus had paid this huge price for me, yet I was choosing to wallow in the filth. I realized I needed to value myself as Jesus values me."

A year later, Jeffs welcomes others to the church. He's another testimony of the Holy Spirit's cleansing, healing stream.

Formerly, Jeffs and other Undignifieds looked for new ways to get "wasted." Now, during the church's "Waste a Night on God," they spend the night in celebration and worship before the Lord—"losing ourselves in Him," as Rodes puts it.

"King David's energy was totally sapped as he wasted himself before God," Rodes says. "When we choose to 'rejoice crazy' like David, we're just joining in the dance."

The Undignifieds have seen God unleash His healing, life-transforming power, and they won't settle for anything less. Their confidence in the Holy Spirit is reflected by one word on a worshiper's T-shirt: "Himpossible."

Says Rodes: "Jesus has given us an escape, and the Holy Spirit is looking to make us like Him. We really can be little 'Hims.'"

Seeking to "be Jesus" to those caught in the web of sin around them, Rodes likens the Undignifieds to "sheep among the wolves."

"We're totally vulnerable," he says. "But feeling weak, feeling overwhelmed, we are in a position

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to receive power over the enemy. It is God's privilege and joy to spill out His power upon those who are desperate for Him."

That power flows from the cross, symbolized at the Church of the Undignified by a chicken-wire cage stuffed with the junk of life. Next to the cross, a simple sign reads:

"Think of it. All mistakes paid for; the slate wiped clean; that old arrest warrant cancelled and nailed to Christ's cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the cross and marched them naked through the streets."

There's nothing dignified about that. Only awesome power; and—for all those who come to the cross—true Christ-given dignity.

Julian Lukins is a writer and journalist based in Sequim, Washington.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: To read more testimonies from those who have overcome addictions or destructive habits, go to undignified.charismamag.com .