

Small church draws big crowds

The Calvary Fellowship, a nondenominational church in Eugene, is gaining popularity for its unique style of worship

By Brook Reinhard
Oregon Daily Emerald

The sound of electric guitars pierce the air. A bass guitar throbs in the background, and a drummer rolls out a steady beat. In the crowded auditorium, people lift their hands toward the ceiling.

The scene could be typical of any rock concert. But it's 10:45 Sunday morning — the "concert" is just 200 people gathered together at Calvary Fellowship for one of two weekly services.

"We don't tell them what they have to do for the church. We tell them what God has done for them."

Danny O'Neil
Calvary Fellowship pastor

People who go to Calvary don't identify themselves as Baptists, Methodists or Catholics. They say they come to the South Eugene church because the focus is on God.

Calvary Fellowship is one of a handful of nondenominational churches in Eugene that are drawing a crowd of Eugene residents and University students alike.

"I don't give them religion or church," Pastor Danny O'Neil said. "I give them God."

O'Neil, a former University quarterback who helped lead the Ducks to the Rose Bowl in 1995 after a 9-4 record, came back to Eugene two years ago to start the ministry.

The church does not pass an offering plate or have formal church membership. It relies on individual donations in a small box at the back of the room to keep the ministry growing.

"It's not about things or religiousness, it's about growing in the Lord," University student Katie Dersam said.

Dersam, a theater major at the University, is one of the people who helped start the church two years ago at a farm in West Eugene. A year ago, the church outgrew its location and moved to its current building at 40th Avenue and West Amazon Street.



Jeramie Brown for the Emerald

Katie Leonard, left, and Lori Thomas sing praise at Wednesday night's service. They say that singing is a way to uplift the congregation while thanking Jesus for all that he's done for them.

The church has since doubled in size.

O'Neil, who calls himself a "teacher" for his church, said Calvary has split the congregation into two services on Sunday morning to accommodate everyone. He said many of the members come from more traditional backgrounds but stay at Calvary because the focus isn't on religion.

"We don't tell them what they have to do for the church," he said. "We tell them what God has done for them."

There are no pews in the church and no hymnals. O'Neil, in a button-down shirt and khakis, is one of the best-dressed people in the room. The lead worship singer wears a baseball cap, T-shirt and jeans. And after the service, footballs can often be seen flying back and forth the auditorium, landing within inches of the expensive sound equipment and coming perilously close to hitting unsuspecting churchgoers.

This casual atmosphere has drawn many students to the church. Holub estimates that 25 to 50 percent of the congregation are University students.

"We've got everything from punks to hippies to football players to serious, academic students," Holub said.

The activities don't hurt, either. The church is planning sky-dives over the summer, a trip to Eagle Cap in Eastern Oregon, a houseboat trip and a rafting trip. And that's not including the three mission trips Calvary members are planning to do later this year.

Oregon track star John Stiegeler said that, although the activities are nice, he goes to Calvary because of the close relationships he has with other people and the emphasis on the Bible in O'Neil's preaching.

"We just teach on the word," Stiegeler said. "You can't go wrong if you teach what the word says."

Holub and O'Neil expect to add another service to Calvary Fellowship if growth continues. Last year the group had 150 members and now there's more than 400. Holub predicts even more people will come next year.

"Next school year we're just gonna explode," he said.

Brook Reinhard will be a news editor for the Emerald in the fall.

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