

music

Like a Prayer

Elevation: Christian rock with a queer twist

by Patricia L. MacAodha

With hands clapping and bodies swaying, the pews of Metropolitan Community Church of Portland take on a decidedly different tone every Sunday evening. The high-ceilinged, century-old sanctuary—a historical landmark built for traditional Christian hymns—is filled with a driving rock beat that lifts the youthful and young-at-heart congregation to its feet.

The evening service was launched after the Rev. Glenna Shepherd, MCC's senior pastor, looked out at the faces in the sanctuary and noticed only pockets of people younger than 40. She fretted that the church would lose them and began discussing solutions. "We had to have a way of reaching them that would work," she says.

Out of this process, Elevation emerged—although "burst out" might be a more descriptive term. The Christian rock band's approach to worship reaches from an enthusiastic, driving spirituality and an unbridled, joyful energy.

"Young people coming from a faith-based background often have a hard time coming out and an even harder time reconnecting with a queer-friendly Christian community," says bandleader Nicole Highhouse, facilitator of the congregation's Spiritual Development Committee. "There's that pivotal point

where you seek your peers. Where will you go? Seeking spiritual peers is not easy."

Vocalist Angi Waldrop was "just going to church here" when Elevation called her name. She had previously sung in talent shows for about eight years, but the band soon became an important part of her life. She loves singing at Elevation services and wants the band "just to keep growing strong [and] getting the message out."

Kate Bednarski, who holds a degree from San Francisco's Center for Creation Spirituality, has played drums since she was 14, performing in a number of bands. She stopped for a while as she put together her own business but had resumed playing occasionally with MCC's regular music program when Elevation recruited her.

Vocalist Eric Johnson formerly sang with the morning choir but was recruited to join Elevation, discovered he enjoyed the evening service and has never looked back. Vocalist John Huff rounds out the current lineup.

Highhouse plays guitar and does vocals but is still scouting for bass and lead guitarists, a keyboardist and a baritone vocalist. Even with these needs, the band grooves with a great sound and energy.

There has also been talk of making a CD, but Elevation needs someone to front the project, as well



From left, Angi Waldrop, John Huff, Kate Bednarski, Eric Johnson and Nicole Highhouse take an enthusiastic, energetic approach to worship.

as a technical producer and a studio.

"We also need better sound," Bednarski says, acknowledging that might take a while. At least \$5,500 would be needed to upgrade MCC's system. The church, in the process of a building and mission upgrade, doesn't have the money to spare right now, but the need is imminent. Elevation's core group agrees: It's part of creating a queer-youth-friendly environment.

When one walks in the door to take in an Elevation service, the first thing evident is the high level of enthusiasm. People help with setup, and there is a general atmosphere of excitement. What's coming up tonight? Will the band play its signature number, Elvis Presley's "Burning Love," complete with its own Christian words on the screen by the podium?

In couples or single, people begin wandering into the sanctuary: young parents with infants, teen-agers and preteens bringing their parents. One woman even

brings her dog. At this service, Highhouse invites the congregation to kick off its shoes and get comfortable. Accepting her invitation, lay leader Kimberly Brown delivers that evening's message barefoot, and no one blinks an eye.

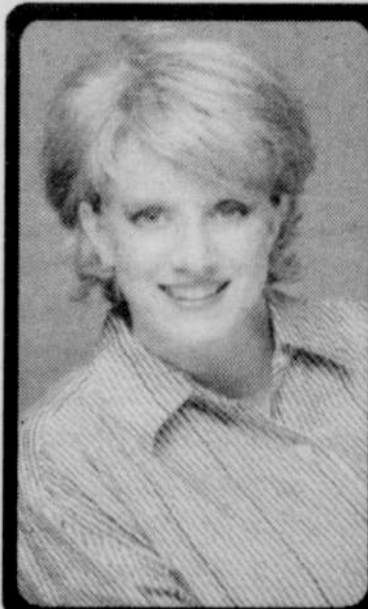
Elevation has drawn attention from the larger MCC community. California pastor Jim Mitulski, part of the denomination's administration staff, has been trying to find financing to bring the band down for a tour of churches in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Highhouse proudly shares, "He says we're the future of our church." **10**

Catch Elevation 6 p.m. Sundays at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway. For more information call 503-281-8868.

PATRICIA L. MACAODHA is a Portland free-lance writer. E-mail her at patmac31@juno.com.

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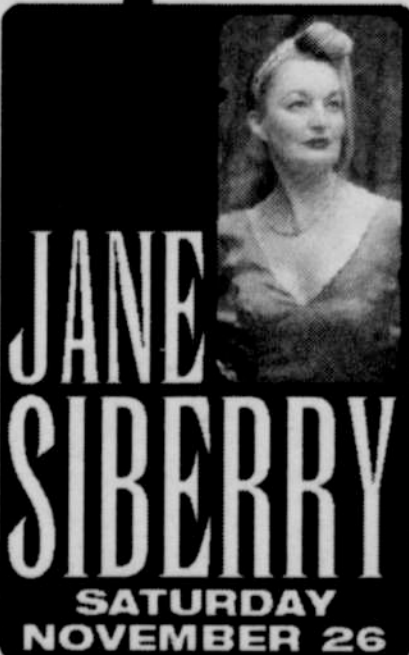
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