

25 Years After Jonestown Massacre, Church Heals Jungle Cult's Wounds

A Pentecostal pastor is bringing healing at a California church once pastored by cult leader Jim Jones

Kim Harvey was driving south on Highway 101 in Northern California in 1979. He had left Bible college and was headed to Sacramento. He was giving a hitchhiker a ride when the teenager told him a story he's never forgotten.

"The guy's whole family had died in Guyana at the hand of Jim Jones," said Harvey, now pastor of Redwood Valley Assembly of God church in Redwood Valley, Calif. "He managed to get away from it because he had snuck around and discovered some of the things they were doing."

Harvey recalls his amazement, noting how the story of mass death the year before at Jonestown, Guyana, the South American home of an American religious cult, was the "heat of discussion" at his college. Even more amazing is that 16 years later, Harvey found himself pastoring "the old Jim Jones church" in Redwood, a small community near Ukiah, Calif. The church at 7700 East Road is where Jones dominated the town and rose to cultic power.

Jones had thousands of followers, but he's remembered historically for the 912 church members (including 276 children) who followed him to their graves as he led them to drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide in the jungle of Guyana on Nov. 18, 1978. Today surviving family members, neighbors and friends of Jonestown victims still have open wounds.

"This was a community with a bruise that was still tender, and memories still very much a part of people's lives," Harvey said. "I knew I couldn't promote the church too strongly, or everyone would associate me with Jim Jones."

Harvey was appointed by the Assemblies of God World Missions Board to pastor the church in January 1995. There were only 20 members. Many of them, he said, had a "cold reaction" to him.

"A lot of the community did not respond to me," he said. "I would introduce myself in town, and when I told them where I had a church, you could see the scowl in their face."

Harvey was excited to remove the stain that Jones had left behind. "The first thing the Lord told me to do was improve the run-down facilities," Harvey said.

He spent two years turning the eyesore into a place of beauty, doing most of the physical labor, including digging ditches and cutting the grass himself. He removed the in-ground swimming pool that Jones had built in the sanctuary, landscaped the grounds and removed the gun towers Jones had set up, where uniformed guards once stood watch.

After the remodeling, Harvey said God led him to reclaim the property in November 1997 with a ceremony dedicating an 18-foot cross and fountain, a service he called "Raise the Cross Sunday." He invited several hundred people, including those who had lost loved ones at Jonestown. Harvey said he experienced a "holy" day of God's fresh anointing over the facility.

"The Lord told me, 'Be a good shepherd as I am a good

shepherd, not as a hireling who flees when threatened but who will be there to the end,'" Harvey said.

Timothy Stoen was one of the people attending the dedication. Stoen, 64, still has a framed photograph on his desk of his son, John Victor Stoen. The boy was 5 years old when he died at Jonestown. Stoen calls Jones a "megalomaniac" who was abusive to all of Redwood City. He said his pain is still fresh. "Everyone is still full of shame," he noted.

"Pastor Harvey is a faithful servant of Jesus," Stoen added. "He's a great guy and a biblically faithful Christian."

Harvey said he often suffered great discouragement and wanted to quit his faith, more than once, but added that God knew he had "a stubborn, stick-with-it [attitude]."

"I tried to demonstrate how Jesus cares. I want to be an agent of reconciliation," said Harvey, whose church now has about 100 people. "I'm here because I believe God has asked me to turn a place of evil into a place of good."

Carol Shepard