

Australian church reaches marginalized youth

Meeting in a warehouse, a church of mostly 20-somethings has rescued people from suicide and homosexuality

By the time Jane Summers (real name changed) of Brisbane, Australia, was 21, she had moved 25 times, lived with six lesbian girlfriends, marched in four gay-pride parades, spent more than \$5,000 on drugs and had flings with more than 50 people of both sexes, including one transsexual.

Then, two years ago, a fellow acting-school student offered her another new experience. They went together to Christian City Church Westside (CCCW), and that day Jesus became Summers' "best mate," she says.

"I went up for a prayer. I'd been to fortunetellers, and I thought I was going to experience the same thing. Boy, was I wrong," Summers said. "I cried: 'I'm sorry, Jesus. I didn't know. I wasted so much time.' The presence of God hit me like a freight train."

Brisbane's inner-city West End neighborhood hosts a large student population amid a milieu of theater, music and arts. The lifestyle of the area removes moral boundaries. Drugs and extramarital sex are rife, as is youth suicide.

Grant Windle, senior pastor of CCCW, founded the church in 1995 with his wife, Cheryl; their sons, Joel and Ben; and several who shared their vision to create a culturally relevant church that would connect with the area's youth. Meetings were held in community halls, but the young church

struggled.

“For five years the church I was looking at did not resemble the church I had in my heart,” Windle said. “That can be a pretty tough scenario year after year.”

Then, some 20 months ago, they leased and renovated a West End warehouse. Suddenly the church burst into growth.

“It started with one or two from the acting [community] that got dramatically saved, and then they brought somebody, and then they brought somebody else,” he said. “Before long we had quite a crowd.”

The current congregation of 200 has an average age of 24. Windle is careful not to force newcomers into a mold but to accept them for who they are. “They come into our church and think: These people are just like me. They look like me; they dress like me; they’re into the same things I’m into.”

Bradford Power, 23, was the friend who introduced Summers to Westside. “After three failed relationships with girls I began to question my identity and sexuality,” he said. “The gay scene introduced me to recreational drug-taking. Every weekend was an escape from my search for love. I was lonely, insecure and afraid that no one could truly love me.

“I was desperate, so one night I cried out to God, ‘If You’re real, please help me!’ Two weeks later my flatmate Cindy got saved and led me to the Lord.”

Windle believes social change has stranded many churches, leaving them powerless to influence people such as Summers and

Power. Though Windle focuses on genuine conversion and renewing the mind in Christ, he also fosters a party atmosphere.

"We've deliberately done that so they can bring their friends to church," he said. "They're bringing people all the time. I'd say 90 percent of the unsaved people who walk through the doors respond to the altar call. There are people who get saved every Sunday."

For Korinne Bradley, 19, salvation came just in time.

"I attempted suicide at least seven times before I even left secondary school. In 2000 I was a top student at university, politically active on campus, talented and [in] medical school. By all accounts I had a bright future," Bradley said.

"Despite all I had going for me, I felt no reason to live. Then somehow I ended up at a youth home group and gave Jesus my heart. I knew I really wanted to live, so I began to fight back for my life.

"I fought through my depression, my past abuse, my lesbianism, my pain. God gave me back my life." Bradley was taken in by one of CCCW's few families, who Bradley said has "built me up so I could face the world again."

Windle honors God for the growth, but stresses it is only a beginning.

"The evidence is in the changed lives and the mobilization of these young people. They're going to preach; they're going to

go for it. They're going to be awesome in what they do."

–Adrian Brookes in Australia