

Christian Boot Camp Reaches Manhattan's Singles

The New York Bible study offers practical tools for Christian living in a fast-paced environment

A charismatic minister has put his own spin on the rules for successful relationships and is creating a buzz among New York City singles.

Christopher L. Burge, 38, a former Wall Street whiz kid, has turned a Manhattan Bible study into a reality check for Christian singles facing sexual temptation, loneliness, unemployment, difficulty in finding a godly mate, and a competitive marketplace that could sap anyone's strength.

"There are people in the city starving for the things of God," said Burge, co-author of *His Rules: God's Practical Road Map for Becoming and Attracting Mr. or Mrs. Right* (WaterBrook Press). "They just don't know where they can go and fellowship with their peers."

Through the Bible study and book, which he co-wrote with Pamela Toussaint, Burge offers a practical, biblical take on the bestselling 1996 relationship guidebook *The Rules*. And the message is striking a chord.

"I've grown so much spiritually since I've been attending this ministry," said DuJuan Newsome, a 26-year-old accountant. "As a young Christian single, especially in a high-pace work environment, there are a lot of temptations out there. As it relates to relationships, women and lust, the Lord has really washed me over the last couple of years."

Vivienne LaBorde, an attorney, toils 60, 80 or even 100 hours a week in her mergers and acquisitions legal practice. In such a high-stress job she needs Jesus to overcome fear, worry and anxiety. "When I come here I get practical tools in order to defeat strongholds," she said. "It really challenges you, showing you how to be a warrior for Christ."

About 100 men and women mostly in their 20s and 30s, gather for two weekly Bible workshops conducted by Burge. They represent a spectrum of ethnic backgrounds, occupations and evangelical denominations from Pentecostal to Baptist to Presbyterian to Episcopal.

The workshops take place in a midtown Manhattan apartment and at St. George's Episcopal Church on East 16th Street. In addition Burge recently launched a 12-week course based on His Rules. Burge teaches for 50 minutes and then leads a frank Q&A session. No subject is off limits.

Dressed casually or in business attire directly from work, participants juggle open Bibles while taking serious notes, sipping water or coffee, or wolfing a sandwich. Burge's delivery is informal but precise and sprinkled with computer-speak. "All of us are a work in progress," he said.

The teaching covers practical subjects such as relating to non-Christians at work, communication between the sexes, relationships, fighting materialism and finding God's purpose.

"Church is cool, but sometimes you need something intimate broken down into a smaller group that talks about issues I'm going through," said Corey Darnell, a marketing executive. "This ministry helped me realize that I'm human. I will make

mistakes. I will fall on my butt. That's all in the journey God is taking me through."

Darnell, like other members of the group, said he feels more comfortable sharing with peers in an informal setting rather than a structured church environment.

Seeds of the ministry were planted 13 years ago when Burge led a Bible study with four men in his one-room apartment. It eventually grew to 20 people.

A graduate of Brown University, Burge was a rising star at Solomon Brothers, a prestigious Wall Street investment firm. He made vice president of fixed income and institutional sales at the age of 25, but in 1999 he quit to study at Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Okla.

"The Holy Spirit was tugging on me strongly," he said. "I loved my job to death and then in a very short window my enthusiasm started to wane. I just recognized that I could not turn my back on this calling. Money didn't matter because I always wanted to be in God's perfect will."

While at Rhema he caught the vision to establish a teaching center where people from different denominations would receive practical Bible teaching. After graduating in 2002 he returned to New York to apply what he had learned. Attendance at the Bible study blossomed and requires two locations now.

The ministry's next step is a permanent location in Manhattan. Burge said he wants to keep helping people live out biblical Christianity in the 21st century. "We want to keep teaching lay people how to apply biblical principles in their

respective spheres of influence," he said.

Peter K. Johnson in Manhattan