

# Church Just Got Trendy in Switzerland

Amid the conservative atmosphere of Zurich's financial world, a new charismatic church is engaging its culture with an unconventional yet relevant display of the gospel.

In downtown Zurich, Switzerland, Europe's renowned center of discreet business dealings and ultra-high finance, one very new church already has something in common with its historical financial neighbors.

They both understand success.

Since it began four years ago, the Zurich International Christian Fellowship (ICF), which markets itself as the Multimedia Gospel Movement, has grown by 1,000 percent in its membership—a “rate of return” even the local bankers would clamor for. And with no intention of curbing its progress now, the ICF hopes in the new millennium to establish itself all over Europe.

Yet, contrasting the very conservative approach to international banking that is practiced here, the ICF is gaining fame for aggressively engaging its “market” and brushing aside all conventions—the religious ones, that is.

Its approach? To be deliberately provocative and progressive in sharing the gospel.

On one Sunday morning in downtown Zurich, young Swiss teenagers are flocking into a fourth-floor nightclub. Inside, video clips gyrate images across big-screen TVs, and colored spotlights flash incessantly. With the latest top Christian hits sweeping across the dance floor at ear-splitting volume, the 13-to-15-year-olds gather around a spread of chips and soft drinks illuminated by flimsy party candles.

As a live band starts jamming, today's host—a young woman not much older than the teens in the club—jumps onto the stage, greeting everyone with loud shouts. The show is on—pulsating live music, fumes and colored spotlights, video clips, stage drama and dancing.

After about 30 minutes it's "message time." The message itself, however, is miles away from being a trendy sermonette that tickles the ears and excites the eyes of the typical Y2K teen-ager.

The speaker is Thomas Tschannen, 26, and he talks in the people's "heart language"—Swiss German—not in the High German that is spoken in schools and most churches in the country. His message is about respecting and obeying government authority, in particular police and school teachers. He testifies about his own experience with shoplifting, and worse things, and about finding peace of mind only after letting Jesus change his mind.

In the evening of the same day, at what is called a Youth Planet event—which targets older teens—the pulse is even more vibrant, and the performance is even more professional. But again the message is no-nonsense.

"We do a tougher version of Willow Creek," says ICF's senior pastor, Leo Bigger, 32, referring to the "seeker-sensitive" church in Chicago. "You do not reach the Swiss by softness."

The ICF started in 1996 with 100 people and now numbers 1,000 members, most of them under age 30. A total of 2,500 attend the weekly services.

Bigger sees his church as a Swiss version of Willow Creek and the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, where the Toronto Blessing revival began in 1994. His church exhibits a sensitivity both to the needs of the culture and to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The ICF slogan for all Sunday meetings (called "events") is to present a "challenging message in a safe ambient" by preaching conversion without compromise while adapting culturally to today's trends.

Doing that, Bigger says, means that at Sunday events outwardly charismatic behavior such as worshiping with hands raised, praying aloud in tongues or giving altar calls is avoided—a necessity stemming from the fact that all across Europe anti-cult propaganda depicts charismatic churches as psycho-sects.

"We are a church for the unchurched, and Sundays are for unbelievers only," Bigger points out with conviction. "We stage six different events each Sunday—Ground Zero for young teens, Youth Planet for older teens and four Gen-X events for young adults. Then there is the Chinder Express, the program for children."

ICF strives to make all its performances professional. "When

the believers bring their friends on Sunday they shouldn't be embarrassed by a quality way below the world's standards," says Bigger, who even visited Las Vegas to learn more about the "latest in showbiz."

But the showy approach is not viewed by the Zurich ICF leadership as the key to their church's exceptional growth. The Sunday events are meant to be supportive of what Bigger calls the "VIP" system.

For this strategy, each member is encouraged to choose an unbelieving neighbor or colleague as his or her personal VIP and to build a friendship with that person. Most decisions for Jesus are made in a private setting, the VIP discussing with his or her friend the message given at a Sunday event.

"The key to growth is making the unchurched your unchallenged top priority," emphasizes co-pastor Matthias Bölsterli, 39. "The Gen-Xers are spiritually open and radical people, willing to catch the fire of the Holy Spirit, but our anachronistic church cultures drive them away. In the ICF we are free to create new church cultures as we go."

Bölsterli elaborates that the church in Europe needs leaders who dare to turn the tide and who prefer to reach the unchurched than to preserve church tradition as they know it.

"The reason the church in Europe does not grow is lack of leadership," he claims. "We need more people with the courage of little David challenging Goliath. The success of ICF has a lot to do with Leo."

A former anarchist street fighter, drug dealer and armed robber, Bölsterli experienced God's transforming power at age 23.

"A court psychologist examining me after I denounced myself said there must be a mistake. He said I could not be the same person described in the files," Bölsterli says.

He is convinced that there is "no stopping God" and that the many prophecies that the ICF has received about ongoing, explosive growth in Zurich and beyond will be fulfilled.

Mira Zanetti is a typical exponent of the kind of people attracted to this expanding multimedia gospel movement—age 20, trendy, and raised in the post-Christian, New Age spirituality typical of modern Europe. Her mother introduced her to alternative medicine, such as crystals and Bach flowers.

"From the age of 11, I was exploring New Age spiritualities," Zanetti recalls. "Buddhism and shamanism used to fascinate me."

She tried out Zen meditation and other esoteric techniques but says they "strained" her.

"You have to put a lot of effort into it. These spiritualities are actually very performance-oriented," she explains. "I got tense and did not find what I was looking for."

Friends introduced Zanetti to Christianity. One girl invited her to ICF's Sunday meetings, and Zanetti says that she "liked it and felt better inside" after each visit but that she kept

“resisting.” The breakthrough for her occurred during a most unlikely time in a most unlikely place—during a school study-tour of a Zurich trash incinerator.

“Seeing all the trash I realized I needed Jesus—and made my decision,” Zanetti says of her experience in October 1998. She says that the best part of living with Jesus is that she now is “relaxed and peaceful.”

“Praying is so easy; you’re not required to perform,” she adds.

Zanetti used to exorcise evil spirits by using feathers and crystals, in shamanist fashion. Now when she is bothered by demons she says she knows how to pray in the name of Jesus and that she can see God’s angels encircling her to protect her.

Christophe Loeffler, 30, delved even deeper into the occult. He had encounters with spirits and sometimes walked barefoot on burning coals.

But music was the idol that controlled him. He felt a compulsion to spend all his money on CDs. Loeffler was a deejay, and a friend asked him if he would volunteer as a deejay at the ICF Christmas party in 1998.

“I was not a believer, but the sincere friendliness that I encountered during the rehearsals really impressed me,” he says.

On New Year’s Eve, Loeffler made his decision for Jesus and was baptized. He now is in charge of the ICF CD and book

table, which is developing step-by-step into a publishing house.

New converts are invited to join “workshops,” church meetings held weekly in members’ living rooms for the purpose of worshiping, praying and studying the Bible.

“In the workshops we celebrate the Lord’s Supper and baptize,” Leo Bigger explains. “The cells [workshops] are the actual church, and their focus is discipling.”

On Monday night all workshops join for unrestricted, charismatic-style worship. “Monday is insiders’ night,” Bigger says with a smile.

In 1999 the ICF movement crossed Zurich’s community borders and started planting churches in other cities in Switzerland and Germany. There are already seven ICFs in such cities as Bern, Basel and Berlin—with many more coming.

“We never intended to move on into Europe,” Bigger confides. “But when it was prophesied over me that I would help plant a church in all major European cities, I broke down under the power of the Spirit and could not get up for an hour. Such a thing never happened to me before.”

The Zurich church has founded ICF Unlimited to oversee the church-planting ministry. Currently, Bigger says, the only strategy for the organization is to “listen to God and follow His lead.”

Following God has been the business of this ex-printer turned church leader ever since his days in a small Swiss town on the Austrian border where God told him—the day after his conversion in 1988—to gather all the other pupils and tell them about Jesus. Bigger obeyed and became the talk of the town.

“I started out as an evangelist, and an evangelist I will remain,” he says.

His “formula” for success hasn’t changed much since then. He’s still telling people about Jesus—only this time he’s gathering the young people of Europe to hear the gospel. \*

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