

Churches on The Edge

Three unique pastors are reaching Goths for Jesus.

With his 6-foot-1-inch, 295-pound frame topped by purple hair, tattoos and facial piercings, Steve “Pastor Freak” Bensinger, 41, couldn’t look less like your everyday pastor—except maybe when he’s also behind the wheel of the black 1985 Cadillac Hearse he drives.

“When you look like I do, you’ve got to know what you’re talking about,” he quips. So he studies 10 to 20 Bible chapters a day as pastor of Come As You Are Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a 50-member congregation he founded four years ago. A gentle giant, Bensinger holds four martial-arts black belts and used to smash bricks inscribed with “S-A-T-A-N”—a fitting skill for someone who says his ministry gift is breaking demonic bondages.

Bensinger represents a growing number of Christians who work outside of tried-and-true ministry traditions to reach an increasingly diverse, non-Christian American culture. Bensinger’s church—like The Refuge in St. Petersburg, Florida, and The Church on the Edge in Huntington Beach, California—specialize in ministering to people who don’t fit in most churches.

People such as the Goths.

Bensinger—with his son, Steven, 18, and church member Seth Gooch, 24, both Christian Goths—minister to the Gothic

subculture by way of a “medieval outreach” held Thursday nights. They welcome Goths of all backgrounds, including Wiccans, and provide a meeting place, a meal, and medieval-style hobbies such as sword-play and dancing.

Bensinger began his ministry after first being denied ministry credentials with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) because he wanted to start a church much like he has today.

“We need to understand that God says don’t judge by appearances but by godly judgment. God wants us to look like Jesus,” he says. “I respect the Goths. God died for them just like He died for me. What will God think if they don’t want to come to Him because Christians offended them?”

Hundreds of miles away, Bruce Wright, 40, a former Youth for Christ staffer, founded The Refuge in St. Petersburg, Florida, eight years ago to minister to kids rejected by churches. He reaches out to Goths through concerts, coffeehouses, Bible studies and a weekly church service.

He often teaches them from the books of Ecclesiastes and Psalms because they identify with the books’ themes of emotional pain and the difficulty of knowing God.

“Goth kids relate to suffering,” he says. “They identify with the disaffectedness, the vanity that Solomon felt materialism and addiction.”

A similar ministry approach is taken by Joey Roche, 46, who pastors the 150-member Church on the Edge in Huntington Beach, California. He’s married with five children but is a self-described “scary-looking guy with lots of tattoos” who plays

in a punk band and preaches a strong repentance message.

His church is “living for God straight-up” and resembles a “Noah’s Ark thing,” he says. “A grandma will be sitting next to a kid with a blue Mohawk. It’s radical.”

“Church on the Edge is made up of believers who are fed up with the traditions of men,” Roche says. “No one is ever turned away because of how they look, talk or live before they come to the knowledge of the truth.”

And that includes Goths. A married Gothic couple lead worship at his church, where ministry is done through hardcore-music concerts, anti-abortion counseling and feeding the homeless.

“People have looked at me and said, ‘That’s the pastor?’ and boom! left right then,” Roche says. “But Jesus never told us to look right. He told us to live right.”