

God Goes to Vegas

In a city known for its strippers and slot machines, the Holy Spirit is drawing thousands of people to a new charismatic church led by evangelist Benny Perez.

From the outside it looks just like the other buildings in the medical business park—nondescript and gray with shrubs and perennials politely arranged around its perimeter. But the difference becomes apparent when you walk through the doors. Inside, the music is blaring, the house is full and the crowd is rocking.

“I don’t need a whole lot of money. I don’t need a big fine car. / I got everything that a man could want. I got more than I could ask for. / I don’t have to run around. I don’t have to stay out all night. / ‘Cause I got a sweet, a sweet lovin’ Savior, and He knows just how to treat me right. / My Savior, He’s all right. My Savior, He’s clean outta sight. Don’t cha know that He is some kind of wonderful.”

“Some Kind of Wonderful,” first sung by the Drifters, has been playing in clubs nationwide since Grand Funk Railroad made it popular in the 1970s. But this is no club. This is The Church at South Las Vegas, and the young man dancing at the front of the room is the pastor.

Benny Perez, who co-pastors the church with his wife, Wendy, likes the song so much he asks the praise team to sing it again. “That’s some good music,” he says as the band starts the song again.

Observers say the 42-year-old pastor’s nontraditional approach to ministry has been the church’s appeal. Since the ministry

was founded in 2003, it has become one of the fastest growing in Las Vegas, swelling from 27 people to more than 2,000 today.

Contemporary and charismatic, The Church at South Las Vegas is multiethnic and multigenerational, and appeals to rich and poor alike. Chip and Beverly Rowe, who were from Episcopalian and Catholic backgrounds, admit that because of past church experiences they didn't have great expectations when they first heard about the ministry. "We were discouraged with church," Chip Rowe says.

But when their daughter started coming home excited after attending youth meetings at Perez's church, the couple became curious. They agreed to visit—but only if they could sit near the exit. Because of their liturgical background, the Rows weren't used to the church's charismatic style, especially the raising of hands during worship.

Perez only added to the strangeness of their experience when he walked onto the platform dressed like the children's TV character Bob the Builder—complete with a hardhat and tool belt—to emphasize his "family makeover" series. Despite their discomfort, the couple soon started attending services not because their daughter invited them, but because they wanted to go.

"This church is about being real," Chip says. "Pastor relates his struggles and adversities in life and talks about problems openly. It's a real place where I can share real feelings and have a real relationship with God."

Perez's authenticity is also what attracted 30-somethings

Sandy Gonzalez and Ingrid Carlin. The two travel from Albuquerque, New Mexico, twice a month to attend services more than 500 miles away at The Church at South Las Vegas. "The people are warm, and Pastor Benny is a great speaker," says Gonzalez, who says she once heard angels singing during a service.

Carlin says since she began attending The Church at South Las Vegas she has been able to quit smoking. The spiritual growth she has experienced, coupled with the warmth of the congregation, are what she says make the nine-hour drive worthwhile. Both women are in the process of relocating to Nevada to be closer to the church.

Keeping Ministry Real

Showing transparency from the pulpit is not an accident; it is intentional, Wendy Perez says. She and her husband want to let members know their pastors struggle with some of the same life issues they do.

Growing up in the ministry as the child of church planters, Wendy watched leaders struggle in private while trying to look like the picture of success in public. "People held up the facade of a perfect life," she says. "You didn't always want to show people your stuff."

In a city like Las Vegas, where taxi cabs are plastered with provocative images and newspapers run ads for adult entertainment, a church that didn't model authenticity would be spotted a mile away, says Annette Westerfield, who is on the ministerial staff. "Because sin is so blatant and open in this city, the church has to be open and real when dealing

with people who may come through the doors," she says.

Wendy says the spiritual warfare has been intense, but she believes God is doing something special through the ministry. "He's building a city within a city," she says.

That "city" includes: the Las Vegas Leadership Institute, which they expect to grow into a Bible school; the Association of Related Ministries (ARM), a ministry network designed to support affiliated churches; a short-term missions organization; and a nine-month young adult ministry training program. The ministry also hosts a television broadcast.

Although it is less than 5 years old, the church has planted ministries in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, and another is planned for Florida. Abel Aguilar, pastor of The Church at Queen Creek in Arizona, met Perez roughly two years ago at a time when he wanted nothing to do with church as usual. "I had seen so much politics and other stuff," he says.

Aguilar says his position as a youth pastor had just been eliminated, and he was given no explanation from the church's leadership. "It was bad," he says. "I couldn't even speak to the pastor. I was told to communicate by e-mail."

After spending time in prayer he felt God was leading him to start a church, and the first person he turned to was Perez. So he took a trip to Vegas, where he saw how the church operated and met with the staff. "They were just so open and warm," Aguilar says. "They walk in a spirit of humility."

Perez and his staff took Aguilar and his church under their covering, and Aguilar says that relationship has helped bring

healing. "As a church leader and a minister it has restored my faith in church leaders," he says. "I told Pastor Benny that he was my pastor."

Ironically, when the Perezes moved to Nevada from Washington state in 2001, they had no plans to start a church. Perez had served as a youth pastor at First Assembly of God in Marysville, Washington, from 1992 to 1998. During that time he pioneered a youth outreach center that attracted Goths and grunge rockers and saw hundreds of youth come to Christ.

He also launched a national conference to train youth in nontraditional evangelism and eventually took that message to adults, founding Pacesetters International in the late 1990s. Soon he was in full-time evangelistic ministry. "We were on the road all the time," he says.

Traveling from Washington was difficult, though, so he and his wife looked for a city with easier access to international flights. After prayer, they felt led to move to Vegas. He had ministered at a couple of churches there and remembered how much easier it was to fly in and out of than Seattle.

So in 2001 the Perezes relocated to Nevada to focus on growing Pacesetters. "That's what we thought, but God had other plans," he says.

An Organically Grown Church

When he wasn't traveling, Perez would hold small, monthly "Holy Spirit meetings" that he called "The Gathering." His wife and a friend led worship, and Perez preached.

Although he was new to the city and didn't know many people, Perez attracted 27 people the first time he held one at his house. "I'm thinking, Wow, God," he says.

The next month 45 people showed up. With the crowd outgrowing their house, the Perezes rented a local elementary school for the following month's meeting; 75 people showed up.

Although the meetings were growing, Perez and his wife still were not thinking about starting a church. It wasn't until more than 100 people showed up at the next month's meeting that Perez began asking God what was happening.

Although the traveling ministry enabled him to support his family, it meant more time away from home. "I'm asking myself if [traveling] is what I want to do with the rest of my life," he says.

It was December 2002, and he had a break in his speaking itinerary, so he and his wife decided to take a short getaway to fast and pray for God's direction. When their two-day consecration ended, they knew God was calling them to start a church.

At the next gathering in January 2003 they announced their plans to start a church and told those who were members of other churches not to attend the February meeting. Only 50 people showed up that month, but Perez says by April attendance had again reached 100.

The ministry was still holding meetings only once a month when Jon Martinez, a minister with whom Perez worked in Washington, moved his family to Vegas to help the Perezes formally launch

the church.

With 20 volunteers, the church held the city's largest Easter egg hunt ever. Roughly 2,500 people participated, and Perez immediately became recognized as the pastor of the church with the large Easter egg hunt.

He and his group of volunteers began planning the church's first service and leased space at a local movie theater for a year. In May 2003 the church started meeting in the theater using four auditoriums. Volunteers would have to set up and break down the equipment each week before the theater opened for business at 11:30 a.m. "We didn't know what we were doing," Perez says. "We used the summer months to figure it out."

In September the church sent out fliers announcing its official grand opening, and 310 people attended. By the end of the first year attendance had grown to 800, and the church had outgrown the movie theater. They began renting space at a local high school and added a second service to accommodate the crowds.

The church continued to grow and soon needed to move from the high school. Rather than look for another temporary space Perez says he went on a 21-day fast to seek God's solution to their dilemma. An answer came quickly.

One of the ministers' wives, who worked in real estate, learned of a new building in the city. The leadership went to see the facility and liked what they saw, but the price was steep—\$4.8 million. They had only 30 days to come up with \$1 million to secure the property.

At the next service Perez told the church he had found a building, and the congregation was excited. Then he told them the terms: They had 30 days to come up with the money. They set a date of May 15 and dubbed it "Miracle Sunday."

Perez says a "spirit of giving" overtook the members. Perez sold some investment property and gave \$100,000. Some families gave the down payments for new homes. Other donations came in from around the country, and within 30 days the church had the money it needed to purchase the building. "It was a glorious day," Perez says.

The building was officially purchased in July 2005, and the church moved in the following April.

Although the church continues to host an annual Easter egg hunt, which this year drew 12,000 people, Perez says the ministry has grown organically through lifestyle evangelism. "My wife and I built relationship in our neighborhood," he says.

"We saw our neighbors come to Christ, come to our church and be actively involved in our church. We have a small group that goes out and ministers on the [Las Vegas] Strip, but the most powerful evangelism is word-of-mouth."

The Church at South Las Vegas seeks to stay on the cutting edge, integrating technology into its congregational life by allowing members to give online and to check their giving using one of four touch-screen monitors in its lobby. Parents also use the monitors to sign their children in to the various children's ministries.

And the church is still growing, having recently added a Saturday evening service in addition to two Sunday gatherings. Pastors all over the nation have asked what Perez is doing to cause the church to grow so rapidly.

He says it's simple: "Authenticity is what draws the people," he says. "We're trying to demonstrate the Jesus style. He was touchable."

Bruce Goolsby is a minister and freelance writer based in Phoenix. For more information about The Church at South Las Vegas, log on at .