

Healings, Miracles Reported During Small California Church's 'Visitation'

People are flocking from as far away as the United Kingdom and New Zealand to experience 'a fountain of cleansing'

With ripped carpets, unfinished walls and holes in the ceiling, Jubilee Christian Fellowship could use a makeover. But instead of getting its own face-lift, this small church in California's central agricultural belt has been hosting pilgrims seeking the Holy Spirit's renovation in their lives.

Since April, Jubilee has become the focus of growing attention as—it is claimed—God began unleashing His power. The Holy Spirit has been pouring Himself into people's lives, resulting in conversions, healings and deliverance, according to evangelist Joe Cicchino, whose planned two-week crusade at Jubilee was extended indefinitely.

"This church has become a fountain of cleansing," said Cicchino, a former business executive who quit the rat race to start Oklahoma-based Vision of Love ministries. "This is not just about healings. It's about repentance, restoration, reconciliation and moving into God's heart of unconditional love," he said.

In Tulare—a farming town of 40,000 about 170 miles north of Los Angeles—the nightly "visitations" at Jubilee have caused quite a stir. The community was soon buzzing with talk of "miracles and people falling over," prompting local TV and newspaper reporters to investigate.

Why Tulare? Jubilee pastor Ken Bowman admitted he's nonplused. A quiet, unassuming man, Bowman told Charisma he received a prophecy last September that his 50-member church would be "visited by God" and that the effects would ripple around the world.

Seekers have come from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Some say they've been physically healed; others, delivered of emotional hurts. Many have come to bask in God's presence, Bowman added. "People are falling in love with God and getting to know Him intimately."

Every evening up to 200 people have crammed into the small sanctuary with the pews pushed back to create space for those who Cicchino said fall under the power of God. "There's no preaching, no offering, no introductions," he explained. "God's presence is so intense."

Rebeca Gomez has lived in Tulare for 37 years. Almost two years ago, an accident left her blind. Since Cicchino prayed over her, Gomez said her sight has gradually returned. Recently she was able to see her grandchild for the first time, she added. "Before, I could see only darkness, but God opened my eyes."

Another Tulare resident, Esther Slape, said God healed her deafness. "I was stone-deaf. ... All I could hear was a distant hum. Now I don't even need to wear a hearing aid." Slape said she also experienced spiritual healing. "Nothing compares to the deep peace I feel."

When Steve Halberstadt heard about Jubilee, he traveled across country from Ocala, Fla. Three weeks later, he was still in

Tulare. Halberstadt said he no longer needed his prescription medications because God healed his diabetes.

Like others at Jubilee, Halberstadt insisted he was not chasing signs and wonders. "I just want more of Jesus," he said. "Right here, He is so vivid, so real."

So real, in fact, that some claimed Jesus appeared to them in the church sanctuary. Others described visions of heaven and angels, or wept as they recalled God's overwhelming presence.

Cicchino, a Rhema graduate ordained by evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne, claimed that almost 400 conversions in a two-month period—along with healings and signs—showed that the Holy Spirit was moving in a remarkable way.

"God wants to consume us with His cleansing fire," Cicchino added. "It's about less of us and more of Him."

Cicchino's wife, Ellen, said that just as California's fertile Central Valley helps feed the nation, "God wants Tulare to feed the world spiritually as well. People are coming filled with pain, and the Holy Spirit is setting them free ... removing the splinters from their hearts."

Tim Vink, pastor of Tulare Community Church, described Jubilee as an answer to prayer. "Several pastors have been praying together weekly for seven years for renewal and awakening in our city," he said. "The outpouring at Jubilee and the launch of the Healing Rooms in Tulare last year are answers to prayer. The kingdom of God is displacing the kingdom of darkness."

Not everyone, however, has been impressed. Bowman said many church members stopped attending when the “visitation” began. Some people have walked out of the church after a few minutes—upset by the sight of those lying on the floor, covered by red sheets. “Others look through the door and say: ‘We want nothing to do with that,’” Bowman added. But he is unruffled by allegations of theatrics. “If we’re acting, we deserve an Oscar.”

Still, many mysteries remain. For instance, why would God choose to visit such a simple, humble church? Cicchino offered his view: “There was no room in the inn, but there was plenty of room in the stable.”

Julian Lukins in Tulare, Calif.