

Michigan Pastor Says His Tattoos Serve as a Witnessing Tool

'Pastor Freak' of Come As You Are Church says his Bible-themed body art has helped him share the gospel

A Michigan minister is using his 150 hours' worth of body art to make a statement of faith.

Known as "Pastor Freak," Steve Bensinger, 44-year-old senior pastor of Come As You Are Church (CAYAC) in Kalamazoo, Mich., says the tattoos—which all have biblical themes—have helped him reach more than 2,000 people with the gospel since 1997 when he founded CAYAC. He also believes they have helped make Christianity more accessible to nonbelievers.

"We accept people for who they are and get to know them," said Bensinger, who pastors the church with his wife of 22 years, Betty. "Telling and showing them a positive side of who God is based on the Word of God. Then when we say we love them, we really mean it."

At 6 feet, 1 inch and 290 pounds, Bensinger is formidable even without his Mohawk, facial piercings and tattoos, which he sports on his arms, back, neck, feet and legs. "By my mere appearance people look at me and want to call me a freak," he told Charisma. "I took their power away and began calling myself freak."

But Pastor Freak also calls himself an evangelist. On his forearm is an image of Jesus on the cross along with John 3:16, and on his leg is a graveyard scene with Bible verses on

the tombstones. Each of the tattoos could have cost Bensinger \$100 to \$200 an hour, but the pastor gets deep discounts.

"Every day people ask me about or comment on my tattoos in admiration or wonder," he said. "That gives me the opportunity to talk about my tattoos, which are all biblical and talk about Jesus, His love, grace and power."

"Most people have an entirely wrong concept of who God is. They look at Him as a big ogre, waiting to judge them and send them to hell. We are trying to go around and show a positive image of Jesus, His love, grace and transforming power."

Tony Bender, large enough to be a bodyguard, is an insurance adjuster who joined CAYAC a few years ago. He says he felt called to pastor, but his former church believed having tattoos was sinful, and Bender has several.

At CAYAC, Bender says he is learning how to use his comic-style tattoos to draw young people into conversations about Jesus. And he says Bensinger is teaching him how to walk in his calling. "I've never walked into a place where I was more loved and welcomed, and I have been a lot of places," Bender said of CAYAC.

Bender says being a Christian is about more than spending an hour and a half in a pew, but about going where the people are. Members of CAYAC reach out to seniors in their community, provide toys for children, assist a local motorcycle ministry and share the gospel at the local mall. "[Store employees] look for us to come and talk to them, listen and take prayer requests," said church member Laura "Wheezy" Owens.

"We are the church, doing what God told us to do," Bensinger added.

For the last 2-1/2 years, Bensinger has been president of the Christian Tattoo Association (CTA), an international ministry for tattoo professionals and enthusiasts founded in 1990. Today, CTA lists more than 100 affiliated shops, with members and branches as far away as the United Kingdom and Australia.

Critics of tattooing often cite Leviticus 19:28, which prohibits tattoos. But Bensinger believes the ban against tattooing is no different from the prohibitions against trimming one's beard or mixing fabrics that are also listed in that chapter.

"When Jesus said it is finished on the cross that meant we now live under grace, not the law," Bensinger said, noting that Revelation 19:16 says, "And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

"It's not about rules but relationship," Bensinger said. "No one is made right with God under the law. We are not harming our bodies or anyone else. The body of Christ should be known for our love. Because of our love for each other we can do what Christ commanded."

Bensinger believes he is impacting those whom the church might otherwise not reach, such as 19-year-old Jenn McGuinness. "I walked in the doors a Roman Catholic, but I walked out a saved Christian," she said.

McGuinness worked as a nude dancer before a friend told her about Bensinger's ministry. "Pastor Freak knew nothing about

me, but preached that you don't have to make a living dancing at DeJaVu [the local adult club where she worked] but that God would provide all my needs," McGuinness recalled. "I gave my life to the Lord that night and have been coming ever since."

LaVenia Jean LaVelle in Kalamazoo, Mich.