

Not Your Grandmother's Pastor

With his tattoos and earring, New York City preacher Rick Del Rio has redefined what it means to be Pentecostal.

Navigating his classic Harley-Davidson motorcycle along congested streets in the East Village of Lower Manhattan, Rick Del Rio, senior pastor of Abounding Grace Ministries, doesn't look like your grandmother's pastor. At 51, he sports a gold earring, goatee, black leather vest, and tattoos on each arm and doesn't apologize for any of them. The tattoos are a living sermon, proclaiming "Jesus Christ Is Lord" and "The Lion of Judah Has Conquered."

"We deal with people nobody wants, so we kind of look like them," Del Rio says. "Like Paul, I am all things to all men so that by all means I might save some."

His brand of in-your-face evangelism fits his turf—a concrete jungle of exotic humanity. Punks, anarchists, Satanists, vampires, bikers, gays, drug addicts, alcoholics, the homeless and seniors rub shoulders with artists and musicians, 20-something professionals and families from low-income public housing. The Hells Angels motorcycle gang is headquartered nearby.

Founded in 1982, Abounding Grace shares space in the First Ukrainian Assembly of God on East Seventh Street near the Bowery, Manhattan's Skid Row. The multiracial church is a flagship for creative inner-city evangelism programs that work. Every year the ministry touches thousands of lives.

Says Del Rio: "Our church is a clinic where the sick and broken can come."

Jesus Loves New York

Del Rio's vision for the inner city dates back to his youth. Raised in Brooklyn, he attended a strict, Spanish Pentecostal church where all-night prayer meetings and evangelism were routine. "I would go out with the youth and at 7 to 8 years old would pass out tracts on the subway stations and in trains," he recalls. "The Lord used that to stir me up and get a ministry going that would take Jesus to the streets where the people were."

However, at age 11 he strayed from the faith and rebelled against religion because of the gossip and backbiting he witnessed among Christians. When he was 16 he repented and asked God to forgive his sins.

"My understanding was that God was there, but I really didn't know Him personally until someone began to tell me about a relationship I could have with Jesus," he says.

He entered the ministry through the back door. After graduating from Zion Bible Institute in Barrington, Rhode Island, in 1973, Del Rio founded a construction company in Staten Island, New York.

Not wanting to do "the basic preacher thing," Del Rio instead traveled the layman's route and became active in his local church as well as Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International. In 1981 the Holy Spirit impressed him to get serious about reaching the lost.

The prompting led him to ask the New York police to identify

the worst crime spots in the Lower East Side. He took their advice and hit the streets with his wife, Arlene, and their three sons. They bought a beat-up Ryder rental truck and outfitted it with a sound system, pull-down stage, and large hand-painted sign that read "Jesus Loves You New York."

"The kids would pass out tracts and T-shirts, and I would play music and speak from the truck," he says.

Del Rio funded the fledgling ministry from his business income and enlisted a team of like-minded Christians to help him. "We were not a glamorous ministry, so we didn't have any support—but that didn't bother us," he says. A year later he gave the business to an employee.

"I walked away from the whole thing and just decided to trust the Lord," he says. "And it's been a walk of faith ever since."

A Street Team Is Born

Abounding Grace Ministries became an official church in 1992. The first service, held in a basement apartment on Sixth Street, attracted 20 worshipers. Four years later Del Rio and his family moved into the same building, where he still lives today. The ministry moved to its current location on Seventh Street in 1998.

Del Rio shuns ego-massaging. He shares the ministry with his wife, sons Jeremy and Jonathan, and associate pastors Joe Maldonado and Rick Jaruczyk.

"My heart is to make everyone around me better than me," he says. "The glory I get is that my sons can preach better and my spiritual sons do better than me."

Maldonado, 51, joined the ministry in 1996 when Del Rio recruited him from Tampa, Florida, where he pastored a church of 400 members. He had pioneered a church once in Lower Manhattan and had served on the pastoral staff of The Brooklyn Tabernacle. Del Rio made an appeal to Maldonado that spoke to the Tampa resident's past.

"In the neighborhood where you were born and raised there are people dying and going to hell," Del Rio had pleaded. "And what are you going to tell Jesus?"

Maldonado knows the East Village well. Before God changed his life, he was a hopeless drug addict and president of a violent street gang.

"Rick and I go back 30 years," he recalls. "We respect each other. We love each other. I know who he is in Christ, and I know his gift and his calling, and he knows my gift and my calling.

"We're a team, so nobody gets the accolades. The only person who gets that is Jesus Christ and He alone. We hide in the shadow of the cross."

Jaruczyk guides worship and music programs for the ministry. He was recruited from the staff of The Brooklyn Tabernacle and hasn't looked back since. "We have a special relationship," he says about his two brothers in Christ. "There's no competition."

The ministerial staff shares a rare unity. "I've worked very hard at not being insecure," Del Rio says. "I've found my identity in Christ so that I don't have to worry about whether this one is going to take over or that one is going to take over."

The congregation of Abounding Grace numbers about 400. Programs include a Christian coffeehouse, youth outreaches, evangelistic events, block parties, after-school learning programs, creative arts and a 90-acre camp—Grace Ranch—in the Catskill Mountains.

The annual budget for the church and 11 staffers is \$550,000. Nobody gets rich. Only two years ago the staff started receiving medical benefits. Del Rio earns a modest \$600 a week and is provided an apartment.

Seeking Cochise

Evangelizing in the inner city is a spiritual adventure. A gang of bikers called Satan's Sinners hassled Del Rio and his outreach team while they were setting up sound equipment for a week of street meetings. When 10 members of the gang passed through the team scowling and cursing, Del Rio sensed he should reach out to the bikers.

Obeying God, he says, Del Rio jogged up to the last gang member and tapped him on the shoulder.

"My name is Pastor Rick—what's your name?" he stammered. The young tough turned his head and flashed an angry glance at Del Rio.

"I want to talk to you guys," Del Rio said. "I'll be around here." Ignoring him, the gang members kept walking.

During daily chapel services the outreach team prayed earnestly for the gang. On the last day of the meetings, Del Rio stood on the stage of the outreach truck and led the crowd in a Spanish chorus "Manda fuego, Señor" ("Send the Fire, Lord"). Immediately after he finished the song, a bright orange flame shot 40 feet into the air and engulfed a cluster of jerry-built shanties in a nearby vacant lot.

Fire trucks appeared within minutes. Del Rio rushed to the scene and learned that the fire was destroying the headquarters of the Satan's Sinners. Gang members scuffled with the firefighters and police officers.

Meanwhile, Del Rio befriended Tito, one of the gang members, and attempted to meet the gang's president, Cochise. Del Rio eventually would—after several tries—meet Cochise, who would tell him that since the day of the fire Tito had been murdered and his body left in a Brooklyn park. Del Rio also would learn that many years before Cochise had given his heart to Jesus while serving prison time.

Several months after the two men met, Cochise and a cohort were arrested for stabbing two young women and throwing them into the East River. Miraculously, the women survived. Cochise was sentenced for the crime.

While in jail at Rikers Island, Cochise repented and was filled with the Holy Spirit. Currently he is serving 10 to 30 years in prison and is certified by Chuck Colson's Prison

Fellowship as a chaplain.

During another street meeting, Del Rio shared Christ with a prostitute while her pimp hovered nearby, a pistol stashed in his jacket. "Aren't you tired of having your pimp push you around?" he asked her.

Spotting the weapon, a Christian friend prayed for Del Rio's safety. Del Rio, ignorant of the danger, confronted the man, who left without causing trouble.

Because of Del Rio's connections in the streets, the police call him regularly to help defuse potentially explosive situations. He once coaxed 12 gang members to his apartment to prevent a retaliatory gang war after one of their friends was murdered. His wife made hot chocolate and sandwiches before they arrived.

"I prayed with them and let them vent," he says. "I didn't say, 'Don't curse,' and I got to build relationships. We defused the situation."

Glamour Not Included

The Del Rios open their home to the needy. People are always coming or going. At one time, in addition to their own children and three dogs, they had seven young people living with them. Some slept on sofa beds in the living room and others on bunk beds in closets. Mei Ling Garcia and her sister joined the Del Rio family when the girls' mother was terminally ill.

"He is the coolest pastor I know," Garcia says. "I love him to death."

Once, when leaving his apartment for a street meeting, Del Rio and a youth team passed a shirtless man without legs slumped in a wheelchair. The man was filthy and sweaty. "He looked so nasty," Del Rio says. "He had maggots on his knees and open sores on his stumps."

"The Lord quickened my heart," Del Rio says. Carrying the man to his home, they bathed him, cleaned his sores and gave him fresh clothing. "We put him down on an air mattress, and he slept for 20 hours," Del Rio says. "There's no glamour. You just do it."

Abounding Grace has helped turn around numerous lives. Before accepting Christ as Savior more than four years ago, Edgar Nieves, now 20, was a member of the notorious Latin Kings gang. He sold drugs, carried a pistol and shot people.

The gang was a way for him to escape from a dysfunctional family. His mother was a heavy-duty drug addict, and since age 9 Nieves had endured a merry-go-round of foster homes. "My whole life was twisted around," he says.

Del Rio reached out to him on many occasions. "I deeply respected him," Nieves says. "He had a great love for the people no matter how I was dressed. He always came down with his Harley and always asked how come I don't go to church. He was just real."

While Nieves was assigned to a court-mandated program, he was invited to and attended a church service in a park by the East

River, where he cried out to God for mercy and deliverance. Soon after, Del Rio invited him to live at the church. Today he is a youth leader and an outreach coordinator.

“I love the Lord so much,” he says. “I just want to live my life for ministry.”

But the story continues. Nieves’ mother, Marilyn Martinez, gave her heart to Christ recently and attends the church now.

“My son introduced me to Abounding Grace,” she says. “I started looking for God, and I found Him here. This is like a little house of miracles. I’m not doing drugs anymore. It’s wonderful to serve Jesus.”

The Future Is Evangelism

Despite his free-spirited personality, Del Rio doesn’t consider himself a Lone Ranger minister.

“I’ve never been out there as a loner,” he says. “Besides my wife and sons, I’m accountable to my associate pastors and other pastors in the city. They all hold my feet to the fire.”

In May 2003 he joined the Assemblies of God (AG) as an ordained minister. “I never thought the AG wanted me because my style is very different,” he says.

He admits to shying away from denominations because he needed the freedom to do what God called him to do. Nonetheless, he says he respects the AG “as an organization more so because

I've gotten to know the people. It's more relational now."

Like any other pastor, Del Rio is not immune to discouragement. He had to learn to live as if ministry were no option.

"It's my life, so that helps against discouragement," he says. "I just want to be pure, with no agenda other than what Jesus wanted in dealing with His kids." It hurts him when people turn away from God. "It's disappointing when someone leaves the Lord," he adds.

Others have ripped him off or bad-mouthed him in the neighborhood.

"I've had people I've invested my life into curse me out in front of the church, screaming because I corrected them," he says. "And then when they come to their senses, they will call me and apologize. I just take them back and forgive them. I have made it a practice that we don't take abuse personally."

How does Del Rio cope? What keeps him steady?

"You have to practice talking to the Lord all day long," he says. "You have to take time to be in the Word. But a personality like mine that's always doing—that's my biggest struggle. I don't love people just because I'm a nice guy. I know that it is God who has empowered and enabled and given me that grace."

For Del Rio, the future means more evangelism. He'll continue taking the hope and compassion of Jesus to more people in

Lower Manhattan. Although he doesn't expect to leave the planet anytime soon, Del Rio wants his gravestone to read, "He poured his life into those whom Jesus loved."

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