

Revival Hits North Carolina Methodists

A wave of miracles hit a Methodist church in New Bern, headquarters for occultism

The city of New Bern, N.C., has long been a center of spiritual activity—but not the Christian variety. Once a major headquarters for followers of Wicca, a neo-pagan religion, the sleepy seashore town is being stirred by visiting evangelists.

Revival services with sightings of heavenly “gold dust” and other unusual phenomena are occurring at two New Bern churches, including a United Methodist congregation that normally is not associated with revival miracles. Ralph Brown, pastor of Faith Methodist Church, says the gold dust and miracles are “blessed addendums” but not the priority at his church.

“That’s not the major joy—the major joy is the changed lives,” Brown told Charisma. “We’re seeing people saved and healed and delivered and made whole. We’re not concentrating on signs and wonders—we’re concentrating on King Jesus.”

Living Word Church in New Bern, pastored by Glenn Garland, has also experienced gold dust, and members also say they have seen feathers and even small diamonds fall from midair during worship services.

Living Word, which meets on the sixth floor of the local Days Inn, began in 1997 with just four members. Although it is still small, as many as 300 have attended their conferences. The occasional attendance by local witches does not intimidate the Garlands. "We believe we're going to win this city, and we believe it's going to begin with the witches," said Garland's wife, Davene.

New Bern, Brown said, was headquarters for Blackbeard the Pirate and later a central depot for slave traders. The town has always been considered as a strong seat of demonic activity, he noted.

Gavin and Yvonne Frost, authors of The Witches Bible, opened the Church of Wicca in New

Bern in the early 1970s. But as the Holy Spirit has moved in with signs and wonders, it seems the Wiccan presence has receded, pastors say. There are still witches in New Bern but the Frosts no longer live there.

Brown said he grew up in the Pentecostal Free Will Baptist Church, "but it did not take." After going to college and leaving church, he became a Christian in 1976. He got involved in a Methodist church in Greenville, N.C., which he later pastored. Brown attended Oral Roberts University and felt called to be an "evangelist of the Holy Spirit" in the United Methodist Church.

"That was amazing to me because I knew so little about the Holy Spirit and was not baptized in the Holy Spirit," he said. Brown said not only was he not interested in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he "outright shunned it." That changed in 1986 when his son Phillip, then 2 years old, fell into a

septic tank. The doctor told Brown and his wife, Jeannie, that Phillip was expected to die that night.

Brown cried out to God for help. The Holy Spirit that Brown had rejected now filled him, and he began to pray in tongues for the first time. The next morning, the doctor came in and said the child's lungs were "as clear as mine and there's no explanation for it," Brown said.

They were later told that through the years, 12 children had fallen into septic tanks and every one had died. Phillip never even developed a symptom. From then on, Brown began preaching about the Holy Spirit's power and developed greater spiritual hunger.

When Brown began pastoring Faith Methodist in 1995, he thought he was stepping into

a healthy situation. But he found a church that struggled financially and spiritually because its congregation was divided.

"Nobody trusted the committees, the boards. They didn't trust one another and least of all they didn't trust the pastor," he said. As manifestations of the Holy Spirit began to occur, some church members became disgruntled. "There was one precious brother who made the public statement that there was no place for the Holy Spirit in a worship service," Brown said.

But as some people left, others came and the Holy Spirit continued to move. Last November, Brown went to France with Virginia-based revivalist Ruth Ward Heflin. That was the first time he saw flecks of gold dust—a phenomenon that is often

reported in her meetings.

“I believe that the closer we get to the coming of Christ, the more signs and wonders we will see,” Brown said. “The gold dust was not such a huge shock to me. In the Old Testament, the bridegroom would adorn the bride with gold right before the wedding. It could just be the Lord is doing this as a sign to His bride right before the rapture.”

Although his congregation had already experienced “holy laughter,” some members weren’t sure what to think of the gold dust. While attending a meeting with Brazilian revivalist Silvania Machado, Brown’s minister of music “just got up with her husband and ran out of the meeting, she was just so overwhelmed.” Later at Faith Church, gold dust began appearing on the music leader when she began worship. She would wash it off, but it would come back when she began worshiping God, he said.

“It was perplexing to some of the people but as it began to happen to them, it was undeniable,” he said.

Sam Wynn, the United Methodist district superintendent for the area, regularly attends Faith Church. “This is probably the most radical thing that has happened in the Methodist Church in this decade,” Wynn said. “It’s unheard of.”

Both Wynn and Brown point out that the roots of Methodism are also the roots of revival.

“All of the Holiness movements came out of some form of Methodism, and we’ve moved out of that. I believe this is God’s way of bringing us back,” Wynn said.

“I like to think of the Methodists as a barometer,” Brown said. “If you see the Methodists getting happy in the Holy Spirit, you know it’s a move of God.”

—Richard Daigle in New Bern, N.C.