

Rod & Reel Faith

Something fishy was going on at Celebration Church in Lakeville, Minnesota, on this cold winter night. With the temperature outside in the 20s, 1,100 fishing enthusiasts had gathered at the Assemblies of God church in the Minneapolis suburb.

They weren't there for a worship service, however. They had come for Celebration's fourth annual Wild Game Feed and Fish Fry. The free event featured a menu of roasted bison and fried cod fillets prepared by 18 cooks.

Although the atmosphere was fun, festive and relaxed—with a country-music band and well-known angler Al Lindner speaking to the fishermen—the dinner was first and foremost evangelistic.

"Jesus said, 'Come, follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men,'" said Celebration Church pastor Lowell Lundstrom, quoting Matthew 4:19. "As a congregation, that's what our Wild Game Feed is all about. We are reaching fishermen who will never darken the door of a church. The Wild Game Feed and Fish Fry is a great hook for the gospel."

He estimates that 600 of the 1,100 who came for the outreach weren't from his church, and approximately 50 percent were nonchurchgoers. At the end of the event, 200 men and boys accepted Christ. The game feed is just one of the unconventional methods used by Celebration to bait fishermen into encountering God.

A growing number of churches, fishing ministries and parachurch groups nationwide are targeting unchurched anglers and outdoor enthusiasts—people outside the typical church's radar. Although fishing is considered a summer activity, these groups hold outreaches year-round.

Terry Chupp, founder of Team Jesus Ministries, which uses fishing, hunting and other recreational activities for evangelism, says sportsmen are one of the most overlooked mission fields in the United States.

"In fishing, you don't catch the fish in your own bathtub," says Chupp, 63, an ordained Southern Baptist minister and former professional bass fisherman. "You have to go where they're at. If there's no cast, there's no catch.

"It's the same way with fishermen," he adds. "You have to go where they're at—and there are plenty of fishermen to catch out there."

Indeed, recreational anglers are not an endangered species in America. The U.S. National Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that there are approximately 50 million sport fishermen in the United States.

According to the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, fishing is one of the country's favorite outdoor pastimes, with anglers outnumbering golfers and tennis players combined. A survey by the U.S. National Fish and Wildlife Service found that freshwater and saltwater anglers spend about \$35 billion a year on fishing trips, equipment and other items.

Fishing's popularity has also caught on as a legitimate

competitive and spectator sport. The Alabama-based Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS), a 38-year-old organization that runs bass-fishing tournaments around the country, has more than 600,000 members, making it the largest fishing organization in the world.

The BASS Masters Classic, which is considered the Super Bowl of fishing, can draw as many as 25,000 fans and has transformed professional bass fishing into a big-league sporting event. In an era when TV ratings for many sports are declining, professional bass fishing has enjoyed a 90 percent rise in viewers since 2001. During last year's BASS Masters Classic in July, ESPN devoted more than 11 hours of coverage to the event.

In addition, well-known bass pros such as Jimmy Houston and Shaw Grisby are dedicated Christians who host popular fishing programs seen by thousands. The success of BASS has spawned fishing ministries that evangelize, disciple and encourage bass anglers.

In 1983, Houston started the Fellowship of Christian Anglers Society (FOCAS) primarily as a Bible study group for several professional fishermen competing in bass tournaments nationwide.

Based in Arkansas, FOCAS today boasts 8,000 members, with 128 chapters in 25 states. A spokesperson for the group says thousands of anglers have accepted Christ because of the organization.

Launched just seven years ago, South Carolina-based Fishers of Men (FOM) already has more than 3,800 members in 25 states.

Focusing on outreach evangelism, the group seeks to make converts at bass tournaments while fishermen “compete for cash, prizes and recognition in an environment unlike any other.” Founder and national director Al Odom says the ministry has witnessed more than 2,500 professions of faith.

“We use fishing as a lure, pardon the pun,” Odom says, “to draw men into an environment where they can experience the life-changing power of a relationship with Jesus Christ.”

FOM is interdenominational, with different churches hosting Friday night pretournament meetings. Participants receive a free meal, door prizes and an inspirational message.

After hearing about Fishers of Men, Orlando, Florida-area resident Danny Moseley and his fishing buddy, Bill Bloomfield, began attending the group’s meetings and tournaments last year with their wives. The Moseleys and Bloomfields, who are nonchurchgoers, were moved by the testimonies and minisermos they heard.

“After one of the meetings we filled out the cards at the end, saying we had questions about Christianity,” Carol Moseley, 56, explains. “Later we all talked about how we felt emptiness inside.”

In February 2004, both couples accepted Christ. The next month they were baptized at a Baptist church they had joined. “I thank God for the Fishers of Men for bringing me to Him,” Danny, 57, says with tears in his eyes.

Bill Bloomfield, 58, who was raised Baptist, agrees. “It’s brought all four of us closer,” he says. “It’s a different

feeling. Our lives are different because of God.”

Carol notes that FOM members display Christ’s character. “They’re not about empty words,” she says. “They practice what they preach. It’s the first time I’ve felt comfortable and welcome in fishing tournaments.”

Paula Bloomfield, 64, who was raised Catholic like the Moseleys, adds: “I’ve never been interested in fishing. Now I look forward to and can’t wait for the meetings.”

FOM member Phil Greathouse, 57, says the ministry challenges him in his walk with God. “They’re on a mission, which causes the rest of the Christian anglers to have the same mission,” Greathouse told Charisma while eating a meal of fried fish, hush puppies and cheese grits during a Fishers of Men meeting at a Southern Baptist church in Sanford, Florida.

His involvement with FOM prompted him to invite David Pace to Fishers of Men. Pace, 40—who had not attended church for years—eagerly accepted the invitation because he wanted “to get back on the right track.”

“After I started attending, I began reading the Bible and listening to Christian radio,” says Pace, who admits that he’s still spiritually seeking. “I wouldn’t be doing that if it wasn’t for this group.”

Having fished secular tournaments, Pace says he has also noticed FOM’s positive environment. “The anglers are more polite here,” he says. “It’s a different atmosphere. You can feel it from day one. It’s not all fishing. They’re about God first.”

Jesus and the Fishing Scene

Leaders of fishing ministries say faith-based angling groups are as natural as, well, fish in water. They point out that the New Testament is replete with references to angling and that Jesus often taught and performed miracles with fishing as the backdrop.

“Eight of Jesus’ 12 disciples were fishermen. I don’t think that was a coincidence. God had a plan, and that was to use fishermen to bring His Word to people,” says Jim Grassi, who started California-based Let’s Go Fishing Ministries in 1981. The outreach holds outdoor activities to strengthen families and encourage spiritual growth.

Grassi, 62, an ordained minister through the Evangelical Church Alliance, notes that Christ related well to fishermen. He cites passages such as Matthew 17:27, in which Peter catches a fish with a coin in its mouth, and John 21:6, in which Jesus tells His disciples which side of their boat to throw their nets on.

“[Jesus] realized that many of the principles, methods and techniques used in relating to people on a spiritual basis are very similar to those used in fishing,” Grassi writes in his book *Heaven on Earth*. “By showing the disciples how to apply His teachings, they could then pursue the ultimate challenge—becoming fishers of men.”

Bass-fishing pro Jay Yelas notes that fishing is a sport that requires a lot of faith. “Faith, not even faith in Christ, is a prerequisite for being a good fisherman,” says Yelas, 39,

who along with fellow Christian, Mark Davis, is the only BASS fisherman to win Angler of the Year and the Masters Classic in the same year. "That's probably why many of Jesus' disciples were fishermen. They weren't all Doubting Thomases. They had faith to be fishermen. And God is still calling fishermen today."

Minnesota's most famous angler, Al Lindner—a long-time member of charismatic Agape Christian Church in Brainerd—agrees. "The Holy Ghost is moving in the sport-fishing industry like I've never seen before," says Lindner, 61, who founded the In-Fisherman media empire with his brother, Ron, in 1975. He sold the company in 1998.

Lindner, who today hosts Lindner's Angling Edge, a TV show with a Christian message, believes fishermen are open to the gospel because of their surroundings.

"When you're out on the water, it breaks down barriers unlike anywhere else," explains Lindner, who became a Christian through Lowell Lundstrom's ministry. "When you're looking at the magnitude of God's creation in the outdoors, you are faced with the fact that someone made them. I think most fishermen don't deny God's existence. This is why I believe fishermen are potentially one of the greatest segments of society for churches to reach."

Lindner, who co-authored with his brother Ron the faith-based fishing book *First Light on the Water* in 2003, says outreaches such as wild-game feeds, angling seminars, and father-and-son fishing outings are effective ways to evangelize.

"Everywhere I go, these outreaches always work at reaching

people for Christ,” notes Lindner, who has spoken at fishing-related events at churches for more than 20 years. “Every year I get more requests to be a part of them. Churches are getting hooked because it’s a very effective, non-threatening way to reach people.”

Lundstrom, 66, an avid fisherman for 50 years, concurs. Besides his church’s wild game feed, Celebration annually puts together a fish fry and other fishing-based events that attract hundreds of anglers, many of them unsaved.

So what can an average church do to get started in order to reach unchurched fishermen? Lundstrom says a congregation doesn’t have to spend \$14,000, the cost for Celebration’s annual winter game feed.

For a game feed, he recommends bringing in a fishing personality such as Lindner, quality musicians and “the best cooks” the church can find.

“Don’t allow the outreach to feel like a church service,” Lundstrom says. “The key is to create an atmosphere of fun—but not water down the message.”

Tackle-Box EVANGELISM

Terry Chupp has learned a lot about evangelism from his favorite sport.

Former professional fisherman Terry Chupp loves to fish, but the evangelist loves to reel in lost souls even more. Chupp, founder of Team Jesus Ministries, an evangelistic organization

based in Atlanta, fished in Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS) tournaments for 27 years. He retired from pro fishing in 1999 to enter full-time ministry.

“When the Lord impressed upon me to retire as a pro, I didn’t retire from fishing for men, women and children,” the ordained Southern Baptist minister says. Chupp has seen thousands come to Christ, including famous pro anglers Jay Yelas and Shaw Grisby.

“The average pro fisherman casts his lure an average of two to four times per minute,” explains Chupp, 63. “Over a 10-hour day, that’s 2,400 casts to try to catch five fish. That’s a lot of rejection.

“Even though I’m faithful in sharing Jesus with everyone I can, not everyone is going to get caught on the first cast,” Chupp adds. “But all I do is make the cast. The Holy Spirit sets the hook, and Jesus does the cleaning.”

Although he has been retired from BASS for six years, Chupp says many of the pros still contact him.

“These fishermen travel all over the country, and they don’t have a pastor,” says Chupp, who speaks at church events and organizes Christian fishing tournaments. “They call me because they know that I won’t patronize and say what they want to hear. All I’ve tried to do is love these guys enough.”

He says when he was on the BASS tour, a large part of his ministry was “ministering to the guys in the parking lots while they’re working on their boats and tackle and drinking beer.”

"I had to earn their friendship so I could earn the opportunity to share Christ," he says. "I've had some who I've been working on for 30 years, but I don't give up."

Grisby, 49, a professional angler for 20 years who was baptized by Chupp in 1991, adds: "The secret to catching bass and being a witness to bass pros is patience. Let the bait do the work in fishing, and let Jesus do the work in fishing for men."

Yelas, 39, who won the BASS Angler of the Year and the Masters Classic in 2002, says bass pros are "a tough nut to crack," when it comes to the gospel.

"Most of these guys are so into performance and competing," says Yelas, a bass pro for 18 years. "There's a lot of pride and ego. It's a challenge to witness to the other pros, but we do it."

Yelas estimates that of the more than 200 anglers who fish BASS tournaments, 40 are committed Christians and 20 percent are outspoken about their faith.

"It's not a revival, but there's a new generation of believers, guys in their 20s, who are pretty bold about Christ, which is exciting," says Yelas, who also was baptized by Chupp, in 1993.

Chupp adds: "I think today you will hear more professional fishermen brag on Jesus than any other group of pro athletes."

Fishing Ministries

Fishers of Men:

877-347-3585

Al Lindner:

218-829-9500

Team Jesus Ministries:

770-554-8448

Let's Go Fishing Ministries:

925-362-1433

Fellowship of Christian Anglers Society:

Jay Yelas:

Shaw Grisby:

Eric Tiansay is editor of CharismaNow (). He attended a Fishers of Men meeting in the Orlando, Florida, area to write this article.