

5 of the Fastest-Growing Churches You've Never Heard Of

Other Christian magazines annually report on the “fastest-growing churches in America.” Churches like New Spring in Anderson, South Carolina; Church of the Highlands in Birmingham, Alabama; Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California; Gateway Church in Southlake, Texas; and Citylife Church in Tampa, Florida, have all received their just due for packing 'em in every Sunday and winning souls for the kingdom.

But what about those church plants—ones that you might not quite be familiar with—that Jesus has blessed with phenomenal growth in a short period of time?

One of those churches “fearlessly” meets in a nightclub in downtown Los Angeles—complete with, dare we say it, stripper poles. Another started out in a laundromat, with members putting quarters in machines and paying for other people's laundry, and wound up in an Irish pub.

In a society when many churches are either on the decline or have shut down, these churches certainly have hit on a godly formula to attract the unchurched.

Unique Growth

One church met in a nightclub with stripper poles—a venue popular with Hollywood celebrities. Another focused on the “profound mystery” of marriage, encouraging husbands to be the “pastors of their homes.” A third uses a Crossfit gym as its second campus and offers a workout after the service. A fourth is breaking all the rules with love, miracles, long sermons and worship services that allow the gifts of the Spirit to flow. The last started doing free laundry for the less

fortunate, met in an Irish pub and has the blessing of Pastor Jack Hayford, former president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

While their methods and gathering places may be unconventional, they all share a passion for spreading the hope and love of Jesus in highly innovative ways. They are among the fastest-growing churches in America that most have never heard of. Here are their stories:

Fearless Church

From an early age, Jeremy Johnson felt God was calling him to plant a church in one of America's most unchurched areas.

But he never imagined his church would hold services in a nightclub with stripper poles or that it would be featured in a positive light in a liberal, alternative newsmagazine such as *Los Angeles Weekly*.

The idea for this daring and innovative church gelled one day during a prayer meeting in Modesto, California, several years ago when the words of A. W. Tozer came to his wife's mind: "A scared world needs a fearless church."

"My wife (Christy) said, 'What if we call it Fearless?' Something just jumped out to me when she said that because fear had almost dominated my life to the point where I couldn't speak or share the gospel," says Johnson, pastor of Fearless Church, a Los Angeles-based church that has grown from 20 people last year to about 400 now.

"I said, 'God, I'll go out on a limb and tell the whole world. God broke my fear of approval of man, fear of failure and just worry and anxiety. 1 John 4:18 says, 'perfect love casts out fear.' There are actually 365 'fear nots' in the Bible. There is one for every day."

The birth of Fearless Church has its roots in a message

Johnson gave at the funeral of two high school friends who died in a car accident in 1997. Plagued by fear of public speaking, Johnson only gave a “nice little prayer.” Afterwards, several other friends got drunk and got into an accident. When the driver awoke, he mistakenly thought he had killed everyone in the car, walked to nearby railroad tracks and took his life. Troubled that he hadn’t shared the gospel at the funeral, Johnson decided at age 18 to dedicate his life to spreading the gospel and become a pastor.

After graduating from Vanguard University, he spent a decade working as the youth pastor at The House: Modesto church. Then, one day, Johnson had an encounter with God while traveling with the band that grew out of his youth group—Worth Dying For. On the bus ride, Johnson says it felt like “all the sound in the bus (it was very loud) shut off for a second and I felt God speak to me and say that in five years I would plant a church with this band.”

In 2011, Johnson and his family moved to Southern California. Joined by the band and others from the youth group, they held their first service around a bonfire on a Corona del Mar beach.

Unbeknownst to Johnson, it’s the same place where Chuck Smith, founder of the Calvary Chapel movement, baptized hundreds of hippies during the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

“We grew to about 50 people, but the police shut us down,” Johnson says. “The people getting drunk and high all around us called the cops for having church on the beach.”

So Johnson moved his congregation to a coffee shop in Irvine where “God would just show up in such a powerful way that the whole team would be on the floor—just weeping and crying out for souls.”

Next, his congregation moved a rented warehouse in Costa Mesa where he hired a “secular marketing guy.” He challenged them

to “ask your God why He sent you here and who He sent you here for.” “

Motivated by his remarks, the congregation felt inspired to reach those “who are chasing a dream and who have been crushed by a dream.” In May 2013, the congregation relocated to the Belasco Theater nightclub in downtown Los Angeles. Johnson told the manager that he wanted to hold church services there.

“He looked at us like, ‘You’re crazy,’” Johnson recalls. “‘Why in the world would you want to have church here?’ He said, ‘Those are stripper poles over there.’ “

Nevertheless, Fearless Church held its first service at the theater on Pentecost Sunday and the line “went down the street.” The church continued to grow—holding services at locations that doubled as nightclubs frequented by Hollywood stars and music personalities—and moved several times before settling on the Exchange LA at 618 S. Spring St.

Today, less than two years after the church held its first bonfire beach service, attendance averages about 400 each weekend.

The church, which is “super-connected” to Planetshakers City Church in Australia, has a vision see the entire city “come to know the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ.”

“I attribute it to following the will of God and listening to Him even when it doesn’t make sense,” Johnson says.

Koinonia Christian Church

Every growing church is a marriage-building church.

That’s the secret behind the growth of Koinonia Christian Church in Arlington, Texas, a church that exploded from a five-person Bible study a decade ago to a congregation of more than 4,000 members today.

"When you become a marriage-building church, you are pumping health and life into your church which creates the foundation for it," says Jimmy Evans, the founder of Marriage Today, a Texas-based ministry dedicated to restoring the dream of marriage in America. "It creates an inductive atmosphere where people will want to come because they know something great will happen in their relationships."

In 2004, Koinonia pastor Dr. Ronnie Goines, his wife Nikki and three other people started a Bible study in the Goines' family living room. Over the next two years, the Bible study gave birth to what eventually became Koinoinia, a church that had grown to about 70 members by 2006.

But the growth of the church didn't really take off until Nikki came home one day and told her husband about the Marriage Today ministry. They listened to a CD that teaches couples how to have a strong marriage.

"I was blown away by it," Goines says. "We said, 'We have to open this up to our people.' "

The church created what became known as the COMMITTED marriage ministry. COMMITTED is not only designed to "save" marriages, but to make good marriages better.

"Many people mistakenly base the decision to marry on love, but don't realize that love alone is not the basis for a healthy marriage," Goines says. "Many couples are in divorce court every day and still in love. However, if your marriage is based on commitment, even during seasons where love is not felt, a couple is committed to working it out."

The church is modeled after Evans' ministry.

"From our perspective, churches are ignoring some of the biggest issues in society—one of those being the demise of marriage," says Evans, author of *Marriage on the Rock* and co-host of the *Marriage Today with Jimmy Evans* television

program. "People want to be married. It's in their DNA. When you help people be married, you are not trying to push something on them they don't want. They just don't know how."

Goines says it's unbalanced theology for a church to not teach about strong marriages.

"According to Ephesians 5:32, marriage is a profound mystery that is akin to Christ and the church," Goines says. "Therefore a solid understanding of marriage is somehow amalgamated with a solid understanding of Christ."

Initially, only a few couples signed up for the sessions. But as word spread, the meetings soon drew 20 to 30 couples. Over the next year, attendance shot from 100 to more than 400.

"In the midst of that, I discovered there is a big void in the home when it comes to men embracing their roles as husbands and leaders," Goines says.

During the sessions, Goines says men would often tell him that they didn't know how to live the lifestyle of a godly man, but if he asked them about the responsibilities of a pastor they could easily offer a good answer.

"They had a pretty accurate idea of what they expected from me as their pastor," Goines says. "With that discovery, I started to teach men that they are to be the pastors of their homes."

As word of saved marriages began to spread, more and more people started attending the church and going to the COMMITTED sessions. By 2008, the congregation had grown to 2,000 people.

"People are coming to get the real deal on not just on how to be married, but how to enjoy their marriages," Goines says. "We taught men and women how to embrace their roles as God designed. "

Today, the church has more than 4,000 members. Goines says the growth is largely the result of Marriage Today and its initial

generosity in sending the church a year's worth of curriculum, books and DVDs at no charge.

"They sowed that seed into our ministry and now today, as God would have it, I'm scheduled to speak at a Marriage Today conference," Goines says. "I met Jimmy Evans personally. That's an awesome honor for me to be friends with a guy who is responsible not just for our church growth, but also for saving so many marriages in our church."

OneChurch Columbus

Like most church-planting pastors, Greg Ford had many trepidations about the new venture he and his wife Shaylyn had taken on when they moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 2011. They had been trained for this through the Assemblies of God, but building relationships and trust among the community was an entirely different thing.

The Fords' vision was to establish a church that would not only attract Bible-believing Christians but also the unchurched and those who had little knowledge of Jesus. Attracting that type of crowd to church certainly wasn't going to be easy.

As a second means of income, Greg Ford took a job at the front desk of a local Crossfit gym. An athlete himself, Ford soon discovered that he could relate easily to the members of the Crossfit gym and that they were receptive to hearing the gospel.

"I was the morning person, so I'd arrive at the gym every morning at 4:30 a.m. and the doors would open at 5," said Ford, 33, a former youth pastor at Calvary Assembly of God in Toledo, Ohio. "Literally there would be hundreds of people each day that gave me the opportunity to build friendships let people get to know what we were trying to do. You had regular fitness buffs, but you also had professional athletes and former pro athletes that went to the club, and most of these

people weren't going to church."

OneChurch's Crossfit campus—an 8,000 square-foot facility in New Albany—holds services on Sundays at 10:30 a.m. in that gym. Ford says he has about 100 people who call that church their home church, but normally has 50 people in attendance on Sunday. Not only can attendees hear an inspiring message, but they can stay for a free Crossfit workout afterward.

"We define worship in broader terms than some."

OneChurch's Cornerstone Campus in Westerville holds two services on Sunday mornings and has grown to around 600 members. Between the two campuses, OneChurch has attracted both the lost and believers who are new to the faith.

Ford says his biggest thrill is seeing people get saved on a regular basis and then discipling them.

"We've had a lot of turnover, and that's been a challenge. But, it's been exciting to watch our church grow so rapidly," Ford said. "God is really doing some amazing things here."

Redemption Point Church

Redemption Point Pastor Kevin Wallace has a vision to pastor the "most loving church in America"—not to mention one of the more miraculous.

As pastor of a church in Ooltewah, Tennessee, that has grown from 34 attendees at its first meeting in 2000 to more than 1,200 today, Wallace seems to be well on his way to fulfilling that calling.

However, the early years weren't easy. In fact, the pastor of Redemption Point Church says it was "hell on earth."

"This is the part people don't usually hear about," Wallace says. "My 1-year-old son Jeremiah had seven kidney stones in his right kidney. My newborn son and my wife in the first six

months both got spinal meningitis within the same week. I almost had a nervous breakdown. But what catapulted our church into the first wave of explosive, quick growth was that God healed my son of kidney stones, and he healed my wife and newborn son of spinal meningitis.

“Our agnostic doctor confessed that although she didn’t believe in miracles, something had to have happened because the kidney stones disappeared. It was definitely after the church had prayed. And when those miracles happened, the church went from 34 people to about 200 people in nine months. We went into a major revival mode.”

During this time, a number of miracles occurred among members of this Church of God congregation, including a mother with a walker who “threw off that walker and took off trotting around the church without a walker,” Wallace says.

“The church was rather dead, to be honest, when Kevin got here,” says Ron Phillips, the senior pastor at Abba’s House in Hixson, Tennessee and host of the *Ron Phillips From Abba’s House* television program. “He began in his joyful and enthusiastic way to preach the Bible and grew the campus in Ooltewah.

“I’ve never seen a church advance as rapidly as his church. It hasn’t happened because he embraced some modern or contemporary model. It’s advanced because there is a strong presence of God on this young man’s life. It’s obvious he’s gifted by the Holy Spirit, in addition to his own natural talents as a preacher. He’s a great people person and a great man in the pulpit. He seems to attract resources as well that have brought great favor to him.”

Wallace, who received a word of prophecy from Phillips as a youth that he would become “a voice in your generation,” says church growth experts are often shocked by his church’s success “because so many times we do the opposite of what we

are supposed to do to grow.”

“We broke all the rules,” Wallace says.

Instead of giving a 25-minute sermon, Wallace often preaches for 45-50 minutes, and worship services can last for hours.

“It’s almost old-fashioned with a fresh, prophetic sort of focus,” Wallace says. “I don’t like weirdness, but at the same time I think that our churches have gotten so normal that anytime we get back to the Bible everyone thinks we’re abnormal.

“When people come to our church, they may see people fall out on the floors, speak in tongues and there is an interpretation and healings occur. That is shocking to even some Spirit-filled people who come to church, but that is the paradigm that the New Testament church is called to operate in. While some people think that’s abnormal, we think it’s normal.”

In the past, ministers have been told that if they allow the gifts of the Spirit to flourish that their congregations won’t grow, Wallace says.

“But in the Book of Acts every explosive growth season in the church was tied to supernatural and miraculous sorts of activity where God broke in and just did things that only He can do. When He did that, and the people allowed Him to and entire cities and communities were transformed.”

Wallace says the church needs to refocus on the things of God and let the Spirit of the Lord do what only the Holy Spirit can.

“We have seen the limits of what man’s gifts and man’s abilities can produce in the church,” Wallace says. “Whatever we see now is as good as it can get without God restoring true apostolic power and authority. The only thing that I think will revive the church in America is an authentic demonstration of the presence of God and the power of the Holy

Spirit.”

Freedom Church

Freedom Church started with seven friends from his Bible study going to a Laundromat in Chatsworth, California, putting quarters in the machines and paying for everyone’s laundry.

“We did it without any strings attached—just a way to love and serve the community in a really under-resourced area,” says Freedom Church Pastor Justice Coleman. “Over the course of months, we made a lot of friends. I prayed for people, I did a funeral and we did more than 1,000 loads of laundry.

“When it came time to start the church, we had a group of people who were really excited about it. They were like, ‘When are you going to start your church?’ “

In deciding on a place for the church to meet, Coleman thought about a tattoo-covered friend he once invited to church who felt so awkward that he never returned.

“It was then that I realized that the church experience he had was fine—like the pastor did a great sermon and people were welcoming—but it wasn’t good for Jake and he never came back,” Coleman says. “I realized that I wanted to start a church so people would have a place they felt like they could belong before they even believed.”

One day, Coleman approached the owner of McGee’s Irish Pub in Chatsworth to see if he could hold his church services there.

“He didn’t want me to start a church in there,” Coleman says. “He said, ‘I don’t want my bar turning into a church.’ With fasting and prayer and by the grace of God—and the right price—he agreed to rent it out to us.”

The first service was held on Easter Sunday in 2011, and about 100 people showed up.

“We wanted to start a church in a pub because I felt it would be the most comfortable place people who are not Christians to go,” Coleman says. “We were trying to start a church to reach as-yet-not Christians. We were trying to create a church where people can belong before they believe, and an Irish pub seemed like a good place for that.”

Jack Hayford, former pastor of The Church On The Way in Van Nuys, California, where Coleman grew up, says Coleman is an “outstanding young leader, and I’m grateful for his leadership and for what’s occurring over at Freedom Church.”

After meeting at the pub for a while, the church relocated to a middle school and opened a campus in Highland Park near downtown Los Angeles. About 500 people now attend the two campuses each weekend.

“I think people are really hungry for real and authentic faith and real and authentic community,” Coleman says. “The No. 1 thing I hear from people when they take a survey or are talking about the church is that it just felt real. We are talking about real stuff every week that is very practical.”

7 more churches in America experiencing rapid growth

Here’s a look at some more rapidly growing churches in America:

1) The Fellowship Church, Antioch, California (ARC) – For the better part of seven years, The Fellowship Church, established in 2003, stayed stagnant at around 350 members. Pastor Shaun Nepstad was essentially a one-man band, doing everything from worship to visitation, announcements and preaching.

After much prayer and a new vision, the congregation hit a

growth spurt a little more than three years ago, and Sunday attendance now stands at around 1,500. Nepstad attributes that to the church's faithfulness in serving the community and getting everyone involved as a volunteer.

Gratitude baskets to police officers, free BBQ for the homeless and passing out coffee and donuts to commuters at the local train station are only some of the ways members of The Fellowship Church brings the gospel to the unchurched.

"All of these outreaches are to get people in the church serving," Nepstad says. "I've heard 11 percent of people in the church have the gift of evangelism. So what do the other 89 percent do? We've got to figure out a kind way to reach God's lost kids."

2) New Hope Leeward, Waipahu, Hawaii (Foursquare) – Under the direction of Pastor Mike Lwin, New Hope Leeward, a January 2003 church plant, outgrew the Leeward Community College Theater where it met when it opened. By the end of its first year, it became clear that God had huge plans for the church. It moved into a new home, the Leeward Ministry Center, and the church has grown to more than 1,200 members for that campus.

However, the church has birthed three other campuses, and its attendance numbers have reached 5,000. Three more campuses on the Hawaiian Islands are planned.

3) Abundant Life Church of God, San Antonio, Texas (COG) – A multi-cultural church under the direction of Pastor Eliezer Bonilla, Abundant Life adopted a small-group ministry strategy and started a second all-English service in 2003, shifting its focus from the congregation to the community. The church planted a second campus in 2008, and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the congregation has grown from 200 to 2,000 in less than six years.

The fruit of these gradual changes has yielded four worship services (two in Spanish and two in English) and it has

cemented a growing trend where Hispanic churches are planting English-speaking congregations.

4) Mill City Church, Fort Collins, Colorado (ARC) – Not unlike many others, Mill City Church's small-group ministry is thriving. Instead of meeting at church members' homes, however, MCC has what it calls City Groups, which look to be the hands and feet of Jesus by paying attention to and meeting needs around their families, neighborhoods or workplaces. This outreach has helped MCC in its growth spurt since being launched in 2012.

Mill City Church, under the direction of Pastor Aaron Stern, is a church plant of the Association of Related Churches and has grown to 1,000 members in less than two years.

5) New Hope Church of God, Trenton, New Jersey (COG) – Ranked as one of the most dangerous cities in America, Trenton is where God instructed Pastor Philip Bonaparte to set down roots for New Hope. With one location already in East Windsor, Bonaparte, a doctor by trade, founded a second congregation in Trenton in January 2013 and decided to go full-time as a pastor.

In a little more than a year, the congregation of New Hope has swelled from less than 50 to 500. Among its many outreaches are a food bank and clothing ministry to help the poor and destitute of Trenton. As another testament to its growth, New Hope began a third congregation in Long Branch, New Jersey, in July 2013.

6) Hope Fellowship Church, Frisco, Texas (AG) – In a little more than a decade, Hope Fellowship, which initially met as a church plant at a daycare center, averages 5,500 on Sunday mornings. Pastor John McKinzie chose Frisco to set down roots because of its moniker as one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation.

"We just put up a sign and we initially had 51 people,"

McKinzie said. "It was the only place in the whole city that was open to start a church."

7) TurningPoint Church, Lexington, Kentucky (ARC) – Launched in February 2012, Turning Point Church's congregation has swelled to 1,200 in a little more than two years under the direction of Pastor Josh Mauney with Sunday services at 9:00, 10:15 and 11:30 a.m.

Yet another ARC church plant, TurningPoint's mission is to "help every person we can find their place in God's plan." TurningPoint's Connect Groups, including its Café Team, College Survival Guide, Friday Friends, Men Being Men and Making the Most of Your Marriage, help keep the congregation connected to each other and the community.

Shawn A. Akers *is the managing editor of Ministry Today magazine.*