

Healthy Churches Bolster My Faith in the Body of Christ

With a few pastors falling and many churches dwindling or closing, many Christians are concerned about the state of the church. If you add to that “flaky” charismatics, doctrinal error, compromise and lax moral standards, it’s easy for someone like me, who observes trends in the church up close, to become cynical.

But in a recent three-day span, I experienced three very different expressions of the church in Minnesota, Illinois and Ontario, Canada, that encourage me about the local church. While what I’m writing may seem to be merely personal observations, I believe it’s a snapshot of the church that shows God always has a remnant—and the church is healthy in many places the secular media may not cover or even someone in the church like me may overlook because we’ve “seen it all.”

Minnesota

Last Saturday, I visited River Valley Church in Apple Valley, a church pastored by Rob Ketterling, a high-energy visionary who was mentioned this month in our article in *Charisma* on the Assemblies of God. I ran into him at the AG General Council in early August, where he had a big part behind the scenes and on the platform of moving that denomination in a positive direction.

The Saturday night service was one of 13 services that took place this past weekend on five River Valley campuses. The worship was awesome—as good as when I visited Hillsong in Australia. The service I attended was nearly full. There were about eight babies dedicated with a lot of visiting relatives.

Then Ketterling preached the best sermon I’ve heard on the justice of God, with Jesus as our advocate before the Father.

I told Rob later that his sermon was “cool,” yet he didn’t compromise the gospel. If you follow me on Facebook, I posted a couple short videos this week. The whole service lasted an hour.

Afterward, I met longtime *Charisma* subscribers Bill and Merrlyn Seefelt, who read about River Valley Church in *Charisma* and drove 90 miles to check it out!

Rob then invited me to sit in on a quarterly dinner with his leaders, who laughed and celebrated things like one couple who recently found that they were expecting, and another couple that walked away from a really bad car wreck. Then there were testimonies, like a 30-mile bike ride earlier that day that raised more than \$30,000 for missions and tales of people ministered to by the church—some of them tough cases—who received Christ.

Most of the leaders and most of the congregation are young. Several I spoke with connected the name *Strang* with Cameron Strang (my son) and *RELEVANT* magazine. They seemed happy, motivated and gung ho about serving Christ—like the Jesus people of a generation ago.

I know it’s risky to give a pastor or church a seal of approval. But I’ve known Rob Ketterling for a long time, and I have friends in that church. I wish every church I have visited—and the ones I have not—were as healthy as River Valley Church.

Chicago, Ill.

Let’s compare that hour-long service to the three-hour service I attended Sunday at Crusaders Church on the South Side of Chicago, pastored by best-selling author Apostle John Eckhardt. I got up at 5 a.m. to make the flight to Chicago from the Twin Cities and arrived as the praise and worship began.

The service is like many other predominantly African-American churches—lots of hand clapping and jubilant music complete with praise dancers waving banners. They took the offering by coming forward, and during the sermon, if someone was blessed by what was being preached, they ran forward and put another offering on the platform.

But there was something powerful there that I haven't found in most churches, and I am impressed with the spiritual depth and the discipleship at Crusaders Church. I attended there 10 years ago, and I remember learning that when new converts joined the church, they were told to get a passport, even though many had never been outside South Chicago. That's because the Bible says to make disciples of all nations. The church sends teams all over the world ministering powerfully in what they call prophetic ministry.

Ten years ago, we at *Charisma* saw a couple of self-published books on prayer and asked Eckhardt if we could republish them. A six-book series grew out of the success of his first book, *Prayers That Rout Demons*. When the series passed 1 million sold, it was time to present the author with an award. When I presented it, the people clapped and cheered as if the Bulls had won the NBA championship again. I never saw so many cellphones taking photos! They celebrated with their pastor they love, and they showered some of that love on the publisher who brought it!

Unlike the service at River Valley Church, which was full of the Spirit but carefully scripted, the Crusaders Church service was anything but scripted including praying loudly in tongues. They “decreed favor” regarding jobs, healings and other things. There was prophetic ministry and lots of spiritual warfare—for which Eckhardt is known.

Ontario, Canada

Then there was the “church” up in Ontario, Canada, with 10

businessmen from five states who fly up from a week of great fishing every year on a float plane to a remote lake miles away from any town, road or cellphone tower.

The trip reminded me, in a way, of going with Jamie Buckingham and a dozen men into the Sinai Desert in 1979, where he taught us that for a week we were, in a small way, an expression of the church. Didn't Jesus say where two or more are gathered together, He'd be there?

Even though I'm not known as a fisherman, the men invited me to tag along to go fishing in Canada. Several men are in my small accountability group. A few others were strangers to me until we met at the Canadian border to make our flight.

Our little "church" talked and prayed and encouraged each other all week. Sure, there was some good fishing, and we saw caribou, beavers, a bear and several bald eagles and other birds.

But for a week, we were an expression of the body of Christ, and we ministered to each other. Several were going through difficulties—one had recently been told he had cancer. Others were dealing with enormous business stress. Some were dealing with decisions about succession, leading to retirement. We listened. We advised. We prayed.

In a way, we experienced the sense of community and ministry. Isn't that what the church is all about?



Steve Strang and Rob and Becca Ketterling



From left, Bill Seefelt, Merrlyn Seefelt, Steve Strang and Rob Ketterling

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