

'Scum of the Earth' Outreach Touches Church Outcasts in Denver

People with body piercings, tattoos and wild hairstyles find acceptance and love at a new Colorado church

They're not really the "scum of the earth," but attendees of a church by that name in Denver don't mind being called its members. With their tattoos, body piercings and alternative hairstyles, they are finding acceptance in a setting that's meant to make outcasts feel welcome so they can hear the gospel.

Scum of the Earth began two and a half years ago as a Bible study led by the Christian band Five Iron Frenzy. The church's name isn't meant to be degrading to its members or other churches, according to Mike Sares, pastor of the church.

Rather, it's based on 1 Corinthians 4:11-13: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world" (NIV).

A visit to a Sunday night service finds about 200-plus people stuffed into a coffeehouse. Instead of pews, there's a handful of couches and a large floor space for mingling. Before the service, attendees are invited to a cooking class that's followed by a full buffet for anyone who wants to come.

Everything from grilled-cheese sandwiches to eggplant Parmesan to fettuccini Alfredo is served free of charge. The service includes a message from Sares or Reese Roper, Frenzy's lead singer. Afterward the church becomes a kind of house-party hangout.

The Bible study started out being hosted in band members' homes, but when a larger meeting place was needed, Sares—who pastored several of the band members—offered space at Corona Presbyterian Church, where he was the minister.

He became the host pastor, but Roper continued to lead the study. Eventually Sares suggested it should become a separate church service, but the band's touring schedule made it impossible.

In early 2000, things began lining up. Sares had resigned from the Presbyterian church, and Roper had several months off from touring. So Sares, band members and Bible-study attendees met in Sares' living room to design a church setting that would allow people to be themselves. They wanted kids to be comfortable enough to invite friends like them who wouldn't find traditional service styles appealing.

Anyone is welcome, and Sares said during the last year the congregation of skaters and punks has grown to include a significant number of disenchanted suburban youth.

"We're the church for the left-out and the right-brained," Sares said. "I just hope the suburban kids don't crowd out the rest. So far it looks like a place where they can mix."

In the spring, a trial run of small groups was organized.

Special interests, rather than a particular book of the Bible, was the emphasis.

“We had a girls’ skateboarding small group, people who want to learn Spanish small group, and a propaganda small group [for graphic artists]. They had to do three things: meet together for prayer and study, do a service to the poor, and have fun together. We’re going to start them up again.”

Margaret Feinberg in Denver