

Youth Revival Rocked Arizona Town Until Fearful Adults Intervened

'Scary' Pentecostal-style meetings and bold evangelistic efforts by teens in Yuma turned off some parents and school officials

The sleepy Southwestern town of Yuma, Ariz., is still feeling the effects of an impromptu youth revival that shook spiritual foundations before it was shut down late last year. What started out as a simple revival among the 120-member youth group at Community Christian Church lasted for 12 days and spilled beyond the church walls into the streets.

"It was definitely something that was not normal," said Richard Witmer, who was youth pastor of the church at the time.

Witmer said the youth were ending a 40-day fast in late December when his friend, evangelist Scott Gurule, preached a message titled "The Seven Prophetic Words for 2001." The service was supposed to conclude the revival but instead ignited it.

After the service, Gurule prophesied to the kids and spent two hours laying hands on them and praying for them.

"Kids were weeping all over the packed coffeehouse," Witmer

said. The spark of revival was lit, and the youth, energized and zealous, started sharing their faith wherever they went, often inviting people to the nightly meetings.

Witmer said that as a result many people became Christians. Popular spots for evangelizing included the local shopping mall, restaurants and Kofa High School. There, a couple of students upset school officials when they stood on tables and preached to their classmates during lunch.

Officials told the family of one girl involved in the revival to take her to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist examined the student and concluded there was nothing wrong with her—complementing her parents on how well-adjusted she was, according to Witmer.

The doctor also suggested that the parents allow their daughter to continue attending the youth revival. Instead, the family left the church. Other young people reported that parents and siblings repented and gave their lives to Christ during the revival.

Similar to other recent moves of God, this one had its share of critics. Some parents complained to senior pastor Doug McCallister and expressed concern about the Pentecostal element. Others believed it was cultic.

“We’re not a charismatic church,” McCallister pointed out.

He said the church of some 450 members is conservative and nondenominational. There are a few attending who speak in tongues, and others raise their hands during worship.

"When it gets beyond that it gets a little scary," he said. "Some adults had questions because they weren't used to it. That was a lot more excitement than the adults were used to."

Though supportive of the revival, McCallister said he believed it was best to shut it down because of the friction it was causing in the church among the few parents who were upset. Most of those who complained no longer attend the church, he said.

By the time the revival was stopped, its popularity had extended to unchurched teens in the city.

Shane McAllister worked at the revival with Gurule. Five days after the revival ended, two vans of un-churched teens drove up to the church looking for the "Jesus Party," she said. Disappointed that the revival had been shut down, they got back in their car and drove off.

However, a new revival could be starting in the city soon.

Witmer said he plans to plant a new church in Yuma as a result of the revival. He is expected to name it Generation Church and will be the senior pastor. The new church will focus on reaching young families and college-age people with the gospel.

McCallister was the first person to learn about the new church and although surprised by the decision, Witmer said McCallister is supportive. "We're going out with a blessing," Witmer said.

Witmer, who has a staff of about 12 volunteers, said he hopes to affiliate the church with a major denomination, though declined to name which one because the talks were still in progress. As part of its new identity, the church will hold its main service on Saturday nights instead of Sunday mornings.