

# Beer at Church? What You Need to Know About the Latest Congregational Trend

Martin Luther, the famed 16th-century rebel monk and Protestant Reformer, is known to have had a penchant for a palatable pint of beer. He even once exclaimed, “Whoever drinks beer, he is quick to sleep; whoever sleeps long, does not sin; whoever does not sin, enters Heaven! Thus, let us drink beer!”

Perhaps it should come as no surprise then that the first known congregation founded expressly as a “brewery church” is a Lutheran outpost, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its Florida-Bahamas Synod.

Castle Church Brewing Community describes itself as “Orlando’s newest premier destination brewery” but also makes clear that while beer is its passion, “as a spiritual community, we exist for people first.”

The community is the brainchild of co-founders the Rev. Jared Witt, now its pastor, and Aaron Schmalzle, its president, both in their 30s. The two began sharing their ardor for beer and fellowship in 2014 in Schmalzle’s garage, where he home-brewed, and soon a community of other folks had bubbled up around them. After small groups began to meet in homes, the pair started plans to found their own brew house.

With a church development grant from the Florida-Bahamas Synod and other fundraising, they secured a spot for the brewery in a diverse neighborhood near Orlando’s airport.

Since it opened in October, the community of about 50 has been meeting each Sunday at 11:11 a.m. for worship in the brewery’s beer garden, using apps on their smartphones in lieu of

hymnals. Afterward they enjoy some frothy fellowship.

Jeremy Carnes, 29, started worshipping at Castle Church after moving to central Florida from Milwaukee. “There’s no beer during the service,” he said, “but people hang out and eat snacks together and enjoy a beer and get to know one another over a cold one.”

The brewery offers a sampling of Reformation-themed drafts: Indulgences double IPA, Wittenberg wheat porter (named for the north German town where Luther posted his 95 theses – on the door of the town’s Castle Church) and Katie’s Kölsch ale, memorializing the reformer’s wife, who was also the head brewer in the Luther household. The beer garden and taproom are open throughout the week and support the church and its staff. Said Witt, “We are not trying to get rich off this or anything, but we have to make a living.”

Not wanting the enterprise to come off as a gimmick, the founders have poured serious effort into their brews. The All Saints Einbecker ale, patterned after one of Luther’s favorites, is a unique offering unavailable at even the most niche craft breweries. Schmalzle replicated Luther’s brew by using an open fermentation process based on late Middle Age brewing lore and Luther’s own writings. The result is a yeasty brew that stands out for its funkiness.

“While we make cute references to the Reformation and some spiritual themes,” said Witt, “we knew that if the quality wasn’t paramount we would be dismissed as a novelty pretty quickly.”

While the Castle Church’s spiritual brews may seem novel, mixing beer and religion has a long history.

Sacred sages have been closely connected to liquor since ancient times, evidenced by the deities of divine drafts – from Silenus, the Greek god of beer, to Ninkasi, the Sumerian goddess who slakes the thirst of the world with the fruit of

her bounteous hops. Mexicans recognized Tezcatzoncatl as the deity of drunkenness. Since at least the Middle Ages, European monasteries have produced monkish beers such as Franziskaner and Augustiner. Though no longer brewed by monks, the brands still fly off the shelves the world over.

Christian communities in the U.S. have long used unorthodox means of reaching people who aren't likely to come to a church to find God. "Churches have long used sports ministry, movies and entertainment, music and other pop culture to target a non-Christian audience," said Annie Blazer, associate professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary.

"What's new is alcohol," she said.

A November 2018 report from LifeWay Research revealed that although most U.S. churchgoers say the Bible advises against drunkenness, about 4 in 10 are comfortable with the occasional drink. LifeWay also reported that 41 percent of Protestants say they consume alcohol; 59 percent said they do not.

The fear, according to LifeWay, is that when Christians drink socially, this could cause some people to "stumble or be confused" – morally, one presumes.

Witt said Castle Church has not experienced any strong pushback about the potential pitfalls of blending beer and fellowship, while admitting that "bad stuff happens, sin happens. There's no escape from that.

"We are aware of the things that happen if people drink too much alcohol," Witt said, "but we are hoping that when people get together and share a couple of beers they can talk about dealing with some of the greater dangers in our world committed by people who are perfectly sober."

Perhaps ironically, the temperance movement that urged Prohibition on the United States in the early 20th century

grew in part from concerns of Protestant women who felt unsafe around heavily drinking husbands and other men in the Industrial Age, according to Blazer.

“Women in the early 20th century didn’t have much power outside the home, and alcohol consumption impacted, impoverished and threatened them,” she said. And so, Blazer said, they fought for Prohibition as a means of safety and social justice.

Witt admitted that craft beer tends to appeal more to men than women, but there is a good mix of both at Castle Church.

“We are a mashed-up community of different people,” Witt said. “We have bikers here for meetups and hipsters here to play Settlers of Catan, Puerto Ricans from the neighborhood and suburban moms doing hatha flow yoga on Monday nights.

“We are here to sell beer and stay afloat as a business, but the idea is that we can gather a bunch of people together who would otherwise not show up at our door if we just started a regular Lutheran church here,” he said.

Castle Church’s vision for diversity is what brought Carnes and his wife to the community.

“The brewery aspect didn’t really function into our decision to come here,” said Carnes, the former Milwaukeean. “What mattered is that they are an open and affirming church. And cool, they drink beer together too.

“What that might mean is that this church is open to a different way of doing Christianity,” he added, “but otherwise the beer is just a bonus.” {eo}

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