

Genesis Project Transforms Strip Club Into Church

From breaking up fights between rival gang members as a youth pastor to planting a “church” in a strip club at age 50, Pastor Rob Cowles is—in his words—an unconventional hippie preacher married to a woman who didn’t pray hard or long enough for the right mate.

At a juncture where he might consider joining the retirement group AARP rather than starting down a new ministry path, Cowles is heading up a “church” plant in a renovated dance bar that not too long ago featured naked females.

The neighborhood is a little unorthodox for a traditional church, too, just like the silver-haired Cowles who left his Assembly of God (AG) credentials in an executive office and headed for an exotic nightclub with a big vision, committed followers and a handful of friends in more “traditional” ministry.

Located in an industrial zone, the Genesis Project prefers not to use the word church to describe its mission or presence in a building that nobody thought would ever be anything but a trash pit in northern Colorado.

Formerly called A Hunt Club, The Genesis Project is now a house of prayer with worship and common areas where unclothed women once danced and served booze to cigarette- and cigar-smoking patron. All but their locker room and spaces for a future commercial kitchen, coffee shop and bicycle ministry have been transformed.

Transformation from seedy ground to holy ground at The Genesis Project didn’t stop with the club’s demise in 2013; the former owner and one of his dancers have given their lives to Jesus Christ and are now in full-time ministry.

Purchased last year by an AG congregation in Fort Collins, Colorado, the bar reopened in early February 2015 with tens of thousands of dollars invested by other churches, which bought into the vision for turning it into a non-traditional house of worship and ministry center for people looking to begin anew.

The distinct smell of perfume inside the locker room is a reminder the building was once a night club; the lingering odor is also a sign of God's love for people trapped in less-than-perfect circumstances.

Determined to bring new beginnings to people who've been burned by religion, Cowles and his band of 20- to 70-somethings are committed to transforming a community known for its brokenness and spiritual darkness.

But first Cowles had to experienced a personal transformation, which took several years.

As executive pastor at Timberline Church, a thriving AG congregation in Fort Collins, Colorado, Cowles didn't think too much about people who "don't do church" because of bad experiences with religious people.

That is until 2008, when he listened to a speaker talk about "living bravely in the way of Jesus."

Stirred by the International Justice Mission's message, Cowles wrestled with its meaning for four years while continuing his leadership at the prosperous, Spirit-filled congregation.

Then, in 2012, Cowles was invited to speak at The Genesis Project in Ogden, Utah, where one of his former youth-group members from Colorado Springs had formed a place for people who had given up on church but wanted "real relationships, raw Christianity and church re-imagined."

Cowles says he was "wrecked" by the experience, meeting people who, in the depths of darkness and addiction, were transformed

by relationships with church members and, most importantly, with Jesus Christ.

They were people like Aaron Bekkela back in Colorado, the part owner of the strip bar, A Hunt Club. Alcohol and naked young women—the seedy parts of working alongside his dad and brothers at the family business from the tender age of 12—led Bekkela to Jesus Christ.

Though Cowles didn't know Bekkela at the time, both were undergoing transformation; Cowles was wrestling with “brave, real, raw, relationships and Christianity” as executive pastor at Timberline, and Bekkela was looking for an escape from booze, naked women and the pungent smell of perfume.

Unknown to the “wrecked” Cowles, Bekkela began praying and seeking an exit from A Hunt Club, even visiting Timberlines' senior pastor, Dary Northrup, asking for practical, biblical advice on changing his life and his family's.

As he changed further through relationships with Christians and with Jesus, Bekkela talked to a few pastors, including Northrup, about buying A Hunt Club and transforming it into a church; most thought the idea was divinely inspired.

Northrup and his AG congregation agreed to buy the strip club after it closed in 2013 with money donated by a generous supporter of Timberline and The Genesis Project.

Other churches in northern Colorado, Colorado Springs and Utah contributed tens of thousands of dollars to remake the bar into a house of worship, which will offer culinary training and other job skills to people in need of new beginnings.

“We exist to create space for people to discover new beginnings,” says Cowles, who baptized two women at The Genesis Project's first worship service Feb. 8 in the former bar.

As she stepped into an inflatable tub near the altar, the woman's video testimony revealed a lifetime of sexual, emotional and physical abuse prior to her accepting a friend's invitation to The Genesis Project.

The women are prophetic types of people The Genesis Project intends to help recover from traumatic events that contribute to brokenness in spirit, soul and body, says Cowles. Baptism, he says, represents a new beginning, leaving an old life behind for the new one Jesus Christ brings.

Michelle Ramus, a victim of sexual abuse as a child, was called "trailer trash" by friends who judged her poor surroundings. Healed of childhood traumas through relationships with Jesus Christ, her husband Rick and other sexually abused women, Ramus is preparing to lead a recovery group at The Genesis Project, which already offers support to 12 women in two small settings of six each.

Echoing her pastor, Michelle Ramus says, "The desire of Genesis Project is to embed itself in part of town characterized by brokenness."

Cowles, grateful for chairs donated by The Genesis Project in Ogden, Utah, says if people intend to park their butts in a building while spiritual darkness blankets their city, they've come to the wrong place. They know, he says, their mission is to storm the darkness, invading the gates of hell outside the four walls of their new building. Previously, Cowles and his dedicated band of spiritual warriors met in a coffee shop closer to Fort Collins' financial district.

"We have not signed up to be comfortable consumers who take up chairs at The Genesis Project," says Cowles, who thinks it's ordinary for disciples of Jesus Christ to be called to dark, infested places to love people who feel "unlovely."

Matt Roberts, who leads one of two Genesis Projects in Utah, says the unorthodox movement into places where the smell of

spiritual death is haunting now encompasses Colorado and two “projects” outside New Orleans, Louisiana.

“It’s our project to bathe everyplace we go with the light and life of Jesus Christ,” says Roberts, “and to be haunted by the smell of death around us.”

Roberts isn’t the only one to talk about distinct smells when he talks about spiritual things.

Bekkela, A Hunt Club’s former owner, returned to his old haunt the day The Genesis Project opened—this time to worship God and to remember the stench from which God delivered him.

“Be patient. Whatever mess you have yourself in, you didn’t get there overnight,” says Bekkela who, since walking away from A Hunt Club, has earned a degree in biblical counseling and hopes to use his training to help people begin new lives.

Bringing his wife and children back to The Genesis Project—this time to worship God—begins a new legacy for Bekkela’s family which, he says, understands his pain. Saying the family business “poisoned” a community, Bekkela knows God’s grace is greater than the harm A Hunt Club inflicted on employees and patrons.

At some point, he says, the Bekkela family may chose to call The Genesis Project it’s “church” home so that he can be closer to the people who, like himself, need a new beginning in life with God and others.

A former dancer at the club, Lauren Bedola, recently returned to Fort Collins, telling the small but growing congregation—it went from one to two services in the span of a week—that she’s now in full-time ministry in southern California with One Voice Student Missions.

Bedola’s new beginning after leaving the dance bar didn’t surprise her, she says, because God and the church were part

of her upbringing. Bedola says her employment at A Hunt Club wasn't the best choice she's made, but she retains fond memories of the girlfriends with whom she danced at the bar.

Having completed an intensive discipleship and systematic Bible study program with Youth With A Mission, Bedola is currently in Thailand on a missions trip with OVSM, the California-based high school Christian outreach to student campuses.