

UK's First Atheist 'Church' Wants to Expand Worldwide

The United Kingdom's first atheist "church" is expanding to more than 20 cities across Britain and the world, including New York and Sydney.

Stand-up comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans set up the gathering in January this year, saying they like many aspects of religion but don't believe in God.

Now the pair are embarking on a global tour to visit other congregations that have set up with a similar premise across England, Scotland, the U.S. and Australia.

But Nick Spencer, research director of religious think tank Theos, says similar groups that formed in the 19th century disappeared within a couple of generations.

Spencer says, "The reason for that was because you need more than an absence to keep you together. You need a firm, common purpose."

He says people in these modern-day atheist churches are united by a "felt absence of community."

He adds, "I suspect what brings them together is a real desire for community when in a modern, urbanized, individualized city like London you can often feel very alone. That creates a lot of camaraderie, but the challenge then becomes: What actually unites us?"

The Sunday Assembly meetings follow a pattern of songs, time for reflection and a secular talk.

Ruth Gledhill, journalist for *The Times*, notes that at one gathering, a poem was read and a cup of wine was passed around the congregation while a wine connoisseur spoke from the front

about the “fruits of the vine.”

The founders hope to see 1,000 atheist “churches” worldwide within a decade.