

Gambling For Souls

In one of America's most decadent cities, the International Church of Las Vegas is experiencing renewal and helping thousands find freedom in Christ.

The Las Vegas Strip is bustling with activity on this warm Saturday night. Billboard-size TV screens jutting from casino walls scream their messages in vibrant color: "Barry Manilow!" "Cirque du Soleil!" The Eiffel Tower—or rather a half-size replica—straddles a hotel. Just a few blocks away sit life-size replicas of the Great Pyramid, the Sphinx, Seattle's Space Needle and the Empire State Building—all of which make the Las Vegas skyline look like the work of a mad architect.

Throngs of tourists pack the busy sidewalks and skyways. Some window-shop at elegant boutiques, others squander their cash in cheap trinket shops, and others mob carnival rides and roller coasters. Drunk Americans and overwhelmed foreigners gape at mega-hotels, as men in baseball caps sidle up to strangers and thrust strip-club invitations into their hands.

But the Strip, for all its renown, is only a small part of the Las Vegas area, which boasts a population of 1.1 million. Just a few blocks in any direction the casinos disappear and the City of Lights—which is the No. 1 summer tourist destination in the nation—turns into Anywhere, USA, with a panoply of restaurants, grocery stores and seemingly endless neighborhoods of Spanish-style homes. One local observer even describes the suburban scene as "Midwestern."

In these suburbs, 15 miles from the jingling of coins and the clattering of slot machines, an Assemblies of God (AG) church

stands in stark contrast with the surrounding spiritual darkness. The International Church of Las Vegas (ICLV), which meets in an understated cream-and-salmon-colored building, is home to a revival that is helping to transform the city.

Inside the sanctuary—a vast warehouse with international flags hanging from the rafters—a prayer meeting is in progress, and people are fighting for souls.

“Draw the lost, Lord! Give us a mighty harvest!” cries the worship leader, a young man with spiked blond hair and a shiny black guitar. A handful of people walk the perimeter of the room in earnest intercession, and a hundred more are gathered at the spacious altar area. Some lie facedown, others sit cross-legged, and others kneel.

At times they seem to be engaged in battle, clenching their eyes and fists and belting out the words to a praise song. In other moments there is a peaceful quietness, a softening of the music and a drinking in of God’s presence. Senior pastor Paul Goulet, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, kneels on the front row.

“From the north, south, east and west, bring them in!” associate pastor Mike Richardson prays. “We ask You for a mighty out pouring. We will not rest until, like in the book of Acts, this city is turned upside-down!”

This Saturday evening prayer meeting has been an anchor for ICLV during an amazing season of supernatural visitation. The revival, which is evidence of not only the numbers of people coming to Christ but also the intensity with which the church has pressed into God and reached out in evangelism, is making

an impact on the city. Although one might assume church growth to be automatic in Las Vegas because it is the fastest growing city in the United States, the growth of ICLV has been unusually astounding. Between 40 and 50 people flood the church's altar on a typical Sunday—and for special services the number is even higher.

Goulet says it is simply the power of God drawing sinners to Himself.

“We have been able to mix evangelism with renewal,” says the 43-year-old pastor. “We lay hands on the sick and do all those things, and we’re still growing.”

On Sunday morning Goulet, now in a tie and a crisp white shirt, greets people between services, offering hugs and high fives. He laughs readily and gives the “field goal” signal whenever someone shares a good testimony.

Suddenly the praise music starts, and the congregation quickly chimes in: “Sunrise, I’m gonna praise His Name!” People lift their hands or pump their palms toward the ceiling. Others dance in the aisles or at the altar. “For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised/ ... Magnify and lift Him up!” The song ends with whoops, cheers and laughter.

Goulet takes the stage and calls people forward to intercede for the nations. Teen-agers, each holding a different flag, are stationed across the platform steps.

“Maybe you see the flag of your background up here,” Goulet says. “Does anybody want to see revival spread around the world? Come on, team, let’s call God on His promises.” The

congregation responds with cries of prayer, crowding around the flags until more people are up front than in the seats.

“Begin to repent for America,” Goulet instructs, “for the sins of Las Vegas, the sins of Nevada. I pray for Las Vegas, that every part of the city would be impacted by this revival.”

After 20 minutes of intercession, Goulet draws it to a close. People get off their knees, shake hands with one another and return to their seats.

By the end of the service—after testimonies, a sermon and a drama presentation—people eagerly return to the altar. Sixteen raise their hands for salvation—18 did the same in an earlier service—and hundreds flood the platform to seek God for His power in reaching lost family members. It is well past lunchtime when the meeting breaks up.

Interrupted by the Spirit

Goulet, a French Canadian with a master’s degree in pastoral counseling and psychology, came to ICLV (then West Valley Assembly of God) in 1992, intending to build a seeker-sensitive congregation. But an interruption by the Holy Spirit one Sunday morning in 1994 led them instead toward a Toronto Blessing-style revival marked by supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit, including a large number of physical healings (see related story on page 68).

Initially the change of gears whacked 100 people—one-fourth of the church—from the attendance. But those who remained embraced the new move of God, and the church grew from 300 to 3,000 in just four years. Paul Goulet and his wife, Denise,

believe part of the reason for the growth was Paul's decision to channel the revival into soul-winning efforts.

"Paul started preaching that it wasn't about blessings or falling down or goose bumps or manifestations but about winning the lost," Denise Goulet says. "We were going to take what He had given us—the power of the Holy Spirit—out into the world and give it to people. That is what it's for."

"The more the power flows, the more I have to focus people on the lost," Paul Goulet says. "When we have a blowout service I have to emphasize what it's for. That is the responsibility of pastors and leaders. We don't want to become introverted, or people [will] get jealous of each other, and it becomes about going to the altar for the next experience, not winning people to the Lord."

Las Vegas is a place of new beginnings and tragic endings—the city's suicide rate is twice the national average— and many pastors here see themselves as strategically positioned to snatch newcomers from the brink.

"There aren't many Las Vegas natives in town," says Stan Steward, pastor of Calvary Community Church, an AG church. "A lot of people move here to start over after a bankruptcy or divorce. And in starting over they want a spiritual life."

Pastor Gene Appel of Central Christian Church, the largest church in Las Vegas with 5,600 attendees, agrees.

"People come to Las Vegas believing there is a new future for them," he says. "They might not know they are hungering for it, but they are spiritually open and willing to try new

things. We are a hotbed of transition, and it presents great opportunities for fertile soil.”

But in winning back territory from Satan, Christians invite spiritual opposition. Goulet says he did not anticipate how ferocious the spiritual warfare would be. His family has had an unusual number of “misfortunes”: four car accidents in one year, a harrowing snowmobile wreck that left Goulet unable to walk for several months, one daughter who suddenly came down with seizures and another daughter who was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease (both daughters were miraculously healed).

“This city will devour you unless you fast and pray,” Goulet says. “The thing that ties it all together is Philippians 3:10: ‘I want to know Him in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings.’”

“If I want to take Las Vegas like God wants to take Las Vegas, and I partner with Jesus Christ, then I will partner in His sufferings. Most people want to know Him in power, but they don’t want to walk through ‘Door No. 3’: the fellowship of His sufferings. They realize they could lose their family, their house.

“Most people don’t win their city because they don’t walk through that door,” he continues. “But if you walk through it, you reap a rich harvest. If I had known what it would take, I would have gone back to being a therapist. But at some point you are called to give your life to something, and we are called to give our lives to this city. People are getting saved and delivered. I really think we are a threat to the demonic powers here.”

Other pastors express a similar sentiment.

“One of my staff members said recently, ‘This is not a place where you can be spiritually lazy,’” says Appel of Central Christian Church. “The climate can either be destructive, or it deepens you in a way that would not happen in safer environments. I love being in the high-risk game, knowing that so much is at stake. Heaven and hell are hanging in the balance for these people.”

One of those hanging in the balance was John Mazur, 40, who says he was a “die-hard drug user” before meeting Christ at ICLV. A New Jersey native, he found himself on the losing end of Vegas’ offerings.

“I would rather have been dead than alive,” he remembers. “I could not beat the drugs, the alcohol and the street crime. One day a man on an airplane handed me a card for ICLV and said, ‘These people will love you.’”

Mazur came to the church, and God turned his life around. But his body began to falter after years of abuse. He was diagnosed with liver disease, hepatitis, cirrhosis and possibly cancer. He received prayer for healing, and further tests showed a completely healthy liver.

“God has taken addictions from me,” Mazur says with tears in his eyes. “He took my rage. I used to like to fight. I used to jump out of my work truck to go after people. But now when I see angry people, I pray for them.

“My heart is to go onto the streets and pray for homeless people,” he continues. “The Lord never gave up on me. That’s

the love of Christ I found here. My whole family is saved now. My daughter reads Scriptures to me at night. My wife is a prayer warrior. My father accepted Christ three weeks ago.”

Such stories of salvation are common in Las Vegas, pastors say. Most Bible-believing churches are seeing people come to Christ every week, and Christians are even having an impact, however quiet, on the casino industry.

Churches are full of “industry people” such as bouncers, maids, blackjack dealers and pit bosses (see related story on page 67). And because of the steady influx of people relocating to the area Appel says Central Christian could plant five megachurches every month and still not keep up.

Reclaiming Sin City

It’s now Sunday evening, and the sanctuary of ICLV is packed out. As the worship time begins, many have again crowded the altar area. One mother kneels there, hugging a child to her chest.

Goulet calls for people with various illnesses to come forward for healing. Dozens come forward and fall to their knees. Goulet instructs pastors to anoint people with oil and pray for them. One leader pours oil into the palms of another, who begins applying it to foreheads as he prays.

Suddenly Goulet calls people out of the crowd by situation: A man whose wife left him; a woman concerned for her unsaved child; a man with heart problems. The altar is a kaleidoscope of activity, with Kleenex boxes in high demand and tears and oil flowing.

A 6-year-old lifts her hands. Three men of different races hold hands like children and worship as the musicians play: "From my heart to Yours / I lift a love song up to You."

"I tell you, the power of God is just breaking out," Goulet says, grabbing his 12-year-old son from the front row and bringing him on stage to marvel at what God is doing. He puts his arm around him, swaying, singing and laughing while the prayer time continues.

The man Goulet called out to receive prayer for heart problems has risen from the floor and is jumping and pumping his fists in the air. Several people lay under modesty cloths. A line forms as Goulet calls people forward who need jobs.

"Come on, saints. Pray, pray, pray."

The congregation prays and sings. Several minutes later, as easily as it began, the prayer time ends, and people return to their seats, socializing along the way. God has touched many, so Goulet launches into a testimony time.

"The first thing God did for me was bring me to this church," says a 60-year-old woman. Another woman tells how she led a business client and his wife to the Lord.

Goulet is endlessly animated: more "field goal" signals, high fives, laughter and hugs. After the testimony time he preaches on the power of impartation and calls on unbelievers to accept Christ. Eight come forward. Then he calls believers to prayer.

“How many of you are willing to lay down your life to win one more soul? Come down.” Hundreds stream forward, and Goulet begins praying for them. “Come on, Spirit of God, blow, blow, blow.”

Meanwhile, the collapsible wall on the right side of the sanctuary is drawn back, a mobile water tank is rolled out, and water baptisms begin. People gather to watch and applaud. The prayer time continues at the altar as the band plays, “Every breath I take, I take in You / You make me move, Jesus!”

After a while, the number of people praying dwindles, and the Goulets casually visit with friends.

“There has been a release in our lives,” Goulet says, “and our job is to keep pouring, like the woman with the little flask of oil. That is how God is building His church.”

And that is how the Holy Spirit is penetrating the darkness in this City of Lights.

God at the Blackjack Table

Jack Runion, 63, doesn't hold down your everyday office job. He is, in fact, a “pit boss”—a person who oversees gaming tables—at a busy casino in Las Vegas, which attracts 30 million visitors each year to its hotels and gaming establishments.

He also is a member of Calvary Community Church, an Assemblies of God congregation in Las Vegas. And though this may be

surprising to those who live outside of Vegas, Runion's situation is not that unusual. Many Christians like him work in the casino industry and see it as a mission field.

"This is the best place in the country to make a lot of money, even if you don't have a college degree," says Stan Steward, Runion's pastor. "A valet can make \$50,000 a year, which is why, after they come to the Lord, they stay in that [line of] work."

As the backslidden son of a Pentecostal pastor, Runion started dealing craps in 1956 in Kentucky, where gambling was illegal. He eventually moved to Las Vegas and worked the tables there for 30 years. Today he oversees five tables and 16 dealers. He and his wife, JoAnn, came back to the Lord after she was healed of cancer in 1995.

"After I got saved, working in the casino bothered me," Runion says. "I had a real problem with it, and I prayed and talked to pastor Steward about it. The Lord spoke to me and said: 'It's just your job. Go do it and forget about it.' I haven't had a guilty conscience since then. I think there is a purpose to being there."

Runion says many of his fellow employees are believers, such as a man who works in surveillance, a day-shift manager, a lady in the cashier's cage and two people in slots. But others are caught in the cycle of gambling and often come to work after losing their paychecks to the roulette wheel or some other game.

"They wait to get their tips, and the next morning they are broke," he says. "They are looking for that big score. The

employees respect me for being what I am, and I invite them to my house to talk more. They see I have no [gambling] problems. I am the same every day, smiling and happy.”

Until recently, Runion and his wife taught a class at church for people breaking free of gambling and other addictive behaviors. “The Lord led me to take over that class,” he says. He opened his home for the 12-week program and led meetings that included prayer and discussion.

At work, Runion sees plenty of unreformed gamblers.

“A lot of desperate people come in,” he says. “I’ve seen people whose lives or businesses went into the drop box. I know people who have committed suicide. It is hard to watch sometimes because I think of what people could do with their lives. But some of them don’t care. That’s all they live for.”

Runion strongly believes that Christians should not gamble, but he is convinced that the industry provides Christians the opportunity to bring others out of the enemy’s grasp.

“Casinos are like factories,” he says. “You go in and do your eight hours. If you save one soul, it could be worth it all.”

Miracle in a City of Lost Bets

Doctors told Tom and Julie Bryant their baby would be born dead. But God had other plans for little Jessica.

Tom and Julie Bryant, members of International Church of Las

Vegas, were devastated to learn that the baby inside Julie's womb was endangered because a lack of amniotic fluid. And while doctors encouraged the couple to choose abortion, they refused—even though they were told that the baby would almost certainly die at birth.

"Julie had no fluid around the baby or in the [baby's] lungs," says obstetrician John Martin, who at the time was a resident doctor at University Medical Center in Las Vegas and who eventually delivered the baby. Martin says it is believed that lungs develop because of the amniotic fluid that fills them.

"The worry," he told Charisma, "was that this baby was fine as long as mom supplied the oxygen, but once [the baby] came out, the lungs would be nonexistent or severely compromised in their function."

There were other complications, too: a narrowly averted miscarriage at 17 weeks and the baby's frank breech position, meaning the bottom pointed downward and the body made a v-shape. Normally, when a baby almost miscarries so early the mother aborts. But the Bryants stuck by their decision.

"The doctors were loathe to offer us hope," Tom Bryant adds. "They warned us of probable mental retardation, atrophied limbs and/ or spina bifida, and the risk of infection that could harm Julie's health. We asked everyone in our church to pray with us."

The prayers were not in vain. On April 18, 1996, in week 26 of Julie's pregnancy, baby Jessica was born. Tom saw that she was pink—a sure sign, he thought, that she was taking in oxygen. Sure enough, a doctor told him that the baby showed

“promising” lung development.

“It shocked all of us,” Martin says. “The lungs developed. The baby didn’t seem to be compromised even though she’d been ruptured for 12 weeks.”

“The medical staff varied greatly in response to what they had seen,” Bryant says. “One doctor rejoiced with us, although this contradicted all that he knew. Another specialist deliberately avoided us.”

“What happened was one of those miracles that you hope and pray for,” Martin recalls. “The baby survived and did well and is doing well to this day, which is so amazing to me. It was against such overwhelming odds.” Martin adds that he was moved by what happened to Julie, whose “strong religious convictions” impressed him.

“I now talk about the possibility of survival,” he says. “I am more upbeat than other doctors because I have seen babies survive.”

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