

God Can Use Dirtballs

Motorcycle enthusiast and pastor Mike Haseltine says he's just 'a dirtball saved by grace.' He's taking his message to bikers and social outcasts who gave up on church long ago.

Everyone has a stereotype of what it means to be a Christian," pastor Mike Haseltine says. "My job is to break that stereotype." How does Haseltine break the mold? A casual walk through Maranatha Assembly of God in Forest Lake, Minnesota, provides some answers.

The foyer includes a coffee shop that serves specialty drinks such as Three Wise Men (chocolate, caramel and vanilla latte), King Solomon (chocolate, espresso, and half-and-half) and Goliath (a six-shot latte). The parking lot has a hot-rodder's "burnout pad" where car and motorcycle aficionados are welcome to squeal their tires—a feature certainly missing from most modern worship facilities.

Some aspects of the property are designed with men in mind. Church activities include a "You shoot it, we cook it" wild-game feast with a car show. The men's restroom is decorated with Harley-Davidson motorcycle parts and a picture of Haseltine participating in a grand prix motorcycle race.

"Men come in here, and it changes their whole perspective of what church is all about," Haseltine says.

The church has 12-foot-wide hallways and a foyer with glass walls giving a great view of the outdoors. "Men are like wild game," Haseltine says. "We don't like to be trapped—we like to find our escape routes. I told the architect I wanted that front wall to be glass. It gives that open, we-have-nothing-

to-hide welcome.”

A Unique Evangelistic Fire

But why work so hard to defy stereotypical Christianity? Are the public’s perceptions that bad?

“Because most stereotypes are wrong,” Haseltine explains. “They think God is far away. No, He’s very near. They think He’s anxious to punish. No, He’s anxious to forgive. Think about the ramifications of people’s stereotypes—their belief that church is boring and irrelevant. I want people to be saying, ‘You’re a pastor?’”

He’s defied other stereotypes as well.

Many pastors change churches every five or six years, but he’s spent more than 20 years in Forest Lake, a town of 7,000 about a half-hour north of St. Paul.

Many pastors treat their worship centers with reverence, but Haseltine once let the local fire department torch the sanctuary his church had outgrown. The property where his church was located at that time was worth more without the building. Because the structure was going to be demolished, the fire department asked for permission to use it for practicing fire-fighting techniques. Giving them the go-ahead provided Haseltine with yet another opportunity to break a stereotype.

“A week before they burned the building,” he recalls, “the fire marshal called me and said: ‘Hey, pastor, we’ve had all

sorts of calls from people who found out we're going to burn your building. Some of these guys are really superstitious. They don't want to burn your building. What do you think?'

"I said, 'It's just a building.'

"And he said, 'Will you come out and talk to them, tell them how you feel about it?'

"They were burning it on a Sunday morning, so I showed up bright and early before our service and had a chance to share with everybody that the building is just a tool. It's not the house of God."

That's a belief that Haseltine applies across his ministry. "It drives me nuts when people refer to church buildings as the house of God. It determines how you decorate the place, how people should act in it. If it's 'the house of God,' we can't laugh or have fun. We get offended if somebody walks in with a cigarette pack rolled up in his sleeve."

Haseltine told the firefighters that the building they were going to burn was not the house of God. Placing his hand on his chest he added, "This is—the Bible teaches that you are the 'temple' of the Holy Ghost."

After the building was burned, Haseltine got a call from one of the firefighters who told him that a wall had unexpectedly collapsed moments before he and three others had entered the room.

"We'd have been killed," the firefighter said. "I really

believe it's because you prayed for us." That man wound up giving his life to Christ and coming to church.

Strut Your Stuff?

More stereotypes are broken when the church hosts Strut Your Stuff, a 16-year tradition that brings in about 3,000 people and cars from all over. "Kids need a place to hang out—especially guys with their girlfriends. And cars are a big deal for a whole segment of them," Haseltine explains. "I thought we should have a place for them to come hang out. Some of them might be drinking and doing drugs, but what better place than in our parking lot? At least you know where they are and can do some ministry."

That was the genesis of the car show—where a kid can come and "strut his stuff," even if all he has is a junker, and have an opportunity to squeal his tires, legally. The show was a natural outlet for Haseltine.

"I like things that go fast," he admits. "It's my vice. It makes me relax. It takes all of my focus, so I actually relax because I'm so focused on what I'm doing. Speed does that for me. I got my first motorcycle when I was in ninth grade. I love being on my bike [a souped up '87 low-rider]. The thing will do wheelies—she really barks."

He loves speed so much that two years ago, when he was 39, he took up grand prix motorcycle racing.

"I only did it about a year because all the racing is on weekends. Plus, it's dangerous. About every other year a guy gets killed. To race, you have to have your name and blood

type on the back of your helmet—it's part of the rules."

He's even passed on the racing bug to his wife, Orleen. One year, she said she'd like to get a car up to 100 mph in a quarter-mile. That request was all Haseltine needed. He spent three years building the car that got her up to a speed of 103—and then enjoyed telling people that he was married to "the fastest woman in town."

Orleen—the women's pastor at the church and mother of their four children—came from a background far different from her husband's. "I was an alcoholic and a drug addict," Haseltine notes about himself, "and she had never tasted a beer in her life. I made her life interesting, and she made my life safe."

Haseltine started drinking and using drugs in junior high school. By his sophomore year, his drug use had gotten so bad that a girl he had dated for six months told him she'd never seen him sober.

He was in the middle of his rebellious phase when his mother was born again after attending a Christian seminar. The next year his dad went to the seminar to see exactly what had brought about such a miraculous change in his wife—and he got saved as well.

Haseltine, who is the oldest of four brothers, recalls of his parents' conversions: "I got the guys together and said: 'They're dropping like flies. We've gotta protect ourselves.'"

His newly saved parents, concerned about his drug use, went out of their way to let him know they were worried about what he was doing to himself and that they loved him.

“All my friends who got caught by their parents were being beaten, yelled at, grounded, and here my parents were telling me, ‘We love you, and we’re praying for you.’ How could I fight against love?”

Haseltine was raised Roman Catholic. He visited a Christian and Missionary Alliance church in town and for the first time heard the gospel. He knew it was true but didn’t surrender. It took months of personal struggling, life-threatening accidents and overdosing friends to drive him to the point that he could face the truth.

“I was looking at my reflection in a restaurant window downtown, and I said, ‘Mike, who are you?’ I was a popular jock. But here I was living this dual life. I knew the gospel, but I wasn’t living it.

“And I kind of lost touch with who I am because I was drinking all the time and high all the time. ‘Who are you?’—that scared me. Because I was losing touch with who I was.”

He gave his life to God during a summer evangelistic crusade and changed dramatically. After a struggle he quit drinking and using drugs.

“I didn’t quit because I had to but because I got to. My love for God grew to the point where I loved God more than this, and this got in the way. Ultimately, we all do what we want to do. My ‘want to’ to love God was greater than my ‘want to’ to get high. So it just crowded it out.”

They Don’t Take ‘Plastic’

That experience has formed the basis for Haseltine's approach to ministry. He's a positive preacher who emphasizes God's love and mercy, not a negative preacher who rails against things. Of course, that doesn't keep him from looking at least a little scary. His skull ring is certainly part of it.

"Everybody has a skull," he argues.

"I like [the ring], and it irritates religious people," he adds. "I also have a lot of tattoos. The one on my back is a picture of Jesus out of the book of Revelation."

When one son finished high school, he and Haseltine got matching tattoos—Chinese symbols forming an acrostic for the word "life" (love, integrity, forgiveness, eternity). Associate pastor Travis Abrahamson admits: "I'm the rebel of the church because I don't have a tattoo."

But don't get the wrong idea about Maranatha Assembly, as bookkeeper Eileen Fehlen explains: "People think this is just a biker's church, but there are a lot of people who are just regular people who go here. There are people from every walk of life, from three-piece suits to bikers."

Haseltine agrees. "Shirt and tie right next to shorts and muscle shirts. We have white collar, blue collars and no collars—a little bit of everything. Everyone can find a niche, if they're not trying to be a phony.

"We even have a couple of doctors, but these aren't your run-of-the-mill doctors. They're not into status. They're just real people. We have many teachers who come here. We have a

couple of police officers. We have business owners.

“But we don’t have any yuppie types that are just into image. If you come in with image here, you’ll be exposed in a very short time. Not because we will do it intentionally, but because you will find yourself saying, ‘I’m so plastic, and these people are so real.’

“The thing I hear most often from people who come to visit here is, ‘Church is fun.’ The second comment I hear is, ‘You guys are so real.’ That’s the way church ought to be.”

Maranatha Assembly has done well with that approach. From its beginnings as a group of 17 people who met in Haseltine’s father’s basement, it has grown to a weekly attendance of about 800 and just moved into a facility designed to expand to seat 3,500. (When the floors had been poured for the new facility, Haseltine gave them a sort of baptism of rubber by doing burnouts on his motorcycle up and down the hallways.)

Only 20 percent of the congregation come from Forest Lake. Some people drive up to an hour to get to the church.

Though his church has seen steady growth, expansion isn’t Haseltine’s goal. “If people say I’m just trying to build a big church, I’m embarrassed a couple of ways—first, that they would think that of me; and second, that they would think this is big. It’s tragic that this is considered a big church when we scratch such a small portion of who is around us.”

Haseltine rejects the notion that there’s anything special about him.

"I always tell people: 'I am simply Mike Haseltine, a dirtball saved by grace. God's asked me to preach. What's He asked you to do?'"

Doug Trouten teaches journalism at Northwestern College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is the current executive director of the Evangelical Press Association.