

Surfing for Jesus

From Hawaii to California to Florida, surfers are catching a new wave of spiritual fervor.

Dressed in shorts, sandals and a Hawaiian shirt, Bill White stands behind a surfboard-shaped pulpit. The 80-plus congregants before him—some barefoot; others still damp from a late afternoon ride on the waves—hang on to every word as the long-haired pastor from the Jesus Movement generation spins a surfing analogy into a lesson on trusting God.

Welcome to Surfer's Chapel. On Saturday nights, board-riding worshipers gather at this Foursquare church that meets in a warehouse-cum-sanctuary in surfing-rich Huntington Beach, California. A mix of Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers, they praise Jesus to contemporary music, sometimes even to the strum of a ukulele. They listen intently as White weaves Scripture-laden stories about the Messiah who walked on water and a God who is more awesome than the greatest kahuna.

On Sunday mornings this unconventional tribe of believers fellowship in a much different way. They don wetsuits and converge two blocks west—in the Pacific Ocean—to surf. Their slogan could be: “The church that surfs together stays together.”

The believers at Surfer's Chapel have created an environment in which fellow surfers—Christian or non-Christian—can segue easily between sand, surf and Spirit, while hearing the gospel in a way that is natural for them.

“In our church, we are surfers. Our mission field is right in front of us—on the beach,” White told Charisma. “In a way, I

feel like a native going back to tell his own people about Jesus.”

White’s approach to congregational life may seem uncommon, even radical (that’s “rad” in surfspeak) to some, but it’s with good reason. Plenty of wave riders, whether professionals, amateurs or hobbyists; whether from Australia, Hawaii, California or Florida are finding solace with God today.

“There are a lot more Christian surfers now,” notes Chandler Brownlee, 29, national director of Christian Surfers United States. “At one of our events 28 groms [young surfers] accepted the Lord. In the last four years, [Christian Surfers] has grown from one to 12 chapters on the East Coast.”

Yet the world’s beaches are dotted with millions of surfers—close to 3 million in the United States alone. Even though more surfers than ever are Christians, does it mean an all-encompassing surfers revival is brewing on the horizon?

Brownlee doesn’t go quite that far. “I don’t know if we can call it a movement,” he says.

Mark Mazzarella, 50, president of the Vero Beach, Florida, Christian Surfers United States chapter adds: “We have a big surfing community here that is pretty much unreached for Jesus”—which for him is a plus for the gospel.

“I can get up on a Saturday morning, paddle out and just start talking and asking people where they are at. It is a great atmosphere to talk about Jesus.”

Graham Hadidian, 19, of Santa Barbara believes that for outsiders “surfers are a hard group to crack,” but he notes they are accepting of one another.

“They think that they have already found God, which is the ocean,” he explains. “If you do not surf, you are not respected. Because I surf, every time I paddle out, there is an opportunity for ministry.”

The attitude Hadidian shares with many other Christian surfers toward spreading the gospel is perhaps why more than ever, the fields—or in this case the foam—is white for harvest.

For example, Christian Surfers International—the parent organization of Christian Surfers United States—was founded 20 years ago by Brett Davis in Australia and today has chapters wherever good waves pound the sand, from New Zealand and Tahiti to Japan and South Africa.

Twenty local chapters with a total membership of 1,500 span both coasts of the United States. Members offer fellowship, host Bible studies, sponsor surfing contests, show Christian surf videos and reach out to the surf subculture.

Christians in the subculture reach beyond the amateur ranks as well. Professionals such as 22-year-old C.J. Hobgood, the reigning men’s world champion, have given unabashed testimony to their faith. “I love Jesus and I love surfing,” Hobgood declares in an endorsement of Bryan Jennings’ Walking on Water Christian surf camp.

Hobgood and his twin brother, Damien—ranked 16th in the world—often talk about praying for good waves and give God

credit for their victories. When not on some far-flung beach, the Hobgoods attend a Calvary Chapel church and host a Bible-study group in their hometown of Satellite Beach, Florida.

And it isn't just Christians who have noticed the rising of this offshore spiritual swell. Online secular magazine Salon observed in 1999: "A great many [surfers] are big Jesus freaks, in a real Old Testament, Book of Jeremiah, the Apocalypse-cometh kind of way. Christian surfers like [professionals] Glyndyn Ringrose and Tim Curran are always doling out quotes about how 'He's coming soon!' and attributing all their victories to personal favors from Christ."

Stoked By the Sea

Why do a growing number of wave riders seem to want to know God? One explanation stems from the fact that surfers tend to be a naturally spiritual lot anyway, with two primary leanings toward the divine—they worship either the creation or the Creator.

One group views the ocean itself as a deity. They mount the fount in order to conquer or become one with the gods.

The other group embraces the sea as one of God's ultimate expressions of beauty and power. They traverse its swells in awe of the architect, confident they are in the safety net of His hands.

"How can you not see God when you are surrounded by His handiwork, when it is just getting dark and the water turns an incredible pink, or when you see dolphins up close?" questions

Kim Clark, a 27-year-old surfer from Santa Barbara, California. "I rejoice in His majesty. How amazing is it that we can ride these waves! This shows me that there is a God."

Clark notes that "when you are out there, you experience God like you can in no other way." Surfer Dana Green, 25, for example, uses the ocean as her place to be alone with God. She paddles beyond the break and spends the time on her board praying and worshiping.

And the sea's natural beauty—though magnetic and inspiring—isn't something non-Christian surfers necessarily attribute to God Himself.

"Sometimes they call it Mother Nature," says Lexi Sumpter, 22, a Christian who once worked in the surf industry. "Sometimes they connect with the wave but not with God."

Nevertheless, most surfers pray before they go out, even if they do not know Jesus, says Rochelle Ballard, 31, ranked fourth in the world among women's professional surfers.

"Think about it," she says. "You walk into the ocean and sink yourself into this liquid. You are surrounded by this creation that God made, and it washes all of the other stuff away. It brings you to a place before God and makes you analyze your life."

Three-time men's world champion Tom Curren agrees.

"When you go out into the ocean and the waves are bigger than you are, you have to know God is there," he says. "Some trust

in themselves or their abilities. I know I would never have [won championships] if it was not for God.”

The Gospel of Good Boards

Surfing caught on as a popular sport in the 1940s and 1950s when lighter-weight boards were introduced. It reached the subculture stratosphere in the 1960s when it was glamorized in popular movies and music (for more, see related article on page 54).

The modern surf subculture comprises what Brownlee calls “an unusual tribe of people” who have their own clothing, language, rites of passage and attitude toward life. The fallout from their clannishness, however—as once memorialized in the 1982 movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*—is a cultural stereotype of surfers as rebellious, irresponsible, and steeped in the proverbial sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle.

“The surfer lifestyle is not in any way moral for the nonbeliever. So when you are a believer in that world, it is pretty easy to let your light shine,” says Dan Sumpter, 22, a Christian surfer from Huntington Beach. “If you are not out there boozing it up and smoking pot, they know there is something different about you.”

Ballard, who once led a Bible study on the women’s professional tour and attends Hope Chapel in Hawaii, agrees.

“My husband and I may be social [with surfers], but our friends know we are Christians,” she says. “I have never felt the need [as a surfer] to go out and get drunk and be wild.”

Though the type of Christian impact Ballard and others are having upon the surf subculture is more widespread today than ever, it is not altogether new. For 30 years, Al Merrick, one of the premier board shapers in the country, has been sharing God's love with countless everyday surfers.

In 1972, Al and his wife, Terry, started a small surfboard-manufacturing company in Southern California. Terry sewed and sold surfer attire, and Al quickly gained a reputation for producing some of the best boards on the planet. Since then, his clients have included world champions and surfing legends Tom Curren and Kelly Slater.

The couple has long been known as believers. "We ran a Christian coffee-house in the '70s. A lot of surfers would hang out there," Al told Charisma. "We were always talking about Jesus."

When a customer would come into the shop, Al often would pray with him, then talk about the board design he wanted. Today his Santa Barbara-based Channel Islands Surfboards is the largest surfboard manufacturer in the world. In fact, while the surfing industry slumped in early 2002, Channel Islands thrived.

"The guy who supplies our blanks [the unshaped surfboard core] accused us of hoarding," Al says with a chuckle. "He said he knew how slow things were. But we really were using that many blanks. We have never been so busy, and I can only attribute it to God's anointing."

Often people ask Al what his secret to success is.

“The surfing magazines will not print this,” he told Charisma. “But it is God’s blessings. There is no other explanation.”

Al still shapes five boards a day. He often prays over his products and includes ichthyuses (Christian fish symbols) on them.

“I pray for [the surfers],” he says. “I ask God to bless them and to protect them and, if they are not Christians, that they will see Him. I had thought about going into ministry. But God has given me a gift to make surfboards.”

Called to the Next Wave

On the other hand, the couple’s son Britt—born the same year his parents started their company—has thought about staying in the surfboard business, but it appears God has called him to full-time ministry. The lanky, 29-year-old blond Southern Californian can now be counted among Calvary Chapel pastors who have surfboard racks atop their cars.

Through the years the Calvary Chapel churches in particular, known for an informal, laid-back social atmosphere, have attracted many surfers—their own pastors included, such as Greg Laurie, Raul Reis and Bill Stonebraker.

Britt recommitted his life to Christ while in his late teens and started attending Calvary Chapel in Santa Barbara. At the time, he oversaw the surfing teams sponsored by Channel Islands.

During the 1994 world championships in Huntington Beach, Britt

and his fiancée (now wife), Katelyn, were on the beach studying the Bible. A 14-year-old team member approached and asked what they were reading.

“He had never seen a Bible,” Britt says. “This stunned me that in America today there are kids who have never seen a Bible.”

Back home, Britt heard from God: “Britt, these kids surf with you every day, but they have no idea who I am. I want you to tell them.”

Almost immediately, Britt went to a local surfing hangout and invited about 10 groms to join him at his parents’ house for a Bible study. Because it was the Merricks inviting, they came. All of the young surfers accepted Christ as their Savior, and Britt baptized them on the same beach where they caught waves.

The Bible study grew to about 25 regulars—including Graham Hadidian, who now is on a ministry team at Calvary Chapel in Santa Barbara—and lasted four years, until early 1998. Calvary Santa Barbara pastor Ricky Ryan—also a surfer—had heard about the group’s success and asked Britt to take over the church’s college-age group, Reality.

The Friday night gatherings have mushroomed. Today as many as 400 people come to Reality, cramming into a converted warehouse sanctuary just a few barefoot steps from the Pacific Ocean. Students, local teens, surfers and extreme-sports enthusiasts relax in lounge chair-style pews and sing contemporary praise and worship songs, led by professional body-boarder Kyle Maligro.

After worship, Britt teaches from the Bible. The lessons cover

the basics of making a commitment to Jesus, living a Christian life and principles for dating. Using surfer jargon such as “rad” and “stoked” comes naturally, so he has his audience hooked. Everyone laughs when Britt asks if the purpose of hearing God’s voice is to get divine direction about which surfboard to buy.

“Surfers think they are the coolest people on earth,” Britt says. “A lot of surfers will not talk to anyone not in their world. They are very suspicious of anyone who does not talk and look like them.

“The Lord me this platform,” he continues. “A pastor with a coat and tie could not reach these kids. I think of what the Lord can do in the surfing community and I am stoked.”

Rad for God

Britt has good reason to be excited. In October 2000, he was near the University of California at Santa Barbara campus handing out invitations to a Halloween-night concert sponsored by Reality. He ran into 23-year-old professional surfer Hagen Kelley and his girlfriend, Erika. Hagen was a former member of the Channel Islands surfing team.

“They were out partying. I gave them an invitation anyway, not thinking they would come,” Britt says.

Hagen, Erika and her brother were big partiers, but on Halloween night they had not planned how they would celebrate. Disgusted with the prospect of staying sober, Hagen buried his fists deep into his pants pockets, where he found the invitation from Britt.

"We decided to go even though we suspected it might have something to do with God," Hagen says. "When we got there we heard this cool music [from Christian ska band O.C. Supertones] and everyone was dancing. Then Britt runs onto the stage and starts preaching. Whoa, I was not expecting that."

Hagen and Erika were in the front row and responded to the altar call.

"He was instantly changed; his whole countenance was different," Britt says. Hagen and Erika have since married, with Britt officiating, and now attend The Rock Church in San Diego.

"I used to think surfing was so important. Now all of those trophies do not matter," Hagen says. "God released me from so much bondage. I was into drugs and the whole surf subculture.

"Surfers think it is so cool, but they do not realize they are just in bondage," he adds. "[Becoming a Christian] took all of the stress out of it. I now realize it is a blessing, and I am surfing the best I have ever surfed in my life."

Hagen's verve cuts right to the core of the subculture he once embraced. He wants to reach out to the people he used to party with. After he became a Christian, he immediately started inviting friends to church.

Now, along with veteran surf writer Chris Ahrens, he has launched a Christian magazine titled Risen. Drawing its design inspiration from extreme-sports catalogs, Hagen says the bimonthly, four-color publication will be aimed at youth and

young adults in the surf subculture and beyond.

White, Brownlee, Ballard, Merrick, Kelley and many others see vast evangelism opportunities among the millions of U.S. surfers. They're stoked that conditions are right for penetrating the surfing subculture like never before with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Surf's up!

Claiming the Waves for Jesus

Missionaries in the 1800s condemned the sport of surfing, but today a new generation is using it to spread the gospel.

Some people like the notion that Jesus was the first surfer and Peter was the first to wipe out. Historians, however, give credit to Polynesians for inventing the sport in about A.D. 400.

Early surfers in Hawaii enshrined Kahuna as the pagan god of the surf. But the sport almost wiped out in the mid-1800s when Christian missionaries declared it an immoral form of pleasure and then banned it.

The ban did not stick. More than 150 years later, Hawaii thrives as the world's surfing mecca. And now God, not Kahuna, is calling surfers to be missionaries.

"Surfers are probably the most devoted people in the world," says Dave Jordan, international director of Surfers for Missions in Hawaii. "They will do anything to find the perfect wave."

“Who else would actually get stoked about eating junk food, living in huts and not having hot showers? Once they know Jesus, they make perfect missionaries.”

As a branch of Youth With a Mission, Surfers for Missions hosts discipleship training schools at outposts in Australia, Hawaii and Mexico. Students can bring their boards and hit the waves, but they also must keep up with regular worship, prayer, Bible study and class time.

The early results—the ministry was started in Mexico by Tom Hackett in 1991—are encouraging. A number of graduates now work alongside traditional missionaries or fill voids.

In the Philippines, three of the ministry’s surfers are building an orphanage and a school. In Mexico, Surfers for Missions runs a café located in front of the local “pipeline,” the spot where the prime waves break. In Madagascar, surfing missionaries made the initial contacts in a previously unevangelized beachfront village.

“People say, ‘Oh yeah, you are surfers just going out to have a good time, but they do not see that surfers make the best missionaries there are. Surfers are ready to go on the front lines,” Jordan says.

Tom Bauer has launched a similar ministry, Surfing the Nations, and sends Christian surfers to evangelize people in some of the most unreached nations of the world. Based in Hawaii, Surfing the Nations has conducted short-term missionary ventures in India, the Maldives, Vietnam, Costa Rica, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Japan.

Bryan Jennings has taken another approach. At 28, the professional surfer runs the Walking on Water Christian surf camp in San Diego. Last year, 280 youth learned to ride waves and sat in on daily Bible studies.

Jennings, who appears in the popular surfing video *Changes*, is instilling a moral foundation in this next generation of Christian surfers. Campus Crusade for Christ has ordered 19,000 copies of *Changes* to be used as an evangelistic tool on college and university campuses.

'Wipe Out' Gets the Word Out

The classic song of the surf era has been reborn by members of the original Surfaris, who now use it to spread the gospel.

In the early 1960s, surf music swept through American pop culture like a tsunami. Stoked by movies such as *Gidget* and Bruce Brown's *Endless Summer*, teens hit the shores from Florida to California, and kids from Pocatello to Peoria tuned into the beats of the Beach Boys, Dick Dale and the Surfaris. Surf music, with its unique cadence and connection to its audience, was king.

"In this world there is music for doing only four things: war, worship, dance and surfing. Everything else is just listening," wrote Sam George in the April issue of *Surfer* magazine.

Indeed, as original Surfaris members, Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famers Jim Pash and Bob Berryhill find that 40 years after its spontaneous creation the classic surf song "Wipe Out" still

moves fans to move, sometimes even as a prelude to worship. Today Pash and Berryhill—both Christians—lead and perform with bands called the Surfaris.

Pash plays oldies with an assemblage of well-known Christian artists. Berryhill is joined on stage by his wife and adult sons.

The Berryhills take a more visibly evangelistic approach, using “Wipe Out” as an entrée to the gospel. Both Pash and Berryhill trace their faith to the Jesus Movement and Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa, California.

“Disc jockeys often ask me what it feels like to be famous,” Pash says. “I say: ‘To be remembered by mortals is to be forgotten. The only one I want to be remembered by is God—that means I will have eternal life.’”

By 1967, the original Surfaris were no longer touring as a group. Pash, the group’s saxophonist, served in Vietnam, seeing active combat in the second Tet Offensive. Upon returning to the United States, he spent time as a street evangelist, started a band called Dr. James’ Eternal Electric Medicine Show and ran Jesus People coffeehouses in Houston and Los Angeles.

He later joined the staff of Richard Wurmbrand’s Voice of the Martyr’s ministry to communist nations and embarked upon a bold research and recording project. On The Harp of David: A Modern Translation, Pash sings through Scripture, verse by verse, using what he claims are the original Jewish melodies.

Today Pash’s Surfaris play “Wipe Out” and other oldies at

theme parks, on cruises, at street fairs, at stadium events and at private parties. Joining Pash are original Surfaris guitarist Jim Fuller, former Love Song bassist Jay Truax, former Belmont Paul Johnson, keyboardist Robert Watson and Amy Grant's former recording-session drummer David Raven.

"We are not a Christian evangelistic band in that we do not preach or have an altar call," Pash says. "But we are Christians who have a band. It is good, clean fun. How can you go wrong with 'Louie Louie'?"

"I have seen parents and their kids dancing together in front of the stage. It has brought a lot of healing."

With the members of the Surfaris going their separate ways in the late 1960s, Berryhill embarked on a career in the automobile industry and developed ministry relations with leaders at Calvary Chapel.

Berryhill and his wife, Jean, traveled with contemporary Christian musician Karen Lafferty to Amsterdam for an outreach with Youth With a Mission. From that experience came the idea that "Wipe Out," with its instant international recognition, could be used as an evangelism tool.

"I have dedicated my life to serving Christ, using whatever gifts and resources He has given me, including 'Wipe Out,'" Berryhill says.

In June 2000, Berryhill and his family, including sons Deven and Joel, started performing together as the Surfaris. Their venues include churches, such as Horizon Christian Fellowship in San Diego, and their selection of songs includes "Wipe

Out," "Surfer Joe" and "Point Panic."

For more information about Pash, Berryhill and the Surfaris bands and music, visit them online at [and](#) .

The Surfer's Turf
surfing ministries

Christian Surfers International

Christian Surfers United States

15 8th St., St. Augustine Beach, FL 32080
(904) 461-9399

Risen Magazine

P.O. Box 7204, San Diego, CA 92167
(619) 269-3377

Walking on Water Surf Camps

6400 Alexandri Circle, Carlsbad, CA 92009
(760) 918-0195

Surfers for Missions International

c/o Youth With a Mission
P.O. Box 790237, Paia-Maui, HI 96779

Channel Islands Surfboards

29 State St., Santa Barbara, CA

(805) 966-7213

Calvary Chapel Surfing Association

6400 Westminster Blvd.

Westminster, CA 92683

(714) 893-4141

Surfer's Chapel

5102 Argosy, Huntington Beach, CA 92649

(714) 751-5514

Steven Lawson is a veteran Christian journalist who lives near the surf in Los Angeles.