

NEED TO KNOW NEWS



ELISE BERGMAN/REDEYE

A group called Metro 212 meets every other Monday at Joe's Bar in Old Town. A bar is an ideal setting for interacting and talking, a group leader says, plus it's more inviting.

Casual Sundays

New churches use alternative locations, laid-back setting to help young adults fit in

By Kathryn Masterson
RedEye

Heidi Gripp grew up a pastor's kid, but the 31-year-old Chicagoan prefers a more casual approach to her relationship with God. Instead of dressing up on Sundays and sitting in a pew singing hymns, Gripp worships in a gym in Logan Square—in jeans and a sweat shirt with a cup of coffee in her hand—and in a bar in Old Town.

"I have some issues with traditional church," said Gripp, a Web designer. "I couldn't make myself fit in. Younger churches seem more moldable. You can offer something and they can maybe use it."

New churches such as New Community Covenant Church, which Gripp attends,

are growing in popularity with young adults nationwide. They offer a casual way for people to worship, eschewing dress codes, choirs and sanctuaries for coffee shops, theaters and bars and a come-as-you-are attitude. And these emerging churches, as they're known, typically have young ministers who talk about the issues important to people in their 20s and 30s and pepper their sermons with quotes from *Vanity Fair* magazine or references to "The Matrix."

"I think there is a turning away from traditional religions," said Peter Hong, the 34-

"Most people in their 20s are trying to sort through those big life questions. I think unfortunately, many of them aren't finding that at church, but in other places."

—Daniel Hill
pastor of River City Community Church



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River City Community Church meets at the Congress Theater in Logan Square.

year-old pastor of New Community Covenant Church. At the same time, "There's a huge, huge hunger for spiritual things," Hong said.

Another thing the casual churches offer is a sense of community, something Hong and other ministers say young adults are longing for. They're looking for a community where they can make friends and fit in.

"When I go, I'm looking for relationships," Gripp said. "People to hang with, people to go deep with."

Gripp also attends Metro 212, a gathering

of young people in the city that meets every other Monday at Joe's Bar in Old Town. The group is connected to South Barrington-based Willow Creek Community Church, and Andy Padjen, a 30-year-old intern with Willow Creek, leads a discussion for an hour.

Metro 212's emphasis is interaction and conversation, and the bar setting is ideal for that, Padjen said. People can eat, drink and hang out afterward—the group buys appetizers for the new people—and it's much easier for people to invite friends to check out a church that meets in a bar.

"When they hear bar, they just get so curious," Padjen said. Location also is important to River City Community Church, which meets at Logan Square's Congress Theater.

NEED TO KNOW NEWS

'Biblezines' spread the word to teens

KRT

The Bible is getting a makeover.

New versions of the Good Book look like teen magazines, with colorful covers that promise beauty tips for girls and ask, "Are you dating a Godly Guy?" For guys, the Bible covers have pictures of skateboarders, teasers that say, "Girls Spill it All!" and articles about the best way to shave a beard.

For centuries, the Bible has been the story that sold itself. But publishers, competing in an increasingly media-saturated climate, are turning to pop culture to sell the Bible to teens and young adults.

"This is a look-and-see generation," said Bryce Cole, 22, who hosts a Bible study group for twentysomethings at a Starbucks in Southlake, Texas. "If they like what they see, they pay attention."

The "biblezines," which have catchy names such as Revolve and Refuel, include the complete New Testament along with the articles and standard magazine quizzes.

Revolve grew out of research showing that girls who find the Bible too intimidating love to read magazines, said Laurie Whaley, the creator of both biblezines, which are published by TransitBooks, a division of Thomas Nelson. About 30,000 copies of Revolve were sold in a month, a TransitBooks official told CNN last year. A typical Bible sells about 40,000 copies a year.

"What we're observing in the culture right now is a huge shift from how much we value the written word to how much we value the



Magazines such as Revolve and Refuel are designed to get the Bible's messages out to teens.

visual image," said Sarah Arthur, author of "Walking with Frodo," a devotional book that explores Christianity through "The Lord of the Rings."

Arthur said that she's spoken with people who have seen some of the trilogy's films as many as four times. "I began to think there's something going on with this generation, that it's more than just entertainment for them," she said. "They're hungry for more of whatever this is."

But not everyone thinks Bibles that look more like Seventeen or a skateboarding magazine are a good way to teach young people about God.

Dorothy Patterson, a theology professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, said that if the Gospels look like a magazine, people will treat them as they do other magazines.

"If you put something in such a category that it can be thrown away and tossed, you have already downgraded the importance," Patterson said.

Publishers say they're taking their cues from other mass media outlets, such as television, as they try to reach a new generation.

"Just as MTV has pulled off the boxing gloves and is being very bold and nothing is sacred, we felt like we needed a Bible that was edgy as well," said Paul Caminiti, associate publisher of Bibles at Zondervan, another company getting into the trendy Bible market.

"I think unfortunately, many of them aren't finding that at church, but in other places."

Louis Agron, 26, prefers going to River City than the Pentacostal church he grew up going to on Chicago's West Side. At River City, Agron comes to church in a sports jersey, sweat pants and a nose ring and feels comfortable.

Agron first discovered River City during Halloween, when he took his young son trick-or-treating. Church members were giving out treats at their office, and they encouraged him to check out their approach to worship.

"I'm a single parent—I come here, and I feel welcome," Agron said. "It feels very inviting."

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People who aren't religious but want to find out what the new church is about are much more comfortable coming to the theater than a church, said Daniel Hill, River City's 30-year-old pastor.

At River City, the 11 a.m. Sunday service starts at a casual 11:15, giving people a chance to drift in a little late and mingle beforehand. People sit in chairs set up in the lobby facing the theater's main staircase, where singers perform religious tunes and Hill stands to give his message. The young adults who have been coming to River City since it started in August are looking for a relevant spiritual message, Hill said.

"Most people in their 20s are trying to sort through those big life questions," Hill said.



STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE

Chicago-based hip-hop group MPAC works on a new recording recently. The group members say their lyrics are true to Islam—no cursing or lyrics degrading women.

Local Muslim group preaches to rap fans

Chicago Tribune

The three tough guys in baggy trousers and oversize T-shirts moved across the stage to a hip-hop beat, swinging their microphones from side to side.

Then, as a ball of fire flashed across a screen on stage, the tough guys began to rap. "Forgive us our sins and protect us from the fires of hell," they chanted, along with the Arabic profession of faith for Muslims: "La ilaha illallah" (There is no god but God).

That night at DePaul University, rap music and Islam merged in the form of MPAC, a Muslim hip-hop band from the South Side. The group, one of several in the U.S., is part of a growing movement with ambitious goals.

"We try to have lyrics to uplift Muslim youth," said band member Luqman Rashad. "We want them to know that Islam can be strong and cool."

Muslim hip-hop is but one sign of a new and evolving American Muslim identity. Across the U.S., Muslims are bringing their religion to Latinos and African-Americans, who are converting to Islam in greater numbers. In return, they are learning creative ways to fuse Islam with other cultures and traditions.

While Muslim hip-hop bands have achieved varying degrees of success, they have one thing in common: The lyrics remain true to Islamic beliefs.

"We don't use curse words or say things

that are offensive to women," MPAC musician Jameel Karim said.

Muslim hip-hop stands out in other ways too. At the DePaul concert, nearly all of the young women in the audience wore head scarves, and soft drinks were served instead of alcohol.

Printed on T-shirts sold near the entrance were words from the scholar Imam Shafi: "You say you're just a body. But inside you are something greater than the universe."

"One reason this music is catching on is because Islam in America is undergoing a revival, and it reflects America as a melting pot," said Leila Mohammed, 22, who attended the DePaul concert.

Last month at Cafe N'Diga on the South Side, a haunt decorated with African and Islamic art, Muslims of all ethnic stripes gathered for Community Cafe, a mix of tunes and talk about religion and politics.

David Kelly, a musician in the underground Chicago hip-hop act All Natural who converted to Islam in 2001, served as emcee.

The program is hosted monthly by the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, a community organization that runs an array of programs on the South Side. Like many IMAN events, the gathering attracted Muslims from Latinos and African-Americans to Pakistanis and Arabs, as well as non-Muslims.