

Inner-city

Church planter finds a way to reach down-and-outers in Indianapolis

beacon

By John W. Kennedy in Indianapolis

Photos by Paul M. Walsh

Cityview Christian Center is nestled in an urban industrial area that is replete with liquor stores, pawnshops, strip clubs and cubbyholes promoting cash advances.

The inner-city Indianapolis church is functioning as a halfway house of sorts for the homeless, prostitutes, thieves and sexually abusive.

"New people are constantly coming and going — in and out of jail, in and out of addictions," says Pastor Tim McNamee, 43. "For every couple of people who make it, there are another 20 who don't. Those who succeed often move out of the neighborhood."

Such a ministry can be daunting, and few heed the call. McNamee grows weary on occasion, but he knows no one is waiting in the wings to replace him if he burns out.

"So many people are in bondage to alcohol, cocaine and sex," McNamee says. "They need an alternative."

McNamee certainly has a heart for the neighborhood. He lives only a few blocks from the church, even though it's a high-crime area. A thief stole his newly purchased car parked in front of his house last Thanksgiving morning.

Visually, McNamee isn't the clergy prototype. Admittedly, his stocky 5-foot, 6-inch frame, shaven head, goatee and casual attire make him appear likelier to be bouncing patrons at a bar than bouncing on a stage as worship leader.

Yet McNamee fondly remembers God's call to ministry.

MISSIONARY CALLING

McNamee and his wife, Kathy, both grew up in rural Indiana. However, they met and fell in love while enrolled at the Arkansas School for the Blind in Little Rock. McNamee attended art school but had to give up his artistic dreams because of persistent headaches. Doctors warned he could go blind permanently. His vision impairment is the result of a basketball injury

at age 15. While going up for a rebound, McNamee got knocked to the ceramic tile floor and landed on his head. Everything has been blurry since.

Early in their marriage the McNamees attended Lakeview Christian Center, a large Assemblies of God church in the western suburbs of Indianapolis. McNamee considered himself a "casual Christian," more interested in watching NFL football on Sundays than worshipping the Lord. Then one day in 1989 a visiting evangelist's sermon on the need to help inner-city teens gripped his heart. The message changed McNamee's outlook and spurred him to live out his faith.

"You really only have two choices as a Christian," McNamee says. "You can either be missing in action or you can be a missionary in action." McNamee quickly became a volunteer youth outreach leader for Lakeview, charged with the mission of keeping inner-city teens off the streets.

His first night, McNamee issued a basketball challenge to the 40 kids who gathered. If anyone could outshoot him, he would let them play basketball the rest of the evening. If he hit more baskets than the rest, they would listen to him teach from the Bible. A short, white, blind man didn't seem a likely candidate to sink more buckets than younger, taller inner-city youth.

However, those kids didn't know that during McNamee's youth he and his three brothers spent many nights shooting 500 baskets, especially from the free-throw line, under the tutelage of their father. That night in inner-city Indy, McNamee outlasted all challengers.

McNamee's faith continued to grow. By 1994 he left his comfortable decade-long job as an Internal Revenue Service instructor and tax law specialist to join Lakeview's full-time staff. He obtained his ministerial credentials after graduating from Global University.

When Lakeview determined

to plant an inner-city church in 1998, McNamee became pastor. Four years ago Cityview dedicated its sanctuary in a former 13,000-square-foot concrete storage warehouse. McNamee is still working the hoops angle. Cityview's sanctuary doubles as a basketball court.

A year ago, Cityview began meeting on Saturday nights when McNamee stopped drawing a salary from the mother church. McNamee, who has the roles of pastor, youth pastor and worship leader at Cityview, now spends Sundays preaching at other churches, raising funds as an Assemblies of God U.S. missionary.

Yet a core group from the suburbs who have been with Cityview since the beginning remain active and keep McNamee's spirits buoyed. One such worker is Bobbie Brinson, who works in the nursery, teaches children's classes, leads adult Bible studies and volunteers at the church-operated thrift store down the street.

"I am overcommitted," Brinson admits. "But our church is a family, and families do things together. We all have times when we get tired. But the more you do for the Lord, the more strength you have. It isn't a chore; it's energizing."

Church attendance is hampered, Brinson believes, because of perceived dangers in the neighborhood.

"Some people won't come to church because they think they'll get shot," Brinson says. "But people can get shot anywhere."

Julie Licht has been another volunteer since Cityview started. She volunteers at the thrift store, runs the sound board, supervises the tape du-



Tim McNamee leads worship (above) supported by his 18-year-old daughter Hayley on keyboard. The pastor and his wife, Kathy, (center) are both legally blind. The church's new coffeehouse faces a liquor store.

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plication ministry, and drives people without vehicles to and from services.

“Sometimes it’s discouraging, but we keep going because we see results,” Licht says. “There are kids here who are going to be missionaries or ministers.”

Kathy McNamee, although legally blind and officially disabled, volunteers as the church secretary and works at the thrift store. No one at the church draws a salary.

ENERGIZED SERVICE

The cares of the week seem to fade away when McNamee gets behind the pulpit. He is transformed into an animated, demonstrative worship leader, and the congregation enthusiastically follows his lead. Songs tend to focus on how Jesus won’t abandon His followers.

The service typically has about 80 attendees, and it’s a real melting pot: Asians, Latinos, Middle Easterners, blacks and whites. Homeless men in T-shirts and sneakers mingle with im-

maculately coiffed men in suits and ties. The homeless, who ride a bus from a downtown mission, eat a hot meal at the church before the service.

“These are people who wouldn’t feel comfortable in ‘traditional’ churches,” McNamee says. “But here it doesn’t matter what color your skin is, what kind of clothes you wear, or what kind of car you drive — or don’t drive.”

McNamee must use 36-point type to see what he is reading. A lengthy passage of Scripture during a sermon can take up several pages. McNamee doesn’t glance at notes much during sermons. He relies mostly on memory and the Holy Spirit for preaching.

The sermon isn’t pabulum. McNamee warns the assembled they will never find lasting fulfillment in alcohol, illegal drugs or pornography. He stresses that people who want to hear from God, people who want to be healed by God, need to be forsaking ungodly behaviors.

“Who are you associating with

that’s pulling you away from God?” McNamee asks. “What are you spending your money on that isn’t pleasing to God?”

RESCUE MAKEOVER

Cityview — and McNamee — have experienced a series of financial setbacks, followed by miracles. Someone bought him another car the week after his vehicle had been stolen. Someone else purchased a new \$1,500 pair of “periscope” eyeglasses McNamee had in the stolen vehicle and must wear in order to drive.

This summer the ReachAmerica Coalition of Assemblies of God U.S. Missions targeted Cityview as the recipient of an extreme makeover. A U.S. Missions MAPS team and RV Volunteers constructed a new roof and have been renovating an empty area of the facility to turn it into a coffeehouse. Coffee machines and furniture have been donated.

The coffeehouse, called “The



Tim McNamee needs large print to lead worship and read Scripture.

Garage,” is just what the neighborhood needs, McNamee believes. A roll-up door about 150 feet from a neighborhood liquor store will be lifted after Saturday evening church services to reveal a new kind of recreation. Christian musical entertainment and nonalcoholic beverages will be on tap until 2 in the morning — the time the city’s bars close. McNamee is preparing for an influx of newcomers.

“When an alcoholic stops drinking alcohol he starts drinking coffee,” McNamee says. **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

“There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God’s forgiveness and repent of your sins.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

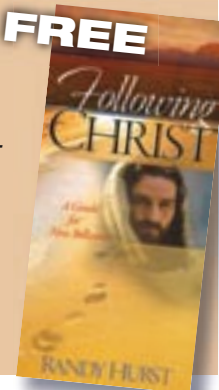
“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

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