

Atheist Congregation Sunday Assembly comes to Silicon Valley

Sunday Assembly atheist movement has a passionate, godless flock in Silicon Valley

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Eric Gray/Sunday Assembly Silicon Valley

Sanderson Jones, the co-founder of Sunday Assembly, leads the audience in song during the inaugural meeting of the Silicon Valley chapter.

GODLESS CHURCH: British comedian Sanderson Jones pumps up a crowd of non-believers at the kickoff of Silicon Valley's new atheist congregation.

White hipster Jesus has them on their feet, clapping and singing along to Katrina & the Waves. Behind him, a projector tells everyone why they're "walking on sunshine," even if there is no god.

It's all just a little much for Art Adams. He grew up Catholic, which meant mass five times a week at parochial school and back to church on Sunday. Kneel on cue, a dozen Hail Marys if he screwed up. But this

service is in another world. Hipster Jesus, better known as Sanderson Jones, is the lead singer for this sermon, and Adams is getting into it.

"Before we kick off, give me a cheer if you know what Sunday Assembly is," Jones shouts at the nearly 200 people gathered this November morning in downtown San Jose's San Pedro Theater.

A resounding cheer.

"Give me a cheer if you don't!"

Just as many cheer.

"I love you guys," Jones exclaims. "I always love the people who—they've got no idea what it is—but they go, 'I'm still going there. I am a leisure time renegade.'"

For the next hour-and-a-half, the spiritual equivalent of a TEDx talk focuses on "new beginnings." This is Silicon Valley's first-ever Sunday Assembly, a church-like gathering of atheists. They bow their heads in silence to ponder the wonder of the universe. Ushers pass around a basket to collect donations. Afterwards, people stick around for another hour, sipping coffee and shaking hands.

To Adams, who became a godless heathen by the age of 12 yet still continued going to mass, the experience was more transcendent than church ever was.

"It's like the best part of church—the singing, the community, the parts about being a better human being—with all the religion taken out," he says. "It was very inspirational."

Organized Non-Religion

Sunday Assembly, an international movement that some media have dubbed an "atheist megachurch," landed in Silicon Valley last month. The whole thing started on a whim, cooked up by Jones and friend Pippa Evans, both British comedians. They created a Facebook page for a gathering of non-believers in London this past January. Thirty people RSVP'd online, but 200 people showed up. At later services the

headcount was 300. Months later, 500 people showed. In the span of a year, it's gone global.

Jones started a crowd-funding campaign and launched a road show to help start congregations in cities around the world, from Perth to Portland. Los Gatos resident Gillian Claus helped lure Jones to San Jose.

"People started writing to us from all over the world saying they would love to have a Sunday Assembly near them," Jones says. "I mean, throughout recorded history humans have come together to celebrate their values. And, I don't know why, for quite a few years they thought that just because you don't have a religion, you weren't allowed to do that. But guess what—we can. And it's super sweet."

Claus hopes the South Bay Sunday Assembly will become an independent nonprofit with monthly services like the one in Jones helped kick off in November. The group, she says, would take on community service projects, like picking up trash and feeding the homeless. Basically, it will become another church, sans deity and dogma, because even non-believers yearn for fellowship.

"You don't have to believe in God to want to come together and socialize," Claus says. "Atheists still have a sense of morality."

Leap of Faith

Typical atheist gatherings take place at pubs, where intellectual types and erstwhile God-lovers hate on religion over a few brews. Sunday Assembly hews to another ethos. The assembly isn't composed of the narrow brand of people who identify as atheist. In the U.S., at least, it's made up of the 20 percent of people identified in Pew studies as the "nones," those unaffiliated with religion or belief, which includes atheists as well as the somewhat spiritual or otherwise non-religious.

"Large numbers of people practice and benefit from yoga without worrying about it smacking of Hinduism," says Daniel McCoy, a Pixar storyteller and keynote speaker at Silicon Valley's inaugural assembly. "Yoga is a more personal inward practice, which has been freed from its Hindu religious roots." He adds that the separation of faith at Sunday Assemblies is no different.

"There are a number of scientific papers stating that church-goers are happier and healthier than the general population," McCoy says. "I think it is far more likely that those benefits are due to the practices involved in church-going, not the associated religious dogmas."

Backlash to the movement has come not just from the God-fearing—that's a given—but also from other atheists.

"If you do start something called the atheist church, you're going to get a lot of abuse on the Internet," Jones says. "Yes, we discovered since the moment we became known as 'the atheist church' that, out there, there are an awful lot of evangelical, militant, fundamentalist atheists. They really don't like the Sunday Assembly because, apparently, the way we don't believe in god is not the right way to not believe in God."

Michael Luciano, a political editor over at PolicyMic, calls godless churches dangerous because they bolster the notion that atheism—by definition, the absence of belief—is another religion.

"Even if Jones were right about the supposed benefits of church, these would merely be incidental to the overarching purpose of the institution, which is to perpetuate supernatural myths," Luciano writes. "The peripheral advantages of religion Jones describes can easily be achieved by other means and in a way that does not cloak the activities in pseudo-religious imagery, rituals and language."

Within months of the assembly taking off in New York City and San Francisco, by-the-book atheists split off to form their own denominations, a pretty church-y move if you ask an atheist.

"It seems a little petty," Claus says. "We're not threatening anyone. This is more a celebration of life than anything anti-religious. It's not anti-anything—it's non-religious. But that doesn't mean a believer can't join us."

Sunday Assemblies appear to promote a level of inclusion long-touted by Universalist-Unitarians.

"We come together in our search, not because we have all the answers," says Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones, head of the First Unitarian Church of

San Jose. "We have a common need, a search to answer a very human question: What does it mean to be alive?"

Jones considered herself something of an agnostic and spent two decades away from any established religion before finding her calling in universalism. Inside her sanctuary, she points to six gold plates on the wall, each representing one of the world's major religions or philosophies—including science, depicted by Copernicus' hand clasping a drafting compass over a map of the solar system.

"We like the questions," Jones says. "We don't pretend we have any answers here. We like people to make up their mind for themselves."

Claus defends the Sunday Assemblies with an equally open mind. "It can be different things to different people," she says. "It makes us feel like we're part of something bigger. If that sounds spiritual, it's not. We have one life to live and that's it. Let's enjoy it and celebrate it together."