

Faith healings, dead raising teams part of Bethel experience

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POSTED: 12:00 AM, Jan 18, 2010

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Jonathon Lair went to the Healing Rooms at Bethel Church on Dec. 5 2009 to get his feet healed of a painful condition.

Jonathan Lair stood in the middle of Bethel Church's Healing Room on Dec. 5 and joyfully got straight to the point: "I'm going to get new feet today."

A pastor at a church in San Diego, Lair said he came to Redding so he could go to the Healing Rooms at Bethel and be cured of a painful condition that has caused his feet to be flat his whole life. Lair, 27, was barefoot and had rolled his jeans up above his ankles, exposing his flat, calloused feet.

"I will see my arches healed," he said just before two women on Bethel's Healing Rooms Ministry team approached him. "I really believe that."

began to pray quietly, tapping him on the chest and back. They motioned for another woman, one with a ram's horn known as a shofar, to come to where they stood. She began to blow the shofar at Lair's feet and in moments he fell to the ground, shaking.

Healing Rooms

Every Saturday morning from 9 to 10:30 a.m., two large rooms in Bethel Church are transformed into the Healing Rooms Ministry; a place where people can come and receive prayer for any kind of ailment.

Randy Castle, who was acting director that Saturday, said the healing rooms generally see 100 or so visitors - and up to 300 on a busy weekend.

Four teams with about 70 people each work the Healing Rooms. Many pray over visitors, commanding the body to be healed, speak in tongues and invite the presence of the Holy Spirit through impartation, or laying on of hands. Others, Castle said, play worship music in the "Encounter Room" where people can go bask in the presence of God.

Music performed in the Encounter Room made its way through the Healing Room speakers, repeating "God is good, God is good, God is good," while worshippers prayed, danced, laughed, cried, fell down and lay on the floor under what they say is the power of God. According to Bethel leadership, this is the room where people are cured of cancer, broken bones, chronic pain, multiple sclerosis and a host of other diseases.

Supporters of the supernatural

Adam Short, a 28-year-old from North Carolina, runs www.Healingherald.org (<http://www.Healingherald.org>) where he posts stories of miraculous healings from the Healing Rooms and beyond.

Short is a third-year intern at the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry (BSSM) and said he has received words of knowledge and signs from God leading him to people who needed to be healed.

During an April 2008 mission trip to Mexico with Bethel, Short said he noticed a man with a full leg cast.

"There was a thought that came to my mind, which I believe was God, and said, 'This man will walk out of here healed,' " he said.

Short said he prayed for the man and the man said the painful bone spur under the cast had dissolved. Short then prayed for the man's tunnel vision to be healed and it was, he said. During the prayers, he made declarations, he said.

"In this case we command the eyes to line up according to heaven," he said. "We're commanding those eyes to come back into alignment as to the purpose that God made for them because God made eyes to see, not to be confined to a tunnel."

Short said his goal for the Web site is for people to be encouraged by the good news and not question it.

"Nobody ever questions bad news," he said.

'Things just happen'

Bill Johnson, Bethel's senior pastor, settled into a plush black couch in his office, his arm around an animal-print pillow. Before anything else, he wanted to talk about healing.

"We just had another brain tumor case of cancer healed," he said. "We have a lot of that kind of stuff happen. It's verified by doctors, they do the tests and the cancer's gone. We have a lot of that sort of thing - miracles."

Johnson, who himself required hernia surgery last year and wears prescription glasses, teaches that the supernatural miracles that happened in Biblical times still happen today if people just value God's presence and open themselves up to receiving it.

"Because we have such value for his presence with us, things just happen," he said.

Johnson said that healings happen all the time and he doesn't feel he needs to provide any documentation or hard evidence to inquiring minds. He also said he doesn't check up on people who come to Bethel for healing - he doesn't have the time.

"If you're sitting here and you say, 'I've been deaf in my left ear since childbirth,' and I pray for you and then I have you close your right ear and I whisper 10 feet away and you can hear me, I don't feel like I need to get a doctor's report," he said. "I'm happy you're happy you can hear. That's enough for me."

Though he had people praying for his hernia to heal early in 2009, the condition still required

healing teams, though both are necessary.

"The doctors serve a great purpose but they'll tell you they can't fix everything," he said. "Some things need to be fixed by a miracle or just aren't fixed at all."

Johnson said in his sermons he often tells the congregation stories of miraculous healings to encourage them. One such story was about a group in the small, rural city of Shelton, Wash., whose goal it is to raise people from the dead.

Dead Raising Team

In an Oct. 19, 2008, sermon, Johnson shared a story about a former BSSM student who moved to Washington State and started a ministry called the Dead Raising Team.

"DRT," he repeated the acronym dramatically at several points during the story.

In a video of the sermon, Johnson said the team got approval from Mason County to be listed along with other county services and had been given badges so they can go behind police lines if there's an accident or fatality. Johnson told the audience, who erupted in shouts of "come on, Jesus" and cheers, that there had been one resurrection so far.

Marty Best, manager of the Mason County Department of Emergency Management, said he met the Dead Raising Team and suggested they become volunteers for his department so they could have access to emergency situations.

"Our mandate is to protect life, property and environment," he said. "If a person is raised by a defibrillator and adrenaline or by prayer they still return to their loved ones."

Best said the team must first get the permission of the unit commander before they can start praying over a fatality and they can never impose it on anyone.

In contrast to what Johnson said, the DRT is not included in the services listed on the Mason County Web sited.

Nor have there been any resurrections, Best said.

"Not yet," he added.

Johnson said the resurrection he mentioned in his sermon was from a DRT report and that he never said it had happened behind police lines.

SkepDoc weighs in

Harriet Hall, a retired family physician and former Air Force flight surgeon, writes a column in "Skeptic" magazine and "O," The Oprah Magazine, on topics including science, alternative medicine and what she calls "quackery."

"When faith healings have been diligently investigated by qualified doctors, they have found no evidence that the patients were actually helped," said Hall, who also writes under the name "SkepDoc."

After Hall took a look at the healing testimonies posted on Bethel's Web site - specifically addressing the testimony of the woman healed of brain cancer - she had a host of questions.

"Where are the medical reports? Where are the X-rays? Why was this case not written up in a medical journal? What happened to the patient afterwards?" she said in an e-mail.

Hall said the Journal of the American Medical Association formerly featured a testimony of a patient who was cured of cancer on one page with the patient's death certificate printed on the opposite page, showing that the patient had died of cancer shortly after providing the testimony.

Faith healings, Hall said, are never properly documented or investigated because the people involved want and need to believe. Without evidence, the claims ring hollow, she said.

"If you challenge the pastor to participate in a formal study to establish that these healings are really occurring, you will get lots of rationalizations and backpedaling with no understanding of how science can go about testing for the truth of a claim," she said. "They have no interest in finding out if the healing is 'real' because they already 'know' it is real for them."

Indeed, Johnson said he has no interest in proving anything to anybody.

Hall closed her e-mail with a warning: "Faith healing can be deadly when patients are led to believe they don't need conventional medical treatment."

Waking up

Back in the Healing Room, Jonathan Lair lay peacefully on the floor, covered in a dark green blanket, while the three women continued to pray over him and blow the shofar at his feet. At one point he got up and hopped up and down in the middle of the room where people were painting pictures on easels, before lying back down again. Eventually, one by one, they walked away and left

him lying still on the floor.

Lair slowly sat up 10 minutes later and looked around. He looked at his feet, then stood up.

He said he had expected bones to crack and form an arch but his feet were still flat.

"I look at them, and they don't look healed," he said.

But his faith was not shaken, he said, because he felt so loved and maybe the physical healing was secondary to the spiritual experience he had.

And he still believes that, someday, God will heal his feet.

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