

New Life, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA



Mystery Worshipper: Harriet M. Welsch.

The church: New Life, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA.

Denomination: Non-denominational.

Subsequent report: We also visited this church in January 2007.

The building: New Life Church looks like a big box store or a shopping mall. The parking lot surrounds the church, police officers direct traffic (and one cop was sitting off the highway with his radar gun pointed at incoming worshippers' cars!), there is the "World Prayer Center" adjacent to the huge sanctuary, sporting American flags flying around it (apparently, at other times, other countries' flags are displayed; this was the Fourth of July weekend). Once you step inside the building, the giant foyer is filled with kiosks for members to sign up for various ministries and activities. There is a statue of the torso and wings of a worshipping angel in the middle of the foyer. Cartoon characters wander among the people. Children relax in soccer-ball shaped easy chairs, watching *Veggie-Tales* videos before the service starts. The sanctuary is built like a concert hall. The stage is circular, with seats all around. Each area is marked like a giant stadium – I suppose so you can find your way back to your seat if you leave to join the worshipping dancers in front of the stage. There is bare scaffolding, six big screens and one GIANT screen.

The church: New Life Church is one of the largest churches in the US. It boasts over 14,000 members and over 1,000 small groups meeting in the Springs. Pastor Ted Haggard (at the time of writing this report) is the president of the National

Association of Evangelicals, and as such, he speaks weekly to President George W. Bush.

The neighborhood: Boring! Originally, the church sat on a desolate prairie. As Colorado Springs has experienced a population boom for the past 15 years, tract houses and highways have cropped up around the church. The US Air Force Academy sits directly west of New Life Church. Focus On the Family is one of its closest neighbors.

The cast: Pastor Ted Haggard.

The date & time: Sunday, July 2, 2006 at 9.00am.

What was the name of the service?

No special name, just 9am worship.

How full was the building?

Wandering past people in the foyer, it felt as full as Disneyland, especially with the strange characters dressed as animals and vegetables wandering around. Once in the sanctuary, it was nearly full. The sanctuary is huge. I found an empty seat next to what looked like "saved" seats. People put Bibles, books and Altoid tins down to mark their spots.

Did anyone welcome you personally?

Yes! I was most impressed with a woman named Nan Emory, who greeted me at the front door (actually, there are probably four "front" doors). She handed me a bulletin, said "God bless you" in a most sincere manner, and even invited me to Pastor Ted's 50th birthday party, to be held later that day.

Was your pew comfortable?

Pew? What pew? It was like being at a rock concert. The seats were padded business chairs with armrests. Very un-church-like, but definitely comfortable. It did seem to isolate me from those next to me (particularly the Altoids tin that sat on the seat to my left for the entire service).

How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere?

Talk, talk, talk! Cliques of people everywhere, talking, laughing, praying. People dressed to the n's, people in cut offs and flip flops, and people in between, all talking to each other. People speaking Chinese behind me – I think it was Chinese. However, this is a charismatic church, so I wonder... No one talked to me after Nan did, though.



What were the exact opening words of the service?

"Good morning, everyone, let's stand up and greet each other."

What books did the congregation use during the service?

No books to be found. Remember, no pews. No slots for books or hymnals or Bibles or those cute little communion shot glasses. People carried their own Bibles. Or Palm Pilots, as the case may be, perhaps emulating Pastor Ted, who read from his Palm Pilot rather than a hard copy of a Bible.

What musical instruments were played?

Get this: acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass guitar, brass instruments, piano, keyboards, drums, six singers leading worship at the six "sides" of the circular stage, and Ross Parsley, worship leader extraordinaire, leading worship.

Did anything distract you?

I don't even know where to begin. My experience at New Life Church was a total sensory orgiastic experience, from start to finish. There was a fog-maker in the sanctuary, there were migraine-inducing spotlights swirling about during worship (if I stayed long enough, would God heal my migraines?), worshippers – uh, what's the word? – "pogo-ing" up and down, full on dancing provocatively, kids in red, blue and yellow shirts forming a sort of tiny moshpit in front of the stage (thankfully, no one jumped into it), people just wandering about and "ushers" who looked like Secret Service (really, they wore dark suits, sported tiny headsets and never smiled). And that's just the beginning. This service celebrated "Pastor Ted's 50th birthday, and the celebration included: ten motor scooters driven into the sanctuary, a fertilizer machine, a year's supply of ice cream bars carried to the stage by children, a pup tent and a real John Deere tractor ridden into the sanctuary (yes, the gasoline smell was also distracting). Then there was the moment blue and yellow streamers liberally fell from the scaffolding and landed on my head. During the sermon, I was distracted by Ted Haggard's breath; yes, I could see his very breath due to the presence of the fog-making machine. Everytime he turned his head a certain way, I could also see spittle project forth. Thoughts of avian flu and "are the vents open?" ran through my head.

Was the worship stiff-upper-lip, happy clappy, or what?

Wow! These musicians are seriously good. In fact, they have recorded numerous CDs of worship music, and New Life musicians have written many of the contemporary songs in use throughout the country (or maybe even the world). The music was loud. It was flawless. And, I might add, the musicians looked so good, I wanted to bring them home with me (I doubt they'd come). The acoustic guitar player reminded me of Adam Duritz of Counting Crows (long, drawn out "yeah"). The six singers were all stylish, including the older gentleman who reminded me of Taylor Hicks, our newest "American Idol", preternaturally greying. Ross Parsley could get us to worship! The large choir behind the band was hardly necessary; the music was so loud, I couldn't hear them. They did look good swaying, which seemed a prerequisite to joining. As for the audience – uh, congregants – they could worship, too. Many, many people jumped up and down, while others danced. The woman with the silky dress and gorgeous body was a bit distracting – or was I just jealous? The children danced and put their hands up. What I found a bit odd was the people who worshipped, with hands raised, to songs such as "America the Beautiful".



Exactly how long was the sermon?

After the 30 minute birthday bash, the sermon was 29 minutes long.

On a scale of 1-10, how good was the preacher?

1 – I was thrown off by Ted Haggard's constant perusing of his palm pilot. Apparently, he uses an electronic Bible. That's okay, but to me, the mother of teens, it looked like he was constantly looking for a text message.

In a nutshell, what was the sermon about?

Let me make this short. It was political, nationalistic and ethnocentric. The Iraq War was mentioned as a fulfillment of Jesus's Great Commission. He said that, compared to the the loss of Hebrew soldiers in I Samuel 4, the US hasn't lost that many soldiers. Pastor Ted said that an evangelical's effectiveness can be measured by how the "enemy" sees us. Among the specific "enemies" he mentioned was the Citizen's Project, a group in Colorado Springs which promotes pluralism and religious liberty, and which is pro gay marriage.

Which part of the service was like being in heaven?

When Pastor Ted took up a special offering for a downtown church, only a block from my house, for air conditioning (it's a sister church, pastored by Ted's son, but still). Ted prayed a long but wonderful prayer saying "it's not about us, it's about helping others".

And which part was like being in... er... the other place?

The sermon. I suddenly felt unwelcome, not a part of the "club", an enemy, even. Enough said.



What happened when you hung around after the service looking lost?

Immediately after the service, the woman closest to me (four seats to my left) swept up all the items from the "saved" seats (including the Altoids tin; I KNEW I should have eaten them!) and left. Apparently, she just didn't want to sit close to anyone. I'm trying not to take it personally. No one spoke to me; in fact, I tried for eye contact and got *none*. When I tried for eye contact with the line of ushers standing in the back, I sensed that they intuited I was the enemy and would carry me off forcibly. I quickly looked away.

How would you describe the after-service coffee?

Here's the funny thing. There is a bar and grill (as in "espresso bar" in the church. I mean, it is a full on restaurant. There is breakfast and lunch, including hamburgers, biscuits and gravy, and all kinds of coffee drinks. Nothing is free, though. No nice styrofoam cup of black coffee.

How would you feel about making this church your regular (where 10 = ecstatic, 0 = terminal)?

1.

Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?

No. Without being political, let me just say I was embarrassed about being an American Christian, and scared that 13,000 people are influenced by the message, and worried that Ted Haggard bends President Bush's ear every week (and vice versa).

What one thing will you remember about all this in seven days' time?

The nice thing I will remember is: When Ted Haggard saw the John Deere tractor, he said "Is that really mine? What am I going to do with it? Can we trade it in for air-conditioning for Boulder Street Church?" I thought that was a wonderful, selfless statement. I also thought that they might want to trade in the fog-making machine for air-conditioning.