

Finding God – before the movie

California-style church wins converts in Framingham cinema

By Mike McGrail

NEWS STAFF WRITER

FRAMINGHAM – A hopelessly lapsed Catholic catches himself in mid-genuflect as he prepares to take his seat at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship service.

A covert glance around the theater where the service is held confirms his suspicion that kneeling is not a big deal at Vineyard services. Neither is ceremony, routine, or anything resembling formality.

The pastor, who plays bass in the five-piece band leading the service, is more likely to wear Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt than he is a robe.

Sunday best at the Vineyard means dressing in blue jeans and sneakers, or whatever else you find comfortable. The service is held in a rented General Cinema movie theater at Shoppers' World; the congregation has to be finished before the noon matinee.

There's not an altar, crucifix or incense burner in sight. Mellow rock music takes the place of organ notes. Worshippers are swaying to the music, hands waving or clasped in prayer, instead of kneeling.

Relaxed atmosphere or no, this is serious religion – albeit stripped down.

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After a 10-year orgy of consumption during the '80s, there are signs that religion is making a comeback in the '90s. The New York Times and the Boston Phoenix have published stories recently about religion's renewed popularity. Newsweek magazine this month reported that the nation's 75 million baby boomers are flocking back to church, many after discovering that BMWs and espresso machines don't necessarily make for a happy life.

"We've gotten some people like that, but things haven't gotten bad enough yet for people to turn to God," said Vineyard Pastor Bob Branch. "We're getting a trickle now, but I expect it's going to turn into a river."

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CHURCH, PAGE 4A

The Vineyard Christian Fellowship of MetroWest is an alternative church with beliefs directly out of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, but without the trappings and hierarchies of traditional denominations.

In the six years since it was “planted,” the Vineyard’s soft rock services, casual atmosphere, and relatively free-form doctrine have attracted 280 MetroWest residents – mostly baby boomers – who fell away from a mainstream religion but turned to the Vineyard as a way to put God back into their lives.

“We were both raised in traditional Protestant churches, but we kind of drifted away from them,” said Dan Gronberg of Framingham, a quality administrator at Raytheon. “A friend told us about this church he belonged to that was a little bit different, so we decided to come down and check it out.”

Gronberg and his wife, Cheryl, have been Vineyard members for six years. Talking in the theater lobby after services last Sunday, the Gronbergs said they were at first uncomfortable with the rocking, expressive services, but quickly decided they had found what they were looking for.

“People raising their hands during the service? Oh, only crazies raise their hands, real people don’t do that,” Cheryl Gronberg said with a laugh, recalling her initial reaction to the Vineyard. “The first time we came to a service, there was a man standing up front wearing shorts and thong sandals and a Hawaiian shirt. He was the pastor.”

“He took us aside and told us every question and doubt we had,” Dan Gronberg said. After a while, “we decided this was real. This was the way to have a close relationship with Christ.”

The international Vineyard movement was founded 13 years ago in California by John Wimber, who is as close to a bishop as the Vineyard has, and Ken Gulliksen, who founded the six-year-old MetroWest fellowship.

The movement has spread to 300 churches in the United States, Canada, South Africa and Switzerland, including six in Massachusetts.

“The Vineyard movement came out of the Jesus movement, which came out of the hippie movement that started in Southern California in the ‘60s and spread out around the country, especially at universities,” Branch said. “The eastern states have been tougher because the traditional denominations are more entrenched, and obviously our style is not real traditional.”

Vineyard aren’t just non-traditional. They’re downright funky.



A half hour into the service, worshippers are still on their feet, singing hymns adapted to rock and roll beats. The lapsed Catholic feels a little lost with no priest or minister telling him to sit, stand, kneel, pray or sing; He’s also starting to wonder if there’s any more to Vineyard services than singing when the music stops.

“We’re having a problem with the sound system, so let’s take care of the hug quota now,” Branch says, shrugging off the shoulder strap of his electric bass guitar.

Hug quota?

Fellowship members start embracing. The lapsed Catholic, who is a vintage New England stiff besides, doesn't know whether to hug or make an unneeded trip to the men's room.

He is just about to opt for the latter when a woman with big glasses and an even bitter smile walks over to him.

"Are you going to give it a try?" she says.

Nothing if not game, he tries. It turns out to be painless.



"Plain and simple, the audience that we want to reach (responds to) current cultural motifs," Branch said. "When you're culturally current, you worship with music that is current – music that you might heard on the radio, not music antiquated by time. We want to minister to people of this generation with forms that have meaning to them. If we want to minister to baby boomers, we're going to play rock music.

Music, though an integral part of Vineyard services, is just a means to an end, like the kinship groups where members gather to study and pray, and the sermon that followed the hymns at last Sunday's service.

Assistant Pastor Joe Giamo said most services would include prayer for sick and readings from the Bible. At last Sunday's service, Jim Goll, a member of the Metro Vineyard in Kansas City, shared a personal religious experience where the Holy Spirit spoke to him.

That's the end of the music, the readings are leading to: a personal relationship with God.

The Vineyard's image of God is a blend of images from the Old and New Testament scripture. He's loving and forgiving, but also dishes out punishment when a follower falls off the straight and narrow.

"We're not a New Age everyone-do-their-own-thing group, because the tendency there is to make God in our image to suit our needs, instead of making ourselves in His image," Branch said. "As a church, we worship together in pursuit of the Lord with one focus: to know Him better. We believe the individual can go right to the Lord."

Branch said the Vineyard helps members find their own path to God, until they can actually hear Him talking to them. Among its other beliefs are prayer for the sick, a simple lifestyle, and a true commitment to having God in your life.

"I needed more than just to got to church on Sunday," Giamo said. "I needed a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and that's what we stress here."

Church members won't give you a hard sell to join. If you're satisfied with another religion, stay in it, Giamo said. If you want something different... well, the Vineyard is plenty different.