

Worshippers rev up spiritual engines at Tallahassee Biker Church



It's Sunday morning in Tallahassee. Services will begin soon at the bustling little church on North Monroe. As the congregants munch on doughnuts and sip hot coffee, the contemporary praise musicians quietly tune-up. Everybody here is in their Sunday best, and wanting to make a good impression; they've all washed

and polished their vehicles to perfection the night before.

Well, that's odd, you might think. I go to church even when my ride is dirty.

Yet it's not odd when you realize that this is a special church. A special place that broadly welcomes people for whom bikes—motorbikes—are more than just a means to move around the city or speed from town to town.

For these men and women, the motorcycle is a way of life; it is a statement of freedom; about camaraderie; about the courage to be who you are and enjoy what you love—even if others may cast side-glances your way.

But today at the Tallahassee Biker Church, not even a storefront, but a store back, 30 to 40 men and women are in their element and reveling in each other's acceptance and in God's love.

A unique and shared interest

“Catfish” Tompkins, Greg Scrivener, and “Colonel Nomad” Mears are milling around outside, checking out each other's bikes. Tompkins wears a yellow skull cap, a sleeveless vest and impressive tattoos. Scrivener is casual in T-shirt, jeans and baseball cap, and Mears's leather vest is covered with colorful patches and pins.

The two men, if they wanted to, could intimidate a tough guy in a back alley. But looks can be deceiving. In just a few minutes, all

three will be raptly listening to Pastor Ernie Garcia bringing them the Word of God, and raising their hands and voices in song.

Beside these men, many still wearing their hats and all of them in casual jeans, are a dozen women—wives, companions—a couple of them are riders themselves.

One is “Suzuki Sue”, who is the music director, guitarist and clear-voiced singer. Word has it that she and her husband have traveled by motorbike “all over the world.” Another is more incongruous. Her name is Nancy Thorson and she is a 73-year-old widow who says that this church changed her life.



Nancy Thorson, 73 year old rider who credits the Biker Church with helping her depression after the loss of her husband. (Photo: Marina Brown)

Thorson has driven up to the church on a yellow and black CanAm FSSport, a three-wheeled motorbike she calls her “hornet.” “I had always wanted to own another motorcycle,” she says, ever since she’d bought her first in Wisconsin when she was 21.

Along the way, the tiny woman describes rising to deputy sheriff of her small northern town, taking on the role of wife and mother with a move to Florida, and then falling into a deep depression with the death of her husband. “This fantastic church changed everything for me.”

Having discovered a unique network of people with one thing in common, Thorson was embraced by others who one way or another had found the “wind therapy” of the Biker Church healing. “Since March, when I got my 6-gear CanAm,” says Thorson, “I’ve put 1300 miles on her. I’m feeling pretty proud of myself,” she beams.

'Nothing but sweet fellowship'

Greeting her, one of many big men in the congregation, Bob Davie says that he has been on motorcycles since he was “8 or 10.” “But this is not just a biker hang-out. This is a serious church. We have Bible study the last two Thursdays of the month and we try to do as

many good-works projects as we can—toy runs and food distribution are the big ones.”



The offering is collected in a motorcycle helmet. The pulpit is a purple Harley gas tank. (Photos: Marina Brown)



Neal Johnson, who is one of the three founders who began the Biker Church five years ago, agrees. “We started under a tent outside the Harley-Davidson dealership with just a handful of people. We were eventually sponsored as a mission by Canopy Baptist Church, then went on our own, affiliated with the Florida Baptist Association. Now there are at least 30 every Sunday. There’s even a Biker Church in Italy that follows us on live stream Facebook and translates our sermons.”

But Johnson says the something that makes this place unique is its acceptance of everyone. “Many people have been hurt by church... their feelings hurt by godly people who just don’t want us there. Here, there’s nothing but sweet fellowship.”



The Church’s first sign



Pastor Ernie Garcia

Finding a perfect fit

Now the seats begin to fill, the musicians take their place and rollicking hymns have everyone's arms in the air, with bodies swaying and voices rising. Ernie Garcia, a powerfully large man himself, is the pastor. Part stand-up jokester and part deeply knowledgeable pastor, he addresses each congregant as if they were in a private conversation.

And if the wall decoration behind him—four exhaust pipes from a Harley-Davidson, and the pulpit itself, the purple gas tank from a Harley, don't give you the idea, his sermon and teaching of Scripture is peppered with allusions to the biking life. Meet your listeners where they are, he seems to say, and they will hear the message of hope.

In a corner, though not timid, is someone Garcia takes special note of, someone the Biker Church has embraced. "Do you remember in the Democrat," he says, the picture of the man who got a shave from the policeman so who could go on a job interview? Well, that's him. That's him and we're glad to have him with us."

Along with the other congregants, the man, with the thick head of coiffed hair and tidily shaved face raises his arms, singing beside all the other joyous worshippers who like him, have found a place where they fit in just right.