

Fish House followers come from all faiths

By Mary Bridgman
Dispatch Accent Reporter

Sunday night and Fish House is filled.

Rick Morris clips a microphone to his open collar. "If you're here tonight and you're the head of the football team, we don't care about that," he tells the crowd. "If you're the loser, we don't care about that either. We care about the role you play in the body of Christ."

The crowd listens intently. "You have to open the door and let him (Jesus Christ) in. Don't go through another day of alienation. Don't do that."

Fish House is a church without pulpit or pews, where Bluegrass music replaces old-style

hymns, testimonials replace the Lord's Prayer and wooden boxes replace offering plates. Its Bible-toting congregation comes dressed in jeans to sing alleluias and say amens.

The 1,400 followers — Catholics, Baptists, Jews, Methodists and more — are threaded together by an ecclesiastical fervor to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Many are disillusioned with their former churches. Most are between the ages of 15 and 35.

"I USED TO go to church every Sunday, just out of guilt — not because I wanted to serve God," said Barbara Scali, 22, a senior at Ohio State University and a one-time Baptist.

Her sister introduced her to Fish House 14 months ago. "I came and I knew they were speaking the truth," she said. "I had never heard it."

Scali said she accepted Christ into her life on Jan. 22, 1982. "I was a sinner. I needed forgiveness," she said.

Scali is typical of many Fish House followers. For them, Fish House is church, and Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

They stream into the large meeting room at Four Flags Office Forum at 800 Freeway Dr. N., and into the multipurpose room at the former Calumet School, 2774 Calumet Ave., on Sunday and Tuesday evenings to listen to teachers who have studied the Bible with Fish House elders.

Typically, more than 300 people crowd into the meeting rooms to listen to talk on the Bible's meaning for today.

At the 30 Fish House "home churches," which also meet weekly, some 25 to 60 followers gather in more casual surroundings — living rooms and classrooms — for more of the same. They sprawl comfortably on the floor and crowd onto sofas for Bible study, prayers and singing, then share punch and cookies.

SOME OF the home churches spawn cell groups, made up of five or six persons who meet for additional sharing and spiritual growth.

"This is the first place I had seen grace preached and how it transforms lives," said Mark Verber, 20, who for 18 years was a practicing Jew. Now, he calls himself a completed Jew.

"It's the love and the acceptance, the emphasis you are a Christian and you've been saved by Christ and why don't you do something about it," said Verber, who attends weekly home church meetings and is a cell group leader.

Ken Gilbert agreed. "People are being snatched out of the devil's hands," said Gilbert, 27, a doctoral candidate in chemistry at Ohio State University.

Ministers question strict principles

The servant fundamentalism of Fish House pulses through the congregation. The message is unequivocal: accept Christ or live eternally in hell.

It is preached over and over at the large central gatherings and in the home churches. It is an essential biblical doctrine and a basic tenet of the ministry, said Gary Delashmutt, a founding member and a Fish House elder.

With essential doctrines in the Bible, there is no room for debate.

Yet it is this perceived narrow acceptance — "believe as I believe and do as I do" — that some find objectionable.

"It is very dangerous," said the Rev. Jack Collins, pastor of St. Thomas More Newman Center, 64 W. Lane Ave. "It ignores the true content of scripture. I don't think life is that black and white."

After a person accepts Christ, he still must deal with his own sinful nature, Collins said. In traditional religion, churches leave room for that and for Christ's forgiveness

Too, Collins said, Fish House ignores some aspects of human life. "How does one integrate into their religion the experience of the human condition?" he asked.

At the Newman Center, Sister Marie Sweeney has formed a self-help group for former Fish House followers and for friends of followers. The group, Collins said, helps people "come out of their poor experience."

While the Fish House leadership is doing an admirable job, the Rev. Bill Lewis said he has counseled people who have had a "dreadful experience" there.

"Their relationship with Jesus Christ got messed up in Fish," said Lewis, campus pastor at Ohio State University for the Christian Reform Church. "It is hard for people who are unsure to have room to explore and ask questions, especially at the house church."

Consequently, he advises parents of children involved in the fellowship to, at least initially, attend meetings with them to learn about Fish House.



Dispatch photo by Amy Sancetta

Doug Lawver, a group leader at a Fish House home church

Fish House was launched by a handful of OSU students during the turbulent spring of 1970 as a campus-based fellowship.

"It was a spontaneous desire to share with others what we had found," said Gary Delashmutt, one of the founders and one of five elders now running the organization from offices at 3400 N. High St.

INITIALLY; they published an underground newspaper, *The Fish*. The Lane Ave. home where they first met was dubbed the fish house and the name stuck, though recently the name was changed to Xenos Christian Fellowship. Followers, however, haven't made the name switch.

"We teach and show people how to love; we teach and show people the truth of the Bible," said Delashmutt.

Delashmutt is one of three elders paid full-time salaries. Delashmutt said he and another elder completed two years of

seminary training. Two other elders spent a year at a seminary. The organization is considered tax-exempt by the Internal Revenue Service, Delashmutt said.

While Fish House has come under private criticism for its zealous evangelism, aimed at both children and adults, Delashmutt defends it. The church should be a witnessing community, he said.

"We know it does work," he said. "We're reaching a tremendous number of junior high and high school kids. They don't want to just sit around and play games."

THE MESSAGE at Fish House, he said, is not appreciably different from the messages spoken from many local pulpits.

"There are a lot of people who like the message (in traditional churches) but they don't like the cultural change they

have to go through. They don't like the 17th-century hymns. They don't like dressing up Sunday morning."

They are people such as Molly Cleary. "When I started to get serious with a personal relationship with God, I came here because I knew they spoke the truth," said Cleary.

Her road to Fish House began more than 10 years ago. "I couldn't live up to the morality the Catholic Church was teaching," said Cleary, 23, an OSU sophomore. "I stopped going to church. I got into drugs. I left morality behind."

Five years ago, a friend took her to Fish House. "When I found out Jesus Christ was alive and it was tangible — that he is a personal God and cares about the individual — I went for it. I dropped drugs. I tried to get my life together according to biblical principles."