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## GOD ON TAP

Spirits lifted, sold when congregation gathers for services in neighborhood bar

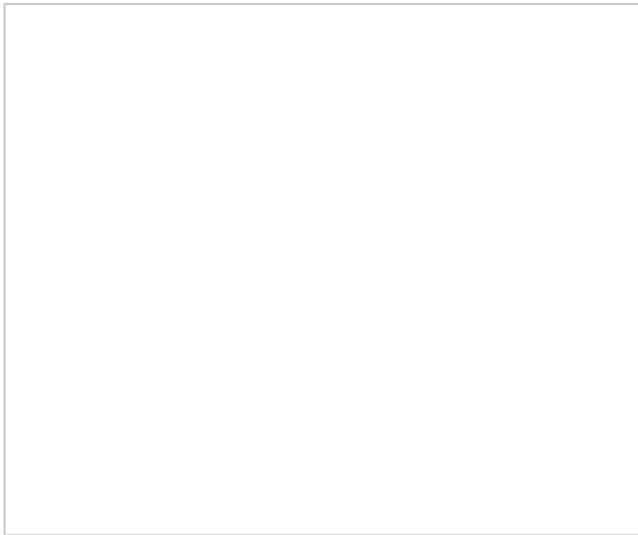
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By Catherine Jhee  
Religion News Service

NEW YORK -- A rock 'n' roll bar with a neon "Pabst Blue Ribbon" sign in its window and truck-driver kitsch seems an unlikely setting for a room full of devout Christians gathered for prayer.

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But on a recent Sunday evening, a small crowd gathered in the back room of Trash Bar in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood as a band warmed up on stage. Friends greeted one another with handshakes and hugs by the bar; some sat in the ripped-out car seats that line the bordello-red walls to chat.

By the time the band began to play "Glory to God," about 40 people had assembled. Some were clean-cut, casually dressed young professionals; others sported tattoos, T-shirts and sneakers. Many closed their eyes and lifted their hands while they sang along with the band. Some knelt or sat with their heads in their hands as they prayed.

A small crop of evangelical groups like the Church at Trash Bar have begun gathering in informal locations throughout Williamsburg over the past year, holding services in bars and cafes and promising an open environment for those who have given up on traditional churches but remain interested in worshipping.

The Church at Trash Bar is one of a handful of New York congregations affiliated with the Vineyard Church, a loose-knit Pentecostal denomination of about 1,500 churches worldwide.

Courtney Bender, a professor of religion at Columbia University, said finding an evangelical church in a bar may seem unorthodox, but actually fits into efforts to "missionize" people wherever they are comfortable.

"They want to show young people that they are not their fathers' or mothers' church," she said. "Meeting in untraditional places also doubles as a way to appear cool or, maybe to put it differently, to demonstrate that Jesus is not out of step with modern times."

For Matt Nolan, a 25-year-old rock musician who grew up in a Southern Baptist church in Missouri, the nontraditional setting and rock music feel right.

"I grew up with hymns and pews and stuff," said Nolan, a first-time attendee whose band was scheduled to perform at the bar later in the evening. "But this kind of environment makes a lot more sense to me. I feel a lot more comfortable."

Courtney Noel, a 28-year-old law student at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, has been attending for more than a year and doesn't mind the hour-long commute from her home on the other side of the Hudson River.

"I've been coming to Vineyard churches since I was 16," said Noel, of Newark, N.J.

The congregation is composed of mostly young adults in their 20s and 30s who came to New York for school or work. For 16 years, pastor Mike Turrigano and his wife, Char, led a Vineyard congregation that met in an office. They switched venues for a space that would allow more community-oriented activities beyond weekly services.

"We'd all go out for drinks after services to a pub on Third Avenue in Manhattan," said Turrigano, 57. "And we found we were really good at hanging out and bringing people together. Why not meet for service at a bar, where we can hang out afterward too?"

Eventually, the congregation looked for a neighborhood setting in Brooklyn, where many of the parishioners actually lived, and wanted a popular bar where they could hold services and hang out. The congregation has been meeting at the Trash Bar since March 2006.

Turrigano said he felt the bar's reputation as a hip venue for live music helped attract curious newcomers -- a handful of new people attend the service each week. Part of the appeal of hosting services at a bar was the possibility of "reaching out to the hipsters, the angry young rebels who have been hurt by the church before," he said.

"It is our mission to be among unbelievers," he said. "We want to show them it's possible to have a relationship with Christ. They're not as likely to come to us in a church. So we go to them to break the stereotypes."

Aaron Pierce, the bar's 31-year-old manager, said he enjoys the congregation's vibe. "They're a bunch of fun-havers," he said.

"Their preaching comes in the form of a band playing rock 'n' roll, with a short sermon." Pierce said he admires Turrigano's leadership and the quirkiness of the church's services. "They're a cool group of people," he said.