

# Atheists Enjoy Church Also!

Atheists starting a church, going to church and enjoying it seems like an oxymoron doesn't it? You might wonder if I am suggesting that some atheists have actually started a church. You might wonder if I am joking about atheists going to church and enjoying it. Why would God-rejecting people want to regularly go to church? You might conclude that cannot be happening. But on January 6, 2013 the first atheist church was started in the northern suburbs of London, Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> The name of the church is the "Sunday Assembly." The church was started by comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. They came up with the idea for an atheist church during a road trip.<sup>2</sup> The church met in a dilapidated church building in the northern suburbs of London.

That first Sunday meeting two hundred people were in attendance. They had hoped for thirty people but the response was unexpected. It is reported that by July 2013 the community had grown from 250 and now meet in a 1,200 seat arena.<sup>3</sup> The room was packed with people from different walks of life and dressed in various styles. The first church service was conducted by . . .



. . . master of ceremonies Sanderson Jones, [with a] "part foot-stomping show, part atheist church, all celebration of life".

Instead of hymns, the non-faithful get to their feet to sing along to Stevie Wonder and Queen songs. There is a reading from Alice in Wonderland and a power-point presentation from a particle physicist, Dr Harry Cliff, who explains the origins of antimatter theory.<sup>4</sup>

Normally, the service of the atheist church is . . .

. . . much like a religious service, with readings, music and singing. The house band even performed Oasis's "Don't Look Back In Anger" during the January service. Each service is based around a theme, which includes talks and moments of reflection based on this theme. The first theme was

"Beginnings" and February's theme will focus on "Wonder".<sup>5</sup>

An online video of the first meeting<sup>6</sup> reveals that it had high energy and the people were enthusiastic. The atheist church is so successful that people come early to get a front row seat. For example,

Julius arrived an hour early, just to be sure of a place at the service, which is described by its organizers as "a godless congrega-

1. The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/02/atheists-sunday-assembly-coming-to-america>).

2. HelloGiggles (<http://hilogiggles.com/the-sunday-assembly-londons-first-atheist-church>).

3. TheGuardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/02/atheists-sunday-assembly-coming-to-america>).

4. BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21319945>).

5. Ibid.

6. YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eF8x2wwLkM>).

tion that meets ... to hear great talks, sing songs and generally celebrate life". But why? "I came last time and really enjoyed it. It's got all the good things about church without the terrible dogma. I like the sense of community – and who doesn't enjoy a singsong?"<sup>7</sup>

Since the first atheist meeting of the "Sunday Assembly," other atheist churches have been started. At the writing of this article there are atheist churches in other cities and countries.

On 30 June, as millions gathered for the NYC Pride Parade, a hundred people crowded into a midtown Manhattan bikini bar to celebrate the US launch of Sunday Assembly.<sup>8,9</sup>

Also in June 2013, a Sunday Assembly started in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>10</sup> The movement is spreading across the United States and around the globe. The services are familiar including a key leader (like a pastor), singing, reading, a collection, discussions and lectures.<sup>11</sup>

Why do they come? The UK BBC captures the answer with this,

"It's a nice excuse to get together and have a bit of a community spirit but without the religion aspect," says Jess Bonham, a photographer.

"It's not a church, it's a congregation of unreligious people."

Another attendee, Gintare Karalyte, says: "I think people need that sense of connectedness because everyone is so singular right now, and to be part of something, and to feel like you are part of

something. That's what people are craving in the world."<sup>12</sup>

In short, these atheists or agnostics are looking for something. At Sunday Assembly they are looking for purpose - craving to be part of something.

**LESSON ONE - GOD DOES EXIST.** There are two lessons from this development. The first lesson is that each of us has an inner need for purpose and to be part of something has been embedded into man and woman by God. We feel incomplete and lack purpose. Romans 1:11 tells us why.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. Romans 1:19 (NASB)

Here we learn that God has made Himself evident within each man and woman. That is, every human has a sense that God exists. It is left for him to seek God and find Him. God has made that promise in Jeremiah 29:12-14,

Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, Jer. 29:12-14 (NASB)

So, if you want to find God, seek Him with all of your heart.

**LESSON TWO - CHURCH CAN BE HOLLOW.** Now for the reason for this article. Did you notice why the atheists went to church - "Sunday Assembly"? No, the answer is not that they are looking for God, that was the message of lesson one. Lesson two is that their "church" makes them *feel good*. It gives them a *sense of community*. It temporarily fills an emptiness. "Sunday Assembly" masks those hollow feelings and lack of purpose. The *uplifting fix* called "Sunday Assembly" started with a Sunday morning welcome, Stevie Wonder songs, Queen songs, maybe a reading from Alice in Wonderland and a discussion about the theory of anti-matter. Oh, we forgot to state that the online video shows

7. The Guardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/03/atheist-church-sunday-assembly-islington>).

8. TheGuardian (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/02/atheists-sunday-assembly-coming-to-america>).

9. Daylight Atheism (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/daylightatheism/2013/07/the-sunday-assembly-comes-to-new-york/>).

10. ABC News (<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/sunday-assembly-melbourne/4785752>).

11. OregonFaithReport (<http://oregonfaithreport.com/2013/06/atheist-seeking-god/>).

12. BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21319945>).

the atheists drinking coffee and eating something from the church snack bar. The atheist church also had electric guitars, drums and other musical instruments along with entertaining skits. Does that sound familiar?

Lesson two is that one can be so eager to go to church that they arrive forty minutes early in order to get seats in the front row. Now that is motivation. Lesson two is that atheists enjoy their “church” experience and leave feeling good, upbeat, excited, and having a sense of community. Lesson two is one can have a Sunday experience and just like the atheists never worship God and yet have a “meaningful experience”. You see one can go to church and leave feeling good and still be godless - empty without God. Doing things makes one feel important and valued. It can give us a sense of purpose without our ever really worshipping God, loving God, and desiring to live as a son of Light. Churches filled with coffee and snack bars, musical groups, huge TV video screens and entertaining programs do not mean that you worshipped God. It does not mean that the Holy Spirit was there because you left with a positive warm-fuzzy feeling and a sense of connectedness. Worship is much more than a great program. Any skilled “worship leader” can make that happen.

I know individuals who have told me that the Holy Spirit was present and active because they “felt” the presence of the Holy Spirit. The comments usually came after an uplifting song, a meaningful time of sharing or an impactful message. But I wonder if they equate the warm-fuzzy feeling with the presence of the Holy Spirit. I wonder what would the atheists say when they experience that uplifting song, meaningful time of sharing or impactful message?

**SELF EVALUATION.** Can we be honest? Christians want to hear words like Jesus, Holy Spirit, salvation, heaven and other religious words when they sing those uplifting songs. The atheists just swap out those words for ones they like while they sing their uplifting songs. I wonder if the atheists fight over which songs they sing or what types of musical instruments they play? I wonder if some day they will have a “traditional atheist service” and a “contemporary atheist service”?

Watch this comment. The warm, cozy, fuzzy, uplifting

experience that you feel in church has nothing to do with your relationship with God at all if you are sitting there with unconfessed sin in your life and unwilling to serve Jesus Christ as the Lord of your life. In fact, the most important “church experience” is to respond, because of one’s love for God, with a broken, contrite heart over one’s sin or be rejoicing that you have just learned some great truth about God. Jeremiah 9:23-24 tells us what is most important to God when we “have church.” Here is the passage,

**Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.” Jeremiah 9:23-24 (NASB)**

Ephesians 4:11-14 gives Christians the purpose for their church *experience*.

**And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Eph. 4:11-14 (NASB)**

Why do you go to church - to have an experience? Yes, every Christian does but what kind? I know a church where the songs are traditional hymns. There are no skits. There are no snack and coffee bars. The priority of the pastor’s message is not warm, heart felt stories. The priority of the morning is the solid teaching of the Word of God in order to satisfy the hunger of fellow saints to know God more (Jer. 9:23-24; Heb. 11:6) and, secondly, to equip the saints for every good work (Eph. 4:11-14). When one loves God and those are the reasons one comes to church, worship can take place. Then one can have a Holy Spirit experience. It may be crying or

may be joy. But that is not the goal. The goal is to respond to God afresh. Then Jesus' words to the woman at the well have new meaning,

**But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. John 4:23 (NASB)**

Worship is our inner response to God. I have found that only comes as I bathe myself in His truth - the Word of Truth.