

# TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

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ASIA KEPKA FOR TIME

**TWEEN SPIRIT:** At a Sunday youth service at Grace Chapel in Lexington, Mass., the middle school worship band plays to praise

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## Feels Like Teen Spirit

Churches have begun to see 13 as a pivotal age for finding God

By **NATHAN THORNBURGH**

Fifteen minutes before the service starts, 100 middle schoolers are already squeezed into a basement rumpus room. The weekly worship for middle schoolers at Grace Chapel in the Boston suburb of Lexington, Mass., is called the Edge, a fitting name for a gathering that appears to be on the brink of anarchy. In one corner girls pouring orange juice giggle contagiously as the juice spills on the table, carpet and doughnuts. In another corner a number of boys are exploring ways to injure themselves with folded metal chairs--like swinging them at one another. A soccer ball zips past a hand-painted sign proclaiming Christ's love. The din of cracking voices gets even louder.

Just then, the music starts. In an instant, the adolescent mob is transformed into a congregation. All heads turn toward the worship band, a lo-fi rock combo of 13- and 14-year-olds led by middle school minister Brian Dietz, 28. Many kids shut their eyes, some sway from side to side and sing along with the rock ballad. "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord," they sing. "I want to see you."

It may not rank with the resurrection of Lazarus, but the pacification of 100 teenagers who just had glazed doughnuts for breakfast is at least a minor miracle. It's one that churches across the U.S., especially burgeoning Protestant congregations with large

youth programs, are trying to duplicate. They aim to reconnect with adolescents, better known for fidgeting in the pews, by giving them their own space to play and pray while serving them the right mix of power chords and Scripture. Experts disagree about how deep or lasting those religious experiences are, but simply by reaching out to 13-year-olds, churches are catching up with an idea that reflects both ancient tradition and modern psychology. Thirteen may seem like a rudderless age, especially in the oversaturated pop culture of today, but it can also be a time of deep faith. "The Jewish tradition--along with many others--recognizes that young people at this age are increasingly responsible for their life's direction," says Rabbi Goldie Milgram, author of *Make Your Own Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. "But they also want the journey to have a deeper spiritual significance." Nearly two-thirds of 13-year-olds polled online by TIME said faith was somewhat or very important in their lives. Almost half said the Bible was the literal word of God.

If the blood-soaked battles and betrayals of the Old and New Testaments seem too remote to interest today's 13-year-olds, think again. Every schoolyard has a Goliath; every new friend is a potential Judas. In sermons pitched to middle schoolers, the analogies are pushed even further. Original sin, says Dietz, is like being born on the Titanic with Jesus as your only lifeboat. With adolescence comes new cognitive tools to explore those ancient ideas. "Along with the ability to understand abstract concepts, their sense of empathy is expanding," says Dr. Mary Lynn Dell, who is an adolescent psychiatrist at Emory University and an Episcopal priest. "In religious terms, this gives them the ability to discern between institutional religion and an internal relationship with God." For the first time, adolescents are able to take God home with them from church.

For some, it's not a moment too soon. Shea Mosquera, like many girls her age, has a cascading set of anxieties that seemed to arrive in tandem with turning 13. She loves her parents but finds herself clashing with them more and more. Life for her, as the third of five children, has suddenly gone from mildly annoying to downright suffocating. Her family recently moved to a new town, and she is worried about friends, grades and fitting in at her new school.

Although her father is an evangelical pastor, Shea says she had just a "half-relationship" with God until she got involved with Dietz's program. Now, after she was baptized by him in a New England lake last summer, she has committed herself to praying as much as she can between schoolwork and other demands. Shea says she prays to make sense of her new, sharper emotions: "I'll pray, 'God, I don't know why I get so mad at my mom. Why am I being mean?'" Shea's father wants to pray about her problems together as a family, as they did when she was younger. Increasingly, though, Shea prays alone. "It's kind of hard to say the things I want to say to God out loud to my dad," she says. "Sometimes they're not things he wants to hear."

Like many of her friends at the nondenominational Grace Chapel, Shea has a routine that includes morning, meal and bedtime prayer as well as daily "devos," or devotionals, a sort of scriptural homework. She says the regimen is paying off. "One thing I think God did do for me was to give me my own room [in the new house]," she says with a smile.

"It's a bit of privacy God gave me to be alone more with him," she adds, "and get away from my sister."

Grace Chapel's senior pastor, Bryan Wilkerson, says a key factor in reaching kids like Shea is the youth of the middle school pastors--most of them volunteers in their 20s. "We know that 13-year-olds are going to move away from their parents," he says. "The question is, Where are they going to move to? In the youth pastors, they see people who drive jeeps and love Jesus."

Many evangelical churches see 13-year-old hearts and minds as the ultimate battlefield in the culture wars. If Jesus is competing with 50 Cent for the soul of today's youth, megachurches like Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, are making sure the Lord is not outgunned. Their junior high worship area features a million-dollar sound system and mammoth movie screens that play to an audience of as many as 1,000 teenagers on Sundays. Prestonwood's executive pastor, Mike Buster, makes no apologies for the slick production values. It takes a good show to expose kids to the good word, he says, because there is so much competition from what he calls a "perverted" teen culture in the U.S.

Other youth ministers caution against the tendency to boil Scripture down to a series of updated commandments about not listening to pop music or not hanging out with friends who swear. Gregg Morris, an Episcopal youth worker, remembers being an adolescent in an evangelical congregation. The stricter teachings kept him acting Christian outwardly, but God seemed like more of a "celestial bean counter." If God becomes just another parent to rebel against, says Morris, then the 13-year-old's spiritual journey may end before it even begins. Morris' search for a more inclusive Christian curriculum for adolescents led him eight years ago to become a trainer for Rite 13, a program modeled on bar and bat mitzvahs as well as Native American vision quests and African rites of passage. The program began in the early 1990s at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Durham, N.C. Parishioners there were worried that their confirmation ceremonies were functioning more as exit interviews, one last sacrament before 13-year-olds inevitably succumbed to secularism and left the church. The solution, they decided, was a two-year program welcoming adolescents into the community with equal doses of mentorship, Scripture and recreation.

Rite 13 has since spread to more than 1,300 churches in the U.S. Morris trains church leaders in the program by first explaining adolescent bodies. "I tell them that 13-year-olds need large-muscle exercise. They need lots of sleep. These things drive us crazy, but it's not their fault." Then he urges pastors to look past the physical exterior and see the opportunities within. "Never underestimate the spirituality of a 13-year-old," he counsels. "If I expect that I will encounter God in them, I'll get a lot farther than if I see the devil in them just because that's how they're acting."

Christian Smith, a co-author of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, says adolescent-specific church programs may be thriving, but his study of more than 3,000 teenagers left him wondering how deep the experiences were.

"At 13," says Smith, "a lot of kids' mental and emotional lives are consumed by school, sports, media, maybe a boyfriend or girlfriend, so they don't have a lot of room for deeper thought." For many 13-year-olds, God is less an eternal truth than a friend helping them get through a really tough year.

Tristan Osgood, 13, who plays electric guitar in Grace Chapel's band, needed help when his grandfather died last year. He knew that the Bible says he would see his grandfather again someday, but he didn't feel certain enough. Then came the Grace Chapel winter retreat in New Hampshire. "I just went out into the snow," says Tristan. "I was cold, but suddenly I didn't care. It was like there's this barrier around you, just you and God, like you could bawl your eyes out and nobody would care." It was the moment that Tristan had been waiting for. He had met God, and his heart told him what his mind couldn't: that he would definitely see his grandfather again someday.

Tristan's personal encounter also gave him the confidence to challenge family members on some aspects of their faith. He thinks gay people were made that way by God, but his dad thinks it's a choice. Tristan believes that practicing his guitar glorifies God, while his parents wish he would do more homework. He's slowly making his own decisions about right and wrong. It's a skill that will keep him safe, he says, from the myriad temptations that will bedevil him between middle school and marriage.

Back at Grace Chapel, the middle school worship band is finishing its set. Tristan plays effortlessly through the chords and stops on a dime for an a cappella finale. A hundred kids in shorts and flip-flops shift their weight from side to side and sing, "Holy, holy, holy ..." Youth pastor Dietz smiles at his band. "Sounds good," he says. "I think God loves this." --With reporting by Adam Pitluk/Plano