

More than 1,000 accept Christ during Sturgis bike rally

By Adam Miller

Aug 17, 2010

CUSTER, S.D. (BP)--Soft breezes and sun filter along the Black Hills near Custer to fill a rustic camp at the edge of town. As evening settles, pastor Jeff "Noose" Nuzziard performs a sound check for a band from Nixa, Mo.

Bikers find a space in the grass to relax and listen after a long day of riding and sightseeing in the region. More than 600,000 bikers rolled into Sturgis, S.D., Aug. 9-15 for the 70th Annual Sturgis Rally, the biggest biker party in the country. But the clean and sober Jazer Camp a few miles outside Custer offered a different tenor from the free-for-all in other parts of the Black Hills.

For \$10 a night bikers get a place to park their ride and pitch their tent, and they're provided two good meals a day and good bands playing into the evening. Lodging is at a premium during the rally, as are locations where drugs, sex and alcohol don't flow freely. This makes the Set Free camp an ideal respite for weary road warriors and likewise a place where God's peace engages the senses in a way exactly opposite to the barrage of biker mayhem.

"They can come here and have fun without being confronted with all the stuff that's in Sturgis," said Bill Savery, pastor of First Baptist Church in Custer. First Baptist hosted Jazer Camp and has made a five-year commitment with the Dakota Baptist Convention and Set Free Ministries to run the camp at future rallies.

Noose Nuzziard from Set Free Church in Denver and J.T. Coughlan, pastor of Set Free Ministries in Great Falls, Mont., partnered with the Dakota Baptist Convention to provide security and ministry volunteers at the camp. Both have former lives and connections within the biker community and know how to provide an atmosphere inviting to bikers.

"We're just out here to reach these people who may not have any idea what goes on in a church," Coughlan said.

During the week, Jazer Camp hosted biker groups and individual riders whose first impression was a sign reading "No drugs. No alcohol. No joke." But the camp left a lasting impression as a place where judgments are withheld and truth and compassion are expressed through stories of God's power and acts of kindness.

Through the hands and feet of His people, Christ was in Sturgis this year, His love displayed by Southern Baptists who traveled from the nearby Dakotas and from



Volunteer Lynn Hanson, left, and pastor Roger Pervis talk with bikers at the 70th Annual Sturgis Rally in Sturgis, S.D. Through the efforts of Southern Baptists, more than 7,000 people heard the Gospel during the seven-day event. *Photo by Adam Miller*



Jim Hamilton, executive director of the Dakota Baptist Convention, leads a prayerwalk through downtown Sturgis, S.D. Hamilton was one of several Southern Baptists who participated in evangelistic outreaches at the 70th Annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. *Photo by Adam Miller*



Pastor Noose Nuzziard, right, provides a sound check for a band playing for bikers at a clean and sober camp outside Custer, S.D., another hotspot for bikers during the 70th Annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. *Photo by Adam Miller*

states such as Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas and Colorado.

Disaster relief chaplains from Oklahoma worked 9-hour days developing relationships with the hundreds of vendors selling their wares at booths throughout Sturgis.

"This is an outreach that has grown to reach not just the people who frequent downtown Sturgis but even vendors and those who stay on the outskirts of Sturgis," said Richard Leach, team leader for servant/ministry evangelism at the North American Mission Board. "This is a perfect example of what God does through people willing to step out of their comfort zone and engage people on their own turf. You don't have to be a biker to reach bikers. You just have to be open to God and willing to reach people where they are."



Filled with color, noise and creativity, the Sturgis Rally engages all the senses when filled with more than 600,000 bikers from all over the country and the world. Southern Baptist churches, missionaries and volunteers had a strong evangelistic presence at the rally. *Photo by Adam Miller*

Dozens of Southern Baptist churches were represented, including members of First Baptist Church in Nixa, Mo., who came straight to the Southern Baptist booth in downtown Sturgis after a 900-mile trek.

"We were fueling up and got a call from Jim Hamilton saying they needed help talking to people," said volunteer Joe Harrington, who out of necessity broke protocol. "I started sharing, then I was trained."

The Southern Baptist intentional evangelism efforts at Sturgis are only four years old, though Southern Baptists have individually served as a Christian witness for many years, according to Jim Hamilton, executive director of the Dakota Baptist Convention.

"This year we hosted a booth in downtown, but for the first time we also expanded to Rapid City and Custer," Hamilton said.

"Many [Southern Baptist] churches have worked tirelessly serving bikers and meeting their felt needs," Hamilton said. "What we want to add to that is a very intentional engagement with the Gospel. If no one had told me about Jesus, I would never had heard. But now I'm a servant of Christ and a minister because someone took the time to tell me."

One of the connecting points volunteers used to reach the biker community was a Harley-Davidson motorcycle giveaway, which they parked just inside the SBC tent in Sturgis. The bike caught the eye of passersby as volunteers held their attention with the prospect of a free motorcycle in exchange for three minutes of their time.

Hamilton unashamedly refers to the bike giveaway as bait, which makes sense if, like Christ commands, believers are to fish for men and women.

An introduction to the God of the universe seems worth a three-minute story. Over a period of seven days, more than 7,000 people signed up to win a bike and heard a three-minute presentation of the Gospel. The opportunity to share the Gospel makes sun-scorched sidewalks and the shipping and handling for a \$17,000 Harley seem a miniscule blip by comparison.

"Next year we're probably going to offer a custom-made bike. Attract a younger crowd," Hamilton said.

Hamilton and crew used the language and cultural cues easily caught by bikers during the seven-day Sturgis party. One of the activities at Sturgis among bikers is the trading of playing cards. Southern Baptists capitalized on the tradition by giving away hundreds of commemorative poker chips and evangelistic playing cards pointing people to FinditHere.com.

The culturally specific approach also included boldness enough to engage the lost at places like the Buffalo Chip and Full Throttle, two of the world's largest and most notorious biker bars.

"Anything goes in these places," Hamilton said. "We pray for the bikers' safety and we also pray for the safety of some Christians who might venture to these places to be a witness."

While volunteers were never encouraged to engage the extremities of the Sturgis Rally party, during prayerwalks with North American Mission Board missionary Garvon Golden and other leaders, Hamilton recognized that many believers at Sturgis were called into such places to share the Gospel.

"Bikers make up one of the largest affinity groups in North America," Golden said. "Some Christian bikers feel a special calling to reach their own no matter where they are."

Whether hitting the hardcore locations or serving at event booths, the efforts of Southern Baptists to make Christ known produced ample amounts of fruit this year. By the end of the rally, 7,317 people had heard the Gospel and 1,147 made professions of faith.

The true fruit of these decisions will bear out in how many transition into true discipleship within a body of believers. To see this happen, registration cards of those who made decisions are given to a church to follow up in the weeks after the individual returns from the rally.

"We share, we provide for follow up and discipleship and we trust God with the results," Golden said. "All we can do is work hard in obedience to share with others the Gospel of the Savior who saved us."

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Adam Miller is a writer for the North American Mission Board.

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