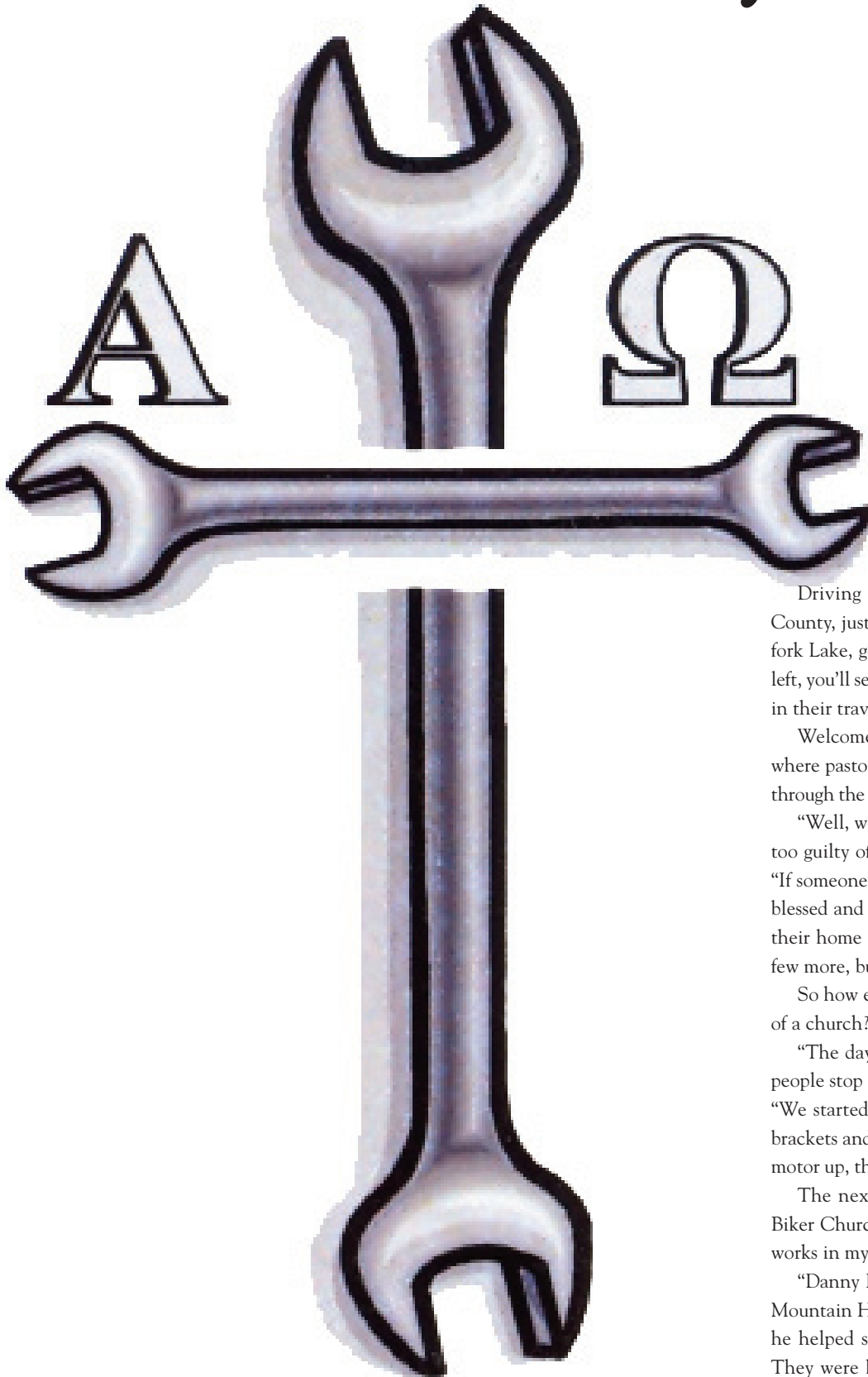


A church for the Harley set ... and everyone else.



BY NIKI DE SOTO

Driving north along scenic Highway 101 in Baxter County, just east of Mountain Home, you'll cross over Norfolk Lake, go past beautiful scenery and, if you look to your left, you'll see a sight that few have probably ever come across in their travels – a motorcycle, perched on top of a church.

Welcome to Gamaliel's own, Three Rivers Biker Church, where pastor Jim Greenslade welcomes everyone who walks through the door, whether they arrived on two wheels or four.

"Well, we don't have huge numbers, but humans are way too guilty of judging success on numbers," says Greenslade. "If someone stops in here, such as a vacationer and they get blessed and they get closer to the Lord and they go back to their home church, that's alright with me. I'd love to see a few more, but we can only seat about 75."

So how exactly does a motorcycle come to be on the top of a church?

"The day we put the motorcycle up there we had three people stop to take pictures of it going up," said Greenslade. "We started with a frame and two wheels, and we had the brackets and arms that hold it up there. Then we carried the motor up, then the tank – each piece was put on separately."

The next obvious question seems to be, why create a Biker Church to begin with? As the old saying goes, "God works in mysterious ways."

"Danny Ponder, who used to own Ponders Drug store in Mountain Home, and I were on a mission trip to Brazil, and he helped start the Cowboy Church in Mountain Home. They were looking for a pastor, and I have been a Baptist



preacher for years, and had three different churches, but I was without a church at that time. So I told him, 'Danny, I'm not really a cowboy, but I like motorcycles.' He made a comment on the trip about starting a motorcycle church and that was the seed of the idea. I've ridden since I was 13 and I'm 62 now, and I had never heard of a motorcycle church. I've been pastor at three small country churches, and Danny explained that a motorcycle church is a lot like a small country church, except that it caters to motorcyclists, even though everyone is welcome. We finished the mission trip, came back home and forgot about it for about six months. We met up again at a men's retreat and he shoved a piece of paper over to me and it said 'motorcycle church' on it. He told me that ever since we had talked, 'the Lord just won't leave me alone about a need for a motorcycle church.' I hadn't accepted a position at a church at that point and I said well yeah, I like motorcycles and so we started on Father's Day, June 21, 2009."

Attendance varies at the church, ranging generally from 25 to 45 each Sunday. "We're near the lake and we pick up tourists. We're not large in number, but the Lord has given us everything we've needed every step of the way."

Originally, the Biker Church met in a storefront in Mountain Home, but Greenslade was approached by members of the Gamaliel Baptist Church. The 25-year-old church was down to five people and had no pastor. The youngest of the five was in their 60s and several were in their 80s. They were thinking about just closing the church altogether, and asked if Greenslade thought the bikers would be willing to come out to Gamaliel.

"They have seven and a half acres, a building that's paid for, a pavilion out back, and most of it is grass. It was perfect for our needs. So the small church of the five voted to give us the place. They gave us everything – the land, the building, the pavilion and \$7,000 in the bank. Four of the five have even joined the biker church. They just came and stayed. We've already had a cou-

ple of people camp out at the church, plus we built a bath house and we let traveling motorcyclists camp out for free. If you've been on the road all day you can stop, clean up and visit one of the local businesses."

The church has certainly appealed to a wide audience. Members come from as far away as Oxford and Bruno to attend the Sunday services.

"If we get too big, we'll start satellite churches and grow that way. We had a guy who came to church the other day who is from Minnesota and he's building a winter home here. He's actually a Lutheran."

One thing the Three Rivers Biker Church isn't about is money, which can be a surprise for some visitors.

"I figure if someone feels right with the Lord, they'll give," said Greenslade. "We don't pass a plate. Instead, we have a helmet offering – it sits on the table there by the door, so if folks want to give to the church they can. This is like home here. At home you don't go to the refrigerator, take out a coke and pay 50-cents. If folks want to donate for that coke, they can do so, but it all comes out of the general fund, and as long as we have it, we're going to keep that refrigerator in the kitchen stocked with cokes. It's not about the getting, it's about the giving."

Giving is definitely on the mind of this church, as they organized a large rally on Sept. 25 to benefit the Arkansas Children's Home, featuring a Biker Rally, Stunt Air Show and more.

"We raised \$1,000 cash and seven to eight bags of toys and other donations for them. Air shows are expensive to put on, but my son-in-law, Patrick Carter, happens to be a stunt pilot who owns Acro-Flights. I asked him if he was willing to do an airshow as a fundraiser and he said as long as we paid for the gas they'd do it, so we got them for just expenses."

The fundraiser also featured decorated Vietnam Veteran John Steer, one of the recipients of President George W. Bush's 1,000 Points of Light program.

“Several of his friends came out from far afield – one from Phoenix, one from Indiana, four came from east Kentucky – and they came because of John. We also had people from all surrounding counties come out for the rally on both sides of the state line.”

Another unique part of the church is its logo, a cross made out of two wrenches.

“On the logo are the Alpha and Omega, as Christ is the first and last, and I had gone to another biker church in Springfield and they had a cross made out of wrenches. Now you know, a lot of bikers are gear heads and mechanics, and I thought, ‘I’ve got some old wrenches.’ A couple in the church does needlepoint and they designed the patch for us.”

And that’s not where the uniqueness ends. Come for a Sunday sermon and you’ll see Pastor Greenslade speaking from a very unusual, custom made lectern.

“The podium that I speak from is made out of a driveshaft and a steel wheel, and a universal joint on the drive shaft holds the lectern part. It still works – it still pivots –and if you get carried away you can accidentally dump everything. I welded on two wrenches on the front of the drive shaft to make a cross. It’s definitely unique. I restore old motorcycles and cars so I have a lot of old parts lying around.”

The warm atmosphere and inviting flavor to this church, settled amongst the beauty of the lake region, makes a great place to stop and rest for a while, and perhaps get a little closer to the Lord.

“We encourage people to come as you

are to church. We want everybody to feel welcome, whether you have a beard down to here or you’re clean shaven. We’ve had people just stop in out of the blue. They may not even be bikers, they just feel the need to stop in. This has been such a blessing to me, this church and this community. Half the people who attend don’t have a motorcycle. In our parking lot we have mini vans, trucks, RV’s, along with motorcycles. The only way someone will stick out here is if they walk in wearing a three piece suit.”

The Three Rivers Biker Church is located about five miles north of the intersection of Highway 101 and Highway 62/412, just east of Mountain Home, in Gamaliel. Services are 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings and the church is making plans to start a Revelations Bible study one night during the week, starting around 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. in the evening. If you’re interested, you can call Pastor Greenslade at 870-404-7916 for more information.

