

New Life Worship Center: Food for the Soul



New Life Church at "Rock the City" rally.

By Karen Andersen

Religious worship is supposed to transform the spirit, just as a daily physical workout is meant to transform the body. Transformation was what I witnessed when I recently visited a Sunday service at the New Bedford campus of New Life Worship Center, which is located, for now, at Keith Middle School. I've been to many functions in Keith's auditorium, and I've seen the stage transform for plays and ballets, but the transformation that New Life's presence brought to the space was different. Inside and out, there were colorful banners and friendly people preparing for the service, and Keith Middle School was, if you'll excuse the pun, converted.

I met with Pastor Marco DeBarros and his wife Lindsey before the service and was given a tour of their converted space with new eyes: the gym had become a wonderfully open space for Sunday school fun and learning, the halls bustled with purposeful movement, and the cafeteria shape-shifted into a

welcoming parish hall for coffee hour and fellowship. We settled down at a table, with everyone in preparatory motion around us, and talked for half an hour while the anticipation of the service built steadily.

One of the questions I asked Pastor Marco was, "What is the most important message that you'd like to share?" With a casual certainty, he answered, "God is for everyone, He is involved in our day to day lives. God is not elusive, He wants to have a relationship with us."



Marco's message is "...upbeat, humorous, and comfortable as he went from one idea to the next, preaching extemporaneously."

He wants to help us on our journey. Don't be closed-minded. Check it out!" On August 23, New Life had a "Rock the City" rally at New Bedford's Hazelwood Park that drew about 1,000 people to "check it out," which, to me, seems a fantastic draw for any local religious-oriented gathering outside of the Feast. Kudos for the outreach!

They gave away diapers and clothes and backpacks for kids and raffled off a dozen bikes and a lots of gift cards for local businesses. New Life is digging in its heels in our community in a beneficial way; I think we can too often overlook the Good Works that churches do to keep up with the physical as well as spiritual needs of the people as local and national government cut spending for feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and helping with the small things that make a difference on a limited budget.

At 11 a.m., a two-minute countdown flashed on the big screen, a signal for people to get settled in their seats (aside from all the people running around in preparation, there was also a small prayer group that met from 10 to 11 in the auditorium). At 11:02 the music began. These were not the subdued hymns of old, but much more like modern rock and roll. The band consisted of drums, electric guitar and bass, keyboards, and some lovely lead and back-up vocals. Being in the band seemed like an intense small group ministry of its own and all of the young, hip-looking people appeared to be having a great time making music together, while the crowd raised their arms in praise and sang along.

The audience wasn't just watching, they were fully participating with mind, body, and soul. I noticed that tears were rolling down several faces, as some people were moved by the Spirit. The energy that was being raised made my spine tingle and I admit that my toes were tapping along to a beat that pulled everyone into a circle of worship that grew tighter as three songs were performed.

Then Pastor Marco appeared down front, and for the next 45 minutes, he preached the "message" for the day. Before the service, I had asked permission to take notes during the sermon and Marco told me, "Sure! Lots of people take notes."



There is a place for kids at New Life Worship Center too!

That way you can go home and think about the message.” And sure enough, I saw many people taking notes as the sermon progressed and Pastor Marco’s message unfolded. His style was upbeat, humorous, and comfortable as he went from one idea to the next, preaching extemporaneously.

The boldest impression I got from Rev. Marco was how expertly he brought Biblical ideas into a modern context, able to be applied in daily life. Holding the Bible aloft, he proclaimed that “everything should be filtered through The Word.” He brought that down to earth by saying that the reality of the Bible is that “life is a beautiful mess;” the stories remain tangible because they “are rooted in eternal principles” that continue to reflect many aspects of our real lives. People’s lives in the time of Jesus was just as beautifully messy as it is now. Responses of “Amen” and “Truth!” chimed in over and over again as Pastor Marco worked the message.

He spoke for a while about social media and using it as a tool rather than something that can suck you in, admitting to his own Facebook usage. You have to ask yourself, “Are you using social media or is it using you?” He pointed out that we have “all the resources in the world and we’re still spiritually starving.” Judging by the numbers New Life is bringing in, he’s right.

New Life Worship Center’s branch in New Bedford opened in

January of 2014 and they have close to 200 members already. There were easily 150 people there when I visited, and that's an impressive enough number for any well-established church's Sunday attendance, more so for a church who has been around for less than a year. I attribute this to the lively energy and atmosphere that New Life provides, feeding hungry souls, and laying out an interactive "spiritual plan" to follow with the support of others.

But New Life Worship Center hasn't just popped up suddenly; it is part of a larger non-denominational Christian Church founded by Senior Pastors Steve and Nancy Boyce in 1988, in a small storefront church behind an A&W in Smithfield, RI. By 1993, they had purchased 40 acres in Smithfield and proceeded to build a cutting-edge worship center, which opened in 1997.



The energy and uplifting tempo is infectious!

Since then, they have grown to include Kittens and Cubs day-care and early learning center, Masters Regional Academy, which is a high school, and Northeast Leadership Center, a 9 month program of Ministry Art and Biblical Studies. I should also mention that they have grown to include four campuses, located in Smithfield and E. Greenwich, RI, and Fall River and New Bedford, MA.

Pastor Marco is a teacher at Northeast Leadership and formerly taught at Masters Regional Academy, as well as serving as its Chaplain, and that experience is evident in his ministry.

While he was able to reach out easily to the congregation and hold their attention during his message, he also exhibited the mark of any good leader: he inspired others to leadership and service. The very last thing he mentioned in his message was, "A Christian who doesn't serve is an oxymoron." Service to God, the Church, and each other is certainly the overarching theme of New Life.

As Pastor Marco left the floor, he was replaced by half a dozen others who ministered to whoever needed it in the charismatic style of prayer and laying-on-of-hands for healing and support. As we all proceeded to coffee hour, outside in the warm sun, I got to speak with several people. They were all passionate about the church, with a certain level of evangelism, but it never got pushy or preachy. It didn't need to. The group dynamic spoke for itself; this is a safe and happy place for individuals and families to worship the Lord, live The Word, and become part of a community of like-minded people.

One of the members, a kind and interesting young gentleman named Julius, told me, "A boring church is a dead church." That message is one that every church or spiritual/religious group should heed; when any institution fails to take into account the realities of modern life, they are on the path to extinction. While other churches that have been around for centuries are closing their doors, New Life is expanding with a message that is supportive and practical, in a casual, yet structured, atmosphere.

Sunday services happen at Keith Middle School in New Bedford at 11 a.m., there is a youth group for teens that meets Sunday nights at the Fall River campus (1082 Davol St.), and there are many "Life Groups" to be involved in, including a men's group, a women's group, a married with children group, and a married without children group. For more information, explore the New Life Worship Center's extensive website at www.atnewlife.org or just show up on a Sunday with an open

mind. You will find a lot of enthusiasm and you will certainly not be bored.

A promotional graphic for New Life Church. The top half is a dark grey rectangle with a green circular logo on the left containing the words "new LIFE" in white. To the right of the logo, white text reads: "Weekend Service Time", "Sunday 11 AM at New Bedford", "225 Hathaway Blvd New Bedford MA", "(Meeting at the Keith Middle School)", "visit atnewlife.org", and "call: 401.232.5200". Below this text, the words "New Life Church" are written in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. The bottom half of the graphic is a horizontal strip of four small photographs: a person with arms raised in a church, a man speaking at a podium, a person playing a guitar on stage, and a woman playing a ball game with children.

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New Life Worship Center

225 Hathaway Blvd
New Bedford, Massachusetts 02740
Phone: (401) 232-5200

Sundays at 11am
Keith Middle School Auditorium

Facebook: facebook.com/NewLifeNewBedford/timeline

Website: atnewlife.org/

Sermons: atnewlife.org/sermons/serieslist

En Español: atnewlife.org/bienvenidos-a-new-life

