

Rev. Elvis takes pulpit for Blue Christmas

Faith movement finds Christ in the blues

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CALGARY HERALD

Rev. Elvis may have left the building, but he hasn't left his spiritual calling, according to his "altar ego," Rev. Bruce Sheasby.

After 12 years as a United Church minister, the last eight at Red Deer Lake on Calgary's southern outskirts, Sheasby has parted ways with the denomination and is launching his own faith movement, the Spiritual Community Church of the West.

The new church will hold its first service tonight, a "Blue Christmas," gathering at 7 p.m. at the Millarville Racetrack Hall, 20 kilometres south of Calgary.

"We're starting in a manger," Sheasby says with a smile as he describes his new venture's venue.

"But spirituality isn't about bricks and mortar; it's about the reality of Christ within every one of us."

Sheasby says he'll mix the sacred and secular at tonight's

Blue Christmas service, a tradition he started 13 years ago when posted in Vauxhall. That will include singing Presley's holiday classic of the same name, one of the King's signature tunes.

"I think people can discover Christ in the blues," says Sheasby, who says he sings, "in the style of Elvis, but I don't try to be an Elvis impersonator."

More churches are holding annual Blue Christmas services designed for people struggling with the loss of a loved one, a broken marriage or simply those who don't embrace the "happy-happy, joy-joy" mantra that's part and parcel of the Yuletide season.

Sheasby says all the hype and heated commercialism of western society tends to mask the woundedness many people are feeling.

"I think every spiritual journey has to face its share of hardship. But even in the darkest personal hour and in the darkest time of the year, the darkness never extinguishes God's light."

Sheasby says taking on the

persona of Elvis in his ministry has allowed him to combine his love of sharing God's message with his musical abilities. He was working on a recording studio project when he opted to enter the seminary in his native Vancouver.

"The Rev. Elvis thing really got going in Vauxhall where I was also chaplain at the local legion," he recalls.

"They were always asking me to do Elvis tunes. The church was in dire need of money so we held a fundraiser which turned out to be phenomenally successful."

Sheasby maintains slipping in and out of his Rev. Elvis persona doesn't trivialize his faith grounding.

"But, sure, Rev. Elvis is kind of a hook, to get people interested in and talking about God and spiritual issues. Jesus called his disciples to be fishers of men and if you're a fisher, well, sometimes you need a hook."

Sheasby says Presley is a positive role model to use in a spiritual context.

"We all know about both his achievements and his human flaws. But there's no doubt he had a love of his audiences and of the Gospel," he says.

"And you think of Elvis and the energy and fun he portrayed on stage. I've always maintained faith can be fun.

There's a time to be sombre, but there's also a time to dance."

Sheasby says his new congregation is booked to meet through the end of January at the Millarville hall.

After that, he says, the future is in God's hands.

"I don't know how we're going to do it, but I believe the future is in mission, not church buildings," Sheasby said.

He says he wants to build a spiritual movement that includes people who come from traditional faith backgrounds as well as those who have never seen the inside of a church.

"I like to use the word 'movement' instead of 'church' because movement signifies you're going somewhere. I see something that's constantly changing and evolving and, all too often, the church tends to be somewhat resistant to change.

"I'd like to have a group of people who are willing to get out of the way and let the spirit take the lead."

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Mikael Kjellström, Calgary Herald
Rev. Bruce Sheasby, as his "altar ego" Rev. Elvis, hosts his 13th annual Blue Christmas service at 7 p.m. in Millarville.

