

Church in recovery: Sanctuary for the addicted

by [Stan Friedman](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

As worshipers walk into Central Park United Methodist Church, Bob Swoverland usually pulls one of them aside and asks him or her to help serve communion. One day he felt moved to ask Karen (last name withheld) to help. As he remembers, “Normally, I’ll just ask anybody, but when she came in it was like God grabbed me by the collar.”

Swoverland recalls what came next. During the testimony portion of that Sunday’s worship service, Karen confessed for the first time that years earlier she had killed a woman while driving drunk. She had served five years in a Minnesota prison as her punishment, and then, despite promises to herself and others, she began drinking again. She spent two more years in a county workhouse. “The judge told me I was a menace to society,” she recalls.

Earlier in the week Karen had gone to pastor Jo Campe in a panic. Tom, another Central Park member, had just shared a traumatic experience with her: he was feeling excruciating pain over the loss of his girlfriend in an accident caused by a drunk driver. Tom was unaware of Karen’s past, and she didn’t tell him. “I knew that he would hate me, and that I wasn’t going to be able to stay at the church. I didn’t belong there,” says Karen. Pastor Campe knew that Karen, a recovering addict who had been clean for fewer than two years, *did* belong at Central Park; he also knew that Karen would have to learn this the hard way—by telling her story.

First she told it to Tom—and braced herself for his anger. But Tom smiled. He had been to his girlfriend’s grave that morning—exactly five months after her death—and asked for a miracle. Karen’s story of redemption, he told her, was that miracle.

Then Karen gave her testimony in worship. She shook as she climbed the steps to the microphone. The talk could go so wrong, and she feared that the 200 people in the pews would be disgusted with her. She couldn’t blame them; she loathed

herself. But when Karen was finished, she received hugs. Then she helped serve the bread and the juice.

Members of this St. Paul, Minnesota, congregation, also known as the Recovery Church, have come to expect God to orchestrate such moments.

In 1940, more than 1,100 people worshiped at Central Park. In 2000, when Campe arrived, the congregation had hit rock bottom; only 11 elderly members worshiped regularly. Today there are more than 600 people in church—and 95 percent of them are involved with some kind of 12-step group.

In the 1990s Campe was senior pastor of one of the largest United Methodist congregations in Minnesota, and he was bound for glory. He oversaw a staff of roughly 30, had a TV show and radio program, and never missed a day of work. He also was an alcoholic, and no one knew. Every night Campe would drink himself to sleep in the parsonage, where he slept alone because his wife had left him. He checked himself into a treatment center after waking from a blackout and realizing that he had loaded a shotgun and nearly committed suicide.

“I just couldn’t do it anymore,” says Campe, who has a doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary. “I was like a Pharisee in the woe sections of the Gospels. My way didn’t work.”

Campe decided that he had to leave his church. “No associate pastor and not a single person in leadership had any idea how to talk to me. No one asked about my drinking or how I was doing—no one except those who had been in 12-step programs.” The bishop reluctantly granted Campe’s request to be reappointed to another congregation, and then, a few years later, to another one—Central Park.

The downtown church of 11 people could afford to pay Campe only because it rented space to a hospital across the street. He invited several friends to join him, and they begin planning a five-day ministry for downtown workers. Terry McKinley, a mortgage banker and alcoholic, remembers that “we had a business plan all written.”

But then other AA members began attending and asked Campe to start a recovery worship service. Campe and several others put together some ideas. Forty people attended that first service; 100 showed up for the second one. Soon worship was celebrated twice a month and then weekly. (A second service was held for the

original 11 members, all of whom have since died or moved on.)

Many churches are adding ministries for people with addictions, but the Recovery Church blends 12-step principles with Christianity to inform and define its entire ministry. The congregation is one of a handful of such churches across the country, says Dale Ryan, director of the Fuller Institute for Recovery Ministry. “These kinds of churches aren’t started because the fear is we’re going to have really broken people here, and we’re going to need some healthy people to balance them out.”

What healthy people look like, of course, often isn’t clear. A highlight for Campe was the Sunday morning he saw an unusual lineup of addicts and alcoholics sitting in the first row. “There were two former prostitutes, one active prostitute, an undercover narc, a judge, a school teacher and a ‘normie’ [a person without addictions]. I looked out and said, ‘There’s our church.’”

Karen remembers the Christmas Eve a young woman showed up drunk. “One of the guys just put his arm around her, and she cried through the whole service.” That simple action reflects the guiding principle of the church’s ministry, which Campe says is the AA responsibility pledge: “I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.”

Nearly 90 percent of the members were unchurched before arriving at Central Park. Those who did attend elsewhere tended to be uncomfortable, believing that they had to keep their secrets to themselves and try their best to look good. “A lot of these people have been chased from their churches, not directly but indirectly,” says McKinley, a mortgage banker. “This is the place where I go and am who I am.” He laughs and continues, “I’ll look at the crowd and think, ‘Where did these people come from?’”

Among the first to attend were residents of the Union Gospel Mission. “We kind of adopted this church,” says Larry Bonniwell, director of the mission’s Christ Recovery Program. “We said we’re going to make this church our church.”

Now members come from throughout the Twin Cities and from all walks of life. “You don’t have to be a drunk to come here, but it helps,” Campe says, laughing. Then he quickly turns serious: “People come here because their lives depend on it. If we could all stay sober, we wouldn’t be here. Brokenness brings people together.”

Many were introduced to the church when they attended one of the 12-step groups that meet in the church and make up its entire small-group ministry. Each week, 1,500 people attend Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, Al-Anon and other support groups. The first meeting begins as early as 9 a.m. and the last one at 10:30 p.m. Rooms are named for people in the recovery movement: Bill W, Dr. Bob, Father Ed Dowling.

There are plenty of addicts to whom the church can reach out, says Swoverland. "We joke that Minnesota is the land of 10,000 lakes and 10,000 treatment centers."

Hazelden, a nearby center that treats thousands of addicts a year, supplies guest speakers every other month. The church frequently hosts other speakers who address some aspect of recovery, such as how to find a sponsor or avoid relapse. Melodie Beattie, author of *Codependent No More*, has spoken at the church, as has Karen Casey, author of *Each Day a New Beginning*.

All of the church's special events relate to some aspect of recovery. Every Friday night, for example, the congregation hosts Sober Jam. Even the church's mission work became oriented to recovery when members started the first AA and Al-Anon meetings on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia.

The Sunday morning worship services follow a traditional pattern but with a 12-step flavor. Campe greets worshipers with "Hi, I'm Jo, and I'm an alcoholic." The congregation responds, "Hi, Jo." A large banner declaring "Recovery Works" hangs on the sanctuary wall. Testimonies, or "stories of hope," are given every Sunday. Members sign up months in advance to tell their stories, and limiting their time can be difficult. During one service, a woman's testimony takes several detours before she turns to Campe and asks, "Am I going too long?" "Yes," he responds, and she finishes.

There is no pretense during the service. A person sitting in a pew halfway back in the sanctuary shouts, "Turn your microphone up!" to Campe, to which he retorts, "Turn your hearing aid up!"

The Recovery Church celebrates communion every week. As the church grew, Campe explains, half of the new congregants were former Catholics, so celebrating communion every Sunday seemed appropriate. "We often have people in tears at the rail," he adds. Just as at a recovery meeting, the service concludes with the entire congregation holding hands and reciting the Lord's Prayer.

Attire at the church is casual. Campe often wears shorts and sandals during the summer. The exception is Easter, when the pastor and many of the worshipers wear tuxedos or formal dresses. "It's a great time," Campe says.

The music is eclectic and inclusive: there may be blues, Native American flute, hymns and contemporary worship songs in the same service. Anyone who wants to participate is welcome. McKinley, one of the worship coordinators, recalls the time a head-injured member was given a rattle and encouraged to keep time for the musicians. "I'm sure that helped worship as much as anything we've done."

People can become members the first time they attend. "They could have been drunk last night, and they can become a member here today," Campe says after a service in which at least a dozen had raised a hand to accept the invitation. "These people have been rejected so much. We want them to know they are welcome here."

Welcoming people at the Recovery Church means making room for religious viewpoints that range from the very liberal to fundamentalist and include vague spirituality and even non-Christian beliefs. Living with the differences can be difficult. Campe's theology is rooted in mainline neo-orthodoxy, but he says he avoids being a stickler on certain theological points. "We tell people to take what works and leave the rest."

"I don't tell people they need to get saved," Campe says. He believes, however, that within a year of arriving at the church, many of the attendees have a better understanding of the Christian faith than people in some of the other churches he's served. A strong emphasis on grace helps. "We keep the main thing the main thing," he explains. "We're here to celebrate and carry the message of God's love to all people in recovery."

It was at Central Park that Karen first experienced that message. Nearly five years ago she stumbled in drunk while on a 10-day bender. A custodian led her to Campe's office, where she passed out on the couch. Central Park was where she encountered grace, but it is also where she is coming to grips with God's love. "What kind of God wants me?" she asks, straining forward in her chair as she leans on a folding table in the church basement. "Die for Jo. Die for someone else, but don't die for me because I'm a piece of shit!" She wipes a tear from her cheek, pauses, leans back and smiles. "But I'm also a miracle. Jo calls me his Lazarus."

“Keeping the main thing the main thing” is a management principle that every purpose-driven church and CEO would affirm. The focus on recovery guides not only what leaders decide but also how decisions are reached. The only permanent leadership groups are those mandated by the denomination. Anyone can participate in “the kitchen cabinet” that meets before worship on Sunday mornings at a local diner, although primarily a handful of regulars attend.

Twelve-step groups, with their egalitarian model of leadership and emphasis on radical honesty, serve as training grounds for those in the kitchen cabinet. Few votes are taken, and decisions are arrived at by consensus. People are free to say what they feel or think—and they do. The primary leadership principle is simple. “We really don’t know what we’re doing, so we try to stay out of God’s way,” says Swoverland, echoing a statement repeated so often it’s almost creedal. “There is just so much that has happened here that we didn’t plan.”

Getting out of God’s way hasn’t been easy for Campe. He says he was an arrogant pastor before entering recovery. “I ran the church,” he says. “I had to learn to let go.”

At six-foot-five, with the build and gait of a former football lineman, Campe fills a room with charisma. His two golden retrievers accompany him to the church office each day. Church members give him some credit for the church’s growth, but not too much. “It’s because of Jo, and it’s in spite of Jo,” says Swoverland.

In other words, Swoverland and the other members harbor no illusions about their pastor’s humanity. They have encouraged, comforted and admonished him through a divorce and other difficult times. They know his frailties. “They know I could take a drink anytime,” Campe says.

“As a member of the church, I must accept the pastor as he is,” Swoverland says. “He’s come to me; he’s come to Terry to ask for help. He’s not God. He’ll screw up royally. But as long as he keeps learning, that’s the important thing.”

Campe is learning now to serve as pastor of two churches at once. Central Park recently purchased the 155-year-old Wesley Church building in Minneapolis. In June, the two congregations began operating as the east (Central Park) and west (Wesley) campuses of the Recovery Church. The conference is providing nearly \$200,000 to subsidize the near future of Wesley. One hundred of the Central Park members are supporting 50 members at Wesley by attending worship at the new campus.

Campe, 62, plans to retire in several years. Replacing him will be difficult. Members say they will be looking for a pastor that few others would want. "You have to have gone through 15 years of hard drinking or being a druggie," Swoverland quips, and he's only half joking.