



St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Framingham is one of 200 churches across the country to have hosted a U2charist. (Dina Rudick/Globe Staff)

These services could segue from Book of Joshua to 'Joshua Tree' The Boston Globe

By Johnny Diaz, Globe Staff | May 2, 2007

FRAMINGHAM -- The crowd clapped, sang, and danced, swaying and waving cellphones in the air like lighters at a rock concert.

"In the name of love, what more in the name of love" -- the U2 song "Pride" blasted over the audience members, whose voices reached higher with each lyric they read off a screen.

Up next on the playlist: "One," "Sunday Bloody Sunday," and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For."

It may have sounded and looked like a U2 concert, but the house this music rocked is one of God -- specifically, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Framingham. On Sunday it held a wildly popular U2charist -- short for U2 Eucharist -- a traditional service set to U2 songs that carry spiritual messages to raise awareness about global poverty and AIDS.

Many of the band's songs reflect themes of social justice, death, love, and faith. Designing a service around this music came naturally, said the Rev. Dr. Paige Blair, who began hosting U2-themed services for her congregation, St. George's Episcopal Church in York Harbor, Maine, two years ago. A U2 fan, she wanted worshipers to connect with the band's music and bring attention to her church's work.

"We kept hearing U2 in our conversations," Blair, 36, said of her chats with parishioners in Maine. "U2's lyrics are so biblically rooted, and [they're so] spiritually grounded that they actually work quite well with a more traditional and familiar liturgy."

Like a spiritual instant message, word spread about the services interwoven with songs such as "Gloria" and "Vertigo." Across the country, 200 churches, mostly Episcopal, have hosted U2charists, some after consulting with St. George's. Blair is quick to point out that she didn't start the idea of using U2 songs during services, but other churches have been contacting her group to learn how to follow Blair's format. In New England, worshipers in Beverly, Cambridge, Holyoke, and Providence have held U2charists. There's one coming up Saturday at St. James Episcopal Church in Amesbury.

Blair has an agreement with the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, which holds the licensing rights to U2's songs, that allows her to use the band's music during services. In a recent *People* magazine story about U2-themed Eucharists, lead singer Bono seemed to offer his blessing. "If they play it in church, great," he said. "If they play it in the streets, great. As long as they play it and get the message."

On Sunday, Blair took her DJs and slide projectionists to Framingham, where each worshiper received a booklet of lyrics upon

walking in. The special 5 p.m. service drew 400 people, about twice as many as attend Sunday morning services at St. Andrew's.

Maryellen Brown and her daughter Paige, 14, dropped by because they wanted "to see something novel and original" in a Sunday service. They usually attend Plymouth Congregational Church up the street, but curiosity led them to the U2charist. "I'm a big U2 fan," Brown said as "Beautiful Day" blared on the speakers, with the lyrics projected on a screen from a PowerPoint presentation. "I know Bono is very involved in bringing awareness to poverty in Africa."

Sometimes, Blair and company remove a few pews to make room for "people to cut loose and dance. We call it our mosh pit." At this service, congregants grooved in pews or poured into the aisles.

Each song takes the place of a hymn. Between prayers, the breaking of bread, and the exchange of the peace, Blair talked about the Millennium Development Goals that were adopted by the United Nations in 2000 to eradicate poverty and global AIDS by 2015. Bono is ambassador of the international campaign.

Throughout the service, a slide presentation displayed statistics and photos of children and families suffering from HIV and lack of drinking water. Blair dashed up and down the center aisle, dancing and encouraging people to make a difference -- by helping to sponsor a children's playground in Africa that has rides that pump water to the community, for example.

"A little bit goes a long way," she said. More than halfway into the U2charist, members passed the plate to raise money to fight hunger and AIDS. They raised \$3,151.

The service was a hit with young people. A dozen youth groups came to check out the scene, thinking it would be a different and lively experience.

"My youth group had never been to one of these, and we wanted to see how they worked in the music," said Kelley Dunn, 16, who filled a row with friends who danced to "Sunday Bloody Sunday" and sang the lyrics loudly in the back row. Their hands turned red from all the clapping.

"We're here to have fun," said Nicole Halbert, 16, as her friends held their illuminated cellphones in the air during some of the songs.

Mea Savoca of Framingham and her son, John, attended the service because they are looking for a new religious home.

"We're disappointed Catholics," she said. "We're visiting because it sounded so cool. We're looking for exciting religious things right now, so this sounded like a good idea. We wanted to give it a chance and see if it is powerful. It's exciting to have them bring current music and make everything in the service about that."

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