

## BUZZFEED: Bethel

Max Whittaker for BuzzFeed News; Lettering by Madelene Wikskaer / BuzzFeed News  
Meet The "Young Saints" Of Bethel Who Go To College To Perform Miracles  
How a school that calls itself "Christian Hogwarts" is upending a small city in California's Trump country.

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Molly Hensley-Clancy

It's the first day of Prophecy Week at the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry. Or, as students here like to call the place, Christian Hogwarts.

The auditorium of the civic center in Redding, California, where first-year students have class, is so full of eager, neatly dressed young people that it's initially impossible to find a seat. The roomful of some 1,200 students hums with expectant energy: People talk in clusters, clutching their books to their chests and stealing eager glances at the stage. There are so many languages spoken here it's hard to keep track: English of all flavors, spoken with Australian and British and South African accents; Chinese; Korean; Portuguese. It's a strange medley for a place like Redding, an economically depressed rural outpost about 200 miles north of San Francisco, in the heart of Northern California's Trump country.

The students are waiting for today's lecturer, Kris Vallotton, one of the school's founders and a prophet so prolific he literally wrote the book on it — *Basic Training for the Prophetic Ministry*, a combined textbook and workbook used by Bethel students to learn how to hear, and speak, God's words. ("Name the five things that distinguish a false prophet from a true prophet." "What is the difference between a vision and a trance?")

The basic theological premise of the School of Supernatural Ministry is this: that the miracles of biblical times — the parted seas and burning bushes and water into wine — did not end in biblical times, and the miracle workers did not die out with Jesus's earliest disciples. In the modern day, prophets and healers don't just walk among us, they are us.

To Bethel students, learning, seeing, and performing these "signs and wonders" — be it prophesying about things to come or healing the incurable — aren't just quirks or side projects of Christianity. They are, in fact, its very center.

In the modern day, prophets and healers don't just walk among us, they are us. So far, Bethel's first-years have been learning the stories of their predecessors, ancient Old Testament prophets like Daniel and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in preparation for today — the day they begin to become prophets themselves.

They have already begun, tentatively, to learn Bethel's other trade: faith healing. I'm sitting on the edge of the room, notebook in my lap, when a thin, sandy-haired young man comes up to me with a wide smile.

"Excuse me," he says, and tells me his name. "Would you mind if I prayed for healing?"

He's looking, pointedly, at my right knee, which is at the moment bound in a thick and very noticeable black brace. "Sure," I say, because there's not really another answer in this kind of situation.

Still smiling, he kneels in front of me and lays his hands on my knee, fingers on the gap in my brace where my kneecap is visible. He begins to softly intone a prayer: Lord, please bring healing to her knee. Complete and total healing, Father.

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When he finishes, he stands up. “Thanks,” he says. “I’m practicing. Do you ... do you want to test it out?”

I’m racking my brain for an excuse not to when the girl next to me, a Bethel student who is coincidentally wearing a brace on her wrist, offers her arm up to him. “You can do me too,” she says, and the kid lights up.

“Thanks,” he says, sheepishly, and kneels again in front of her, fingers gently encircling her wrist.

The room erupts in applause: Kris Vallotton is walking onto the stage. He’s a little portly, with salt-and-pepper hair, a graying beard, and an infectious energy. His preaching style toggles between genuinely funny jokes and sincere stories. “Welcome to Prophecy Week,” he says, and the students roar.

The Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry is at the forefront of a burgeoning — and decidedly youthful — evangelical Christian revival. Some have called its movement the fastest-growing religious group in America — a loose network of churches, led by so-called apostles, who see supernatural gifts like prophecy and faith healing as the key to global conversion. While other religious movements struggle to retain members and draw in young people, Bethel attracts millennials in droves.

The school — which is unaccredited and does not confer degrees — sends students into Redding and across the globe armed with training in how to speak God’s words, heal the sick, and use the supernatural to win souls. It has spawned imitators across the country and on nearly every continent.

But BSSM is also at the crux of a conflict brewing in the small, isolated city of Redding, population 90,000. On one side is the church that runs the school, Bethel Redding, which has more than 9,000 in its congregation — its own little city on a hill. On the other side is a group of longtime Redding residents, religious and nonreligious alike, who are afraid and even angry about the growing influence of this church in their city and their lives.

As it grows rapidly, Bethel has devoted itself to fixing the struggling city of Redding, which is one of California’s poorest. It donates money to the police department. It buys out public buildings. It nurtures local businesses. It sends armies of students to clean the city’s trash- and syringe-strewn riverbanks. To the church’s leaders, Redding and Bethel are inextricable, and the city’s rebirth is one of the church’s most urgent missions.

But to some Redding residents, this is a threat. They see Bethel insinuating itself into every piece of Redding — politics, real estate, schools — and, in the process, altering the very fabric of their city. The church’s opponents have begun to stage protests, pressure local officials, and badger the press to expose the church. Daily, on Facebook, they catalog the infiltration of Bethel into Redding: “Bethel-owned” businesses, Bethel-sponsored events.

In Redding, BSSM’s students — some call them “Bethelbots” — are everywhere. For school assignments, students hang out in parking lots and grocery store aisles, asking strangers who use wheelchairs or crutches if they can pray for them to heal. On Thursday nights, the budding prophets gather to listen for God’s voice, then set off on “treasure hunts” to prophesy for people who match the description God has given them — whole crews of students scouring the local megastore for a man in a yellow shirt one night, a woman with three children and a purple backpack the next. After Friday night church services, they flood the local pizza place with frenzied devotions they call “fire tunnels.” They film themselves trying to raise the dead and post the footage on YouTube.

Redding residents’ worries are as fundamental as the Constitution. Bethel, they say, is steadily eroding the separation of church and state — and doing it at the time their city is at its most vulnerable. There is strong evidence, they say, that Bethel is using its size and money to exert influence on their government, their neighbors, their children.

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Many of Bethel's most outspoken critics are evangelical Christians who are deeply troubled by Bethel's theology. They're the kind of people who would normally mind their own business. But by now, Bethel and the School of Supernatural Ministry have grown so huge that they are inescapable. Bethel is everywhere: on the city council, behind the police department and the local charter school, waiting in the parking lot of the Walmart off of Route 44.

When the church's teachings spiral out of control, some of Bethel's sharpest critics say, they can become dangerous — even deadly.

Piece by piece, Bethel and the School of Supernatural Ministry are trying to redeem Redding. But Redding isn't so sure it wants to be saved.

Globally, Bethel Church is mostly known for its Christian worship music — songs that tend toward the bland and inoffensive, but are wildly popular. Justin Bieber once told *Cosmopolitan* that a Bethel track called "No Longer Slaves" (now at 34 million YouTube views) was in his iPod's top three most-played, along with Lil Wayne and Drake.

But in Redding, the School of Supernatural Ministry and its budding prophets and faith healers are the face of Bethel. They're also a blunt, public, and near-constant reminder of just how far out of the mainstream Bethel is — and of the school's own far-flung ambitions.

The school began 20 years ago as a tiny operation: 37 students, most of them local. It now has 2,400. It is the country's largest importer of foreign nondegree students — 889 active visas in the first half of 2017, according to ICE data, double that of the next-largest school. Because it's unaccredited, it's not eligible for federal financial aid: Students pay \$4,650 a year out of pocket. They can attend for anywhere between one and three years; most stay for one or two.

That still makes BSSM a cash cow for Bethel: It brings in around \$7 million, almost 20% of the church's revenue, according to figures in *The Rise of Network Christianity*, an academic book on Bethel and other similar churches.

BSSM wants to grow even further. Earlier this month, the city of Redding approved a massive expansion: 3,000 students and a brand-new \$96 million campus — one that, in modest Redding, would stick out like an Apple Store in a forest.

In a photograph from 2012 posted on Reddit, Kris Vallotton and Bethel Church's spiritual leader, Bill Johnson, stand in front of a group of neatly dressed young people who are kneeling before them, arms outstretched and palms raised. In Johnson and Vallotton's hands are swords, their long, gleaming metal blades resting on the students' shoulders. It's graduation at Bethel, and its students are being knighted.

More simply: Miracles are a really good way to convert people.

This is the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry's real goal: creating spiritual warriors, young people who will go out into the world armed with just the kind of supernatural gifts that Bethel believes will bring people into the Kingdom of God.

"Jesus is bringing the Kingdom, and he's doing it through signs and wonders," says Dann Farrelly, BSSM's dean. "They're the things that make people go, 'Huh, there's something about you, about this.' Jesus even said: You don't have to believe in me, you believe in the signs I'm doing."

More simply: Miracles are a really good way to convert people.

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BSSM is built on the idea that we are all “naturally supernatural”: We all have the potential to heal the sick and to hear God’s vision for the future. It’s ours because it’s Jesus’s, says Farrelly: Jesus does the work, and humans act as conduits. The school’s job is to foster the supernatural gifts of signs and wonders — to teach people to hear God’s voice and turn it into prophecy.

Dozens of imitation supernatural schools — some of which borrow Bethel’s philosophy, others its lectures and materials — have now spread globally. The idea of “church planting” is not a new one to evangelicalism. But Bethel has created its own version: supernatural school planting. A BSSM map shows Bethel-inspired and Bethel-connected schools dotting the globe, with schools that use a version of BSSM’s curriculum popping up across the country, and in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Ireland, Hong Kong, and New Zealand.

“It’s something that we’ve kind of coined,” said Janelle Fite, who heads school-planting at Bethel. “None of us would have thought that our little school in Redding would have grown to the size it did. We never would have imagined.”

Behind Bethel’s rise is the enormous talent and ambition of the church’s magnetizing leaders, Bill Johnson and Kris Vallotton, who cofounded BSSM in 1998. Depending on who you ask, Vallotton and Johnson are geniuses, false prophets, or both. What’s undeniable is that with Vallotton at his side, Johnson, a fifth-generation pastor, has transformed a small, unremarkable local church into what Christianity Today called “a hub of a global revival movement.”

Johnson has become one of the most high-profile apostles in a loosely connected and ever-multiplying group known as Independent Network Charismatics, or INC Christians, said Brad Christerson, a professor of sociology at Biola University and coauthor of *The Rise of Network Christianity*. Christerson calls INC Christianity, which is also known as New Apostolic Christianity, the country’s fastest-growing religious movement — and Bethel, he says, “is at the center.”

INC churches have no formal structure or governing body, something that allows them to grow and take risks in a way that many other churches, bound by formal rules and structures, can’t. But that also means that INC churches have little accountability for their finances or their beliefs. Apostles often experiment wildly, and they encourage their members to do the same.

INC Christians don’t care about planting churches, or even growing their congregations as large as possible, the way Joel Osteen did with his 52,000-person megachurch, says Christerson. Their sole mandate is to spread their apostles’ beliefs — in Bethel’s case, sharing testimonies and experiences of the supernatural by any means necessary.

There’s the worship services broadcast worldwide through Bethel TV, a subscription service that, for as little as \$8 a month (and up to \$250 for a “season pass”), streams Sunday sermons and testimonies of healings and miracles. It Skypes hundreds of people into its healing sessions. Its conferences, with names like Kingdom Culture, Open Heavens, and Young Saints, draw attendances in the thousands.

Vallotton and Johnson have each built their own brands, too, with sleek websites, dozens of supernaturally focused books between them, and gigs speaking at revival churches worldwide. The Bethel Church bookstore is filled almost wall-to-wall with Johnson and Vallotton’s tomes, bright paperbacks with titles like *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind* and *Intentional Parenting: Kingdom Perspective on Raising Revivalists*.

And then there is the gem of the operation: Bethel Music, whose dozens of Christian artists have made albums that sit at the top of iTunes charts and regularly bring in millions of viewers. Bethel Music’s young musicians, some

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tattooed, all of them beautiful, sing songs that border on the hypnotic, their eyes half-closed, their bodies swaying until they are seized by moments of intense, doubled-over passion.

At Bethel's core is a deep, intense focus on young people. The church is highly internet-savvy, with a network of Instagram and Facebook accounts — each with hundreds of thousands of followers — that post high-quality, heavily-produced clips of songs, conferences, testimonials, and images of faith and revival. Laughing college kids fill the church's Instagram stories daily, and its services are often led by young people barely out of their teenage years.

All evangelical churches are focused on bringing in young people. The difference is that Bethel is actually successful.

Bethel students who grow up as charismatic or Pentecostal Christians find Bethel through services and conferences that are streamed into their own churches. Others tag along with friends to Young Saints, where they fall in love with Bethel's energy and youth in settings that feel more like rock concerts, full of euphoric praise music and pulsing lights. And many more find Bethel simply by clicking the red button on a YouTube video.

For those who have spent their lives in mainstream Christianity, where miracles are generally confined to biblical times, Bethel's theology can be deeply alluring. It offers a kind of certainty — an absolute proof of God's existence — that many of their previous churches never did.

For Eddie Hsu, a former Bethel student from Brazil, signs and wonders were the thing that brought his faith to life.

"As a young kid growing up in the church, one of the things that marked my life was this question of, That stuff that happened in the Bible, why doesn't it happen anymore?" says Hsu. "I was raised with the idea that God was so holy, but he didn't actually do anything."

Hsu was a Catholic in name only until he had a personal encounter with God, a joy-filled moment where he felt Jesus's presence so strongly that it seemed undeniable. Hsu began to listen to Jesus Culture, a Bethel youth revivalist group, and was so drawn to it that on a visit to California he went to a Jesus Culture conference in Redding, four hours' drive from the tourist attractions of the Bay Area.

Since then, Hsu says he has seen many miracles that have sealed his faith. He has seen people healed in front of him; he was himself healed of a shoulder injury — he'd only hurt it bowling, and it was small, but it was deeply meaningful all the same. A prophet once told a friend of Hsu's, plucked out of a group of 800 people, what her grandmother's name was, what her childhood address had been.

"It made her really feel like, Wow, God knows me," Hsu says.

Hsu made the final decision to come to the School of Supernatural Ministry, he says, because of a prophetic dream that he still remembers vividly. He dreamed of a ladder with angels on the rungs, much like Jacob's dream from Genesis of a ladder to heaven. In the Bible, the morning after his dream, Jacob sets a stone on a pillar and pours oil over it. He calls this place Bethel.

Mike Clark is a "born-again, Bible-believing Christian," a pastor at a Baptist-linked church in Aurora, Colorado, who has become an outspoken critic of Bethel Church. Years earlier, he began to see friends drift toward a type of Christianity that was "experiential," oriented around signs and wonders — "wandering into myth," as Clark puts it. Bethel, he says, was almost always behind the shift.

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Clark has seen its leaders' propensity for wild experimentation carry them into "crazy" places — farther and farther away from Jesus's teachings, he says. He and a group of other pastors have begun to catalog what they view as Bethel's problematic theology on a Facebook page called "Bethel Church and Christianity," which has more than 4,500 followers. They mostly traffic in the words of Bethel's own leaders: stories of angels appearing and "balls of electricity" throwing people into the air, coupled with Scripture passages that they say contradict Bethel teachings.

"Here's the danger," Clark says. "Miracles are a reflection of Jesus. When people chase after signs and wonders, they're trading the Light himself, Jesus, for a reflection of the light."

Clark is astonished, he says, at how far and how quickly Bethel's teachings have spread. "There are people all over the world who are espousing this stuff from Bethel, and they don't even have ties to Bethel," he says. "It's this little infection that trickles out from Bethel Music and Jesus Culture conferences. That's where it all starts."

Students who have left BSSM — and, sometimes, the Christian faith — tend to use similar words to describe the school: words like bullshit or party trick.

Bethel's savvy social media presence allows the church to reach tens of thousands of young people. Stefan, who spent three years at Bethel before eventually leaving evangelicalism, felt for his first few weeks at Bethel like he was really seeing miracles: healings and prophecies that felt like they had come directly from God. Eventually, that changed.

Stefan looks back at his time at BSSM and sees an array of "psychological mind games" — healing via placebo, prophecy through confirmation bias. He's done some reading lately, he says, on how magicians convince crowds that they are seeing magic and not magic tricks; how believing that you are going to recover from an illness or that your injured limb has been healed can, sometimes, be enough to accomplish healing.

"I think, for me, Bethel was the beginning of realizing, like, this is all bullshit," says Chris, who went to Bethel in the mid-2000s and asked that his last name not be used because he still has close friends in the church. "When you do it, you convince yourself that this is all really real. But it's cold reading, that's what it is. You just dress it up in Jesus."

Chris was a good prophet, his teachers told him. While he was studying at Bethel, he once had a vision from The Song of Deborah as he prayed over a woman whose name he did not know. As he told her this, she cried out in surprise: Her name was Deborah.

"What I see now is, those are random thoughts," Chris says. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, your prophecies are horrible misses. But you don't remember them being a terrible flop — you remember the one time it worked."

At BSSM, Chris said, the focus was on testimonies of success — retelling to a group of fellow students the stories of the one "holy shit" moment when their prophecy had worked. No one talked about the times they had failed.

There's a YouTube video, viewed more than 175,000 times, of a street preacher's bizarre encounter with young churchgoers in Bethel's parking lot. One woman is loopy, laughing and stumbling, twitching as though she's been jolted with electricity. "We are all loved perfectly no matter what theology we believe," she tells the preacher.

Listening to her, the preacher is visibly upset. "I'm desperately worried about both of you," he says to the woman and her friend. She giggles.

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The preacher gives her a scenario: She finds a man who has been stabbed in the back and has just five minutes left to live. He tells her he's worried about the way he's lived his life and where he'll go after he dies. What would the woman do with those five minutes? There is, in most of Christianity, just one answer: She should tell him the gospel of Jesus, ask him to repent, and save his soul.

The woman flings her arms out and laughs. "I would say, 'God, heal him right now!'" she cries giddily. "And the sword would fall off, and then they'd be fine, and then we'd hug."

I see Bethel students' education in practice one Friday night in Redding, at a church service where a group of third-years warms up the crowd by taking turns prophesying, passing the microphone from one nervous hand to another. They are all young, in their twenties and thirties, and attractive — a woman in heels, a man in flannel and tight-fitting jeans. Almost all of them have foreign accents.

Bethel's main sanctuary, a beautiful building overlooking the mountains and valleys of Redding, is being used for a youth conference tonight, so we're in a smaller space tucked away on a side road. The crowd here skews young, and almost entirely white, but really it's diverse in age and class — older men in camo baseball caps and tank tops, young women in tiny skirts.

The first prophecy comes courtesy of a young white man who asks the crowd if anyone here has had a dream about a phone call with Bill Johnson, Bethel's leader. A man in the front says he had a dream about Eric Johnson, Bill's son, and a few people exclaim, "Wow!" But the prophet seems to think this isn't quite right. He hunts around in the crowd for any Bill-phone dreams, and only when he doesn't find any does he return to the man who dreamed of Eric. Eric, the prophet says, has been on a "journey of fatherhood," and he wonders if this man, too, is "searching around for father figures." If he is, the man says, he should turn to God the Father, a revelation that prompts murmurs of approval.

The only woman in the group, a young Australian, is called to prophesy for a man wearing a red-and-black T-shirt. She asks if he is a musician. He says, to gasps, that he is.

"And do you play the guitar? I'm seeing a guitar."

"A little," the man replies.

Buoyed, she launches into a prophecy about the man's music career, and how it's about to "take off." He's going to find unimaginable success soon. "You're going to be put above kings and queens," she says, to oohs from the crowd.

He also says he saw a hippopotamus.

Another student interrupts her. He says he's seen the image of a Ferrari logo tattooed on the man's head. "It means this is all going to come really fast for you," he says, and the crowd applauds. "Get ready, it's coming."

An elderly man who's asked if the year 1942 means anything to him (it doesn't, but 1941 does) is given a vision of himself with God, bearded and sitting in a throne. "And both of you are holding a giant soda pop, a red soda pop," the prophet says: a sign that "God is fun." He also says he saw a hippopotamus.

After the music and a few sermons, we get to the main event, a piped-in sermon and prophecy from the conference down the road. The speaker is a celebrity in the world of Bethelites, a man named Shawn Bolz who has come to us straight out of Hollywood, where he once met Mel Gibson. He is, I recognize immediately, a different kind of prophet than Bethel's third-years. For one, the miracles he describes are nothing that can be explained by mere coincidence. He tells the story of a young girl he was praying for who confessed that she was a

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cutter. As he “said words” over her, telling her she was loved by God, she held up her arms and her scars disappeared. So did the scars of all of the other cutters in the auditorium.

Bolz ends by prophesying in a way that feels, fundamentally, like Not Bullshit, teetering on the edge of something even I can believe. His prophecies are the kind of thing that Bethel students aspire to. He says he has had a testimony for someone named Judah who is “somehow related to Judges,” and a boy pops up, beaming, in the crowd — his name is Judah, and he lives on Judges Road. Bolz knows that Judah has an “older brother, Bryan, Ryan, something like that.” Ryan’s right, Judah says.

Bolz asks if there is a girl named Luna in the audience, and of course, there is. He tells her he’s had a vision of a Boston terrier — the same kind of dog Luna says her sister is adopting next month. Then Bolz asks her if the names “Alfredo and Antonio” mean anything to her.

“Those are my baby cousins’ names, they’re twins!” Luna cries, giddily, a look of awe on her face. Then she starts to talk again, and it sounds like she is trying to qualify her answer.

“Well, it’s not—” she starts.

But the crowd of young people has erupted in a roar of amazement at Bolz’s prophecy. Luna’s voice is drowned out.

Paul Davis has lived in Redding most of his life. Gentle and soft-spoken, he says he has nothing against Bethel’s students — he thinks they’re “really sweet kids” — but he’s troubled, deeply, by the church’s theology. An evangelical Christian, Davis says BSSM students are caught up in the “extrabiblical,” a focus on proving God’s existence through the supernatural rather than through faith. He spends a lot of time worrying about the salvation of the sweet Bethel kids he interacts with daily, and about the strange, twisted path he thinks they’re leading others on.

But Davis says it’s hard to argue with one basic fact: “Bethel is great for the economy. They bring in millions of dollars, and they do a lot of good for the community.”

As a Christian who loves his city, Davis is torn, he says. On the one hand, “I’m really concerned about our spiritual welfare.” But the other side is this: “Redding has two industries,” he says. “There’s meth and marijuana. And then there’s Bethel.”

If you’ve lived in Redding long enough, you might remember a time when it was the perfect little city. It sits nestled at the foot of snow-peaked mountains, surrounded by Douglas fir trees and rivers and the glassy, clear blue waters of Lake Shasta. Four hours away from wild, liberal San Francisco, Redding once had a familiar story: good blue-collar jobs, safe and friendly neighborhoods, families who passed their time boating and fishing and hunting.

Redding is different now. It has a high unemployment rate and a crime rate that’s almost twice the rest of California’s. Homelessness keeps climbing. So does drug use: marijuana, grown in the idyllic countryside surrounding the city, but meth too, and increasingly devastatingly, heroin, which is “exploding” across the county. Shasta County hospitals see three times the number of overdoses than the rest of the state averages.

Now residents swap stories of people found shooting up in the streets, cars broken into with cinderblocks in fits of desperation, and stores robbed, repeatedly, in broad daylight. In a Facebook group called “Redding Crime 2.0,” more than 27,000 members track down one another’s stolen cars, complain about homeless encampments, and post photos of shady characters caught dealing drugs in parking lots.

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“Most of the startups and small businesses have been from our graduates.”

In a troubled city caught in a downward spiral, there is one bright spot: Bethel. The church has brought droves of eager young people, many of them educated, to Redding. They all need a place to stay, food to eat, coffee to drink. And after graduating, many of Bethel’s students have done something remarkable: They’ve stayed in Redding. They’ve opened trendy coffee shops, bakeries, and ethnic restaurants, even tech companies. They have begun to raise families here.

“People tell us all the time, ‘You have saved the economy of this city, and you guys have brought an international flavor to a city that used to be monochromatic,’” Farrelly says. “Most of the startups and small businesses have been from our graduates. There are so many people that have come to town for us.”

The city budget in Redding has long been tight. For years, the city-owned Redding Civic Auditorium was crumbling, its interior in disrepair, its funding and future always in question. It seemed inevitable that the Civic would, eventually, be forced to close down.

In 2011, though, the Civic found an unlikely savior: Bethel. The church created a nonprofit and used it to lease the Civic. On weekends, the center hosted the same concerts and events it always had. During the week, the Civic became the home of the School of Supernatural Ministry and its more than 1,000 first-year students from all around the globe.

The Civic was, for Bethel, a first step — a toe in the waters. Since then, the church has become increasingly intertwined with the city. Last year, a local nurse and Bethel elder, Julie Winter, ran for city council and won, buoyed by far more in political contributions than her opponents. Their latest campaign is perhaps the biggest: With the local police department’s future in jeopardy, the church offered a \$500,000 donation to the city to save the jobs of four officers. Residents bristled. The city accepted.

But Bethel needs something from the city, too. It has ambitious plans for expansion in Redding, plans that center around the School of Supernatural Ministry: Its beautiful new 171,000-square-foot campus and megachurch, it says, will have parking for 1,800, a “worship center” that seats more than 2,600, and classrooms for 3,000 students.

As controversy brewed in Redding over the massive expansion, an editorial in the Record Searchlight, the local newspaper, put it this way: “If Shasta County had a startup company that had grown from a tiny seed blown over the pass from Weaverville to become a global player, what would we say when it wanted to expand? What if it had become a major local employer, created some of the most popular music and other media in its industry and brought literally thousands of educated, interesting people from around the world to Redding?”

“We do,” the editorial board wrote. “It just so happens to be a church.”

“We’re heading towards a place where a religious entity is in control, and is monetarily benefiting from the city government.”

To Anita Brady, who has lived her entire life in Redding, that is the exactly the problem: As Bethel steadily erodes a boundary between itself and the city, it moves closer to violating the separation of church and state, she says. “We’re heading towards a place where a religious entity is in control, and is monetarily benefiting from the city government,” Brady says. “That’s what scares me.”

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As evidence, she points to the Civic; to Winter's place on the city council; to the hordes of Bethel students who volunteer across Redding, saving the city money. And then there is the \$500,000 donation to the city police department: "They did that with one thing in mind, to curry favor," Brady says.

And, Brady points out, they got just that: After months of debate, BSSM's \$96 million expansion was unanimously approved in September by the city planning commission. In comment after comment on news stories and on Facebook, residents responded angrily to the news. "Bethel has Redding in its back pocket," one wrote.

A longtime public school teacher, Brady was infuriated by a Bethel advertisement for a seminar called "Kingdom in the Classroom," which marketed itself to public and private school teachers alike. "The presence of God in your classroom is not illegal!" the ad read. "Regardless of where you teach — public or private, religious or secular — God wants to come to your school with His presence, His peace and His strategies."

That turned out to be just the beginning, Brady says. In August, a group linked to Bethel opened a taxpayer-funded public charter school, Tree of Life, on the campus of an elementary school that was shuttered because of declining enrollment. Tree of Life's leaders say the school is secular, a legal requirement to receive public money. But its principal told the Redding Record Searchlight that the school would use pieces of a Bethel's "Kingdom in the Classroom" curriculum.

A job posting on a Bethel website, which sought to hire teachers, said the "school has a Kingdom culture and all Bethel-connected Board of Directors and principal," the Record Searchlight reported. The principal said the word "Kingdom" referred to a "culture of love," not religion.

Brady's fears about a growing Bethel takeover in Redding are not unfounded. At the very theological roots of Bethel and other churches like it is the "seven mountains mandate," a belief that Christ will only return to Earth when true believers bring God into seven spheres: religion, family, education, government, media, arts, and business.

Most INC churches organize themselves around the seven mountains mandate, says Christerson, the author of *The Rise of Network Christianity*. But thanks to Redding, Bethel offers a unique test case.

"They're so big, and Redding is so small, that they can actually do it," Christerson says.

Julie Winter first got involved with the city by orchestrating Bethel's plan to take over the Civic. Though she ran on a secular campaign of economic revitalization and curbing homelessness and drug addiction, she says she is deeply influenced by her faith. She recuses herself from voting on Bethel-related matters, but when it comes to Redding, she says her vision is closely aligned with the church's.

"The fact that we have the balls to say, 'We can manage the Civic,' I've never really seen that modeled anywhere else," Winter says of Bethel. "The angst was really high when it happened, but now if you talked to anyone involved with the city, they're thrilled."

At the center of many residents' concerns is the deep, strange otherness of Bethel. Just before the election, which Winter won handily, a half dozen of her large campaign signs were vandalized with the word "BETHEL!" spray-painted in huge orange letters. Another 15 were tagged with "Bethel" bumper stickers.

At the center of many residents' concerns is the deep, strange otherness of Bethel. On Facebook they trade the same videos over and over again to prove it. There's the one of Bethelites doing something called "grave sucking," or praying, prostrate, on the grave of a famous Christian. There are the frenzied "fire tunnels" where giddy church members form aisles and lay their hands on people in the middle, shaking, staggering, and screaming as they are

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filled with the Holy Spirit. And then there are videos of Bethel’s “glory clouds,” where gold glitter begins to drift from the church sanctuary ceiling seemingly out of nowhere mid-sermon, which have been viewed more than a million times on YouTube.

For many white, working-class Shasta County residents — just 19% of whom have bachelor’s degrees, compared to 33% nationwide — Bethel students and churchgoers are strange for another reason too: They represent a foreign elite. In a letter to the editor of the Record Searchlight, a woman named Marilyn Lee said what many in Redding had been thinking: that the stream of foreigners, money, and young, educated tech talent coming to Bethel could leave Redding unrecognizable.

“Kris Vallotton said in an interview that the church’s vision for Redding was for it to become like Paris,” Lee wrote. “Excuse me, but that certainly isn’t my vision. I would be willing to make a guess that that is not the vision of the majority of the people living here. My vision is to keep it as it is.”

When I ask about Bethel, most Redding residents who are opposed to the church return to the same story from nearly a decade ago, in 2008. A group that included Bethel students were drinking at the top of a cliff on the banks of the broad Sacramento River. When one man fell to the bottom of the 200-foot cliff, news reports say, the students didn’t call the police. Instead, they tried to climb down so that they could faith-heal him. They never found him, and for six hours, he lay bleeding and unconscious in the dark at the foot of the cliff. He survived, but was paralyzed. (The students were found to be not at fault in a suit.)

Nearly everyone in the Facebook group, it seems — and many outside of it — has their own private version of this story.

For one local man, himself an evangelical Christian, it was a time that a BSSM student he had trusted to babysit his children called while he was at dinner with his wife to say the Antichrist was in their home and also that the sitter’s own closet was filled with demons that needed to be exorcised.

There’s a story about Bethel students swarming an elderly woman in a wheelchair in a parking lot and encouraging her to walk; massages, dental appointments, and shopping trips interrupted by Bethel students’ “treasure hunts.” The biggest local tourist attraction, the Sundial Bridge, was briefly “ruined,” residents complained, by students looking to practice their prophesy on the banks of the Sacramento River. (They are no longer allowed to prophesy to tourists around the bridge.)

Donna Zibull has lived in Redding for more than 40 years, working as a housekeeper and hospital cleaner until a back injury forced her to retire on disability. But she hadn’t thought much about Bethel until 2014, when the church barged into one of the worst days of her life.

Zibull’s 15-year-old grandson, Orian, was walking home from a friend’s house on a cold January afternoon when he had an asthma attack in the street a few blocks from his home. It was Bethel churchgoers, Zibull says, who found him and ran to his side. As he gasped for breath, they began to pray for healing, letting long minutes tick by without calling 911. One woman even ran back into her friend’s house, Zibull says, to get a copy of her Bible.

Eventually, someone in the group called an ambulance, and Orian was taken to the hospital, some 15 minutes after his attack began, Zibull says. For days, as he lay in the ICU of Shasta Regional Medical Center with irreparable brain damage, Bethel church members and leaders came to the hospital, asking to pray over Zibull’s grandson. They gave her daughter a piece of prophetic art, a drawing they said had been made by a Bethel child.

“They were giving these prophecies about how he was going to be raised from the dead.”

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“They started praying, talking in tongues,” Zibull says. “They were going to blow a shofar. They were giving these prophecies about how he was going to be raised from the dead.”

Bethelites promised Zibull’s daughter, over and over again, that God could bring her son back to life. They said there was going to be a miracle. “They gave my daughter false hope,” Zibull says. Orian died four days later.

Since Orian’s death, Zibull has devoted herself to learning about Bethel, researching the church’s teachings and its growing involvement in Redding’s government.

One thing was acutely painful: Bethel’s annual Medical Healing Conference, which took place in May. The conference was initially set to be cohosted by the Shasta Regional Medical Center — the hospital where Orian died. Zibull was “shocked” and outraged when she heard about the conference, she says. Online, she began to plan a protest with the other members of the Citizens Concerned About Bethel Church Facebook group.

That protest never panned out, but Zibull still has her sign. It reads: “You can’t raise the dead.”

On the plane to the United States, about to start his first year at Bethel, Stefan struck up a conversation with the man next to him, a science professor at Stanford. Stefan told the professor that he was coming to Redding from Austria because he wanted to witness miracles. Eventually, he wanted to perform them himself: to learn how to prophesy, and especially, how to heal.

Stefan and the professor argued for a while about the existence of the supernatural. Neither of them changed their minds in the slightest. But as their flight ended, Stefan says the professor gave him a business card.

“I don’t believe in this stuff,” the professor told him. “But if you ever see a limb grow out, videotape it and send the recording to me, and then I will.”

This is why Bethel is obsessed with healing. It offers that kind of transformative power: the chance to have God’s existence proven to you, right in front of your eyes — laid out so definitively and convincingly that even an atheist professor couldn’t help but become a true believer. (The professor is still, apparently, waiting.)

This is how it worked, for many, in biblical times, Dann Farrelly tells me: People became followers of Jesus because they saw healing and miracles with their own eyes.

Bethel has offered tens of thousands of people a chance to be healed at its massive conferences and on mission trips across the globe. And hundreds of people make the pilgrimage to their Healing Rooms in Redding every week. Many, I am told, practice Bethel’s brand of Christianity, but others are mainstream Christians, dipping their toes in the waters of more radical faith. Others, like me, are not religious at all.

On a Saturday morning, I sit in the lobby of the Healing Rooms, clipboard in my lap and a pen in my hand. On my right knee is the big, ugly black brace, one that I’ve been sporting for six weeks, since a soccer injury left me with two completely torn ligaments. I’m here to have my knee healed — or at least that’s what I write on the Healing Room intake form I’ve been given, which asks me to list my “Physical Prayer Needs.”

I have a lot of physical prayer needs: At the moment, I can’t ride a stationary bike, go down stairs, or even bend my knee at a right angle. I write those down. The form also asks whether I’m “born again” and if I’ve been “baptized in the Holy Spirit.” I check “no” for both.

After an introductory class on the “Biblical foundations of Healing,” we’re led into the main sanctuary, a kind of holding room which is already buzzing with people. Concentric circles of chairs, some of them draped with colorful

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blankets and pillows, have been set up around a large group of easels where people are painting prophetic art on giant canvases: a pair of hands touching each other, a tree shedding blue leaves. A praise band of beautiful young people wearing flannel plays up on the stage, crooning hypnotic, repetitive strains of viral Bethel Music songs. In the corner, in front of a cross draped with sequined gold cloth, a woman lies prostrate and unmoving, her forehead pressed to the carpet. She does not move the entire time I'm in the sanctuary.

In the back of the room, a row of people with telemarketer-style headphones and laptops are conducting healing sessions via Skype. A pair of large screens in front of us remind us that only Bethel's ministry team are allowed to heal.

I settle in the corner, waiting for my number to be called, and watch as a trio of prophetic dancers, barefoot and carrying colorful scarves, gather around a woman near me who looks very much like she has just emerged from a brutal chemotherapy treatment. They ask if they can dance for her. She begins to cry, clutching her husband's hand, as they twirl around her.

After a while, a woman interrupts the praise band to tell us that there is a "healing pool" forming in front of the stage. "It's a pool where the impossible is possible, where oil and water mix, and here there's going to be real healing," she says. As dozens of people come up to the pool, collapsing to their knees or raising their hands in the air, the woman's voice becomes a hypnotic chant: "Oil and water mix here, outside in the world they don't, but in here they doooo. Oil and water mix here..."

The ailing woman and her husband make their way to the pool and begin to dance with each other, swaying slowly.

Later, we're herded into another, smaller room, one where intense healing is going to take place. We wait our turn and watch Bethel's healers do their work, stationed in pairs in front of people clutching their intake forms.

The woman next to me, who looks about my age, has a squirming little boy on her lap. I peek at her form, which lists just two ailments, scrawled in all-caps: PARASITES and HEARTBREAK.

Finally it's my turn. "So, you're not saved, and you're not born again, right?" one of my healers asks, scrutinizing my form.

I explain clumsily that I was "raised Catholic," which is only barely true. With my utter lack of faith made clear, the prayers focus not just on my knee, but on my own relationship to God, asking him to "help me on my journey towards faith."

I can tell I'm a tough case, because a third healer comes over to us, and then a fourth. Soon I'm surrounded by people praying for me, one woman's hand on my shoulder, another on her knees in front of me, and the force of their expectation — desperation, almost — is palpable. Unrelentingly, every few minutes, they ask me how I'm feeling, whether I'm better.

I try to deflect some of their questions, but it never works. When one healer asks me what I feel, I tell her I feel "your energy and prayers." She jumps back, "But what about your knee?"

"Well, it's a really serious injury," I try. "So I think it might take some time."

The woman seems almost offended. "Time?" she says. "Jesus doesn't need time! Jesus can heal you right away."

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We start praying again, and I start feeling a little desperate, like I'll never get out of here. The next time they ask me how my knee feels, almost automatically, without thinking, I lie.

"I think it's more flexible now," I say. I move it back and forth, and I can see my healers' eyes light up. "I think it's getting better. Thank you."

"Thank you, Father!" one of them cries out, taking my hand. We're both, I think, relieved, though maybe for different reasons. "Thank you for beginning this journey to healing."

It's finally over, and my healers ask me to give them my intake form. When I take the paper off of the clipboard, I notice there's a back side, too, meant to be filled out by Bethel staff: a checklist labeled "Miracles Performed." It includes healed shoulders and knees, zapped tumors, cured cancer, and limb-straightening, as well as soul-saving. At the very bottom of the list is the very miracle that the Stanford professor told Stefan would convert him: "Limb regrown."

I hand the form over, wondering if they're going to check me off as a Miracle Performed. As I leave the room, I think I see one of my healers do just that.

Ministry students during a worship service at the Civic Auditorium in Redding, California, September 14, 2017. A week later, when I'm back in New York, I pull myself up onto my physical therapist's table, facedown. The excruciating process of recovering from my injury has, so far, involved forcing my locked-up knee to bend slightly farther at every appointment, a process that always makes me cry out in pain, and sometimes leaves me with tears in my eyes.

"All right, let's see how you're doing," she says. Before I left for Redding, I had told her where I was headed and why, and as I lie there on the table, she jokes, "Maybe you're healed! This could be our last day."

I squeeze my eyes shut and feel her bending my knee back. "Wow," she tells me. "You're doing really well. You've got much more flexibility, actually. I'd say at least 20 degrees."

I had a lot of downtime in Redding, and I spent most of it doing physical therapy — several hours a day of excruciatingly painful work, lying on the hotel room floor and using a strap to force my knee to bend farther and farther. But still. I turn around to my physical therapist, and she and I exchange a look: just a split second. ●

### CORRECTION

October 12, 2017, at 10:01 p.m.

A Bethel nonprofit leases the Civic Center from the city of Redding. In one instance, a previous version of of this story said the nonprofit bought the Civic.

Molly Hensley-Clancy is a business reporter for BuzzFeed News and is based in Washington, DC. She covers the intersection of business and education.