

Jerry Davich: Bouncer-turned-pastor still wrestles with God

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Todd Matchett is my kind of preacher, man.

The 47-year-old father of four is a former bouncer, fitness club owner, and rebellious hellion from Canada who uses his atypical life experiences to spread the gospel. And if words are needed, too, then so be it.

“I regularly wrestle with the Lord, man,” said Matchett, the relatively new pastor at Living Hope Church in Merrillville. “We’re not interested in having church. We’re committed to becoming a church. We want to be a church of relevance.”



Wrestling with the Lord. Committed to becoming a church. A church of relevance. I enjoy such honesty. I respect it, too.

Matchett was one of 38 candidates to replace the former senior pastor at Living Hope, a growing, high-energy and contemporary place of worship located on Taft Street, south of U.S. 30. The large church routinely incorporates elements of pop culture into its weekend services through music, humor, and even staging.

After the church’s short list was down to three candidates, a special committee unanimously voted him in, despite his unorthodox and even controversial style.

Matchett readily acknowledges that his brash 21st century style of preaching has cost the church to lose a few 19th century-minded families (my words, not his). But he’s also attracted a few new families and he has somehow sparked a few stoic old-timers to even dance during church services.

“We can talk to the guy. He doesn’t have a fake holiness. He’s real,” explained Christian Rath, a deacon and committee member.

Yes, Matchett is real — for good, bad and unapologetically candid — a quality too often missing in church administration, I’ve learned. As I often tell churchgoers, although I’m labeled as “unchurched,” meaning I don’t regularly attend a specific church, I’ve visited dozens of churches and spoken to literally hundreds of parishioners and clergy.

Matchett stands out, in a positive way, without being didactic, condescending and, even more noticeably, holier than thou, as too many preachers come across these days.

“I didn’t create this situation on my own,” said Matchett, a huge U2 rock band fan who still pumps iron to keep in shape. “God had his hand in it, and it fits like a glove. It’s been very humbling but incredibly empowering.”

Matchett grew up in a Christian home under his “parents’ religion.” And he despised it. Once he left home, he hit it hard in the opposite direction.

“Buddy, I went pedal to the medal into the fun side of life,” Matchett said enthusiastically, noting big bucks, big muscles, and big-time fame in his social circle.

“I partied with the best of them, and I had a blast doing it. I was the man.”

“Twenty years ago, if I didn’t drop the F-bomb every few words, I wasn’t in the conversation, man. I was a despicable person, a user of people, someone I am not proud of. It’s shameful.”

‘God is here and alive’

But a series of humbling experiences knocked him down a few rungs on the ladder of social ascension. He lost his fitness clubs business. He lost his big money. He lost his so-called friends.

He also had to deal with the surprising death of his father, a good man, a good father, and a loyal follower of Christ. Matchett's father was diagnosed with cancer the same year he retired, robbing him of his golden years.

Matchett felt sucker punched by Christ.

"I've been questioning God for 16 years," he said with conviction, if not anger. "People who can explain such things away with a few handy words, I don't trust them."

Matchett often peppers his conversation with biblical scripture, but he doesn't spice his words with too much dogmatic seasoning.

"I've got two oars in the water — a belief oar and a doubting oar," he admitted.

Matchett's wife of 15 years, Renee, and his four kids still live in Kansas City until their house is sold. In the meantime, Matchett is living in Rath's Crown Point home.

"It's lonely, man," he admitted. "I never thought I'd be one of those sappy Hallmark commercials guys, but here I am missing my wife and kids."

He's a follower of Christ who didn't apologize for getting choked up with emotions after talking about an old friend of his who also found God despite myriad obstacles, including prison.

"If you would have told me 20 years ago that one of my best friends would be a black, ex-gang member who scared the living crap out of me when I first met him," Matchett said, his voice cracking again with emotion. "He proves that God is here and alive."

In 1992, Matchett left Canada for Phoenix for a church pastor training program at a mega-church with more than 14,000 parishioners.

"It was hotter than hell there," he said. "But it was awesome to have that opportunity to work with a church that really worked out of the box. We did things that some mainline denominations would frown upon."

"But whatever it takes to reach people, and whatever it takes to have people think of God in a new light and think of the gospel in a fresh way," said Matchett, his voice rising as if it's a Sunday morning sermon.

Matchett believes that too many church officials are isolating themselves from contemporary pop culture, while also missing the point of what people really need.

One of his favorite quotes also is one of mine, a line attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel where ever you go and use words only if necessary."

To connect with Matchett or watch him in action, visit www.lhcweb.org.