

No.

7

FASTEST-GROWING
CHURCH
& No. 94 LARGEST

*Flatirons Community Church
Lafayette, Colorado*

The Church of “Me, Too”

Nestled in the belly of liberal Boulder County, Colo., is what many casual observers might consider a most unwelcome guest. It goes by the name of Flatirons Community Church. Yet, in an area that's home to everything from the country's largest Buddhist university to man-boy love activists, Flatirons is somehow getting Christ's love past deaf ears and hardened hearts.

The secret, says Lead Pastor Jim Burgen, is two little words: “me, too.” One of the 11-year-old church's favorite phrases, “me, too” means that whatever one's problems, hang-ups, addictions—you name it—Flatirons identifies with people where they are instead of trying to fix or change them to fit a stereotypical church mold.

“We just decided to stop trying to be everybody's Holy Spirit and point to Jesus instead,” Burgen, 46, says. “He can explain Himself better than we can.”

To that end, Burgen preaches Scripture in six weekend services and lets the Spirit do the convicting. It's his and his congregation's job to love unconditionally and provide a safe place where people struggling with issues like divorce, loneliness, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, sexual addiction, mental health issues, chronic pain or sexual abuse can turn. That haven is the church's Shift recovery program, a weekly Friday-evening barbecue with worship and teaching followed by sharing in 13 issue-specific small groups. No preaching is allowed in the groups; leaders listen and gently point to life skills and biblical wisdom.

“It is all about God working through our brokenness, taking something that was once destructive and redefining it for His pur-





pose,” says Care Pastor Toby Shope, who leads Shift and its 150 to 200 participants. Most of them find Shift through word-of-mouth.

Because they know they’re accepted, guests have few reasons to keep secrets or construct appearances at Flatirons, says Burgen, who intentionally models openness in his own life.

“My wife has been bipolar for the last 15 years,” he says. “It’s an ongoing illness that drives us back to God, that unclenches our fists.”

So much so that Burgen can readily empathize with fellow strugglers. “I’ll say, ‘Yeah, life sucks at the pastor’s house, too,’” he chuckles. “And they’ll say, ‘Oh, you feel that way, too?’”

That’s the best part of the “me, too” approach—it disarms. Someone who might typically feel unworthy or unholy at church is quickly put at ease.

“We’ll often say to someone, ‘Is that all you’ve got? Is that what you thought disqualified you?’” Burgen says. “In my church experience, it seems every story needs a neat little bow on the end of it, but Paul died with a thorn in his flesh.”

The same struggle with the flesh unites the 7,000-plus people packing the church’s rented strip mall space in Lafayette, Colo., every Sunday to near-illegal proportions. In environs where bumper-sticker messages like “Focus on Your Own D--- Family,” are a regular sight, Flatirons saw a 57% attendance spike in the past year, becoming an oasis for those who, despite struggles and sin, want a church home, and making it our No. 7 Fastest-Growing church and No. 94 Largest.

“We’re the church of misfit toys,” Burgen says. “We have all the

Fast Facts

Flatirons Community Church

Senior pastor: **Jim Burgen**

Weekend attendance: **7,200**

Launched: **1997**

Growth in 2007: **2,600 (57%)**

Organizing members: **30**

Affiliation: **Nondenominational**

Worship capacity: **1,400**

Worship sites: **1**

Web site: **FlatironsChurch.com**

people other churches don’t want.”

Candy Biederman, 54, counted herself among the misfits. After 30 years of addiction to heroin and alcohol, she couldn’t progress any further in her recovery process. She was a “dry drunk,” a person who’s not currently using but still exhibits symptoms and behaviors of addiction. Then, last September, she and her husband heard about Flatirons and its recovery program.

“At Shift, we got into the reasons why I used,” Biederman says. “Who in my life hurt me, abused me.” In the safety of her group, she was able to dig deep and learn about healing in Christ.

“It has revolutionized my belief in Christianity,” Biederman says. “Now I look so forward to going to church. My husband and I volunteer there. We’re greeters. We serve communion.”

Identifying with the hurting and broken has also sparked the congregation’s excitement to give to the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed and take care of widows and orphans overseas. After leadership presented the idea of rebuilding a war-ravaged town in Afghanistan to the church body, Flatirons’ attendees donated \$500,000 to dig deep-water wells in Berek Aub, as well as build a medical clinic, a school and 50 homes for widows and orphans in the area.

Whether caring for faraway people they don’t know or warmly embracing the ones they do, Flatirons is joining people in their suffering as they whisper, “me, too.”

“We’re all going to fall down, from top to bottom, but we’re all just trying to follow Christ,” Burgen says. “This is life. And it gets us together.”

—Dave Urbanski