

PHOTOS BY JOSEF AGUILAR / INLAND VALLEY TIMES

Rich LaBrie, a member of ManChurch, prays during the Saturday service at Montana's nightclub in San Dimas. On the first Saturday of each month, men gather together, pray, listen to a live rock band and sing rock songs whose lyrics have been rewritten to be religious. A sermon dealing with men's issues, delivered by a pastor, is also included.

'Hanging tough *with* Jesus'

■ ManChurch in San Dimas offers conventional men the chance to worship in an unconventional way.

Joanna Corman
INLAND VALLEY TIMES

It's Saturday morning but the nightclub swells with the live sounds of a Billy Idol cover song. After a Mexican breakfast, the men watch sports bloopers, whistling as racing cars smash into walls and explode into flames.

It's a typical worship service for these men.

But meeting in a bar, isn't that sacrilegious?

Not for ManChurch.

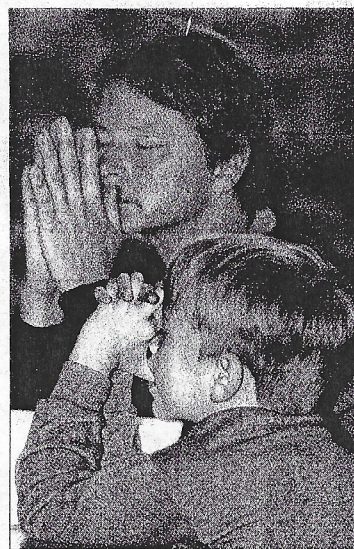
"Some guys would rather be in a nightclub than a church," said Regi Ausmus, 47, a journalist and percus-

sionist in the band. "Here they feel comfortable. It's been part of their lifestyle in the past."

Rich LaBrie, an engineer who recently cut his hours in half to spend more time on ManChurch, started it three years ago. They meet the first Saturday of each month at Montana's, a country and western bar.

Member John Doss, a 46-year-old union carpenter from Glendora, explains it like this:

"The reason we do it in a bar is ... there's a whole lot of people down on church and Christianity but they're really not down on Jesus Christ. ... A guy might be willing to go to a bar for an hour and a half — you can't drag



Bill Roberts and his 6-year-old son, Michael, pray during the ManChurch Saturday service.

him to church for anything."

Doss, LaBrie and others made it clear that the group isn't against women. At their meetings, they learn how to be better husbands and fathers. They talk about having lust in your heart for other women, about the evils of pornography, things they feel they couldn't discuss in front of

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women. Besides, they say, there are plenty of church groups for women. A few women have shown up, both as themselves and in drag. They weren't, turned away, but they're certainly not invited.

"There's nothing anti-woman about what we do," Labrie said. "It's a celebration of men's stuff."

Part of their monthly worship, where anywhere from 70 to 170 men can attend, is doing things that are typically male, "things women aren't interested in," Doss said.

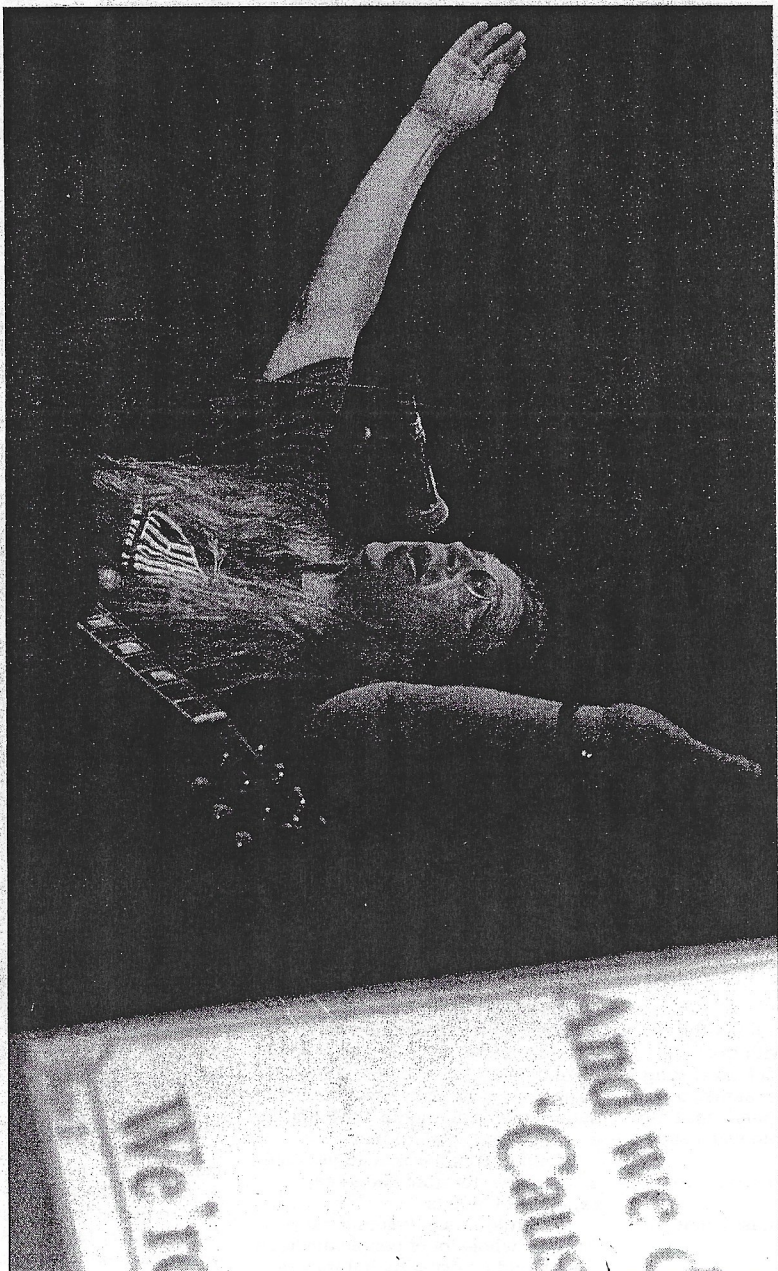
Vicky Rozzi, whose husband, Mark, plays bass in the band, said she supports him praying with fellow Christians.

"Men need to get together and be together with other men and watch sports and stuff in a good setting that's not all negative and raunchy," Rozzi said. "They don't have to get together and watch sports and drink beer and curse."

Before prayer, the men watch sports bloopers. Then the band Stronghold lets loose. Band members rewrite classic rock tunes. Billy Idol's "Money, Money" becomes "Holy, Holy," Loverboy's "Everybody's Working for the Weekend" turns into "Worship Jesus." Labrie even rewrote Queen's "Fat-Bottomed Girls" a song about prostitution. It's now called "Jehovah God."

When he hears the song on the radio, Labrie said he can sing the new words and not feel "slimed." "Won't you take me home tonight" becomes "Lord, won't you send your son tonight."

The band is a mix of longhaired musicians, who look like they've been playing in rock bands a long time, and clean-cut men. The songs are so



Greg Kramer, lead singer of Stronghold, invites the worshipers to sing along following the lyrics on the screen during the ManChurch service at Montana's nightclub in San Dimas.

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loud, you can't talk. Clapping starts on the first song and it's infectious. The men, many in ManChurch T-shirts, jeans and sneakers, raise their hands when they're moved. A few stand, dancing in place, but most clap from their horsehair-backed bar stools.

There are doctors, lawyers, a sculptor, pressmen, a few kids, those fresh from college and some with white hair and potbellies. Even a group of bikers shows up from time to time. The group has two mottoes, one already blazoned across a T-shirt: "ManChurch, hanging tough with

Jesus." And one to reach T-shirts soon: "ManChurch: It's not religious. It's real."

The men say they enjoy the fellowship, the bloopers, the rock 'n' roll. But ManChurch isn't about that. It's ultimately about Jesus.

The men, "They have a heart for God," Doss said. "This isn't a show we put on. ... There's nothing macho about seeing men humble themselves before God."

After the music, the pastor, Bob Reeve, talks of taking control of your life and of the perils of cheating. A Jim Beam poster flanks him and lights

dangle from the chandeliers, a tangle of antelope horns.

"We make our choices and our choices make us," Reeve said.

Repeat after me, he tells the crowd, and they do.

The group has changed Labrie's life. He was a shareholder in an engineering firm, but sold it in April, and took a 50% pay cut to strike out as a consultant. He spends the rest of his time on ManChurch.

"I have a blast in my Christianity," Labrie said. "It's a constant party. I love it. ... I just can't settle for engineering anymore."