

Cape Coral church takes from all religions

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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It's not to be confused with Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Unitarianism or Scientology. Yet, The Center for Spiritual Living in Cape Coral incorporates messages from all of them, as well as from various philosophers and writers, as disparate (or not, as church members see it) as Albert Einstein and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Center is based on a movement called Religious Science International, the philosophies of which are grounded in a book called "The Science of Mind," by Ernest Holmes, a metaphysics writer, speaker and teacher who lived from 1887 to 1960. The movement's core belief is that we are all spiritual beings, so it behooves us to seek out that spirituality.

One of the church's mottos is "Remaining open at the top." That is important, said church member Shelly Redfern, who was raised Catholic, "because understanding can come from anywhere."

Like many members who were formerly a part of other organized religious groups, she now subscribes to Religious Science because of its openness and hyper-positi-

ve message. Religious Science also has ties to self-help movements, especially the idea that positive thinking can lead to a happier, more productive life.

"There were too many things that didn't mesh up," Ms. Redfern said of Catholicism. "How can a loving God condemn you?"

The Center in Cape Coral was founded in 1973 by six members, including Mary



Gauvreau



The church existed in several storefronts before it was able to borrow enough money to buy five acres in Cape Coral to build a facility.



Members of The Center for Spiritual Living in Cape Coral join hands at a Sunday service. The church incorporates messages from all religions as well as various philosophers and writers.

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Chase, who is 91. All six were formerly Protestants.

"I started reading other philosophies and I knew I wanted more than what I was getting," Ms. Chase said.

She added that the church existed in several storefronts before they were able to borrow enough money to buy the five acres it sits on now at 406 Southeast 24th Ave.

The church considers members of all religions part of a "spiritual community,"

but still operates as a separate religious organization.

Much of the symbolism from the various religions the church draws from is absent, or at least toned down; there are no images of God as a bearded old man for example, no statues of Buddha, no

clear cut vision of heaven as cloudy. The church does hold weekly services on Sunday morning, sing spiritual songs, perform weddings and funerals, encourage tithing (records show it gained \$6,188.40 in tithes in October) and is recognized as a religious institution by the federal government, meaning it doesn't pay taxes on its property.

The Center's leader, Rev. Emile Gauvreau, said his favorite philosophers include Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk.

In his Sunday "talks," he might draw from biblical passages. But he could just as easily talk about existentialist philosophy, ancient Greek myth, or, "all of the above in the same talk," he said.

He is usually called "Reverend" or sometimes, "Pastor," his preferred term is "spiritual director," because of the openness it implies.

Religious Scientists tend to seek out the common ground in all religions and dispel the parts they consider negative or contradictory. For example, church members don't believe in hell, the "angry" Old Testament God from the Bible, or that Jesus came to save humanity (although the church has at least two members in Cape Coral who are also practicing Catholics).

Mr. Gauvreau lived in California until 2007 — where Religious Science churches are most predominant. He was involved in nonprofit work there, and real-estate investments, including in Florida. He also

became a licensed minister at the Agape International Spiritual Center in California (similar to a Religious Science church, but a part of its own Agape network), where his mentor was Spiritual Director Michael Bernard Beckwith.

"(Mr. Beckwith) taught how to look for the similarity in all these teachings and inspire people to use them for their highest potential," Mr. Gauvreau said. "We look for ways to open the door to spiritually to others."

Mr. Beckwith, a featured teacher in "The Secret" and guest on Oprah and Larry King, will speak at Harborside Event Center in Fort Myers and at The Center for Spiritual Living in February.

Mr. Gauvreau and his wife left Los Angeles to find a quieter life with less traffic in Cape Coral. They have three grown children and three grandchildren. "There's a lot going on in L.A., but for the most part, it's not very accessible," Mr. Gauvreau said. "You have to drive for two hours to get there."

He was chosen out of three candidates to become the new spiritual director at The Center in Cape Coral, where there are about 110 members.

There are at least 13 other Religious Science churches in Florida, including one in Naples, Clearwater, Sarasota, Tampa and Fort Lauderdale. There are about 500 RSI churches nationwide. ■

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If you go

>>What: Michael Bernard Beckwith, founder of the Agape International Spiritual Center, will speak and Rickie Byars Beckwith, Agape's musical director, will perform original songs.

>>When: Friday, Feb. 13, at 7:30 p.m. at Harborside and Saturday, Feb. 14, at 8:30 a.m. in Cape Coral

>>Where: Harborside Event Center in Fort Myers and at the Center for Spiritual Living in Cape Coral

>>Cost: \$30 for the Harborside event and \$100 per ticket at the Center for Spiritual Living in Cape Coral. Group and hotel discounts available.

>>Info: www.MichaelBeckwithFl.com or call 574-6463 to purchase tickets or more information.