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News

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JOPLIN, Mo. (joplinglobe.com) â Some churches give away televisions or vacations. Others sell homemade pies and quilts. And some raffle off semiautomatic rifles.



Ignite Church went with the last option.

On Fatherâs Day, June 15, the church at 710 S. Maiden Lane gave area fathers an opportunity to put their names in a hat to win one of two AR-15 rifles. Each father entering in the free raffle could submit a ticket for himself and was able to obtain tickets for each of his children who went to church with him. He also could get another ticket for bringing his own dad.

âWe thought instead of a lot of small things, weâd give away stuff the guys were interested in,â said Heath Mooneyham, Igniteâs lead pastor. In a YouTube video shared on the churchâs Facebook page, he called one of the rifles, made by Black Rain Ordnance in Neosho, the âLamborghini of guns.â

The give away was part of an outreach by Ignite Church to a specific demographic group: males age 18 to 35.

âThatâs the biggest black hole in our society,â Mooneyham said.

To lure them in, Sunday morning services start later (10 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.) than many churches, the rock music is loud, the black-and-green color theme is almost reminiscent of a video game system, and the pastor has tattoos and a short mohawk.

âWeâre not trying to put on a show for anybody,â Mooneyham said. âWeâre just dudes.â

Church members have gone on hunting trips and outings to gun ranges as a way to create bonds, and the gun giveaway was done in the same spirit, Mooneyham said.

Still, the giveaway sparked some heated response online. One comment on the churchâs Facebook page was: âGod Does NOT Condone GUNS, VIOLENCE or WAR!â Another person wrote: âI literally cannot believe you are giving away assault rifles on Fatherâs Day â; That is seriously messed up.â

Steve Urie, pastor at the Joplin Diversity Fellowship, 110 N. Range Line Road, said he shared those sentiments.

âI think giving away weapons, with all the violence in this country, gives way to new violence,â he said. âI donât think itâs just nontraditional. I think itâs careless and reckless.â

Like Mooneyham, Urie leads a nontraditional church that is open to LGBT worshippers and does not

specify a denomination. He said they meet in parks, play and sing modern music, and meet from time to time in the homes of members.

“There are other ways to attract young people,” he said. “If it takes an assault rifle to hunt, that’s not a sport.”

Dan McCain, who owns a local guitar shop and plays lead guitar for the church’s band, was one of the two AR-15 winners.

“I was very happy to win the rifle. I’ve never won anything in my life, so it was exciting,” he said. “I enjoy hunting and target shooting. I haven’t had the opportunity to hunt in a while, but hope to change that this season.”

McCain said he didn’t believe the gun giveaway sent a bad message.

“Firearm ownership does not equate to violence,” he said.

Mooneyham said the goal is to get people to church. “If we get people in the door, we get to preach the gospel,” he said. “If we can get more people to follow Jesus, I’ll give away 1,000 guns. I don’t care.”

The AR-15 is not a fully automatic weapon, but it can discharge rounds as quickly as its operator can pull the trigger. An AR-15 was one of several guns used in Aurora, Colorado, where a gunman killed 12 people in a movie theater, and a similar style of rifle was used in Newtown, Connecticut.

“I despise the term ‘assault rifle,’” Mooneyham said. “Whoever coined that phrase has to be misinformed. The appearance of things I think that’s our story as a church – don’t let the appearance of something stop you,” he said.

He also referred to the biblical story of Cain and Abel. “People are crazy, period. Murder has been going on since the beginning of time. The first murder recorded in the Bible was with a rock.”

And the Father’s Day giveaway was cheered on by churchgoers, not criticized, he said.

“It doesn’t enter our minds that we’re potentially harming society by giving away a gun,” Mooneyham said. “It’s just our nature, where as if you have a church where it’s 75- to 85-year-old women, they would give away a nice quilt, and they’d be excited about it. That’s how excited our church got about the AR-15 because that speaks our language.”

In 2011, Ignite Church also drew national attention when it sponsored billboards featuring provocative photos of couples to tout a series about marriage and sex. The series discussed how married couples ought to have more sex to avoid vices such as pornography and adultery.

“It’s easy to not like us. It’s not hard,” Mooneyham said. “You don’t need to go out and find ammunition, we’ll just hand it to you – we give away guns and talk about sex.”