

RELIGION

‘Community beyond belief’ follows church model without religion

By Katherine Burgess

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Isabella Parker, 17, right, sings with her mother Natasha Helfer Parker during a gathering of Wichita Oasis.
KATHERINE BURGESS *THE WICHITA EAGLE*



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People at Wichita Oasis start showing up at around 10 on Sunday morning, drinking coffee and chatting before the music begins.

Once children are safely in the large playroom – complete with a chalk wall, a tent and plenty of toys – the adults and youths find their seats, ready for music and announcements.

But when the music starts, the songs aren't about Jesus. And when the speaker begins, he or she doesn't read a Bible verse.

Although Oasis follows a Sunday morning structure similar to many Christian churches, it calls itself a “community beyond belief,” focused on atheists, humanists and agnostics.

“When you move, it's so nice to just be able to go to a church of your denomination, make friends there, network there,” said Alexandra Simmons, president of Wichita Oasis and a humanist. “I love being able to provide that for people. Just to have a nonreligious place to get together.”

The nonprofit had its first Wichita gathering in January and is part of the larger Oasis network that has about 10 locations across the United States and Canada. It meets on the second floor of the Orpheum offices, 200 N. Broadway, at 10:30 a.m. for coffee and 11 a.m. for the program on Sundays.

Simmons said the group welcomes anyone, including people who are religious, as long as they respect each other's beliefs.

“People are more important than beliefs” reads a framed copy of the group's core values. “Reality is known through reason. Human hands solve human problems. Meaning comes from making a difference. Be accepting and be accepted.”

On April 2, the morning started with 17-year-old Isabella Parker, a student at East High School, strumming on her ukulele as she sang covers to songs like Bruno Mars' “Count on Me.”

The speaker was Aaron Wirtz, known in Wichita for his role as the crazy car pitchman for the Super Car Guys, a character he called the “scourge of cable TV.”

He spoke about the death of his devout Christian grandmother and how he never told her he had become an atheist.

After she died, Wirtz asked himself whether she would have loved him less or treated him differently if she had known he was an atheist or whether he avoided telling her because of those fears.

“What I’m here to tell you today is I think all of those questions essentially are asking the wrong thing,” Wirtz said. “Instead, what I should be asking is ‘Do I love her less because she was a Christian?’ That’s an answer that I have today.”

Afterward, several asked about death, atheism and giving up the concept of an afterlife.

Other speakers have discussed dementia, cognitive biases and gender studies.

In addition to the music and speaker, the group passed around a “donation box” and talked about its charitable endeavors, including making crochet plastic mats for the homeless and working with the Oasis Network’s humanitarian organization, Mobility Matters.

Erik Thompson, who described himself as an atheist and a humanist, said it wasn’t hard to return to a Sunday morning routine after growing up Methodist.

“It could be that Oasis adopted that because there are a lot of things that church does really well,” Thompson said.

“Don’t fix what isn’t broken,” Simmons added with a laugh.

Crystal Peterson, vice president of Oasis, who also described herself as humanist and atheist, said many people in Oasis came from religious backgrounds, so they’re comfortable with the Sunday morning format. But they no longer want the religious side of church.

“We’re not trying to change anyone’s views,” Peterson said. “We’re just trying to start conversations.”

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Aaron Wirtz speaks about atheism and dealing with the death of his grandmother at a gathering of Wichita Oasis on a Sunday morning. KATHERINE BURGESS *THE WICHITA EAGLE*

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