

Pastor stunts make a point and garner headlines

by [David Gibson](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue

A California pastor made headlines in January when he announced that he will live like an atheist for a year to see what it's like on the other side of belief. Ryan Bell was actually just the latest "stunt pastor" to use unorthodox means to draw attention to his message.

In recent years, other church leaders have challenged congregants to have sex (with their spouse) for 30 days straight or have dressed like homeless people or lived in a tiny box or on a roof in order to gin up attention, attendance or funds.

This kind of reality-show piety has a history of sorts, especially in Christianity: fifth-century ascetic Simeon Stylites achieved great fame by subsisting atop a pillar for some 37 years.

The rise of the entertainment industry, combined with a focus on marketing techniques to preach the faith or build up a church, has sparked a penchant for ministry gimmicks that go well beyond the old dunk tank.

Homeless bishops: Last Thanksgiving, David Musselman, a Mormon bishop in Utah, disguised himself as a homeless person and hung out around his church before the service. Several people asked him to leave, some gave him money, and most were indifferent. "Many actually went out of their way to purposefully ignore me, and they wouldn't even make eye contact," he said. Then he walked up to the pulpit, asked to deliver a message and revealed his true identity. Message received. Former Rhode Island Episcopal bishop Geralyn Wolf did much the same thing a decade earlier, and for an entire month.

A month of sex: In 2008, Paul Wirth of Relevant Church in Ybor City, Florida, challenged couples in the congregation (married, of course) to have sex for 30 days in a row—just as he and his wife had. Wirth cited a study showing that 20 million married Americans had sex just ten times a year—and he said churches should do

something about that. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive. “It’s been great,” congregant Doug Webber told the *Tampa Bay Times* as he and his wife finished up their month of sex—despite being parents of a newborn and a toddler. “We’re definitely sleeping better, and it’s really brought us together as a couple. I’m surprised it worked as good as it did.” The church periodically renews the challenge.

A week of sex: Later in 2008, pastor Ed Young of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, urged couples in his 20,000-member megachurch to follow him and his wife in a “Seven Days of Sex” plan, a week of “congregational copulation,” as he called it. In a follow-up gimmick in 2012, Young and his wife, Lisa, set up a bed on the church roof and pledged to spend 24 hours there together in front of God and everybody. But he suffered a sunlight injury to his eyes and had to cut this experiment short.

Losing weight for the Lord: The Bible has been cited as a way to get rich as well as a way to heaven, and it’s increasingly being mined by a health-conscious nation as a way to lose weight. Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in Southern California is the latest to link scripture and fitness: in 2011 he said he needed to lose 90 pounds, and he challenged his congregation to help him do it on what he called “the Daniel Plan,” a 40-day regimen based on the book of Daniel. Some 12,000 people signed up and in the course of the year shed a collective 250,000 pounds. Last December, Warren published *The Daniel Plan* as a book.

Living on food stamps: In the Food Stamp Challenge, participants buy food using only the amount of money (\$4.39 a day in 2012) that is allotted under the federal government’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps. “Near the end of the week, because of the diet, I became irritable, my sleeping patterns became messed up, so the whole notion of what happens and the impact that the diet has on the individual, all were made very real to me,” Sonnye Dixon, a Methodist pastor from Nashville, Tennessee, told United Methodist News Service after living on \$21 worth of food for a week in 2007.

Send money—or else: One of the most famous—and most controversial—church fund-raising schemes was launched by the late great prosperity preacher Oral Roberts, who in January 1987 told his national television audience that he needed to collect \$8 million by March to fund a hospital he was building—or else. “I’m asking you to help extend my life,” he said. “We’re at the point where God could call Oral Roberts home in March.” He eventually raised \$9.1 million, but the medical center

closed in 1989. Roberts died in 2009.

Pastor-in-a-box: In 2009, pastor Ben Dailey promised to spend three days living in a six-foot Plexiglas cube atop his church in Irving, Texas, if more than 4,000 people came to services on Easter and on the following Sunday, when attendance usually dips sharply. The congregation met his challenge—by just six people—and Dailey went into the box. Not that he was a modern-day Simeon Stylites. Dailey had electricity, an air conditioner, books, a laptop, a television, an iPhone, a chair and plenty of food.

Rooftop reverends: Pastor Corey Brooks pitched a tent on the roof of an abandoned Chicago hotel in late 2011 and vowed to stay there until he raised enough money—\$450,000—to buy and tear down the building, which the pastor said was a haven for drugs, prostitution and violence. In February of 2012, actor Tyler Perry pledged \$98,000 to put Brooks over the top, and he came down after 94 days. In London in 2006, a bold vicar camped out on the roof of his church to raise money for its repair—but came down after ten days, well short of his fund-raising goal. “I’m wet and I’m cold,” Malcolm Hunter told the *Telegraph*.

You shoulda put a ring on it: Bishop Rudolph McKissick Jr. knew that lots of couples in his Jacksonville, Florida, congregation were living together without being married. At a Sunday service last October he challenged the cohabitants in the audience to come up to the altar and pledge to tie the knot the next month. Nine couples got up, and nine couples got married last November.

Living the Bible, writing the book: Esquire editor A. J. Jacobs typed up 72 pages of every arcane rule he could find in the Bible and spent a year trying to follow them all. No to shaving his beard, yes to stoning an adulterer—though he used pebbles so they wouldn’t hurt much. The result was the 2007 book *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. Then there was Christian blogger Rachel Held Evans’s effort to commit to *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*—the title of her 2012 book, which tracks the effort of this “liberated” woman to take all of the biblical injunctions regarding women literally. —RNS

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