

Communion on the playa

## **Leading a Christian worship service at Burning Man**

by [Patty Jenkins](#)

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John Brett and Patty Jenkins distributing communion at a Christian worship service, Burning Man 2019. Photo by Byron Gin.

I am wearing a pink dress, hiking shoes, and a hydration pack. My co-leader, John—he's an Episcopal priest, I'm a Baptist pastor—looks rather more traditional in his clerical collar and black garb, with a straw hat to shade him from the sun. Goggles and a bandana hang around my neck in preparation for the dust storm edging across the playa at [Burning Man](#).

All around us are women and men in various states of dress—adorned in peculiar costumes, pasties, tattoos, leather, and piercings. Before we headed out on our bicycles, I overheard a campmate note that she was dressed as a pilot, complete with aviator goggles and long white scarf. All of us unavoidably wear a layer of dust from head to toe.

We gather together before a temple that will be burned to the ground two days later. Our purpose on this Friday noon is to offer a Christian memorial service with Holy Communion for some of those who brought their grief to Burning Man this year.

Each year, approximately 70,000 “Burners” gather for nine days to create an eponymous community in the austere and alkali playa of Black Rock Desert, Nevada. [Ten principles](#) form an ethical framework for the gathering. *Leaving No Trace*, for instance, underlines the need for campers to pack out everything they brought in. Another principle, *Radical Self-Expression*, gave me the freedom to play and explore. Burning Man is also a human, and therefore flawed, endeavor. The supportive presence of EMTs and local police helps remind attendees that what lurks in the “default world” can also lurk on the playa.

The six square miles of Black Rock City host hundreds of theme camps, which animate the half-moon-shaped village. The *Gifting* principle inspires theme camps to be interactive—offering Burners food, art, or an experience, all for free. In fact, nothing is for sale at Burning Man except, thankfully, coffee and ice.

Our theme camp is named “Religious as Fuck.” Our gift is to offer Christian services in a spirit of joy and mutuality. This year RAF comprised 18 people and included a blend of clergy, lay volunteers, and “non-religious” campers who supported our mission.

The vision for RAF began in 2015 when Episcopal priest Brian Baker attended Burning Man with his daughter. “After a few days of immersion in the community of generosity, creativity, playfulness, and non-judgment,” he recalls, “I realized I was on a spiritual retreat. The authentic and loving community I had been trying to create in the church for over 25 years, with marginal success, was the norm at Burning Man.”

The next year, Baker returned with a small group of Episcopalians who offered communion at [the temple](#). “People came up to us and asked, ‘Are you doing this

every day?’ Never on a Sunday morning have parishioners been overcome with enthusiasm and asked that question.”

The Black Rock City leadership commissions artists to design and construct [the man](#) and the temple each year. The man centers the camp; on Saturday night it burns in a riotous conflagration. But the temple is a core reason many people attend. Burners bring grief, uncertainty, loss, guilt, shame, and hope to the temple. They wait all year to offer their messages and memories within its space, knowing it will all burn down on Sunday night. They come as they are, and as they long to be.

This year, RAF offered four Christian services at the temple during the week. Our Ash Wednesday anointing used charred remains from last year’s temple burn. Our services concluded on Friday with the memorial service.

Nobody owns or schedules the temple space. As we set up our worship table on the shady side, I worry about displacing people who are not interested in a religious service. We quietly explain we will be offering a memorial ceremony with communion; some people leave while others draw near.

We prepare two chalices, one with wine and the other empty. After our welcome and opening prayer, I invite participants to speak the names of anyone they wish to honor. At the same time, I pass around the empty chalice and encourage everyone to pour whatever is in their heart at that moment into the cup. Burners move the chalice from person to person as they share and weep. The memories of lovers, grandmothers, siblings, and teachers are spoken into the sacred space. Strangers face one another and embrace in mutual grief and compassion. I feel my own grief and bitterness combine with others’ in the strange alchemy of healing. “When we have no one to witness our grief it remains ragged,” I tell my fellow Burners. “When there is no one to bind our wounds, healing comes slowly or not at all. The truth is we cannot heal ourselves. We need each other to heal.”

The chalice makes its way back to the table, and we prepare for the Eucharist. A professional opera singer begins to sing the words of a Goethe poem, composing an original melody on the spot. A handpan drummer spontaneously accompanies her. This is the playa. The Burning Man principles of *Participation* and *Immediacy* naturally integrate with the service. The communion table is an immediate experience of One who was lost; a co-mingling of past, present, and future. As we turn to Christ, wherever and in whomever Christ is found, we participate in the hope

and joy, the peace and love known in Jesus Christ, in real time.

The people of God form jumbled lines for blessings, bread, and wine. This act is familiar to them; they don't need any instruction. I am dazzled by their vulnerability and truthfulness. A heavyset, sweaty young man comes forward for a blessing, weeping from the exhaustion "of always being the strong one." I worry for an instant he will topple me over as I wrap my arms around him. A young woman tells me that her father died three weeks ago; black Xs adorn her otherwise uncovered breasts. Her skin is young and soft when I hug her. *You who are fearfully and wonderfully made.* I nod as my campmate shares that she is honoring the anniversary of her father's death; he was a pilot. A man wearing mostly dreadlocks and tattoos reverently crosses himself as he comes forward. *Body of Christ, broken for you.* Another man steps up wearing only a cropped shirt and sandals, his genitals relaxed in the midday heat. Many come forward wordlessly, their eyes meeting mine with startling directness. *Blood of Christ, shed for you.*

The white dust storm embraces us as our service concludes. I don my goggles and bandana and gladly take my place in the milling crowd.

*This post was edited for clarity on October 14.*