

A grand old urban church ruined by fire now shelters an unusual congregation huddled in its basement—with blue tarps alone standing between its members and the elements.



# Religious RECOVERY

By Emily Belz

## A church in Brooklyn that is desperately poor of money, but rich in faith, is changing addicts' lives

U.S. deaths from drug abuse are setting records, despite sustained public attention and billions of dollars spent over the last few years. In 2017, 72,000 Americans died of overdose—14,000 more than the total U.S. deaths in the Vietnam War. This plague has lowered average American life expectancy, spiked medical costs, and caused millions of people to drop out of the workforce.

In reporting trips over the last few years to cover the opiate crisis, I've spoken with countless people who know someone with an addiction, someone who overdosed, or someone who went to jail for stealing to support a habit. One family I interviewed spent \$200,000 on their son's rehab. He has had 13 relapses.

Drug and alcohol recovery is not something this quick-fix nation has figured out. It often takes years, or fails to materialize at all. And loving support can be hard for many addicts to find during their struggles. That's where Recovery House of Worship in Brooklyn comes in.

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Edwin Colon, RHOW's senior pastor, is 27 years clean after a collision with drugs that started at the age of 11. Amidst today's narcotics surge, he argues, every region needs at least one church focused on helping people step away from addiction. Most of the congregants at RHOW are recovering addicts. All of the pastors had drug problems in the past.

Church members tell me that RHOW is a place they never feel disparaged. The pastors preach about sin, the need for God's help in overcoming it, and the necessity for individuals to change their behaviors and attitudes. But "we never look at the people we're serving as different from us," says Colon. "It's just us in a different year." One person's addiction crisis might have reached a head in 1998, while another's is ongoing now.

#### Grit is greater than soot

Leaders of the Recovery House of Worship all work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The old Baptist church in Brooklyn where they are headquartered burned in a three-alarm fire back in 2010, and has only been temporarily patched here and there since the disaster. Today's worshippers gather in the basement, a haven just below the destroyed sanctuary closed off above them.

But lives are being changed in this wreck of a church building. "People by nature are people of worship," says Colon. "I define worship as anything that you give your life to or obey. Some of my friends obey crack. Others of my friends follow money.... The only thing in life that you can worship that doesn't take from you, but gives back to you, is God."

Colon has little patience for treatment philosophies that put people on medication without addressing underlying issues. Under that approach, he says, "I'm not trying to help you with your suffering. What I'm trying to do is help minimize the effect of your pain and suffering on me." As part of the unflinching honesty the church brings to this difficult work, members reject today's politically correct terminology

that bans words like "addict," "abuse," "clean," or "habit," on the grounds that they are "demeaning." Euphemisms like "person with a substance misuse disorder" don't encourage the kind of honesty, action, and accountability that the church considers necessary.

The Recovery House of Worship integrates its relationship-based spiritual approach with 12-Step programs like Narcotics Anonymous. Every day, 12-Step meetings are held in the building. Breakfasts and other meals are offered. The church houses men who are in the delicate phases of their recovery—currently, seven individuals live on site—and works with many others who are connected with a group home, living on the street, or floating.

The church encourages participants to make a service commitment (it has a homeless outreach that gives away clean clothes and offers meals from a mobile soup kitchen). Every individual is assigned a mentor and receives regular one-on-one discipleship, personal and spiritual guidance, and financial counseling. The worship services exude a powerful family warmth for persons who often have burned all their bridges with loved ones and have no one else to fall back on.

RHOW, however, isn't very good at fundraising. "I'm not a spreadsheet guy, nor is anybody on our staff," says Colon. The church patches together an annual budget of \$300,000 from tithes (about \$2,500 a week) plus occasional gifts. A little bit of government funding supplements the breakfasts and a weekly food pantry. Colon was able to get assistance from a group called Missions Door for a good portion of his \$39,900 salary (which supports his seven-person family). He works additional jobs during the day. And his wife makes extra money through side gigs.

Sometimes the church will get a donation from the grateful family of someone who recovered. One time a woman from a high-end building nearby asked to use the church bathroom—and when she saw the

condition it was in, she wrote a \$5,000 check then and there to renovate it. She now attends the church.

Spreadsheet-loving donors may be frustrated by RHOW's approach to measuring results. Its method is very give-and-take, and individually customized. There's no "graduation" as at some other residential recovery programs. Some enrollees progress quickly. Certain individuals get referred out to more structured programs. One man has resided at the church for ten years because lingering physical issues from heavy prior drug use make living on

his own unworkable. In general, Colon says, they like for someone to spend a year in church housing, get on his feet, and then transition into other housing and a job. Meanwhile the church's regular worship services and Bible studies provide support, ratification, and accountability for scores of individuals from around the city who are in various phases of recovery.

The church has a vocal network of people whose lives have been transformed by its work, and who want to tell others about its successes. As a result, RHOW has now helped plant similar congregations in Staten Island, the Bronx, Pennsylvania, and California. Another church is in the works in London. (There are also other unaffiliated faith-based recovery programs with a similar

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approach, such as Outcry in the Barrio, throughout the U.S.)

The RHOW approach has gained the attention of prominent Christian development organization Hope for New York. It vetted RHOW and added the church to its network as a partner—offering technical assistance and volunteer coordination, and

Pastor Edwin Colon (right) and assistant Chris Hook (left), the only paid employees, run the church on a shoestring.



Margaret Ferrec

eventually the possibility of financial support, though no grants have yet been made. Colon is also a co-founder of the New City Network, another umbrella organization that promotes urban church planters, with support from pastors like Tim Keller.

**All things are possible, with help**

The church doesn't have the millions necessary to restore its burned-out building. Its leaders would like to find a partner willing to repair and expand the historic building, turning much of its valuable Brooklyn real estate into residences, while stabilizing the spirit-filled fellowship that currently camps in its basement. In the meantime, worshipers sit below grade on folding chairs beneath a Bible verse: "With God, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE."

Colon says his worship space has "the world's biggest attic." The fire-, smoke-

Meals are served for all who will come.

and water-damaged sanctuary above serves as a cavernous closet—packed with supplies for various ministries.

Every Sunday, the catacomb below becomes a packed and throbbing hall of worship. Ex drug dealers, former users of all backgrounds and ages, a few elderly, some children with their parents, a woman with a face tattoo, and the lady from the nice building across the street mix seamlessly. The congregation is black, white, and Hispanic. And they sing out.

RHOW serves all classes, but it particularly scoops up folks who are easy to forget in this changing neighborhood. Outside the building, condos are under construction. With the Brooklyn Academy of Music just one block away and the Barclays Center two blocks distant, the streets bustle all day long. Young couples cart babies in designer clothes past the old brick building with blue tarps covering its roof, having no notion of the life-changing activity that takes place just behind the wooden doors and down the stairs.

This church has always paid attention to people on the margins of society. In the 1840s, members of what was then called the Baptist Temple set aside funds to purchase slaves and set them free. Studies by University of Pennsylvania professor Ram Cnaan estimate that city churches like this one contribute \$150,000 or more worth of social services to their communities per year. (That is entirely apart from the value of the spiritual services they offer locals.) Collectively, the churches



of New York City provide social services worth billions of dollars—more than any of the huge philanthropic foundations that operate in the city.

When I slip into a seat at one Sunday service, Evelyn Ruiz hugs me tight, even though we haven't met. She now manages church finances. Previously, she was addicted to drugs. The city took her children away from her during that time, but after she got clean she won them back.

Now Ruiz gets up to speak to the 150-person gathering, telling her story of chemical imprisonment. "God woke me up," she says through tears. "Don't ever give up." Then Colon preaches from the Sermon on the Mount, and speaks directly to those who want to follow Jesus: "Listen to me. We do this together. We don't walk with Christ alone."

As the service is wrapping up, Chris Hook is standing to the side. He is a recovered opiate addict with tattoos covering his arms and neck. In 2011, he was in 12-Step programs but couldn't shake his demon. Then he met Pastor Raymond Ramos, a former crack addict who co-founded the Recovery House of Worship with Edwin Colon. Ramos kept asking Hook to come to church, but Hook said no multiple times, before finally agreeing to give it a try. A little while after he began attending he relapsed again. "Then people from the church came to my house," says Hook. "They knocked on my door. They were like, 'Where is that guy?' That really touched me."

Hook lived in the church for two years, then joined the staff as an

assistant to Colon. The two of them are now the only paid employees; all others serve as volunteers. "I really love our church," he says, even though it regularly brings him face-to-face with disorder, depression, and even death. Many addicts think they can heal themselves, he says. They will get clean for a while, as he knows from experience, then forget the realities of when they were homeless or emaciated from drug use, and plunge back into the abyss.

Hook remembers one man who became a friend. He was a nurse who started using drugs, and Hook met him in a 12-Step program. The man started coming to church, even playing in the worship band. But he started using drugs again, and one month later a train ran over him as he stood on the Metro North tracks.

"This was a guy we all loved," says Hook. "We've had some really heartbreaking experiences like that. Some guys that we want to help, that we begin to do life with, that we worship God together with. We help them get clean. And then we're doing their memorial service. But that's the reality of addiction."

During church, spaghetti is cooking in the kitchen, and after the

service, worshipers sit down for lunch, along with people who pop in off the street, knowing that RHOW regularly offers delicious meals. Hook is talking to a new guy at the table, telling him about a discipleship group that meets every Thursday. "I'll try to be there," the man says. "It's a Bible study?"

"It's a Bible study. Artie makes really bad coffee," adds Hook, laughing.

**Hoping to reclaim what drugs have cost him**

It is a rainy Monday morning, and buckets scattered around the ruined sanctuary are catching the drips that come through the damaged roof. Down in the less drippy basement, 29-year-old James Barrett has just woken up in his room. He reads a devotion, then grabs coffee in the fellowship hall where church members are serving breakfast to the homeless.

A Harlem local, Barrett is new to the church. Three months ago he was living on the street, his body hollowed out from crack. At the moment he is 80 days clean, but thoughts of using still come regularly. He's been cooking and going to the gym,



Church member George Negron (right), is a former police officer and steadfast volunteer.

and everyone at the church comments on how he's bulked up his once-skeletal frame. He feels like he is doing well, that things are changing, but he wants to be careful because people often relapse when they become too confident and fail to guard themselves.

Raised by a single mom, Barrett was the first person in his family to go to college. That's where the substance abuse began for him. He used to perform at poetry readings and work as a filmmaker before the snowballing habit destroyed his young life. As he watches his friends have kids and successful careers, he's painfully aware of what drugs have cost him.

When the crack habit stole his job and left him in debt, his mom reached out to a philanthropic friend, who paid off Barrett's back rent and then picked up the tab for an expensive rehab. Barrett managed to stay clean for a year, and went back to work. "But something was still missing for me," he says. Soon he was using again, and his mom told him she couldn't help any more. But before she cut him off, she passed on the number

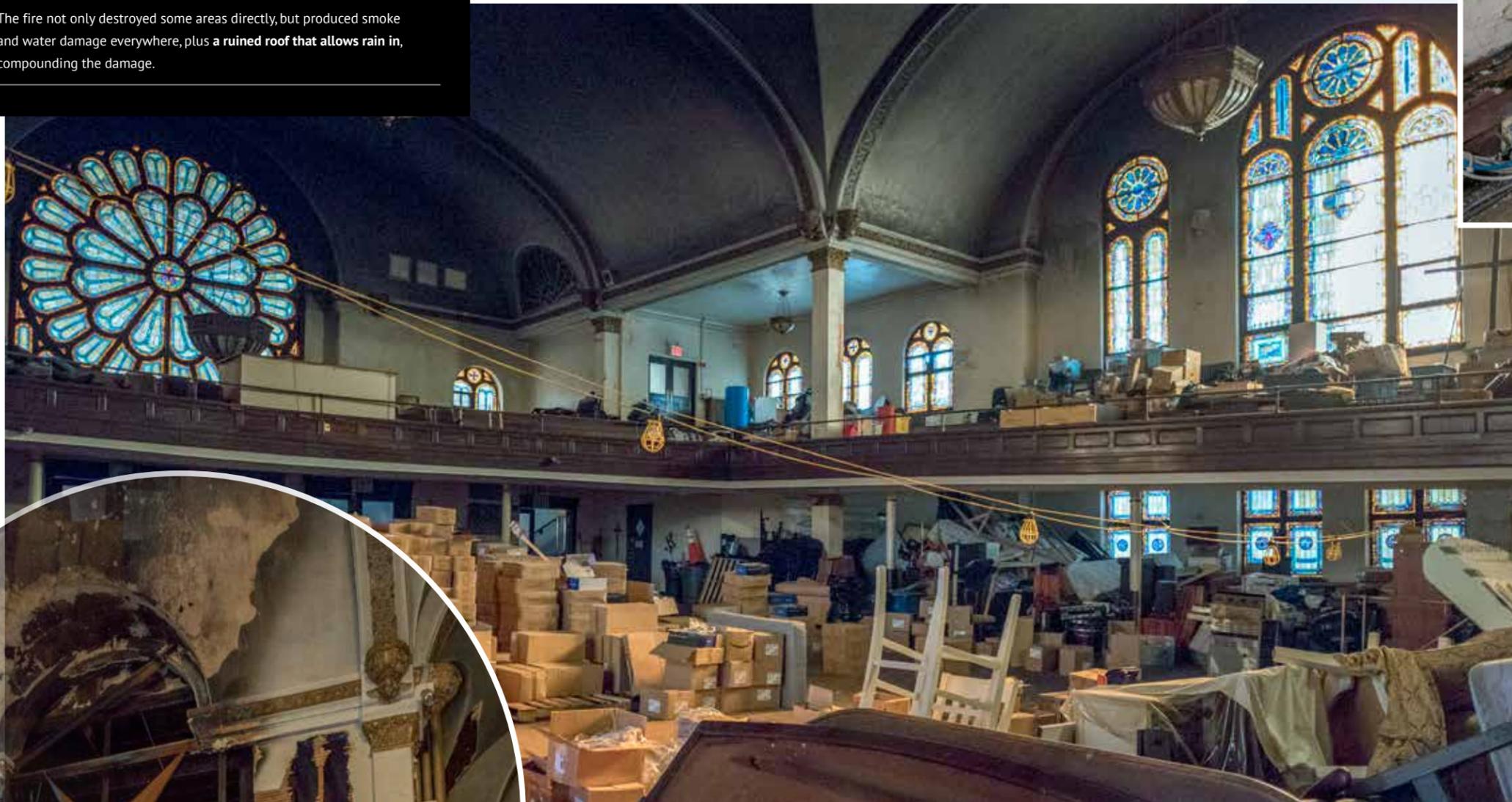


James Barrett came to RHOW as a last resort, and is now five months clean.

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The fire not only destroyed some areas directly, but produced smoke and water damage everywhere, plus a ruined roof that allows rain in, compounding the damage.



of a pastor she had read about at Recovery House of Worship. It was Raymond Ramos.

Barrett called him, and Ramos suggested a rehab program in California. Barrett said he had tried rehab already, it didn't work. Then Ramos suggested the Bowery Mission, in New York, which has a residential recovery program. Barrett went down there, but the mission didn't have a bed available. So Barrett called Ramos again, who said, "How fast can you get to Brooklyn?"

Barrett isn't sure why he trusted this pastor—he felt churches were "cultish" and swore never to set foot in one. And in the back of his mind he thought, "You can stay out of recovery a little longer." But for whatever reason, Barrett went to Brooklyn and immediately moved into RHOW.

Now he has been going to church for three months, to at least one 12-Step session every day, to a weekly discipleship meeting with Colon, and to a

weekly men's Bible study. The church, he says, has given him a spiritual "foundation" for coping when he has thoughts of relapsing. "It sounds weird to me as I'm saying it, but, man, all my friends are now in church and N.A."

#### **A family outside your family**

The regular breakfasts at the Recovery House of Worship have no strings attached, but they can become the intake mechanism if someone wants help or a referral. As the neighborhood has gentrified there's been a surge of homeless individuals showing up. George Negron, a retired police officer and member of the church who coordinates the breakfasts and knows everyone there, welcomes all comers. As he and his team get to know people, though, they push them not to just settle for breakfast, but to plug in to some of the other help the church has to offer—to "break camp and move," as he puts it.

A fellow named Sid strides in wearing pink sunglasses and a cigarette behind his ear. Another man in red pants and a purple striped hoodie nervously fidgets with a Rubix cube throughout the meal. People are talking about how one of the breakfast regulars in his 80s is getting forced out of his apartment by a rent hike. The cook says he's been checking on the man, bringing him lunch and dinner in Tupperware, and offers to go later in the day to ask him about the rent situation.

A slight man named Sledge Smith sits at one table. Before falling on hard times he worked in tech start-ups. He became close friends with Negron, and has been going to the church for about three months. "It's the most dilapidated church I've ever been to," says Smith. "But also the most welcoming place I've ever been."

Just before the food is served, Pastor Pedro Rodriguez—who was a heroin addict pulled off the street by one of the other pastors 14 years ago—offers a devotion from Psalm 23. "Our desire is to be set free quickly from trouble, trial, or heartache," says Rodriguez. "So why is it taking so long? Who has these questions?" The room returns a chorus of affirmations.

After the meal, Barrett changes into his work clothes, then returns to the kitchen. A couple who have been in the church for a long time, Gene and Betsy Mitchell, have taken him under their wing. Gene employs Barrett in his home-renovation business. The poet in Barrett amuses himself with the metaphor that he's fixing up apartments as part of his restoration of his own soul.

He and the Mitchells have a special connection. Because their son has struggled with addiction, Barrett now sees the parental side of the trauma. It has opened his eyes to the pain he has caused others. Meanwhile, the couple are understanding more of what afflicts their son.

"You can find family outside your family," Barrett says. Some of his cousins are "just waiting to hear that I'm smoking crack again." His mom "doesn't understand addiction." She'll tell him, "Why can't you stop getting high? Are you that weak?"

"I feel like Recovery House of Worship is my family." He leaves for work. On this day he is five months clean. **P**