Believers unite for night of beer and hymns

The sacred and the suds celebrated

By Steve Campbell
Times-Democrat Staff Writer

Their melodic voices ascend from the bistro's lower realm, at first soft, the crescendo rising as the night unfolds.

Like saints of old singing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" in ancient catacombs, the Fauquier faithful huddled Wednesday evening in the basement warren of Black Bear Bistro in Old Town Warrenton.

Organized by Joie Weiher, rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Remington and Christ Church in Brandy Station, "Beer & Hymns" night combines two oddly linked passions, beer drinking and hymn singing.

"A lot of our hymns came from drinking songs because that's what the people knew," Weiher said of the Episcopal hymnal. "That was the genius of Martin Luther."

Between sips of Cascade, Devil's Backbone or even the pedestrian Bud Light, the group sang old hymns like "Be Thou My Vision" and "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty."

They sang the Appalachian tunes "Keep on the Sunny Side," "As I Went Down to the River to Pray," and "I'll Fly Away," the latter two made popular by the "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou" movie soundtrack.

Lorraine Updike played keyboard accompaniment to the hymns, while Ellerie Ballard strummed a guitar for the bluegrass tunes.

Times-Democrat Staff Photo/Steve Campbell

BEERS & HYMNS: Joie Weiher, along with Matt Johnson and Peter Hogg, sings hymns and bluegrass gospel tunes during a Beer and Hymns night at Black Bear Bistro in Old Town Warrenton. The group gathers twice a month for a night of fellowship, singing and, of course, beer drinking.

"I wanted the songs to have some historical validity, not the happy-clappy stuff," Weiher said.

She heard about beer and hymns nights from a Lutheran pastor in Colorado. The singalongs are also popular among Episcopalians in London, she said.

"People don't know hymns when they come to church, and they also have this idea that church is stuffy and stodgy," Weiher said.

Matt Johnson, associate rector of Grace Episcopal in The Plains said the group wanted to show that "there's more to Christianity than dogma."

"A lot of it is experience, or like Christ says 'when two or three are gathered together in my name, I'm in the midst of them,'" he said.

Though mostly Episcopalian, with a lone Calvinist, the group hopes members of other faith communities will join them in the twice-a-month beer-drinking hymn fest.

"We just want to be able to get together and relax, have fun in a Christ-centered different way," Johnson said.

For Weiher, sharing a brew and a tune or two "breaks people's ideas of what it means to be a church community."

She named "Christ Is Alive, Let Christians Sing" as her favorite hymn, and the not-quite pale ale Magic Hat No. 9 her favorite beer.

Johnson claimed "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" his top church tune, and called the Irish dry stout Guinness his favorite brew.

Both say participants don't have to be Episcopalian, or Christian, or even beer drinkers, to come along.

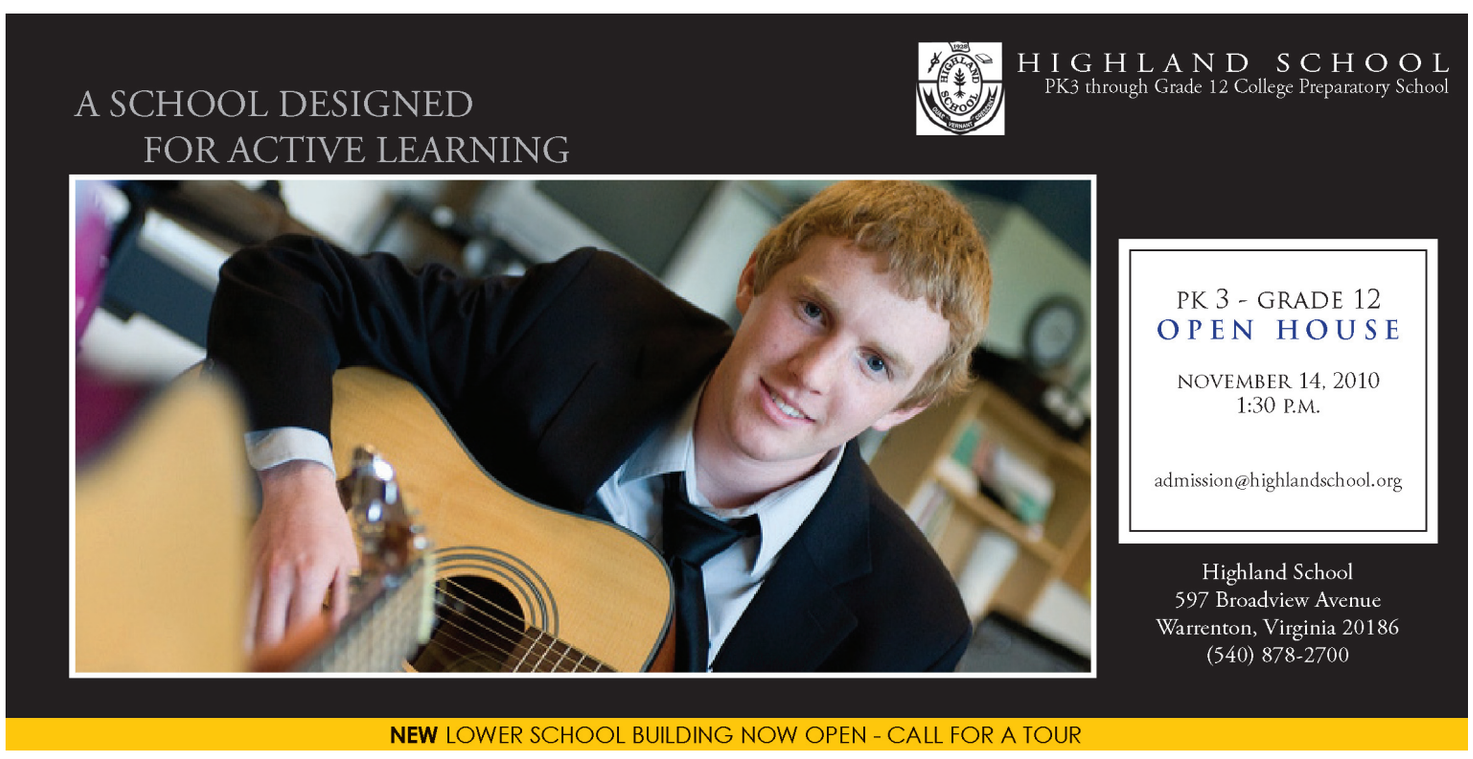
But, they do need to sing.

E-mail the reporter: scampbell@timespapers.com.

> **"A lot of our hymns came from drinking songs because that's what the people knew.**
>
> The Rev. Joie Weiher

Beer & Hymns

What: Beer and hymns, nothing complicated, twice a month, on the first and third Wednesday.
Time: 7 to 9 p.m.
Location: Lower level of Black Bear Bistro, 32 Main St., Warrenton.
Contact: Joie Weiher, (703) 309-0044.



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