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The term "born again" has taken on an almost negative connotation, that of American Southern preachers and arch-conservative Republicans ramming religion down people's throats.

But that is a bum rap, contends Ernie Belch.

The former pastor at Hastings Park Bible Church says "born again" simply refers to a person who has accepted Jesus.

"It means you recognize that you are a sinner," Belch explains. "You come to Him personally and ask for forgiveness ... and invite Him, Christ, into your life."

You must go through Jesus to gain admittance to heaven, he adds.

In the comfortable surroundings of his Maple Drive home, the 70-year-old man who has been preaching the Gospel since he was 18 comes across as an unpretentious, down-to-earth person who you would like to have as a neighbour.

In fact, he has driven coach and school buses, logging trucks and dabbled in model railroading, while still doing his pulpit duty. But please, don't call him by his title.

"One thing that I don't care for is the title 'Reverend'," Belch says. "Most people call me Ernie, or Pastor Ernie."

He says too many people put ministers on a pedestal, creating a fence.

"I've tried my best to tear that fence down," Belch says. "I'm an informal-type person. I like to keep it that way. I had to be able to adapt to the (congregation)."

He is seeing a welcome rebirth of evangelical religion, at least at Hastings Park, which is an independent church, similar in beliefs to the Brethren Assemblies denomi-

nation in that the Bible is the main focus.

The congregation at the Harder Drive church numbered about 100 when he and his wife of 48 years, Evelyn, arrived in Belleville in 1990.

"There's been growth since then," he says.

With Pastor Hal York at the pulpit — Belch retired in 2004 — there are about 280. There is an offering once a week, but many members tithe their income to the church.

It is a congregation that cuts across all walks of life and age groups, Belch notes.

"We are attracting a lot of young families," he says. "We have emphasized the teaching of the Bible. I think we have

become known for that."

It's been a long road home to the Quinte area for Belch — born in Quebec, moved to Stirling when he was three, educated there in public school and then high school in Belleville. After graduation he worked for the CNR, Acme Construction and then Hugh Murray Ltd. (general contracting).

At the same time, Belch was "very much involved with youth work in the church" and was preaching at 18. He decided to follow the path of his father, William.

"I just felt it was God's calling in my life," he says. "My wife was very much behind me."

He attended the London Bible Institute and in 1960, his first charge was a church

in Arkona, in the London-Sarnia area.

Evelyn was an Arkona girl, although the couple were married in Belleville in 1957.

In 1965, he went to the Bancroft Bible Chapel. It was a natural fit.

"My parents started a Bible camp near Bancroft" in 1947, he says. The Joy Bible Camp became a huge success and now runs year around in that small North Hastings community. Ernie and Evelyn, with little ones, spent 19 years there.

"We enjoyed our years there very much, (it was a) good place to raise a family," he says. They have three children, Karen Scrivens of Picton, Van in Simcoe, and another son David in Chicago.

"We have eight grandchildren, four Canadian and four American," he says, smiling.

He was also in Peterborough for six years before accepting the position at Hastings Park. Dad William had been the pastor at Bethel Chapel.

"He (dad) was ... on CJBQ (radio) for 26 years," Sunday morning and mid-morning Monday to Friday.

Faith has sustained Belch through some tough periods, he says.

Daughter Karen has had three kidney transplants, beginning at age 16 — the first donor was an accident victim, the second her father and the third her father-in-law. At age 47, she is doing fine. Faith.

In 1984, Belch was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus and he recovered. Faith.

As for the disasters of today — the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Pakistan — he says he understands some people are anxious and do not understand what is happening. Faith is once again a mainstay for him. Belch says the Bible refers to an increase in natural disasters and that they would come before the return of the Lord.

"I believe Christ is returning, literally." Maybe not tomorrow, he adds, but sometime.

Today, Belch's a tad thin and is taking antibiotics to combat a lung problem that left him so short of breath that he could not continue in his role as pastor.

But he's confident his condition will improve and he will be able to return to his former, more-active lifestyle.

"Faith," he repeats, simply.