

FAITH

'Let's do music and talk about God'

Churches reach out to young people with unique programs and straight talk

BY STEFANIA RIZZI
Staff Writer

Jay Sandiford remembers being part of a church youth group, consisting of a lay leader singing Christian songs from the 1970s and preaching for 40 minutes.

"When I was a kid, there was a lot less events, more traditional and Church-focused," said Sandiford, a youth leader at Springvale Baptist Church in Whitchurch-Stouffville. "Before it was, I just want my kids to grow up good Christians. Now it's, 'Let's do music and talk about God.'"

Last year, the senior youth group organized Chaos '99, a concert in which local youth bands drummed out different musical sounds, such as punk and ska.

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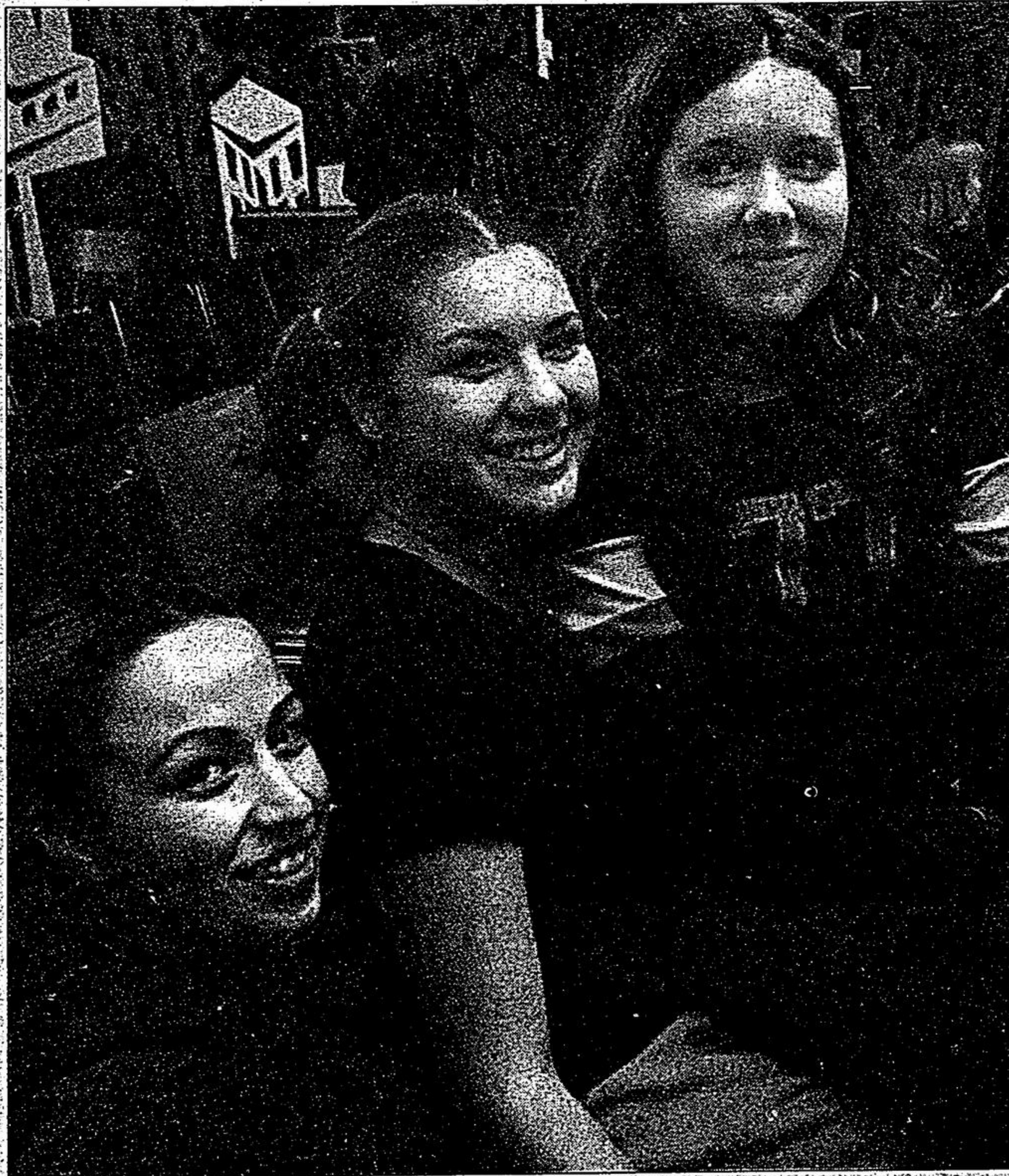
"After the moshing, we talked about Christ. We like to have fun and go crazy but we do have a purpose," said Sandiford, adding there are generally 65 to 75 teens participating in the programs, which include mission work, prayer meetings, retreats, in-depth studies, Sunday school and Thursday outreach nights with the youth Worship Band.

"Whether we're playing a goofy game or sitting down with the kids studying Romans, there's a unique purpose and clear goal. We have social, physical and spiritual sides to be met and if you only meet one side, you'll be an unbalanced person.

"There's a taboo with religion," said Sandiford, explaining how programs can be viewed as dead and boring. "We're looking to give (youths) a positive alternative. We have a good thing going we want to continue."

Matt Ball, youth pastor at Cedarview Community Church in Newmarket, said the church has hosted concerts in the past, but he is hoping to have monthly performances.

"Youth programs have come leaps and bounds," said Ball, who runs senior youth programs including mid-week Bible studies and the new random acts of kindness service projects. "Youth pastors see (teens) need for fun and in-depth study of the Word. They



Erica Cleveland (left), Karen Upton and Chelsea Jeffery participate in the youth ministry at Springvale Baptist Church in Stouffville.

need to be teens but they also need to learn the Word of God."

Stouffville Missionary Church youth pastor Mark Pratt said participation in youth programs has doubled in the past year.

"We've tried to set up fun and exciting programs because when they're fun and exciting, you can draw kids to that and they realize no drugs or alcohol need to be involved in their fun," Pratt said.

Pratt brought the youths on a ski trip to New York two years ago and has held beach parties at the church with a Christian band supplying the entertainment, showcased

coast-to-coast on 100 Huntley Street.

Last June, Pratt brought 12 youths to Los Angeles for a week-long seminar on self-esteem, peer evangelism and other related issues.

Although there's Sunday school and Bible study Wednesday night, Friday nights are reserved for social events, which include paintball games, go-karting or playing arcade games at Mississauga's Playdium.

Since 1997, the young people have entered their demolition derby cars in competitions at the Markham Fair, where they have won the trophy for best-looking car for the third

straight year.

"If we're going to keep kids in church, you've got to involve them to the fullest," said Pratt, who will be entering the kids in the ice race series at Lake Simcoe this winter. "You can be Christian and have fun, too."

Pratt, who has arranged for a top-rated North American teen speaker to speak at the church on Nov. 4 on issues such as stress management and sexual promiscuity, believes the key to making youth programs successful lies in understanding the generation.

"We try to challenge them mentally, spiritually and socially," he said. "The days are over of just doing lame stuff with the kids. It's fun, but it's not enough. Not every kid is at the same developmental level, so we try to meet a happy medium."

For Stouffville Missionary Church member Natalie Klassen, joining the church's youth programs was a way to make new friends. Seven years later, her motives have changed.

'... I don't care if they call me a loser or Bible-thumper because I'll be in heaven for eternity. It'll be worth it.'

"It was a good way to meet people my same age," said Klassen, 17, who lives in Newmarket. "Now, (it's a chance for) good friends to see each other and, on different events, help grow our faith together."

Fellow youth program member Cheyenne Geense grew up in a Christian family, but says that isn't the reason why he remains involved in the programs.

"That doesn't mean a thing. Tons turn away from (religion)," he said. "It's something to fill a void and (the program) is where I go. It helps me strive for more and more."

Although Geense is aware he could be teased by his peers, he says that doesn't bother him.

"Screw your reputation," said Geense, who explained how being involved in the programs has helped him deal with personal struggles, such as a schoolmate's death in a boating accident. "It doesn't matter and I don't care if they call me a loser or Bible-thumper because I'll be in heaven for eternity. It'll be worth it."

Klassen also considers the youth program an important part of his life.

"It's a really big part of my life because it's the one place where you're totally accepted," she said. "It's a safe place where you can have fun."

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