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## Witnessing for JEHOVAH

BY JOE RODRIGUEZ  
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THE RELIGION IS GROWING, BUT MANY PEOPLE DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT IT

Wichitan Brenda Pruitt was on a search for faith, for spiritual direction.

Then, nearly four years ago, she met a woman in -- of all places -- a gym. The woman offered to help Pruitt study the Bible, invited her to a worship service, and gave her a publication that changed Pruitt's life:

"What Does God Require? --Biblical Answers to Questions Jehovah's Witnesses Ask."

Pruitt, who had attended Baptist churches, read the book and decided to attend a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting.

She said she was inspired by the warm greeting she received, by the family atmosphere, and by the constant references to the Bible during the meeting.

"I was just so impressed," she said. "I wanted to come back."

She was baptized in the fall of 2004, and has been a faithful follower of the Jehovah's Witnesses ever since.

Pruitt is one of about 2,000 people from the Wichita area who are part of a growing religion, the Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. There are more than 1 million Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States and about 7 million worldwide.

More than 20,000 from four states -- including Kansas -- are expected to attend the District Convention of Jehovah's Witnesses in Tulsa over three weekends through August, including this weekend.

In the 1940s, Wichitan Mary Jane Harris said, she attended meetings at the only congregation in Wichita, in a room downtown that was located above a bar.

Today, there are 18 congregations in the Wichita area, leaders say, and four of them are Spanish-speaking. Each meets in buildings called Kingdom Halls.

"It's wonderful," Harris said of seeing that growth locally, "because you feel like Jehovah has caused all of this to happen."

### Beliefs

While the number of Jehovah's Witnesses is growing, it remains a religion that many people don't know much about, beyond recognizing the Witnesses for their door-to-door evangelizing.

Witnesses are also known for distributing their Watchtower literature, which shares their views on world events.

Witnesses have distinctive beliefs about Jesus, holidays and religious symbols, some of which are not shared by many Christians.

For instance, they do not celebrate holidays such as Christmas or Easter. And they do not use symbols such as crosses.

Many Christians don't consider Jehovah's Witnesses to be Christian primarily because they do not believe that Jesus is God, said David Weddle, a professor of religion at Colorado College in Colorado Springs who is an expert on Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Christ is Jehovah's son, was the first of Jehovah's creations, but is inferior to

Jehovah -- the word they use for God. Most Christians believe in the Holy Trinity -- that God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one.

Jehovah's Witnesses disagree with the view that they are not Christian.

"Jesus Christ is our personal savior," said Gary Osoba, a local spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses. "He is the only way to approach his father, Jehovah, our creator. He is the way, the truth and the light. Without him, no salvation is possible."

Witnesses base their teachings on the Bible and first-century principles.

It's for that reason they do not celebrate birthdays or holidays -- including Christmas and Easter -- that they say have pagan roots. Witnesses do, however, memorialize the death of Jesus.

It's also a reason they do not use a cross.

"If it (the cross) came from pagan roots, we really don't want any part of it as Christians," said John Harris, the son of Mary Jane Harris. "If the first-century Christians didn't do it, then we want to know why; we're not going to do it either."

But Jehovah's Witnesses are active in modern life, John Harris said.

"Our kids play baseball with each other, and they enjoy video games and other things that kids enjoy," he said. "We don't live some strange existence and deprive our children of the things that they need or want, as long as it's within the confines of the Scriptures."

And it's that foundation -- Bible-based teachings -- that draws people to the church, local Witnesses said.

### **At local meetings**

Inside the Kingdom Hall on North Jackson Street in Wichita, the congregation begins a recent Sunday morning meeting with a greeting and a song, "Great God, Jehovah." A pianist plays along.

The more than 100 congregants -- including the youngest children -- wear suits or dresses and skirts. No one is dressed in jeans.

Children sit with their parents on chairs set up in rows in the auditorium, or sanctuary area. At one end is a podium, which is flanked by two floral arrangements and signs -- one in Spanish, the other in English -- that read: "Stand firm and see the salvation of Jehovah."

The first part of the meeting is what Witnesses call a "public talk," from a leader. On this day, the speaker is Ramon Garcia, who recently returned from Bolivia, where he and his wife served as missionaries for five years.

The congregation is one of the four Spanish-speaking congregations in Wichita.

Across town, at the Kingdom Hall at 21st and Maize Road, another meeting is ongoing.

More than 100 Witnesses are in the second part of the Sunday meeting, in which a conductor -- congregation elder Gerald Peck -- leads a discussion.

The congregants use the Watchtower as a guide to discuss the week's topic, marriage and parenthood, also reading Scriptures about the issue.

At the end of the service, the congregation stands for a prayer.

"Jehovah, we thank you for the congregation we have, the families, friends we have here, and we ask that you do forgive us when we fall short...."

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