

Gospel not music to everyone

*Baptist congregation
heckled in Allan Gardens*

Every Sunday, a dozen members of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church bring their mission to the heart of Allan Gardens. The outdoor congregation is meagre, including in its number a couple homeless believers and, inadvertently, some chic Torontonians who gawk and giggle at what they must consider irony.

The Baptists play accordion and guitar and sing toneless hymns in the centre of the park at Jarvis and Carlton. Ethnically diverse church members take turns preaching to the small crowd. Some, such as Paul Lagace, bring it with fist-shaking intensity. Lagace sports a ponytail, black outfit and powerful voice. Others speak soft, broken English and appear nervous. They don't say anything overtly offensive to liberal ears. "A life without Jesus is a waste," is one of the more incendiary things I've heard in the two years I've been aware of them. This prompts the succinct reply "No! It isn't," from a passing cyclist.

Lagace, 35, who is about to enter seminary school, says Baptists have preached in Allan Gardens since 1929, when "hundreds of people" participated in outdoor worship after mass. He admits times have changed but still sees a need for community outreach. "There are a lot of lonely people in this park," he says. "Some people are intimidated by coming into a church. We believe the gospel should be available to every person."

Sometimes the preachers inspire anger in passersby. A young hipster stage-whispers, "You're crazy." A mother touches her son's shoulder protectively. "This is the word of God!" booms Paul Lagace, causing the little boy to look back with frightened interest.

When the service ends, the preachers approach their congregation. The Listerine drinker raving about what God has done to him and the shy Japanese boy practising his English in the park are extended the same polite invitation to faith.

Mike Sauve, National Post