

What Kind of Church?

A few years ago Tony flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. The way he tells it, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3:00 a.m. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide awake and his stomach is growling.

He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The fat guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?"

Well, Tony isn't so hungry anymore so eyeing some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee."

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, when Tony Campolo heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the fat guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?"

"Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?"

"Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks.

"That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here."

His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. There were hookers wall to wall.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over.

And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!"

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want."

"Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony.

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?"

And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes, for her life, her health, and her salvation. Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

**What kind of church do you
belong to anyway?**