

Fishing for Men

BY ERIC TIANSAY

How a growing number of outdoor-oriented ministries are catching and discipling guys who often skip church to go fishing.

An accomplished angler, Jim Grassi loves to tell fishing stories like any typical fisherman. But his favorite fishing tale doesn't involve catching a 10-pound bass or a trophy rainbow trout. In February 1999, Grassi put together an outdoor outreach program for his church, Real Life Ministries, in Post Falls, Idaho. The church rented a movie theater for Grassi's evangelistic fishing clinic.

"We figured 75 to 100 people might show up," recalls Grassi, an internationally known fishing instructor. "Instead, 350 people came. It was standing-room only and there was a blizzard. Thirty-five men came to Christ that morning. Some of them are now leaders at the church. Those men were fishermen who related to me."

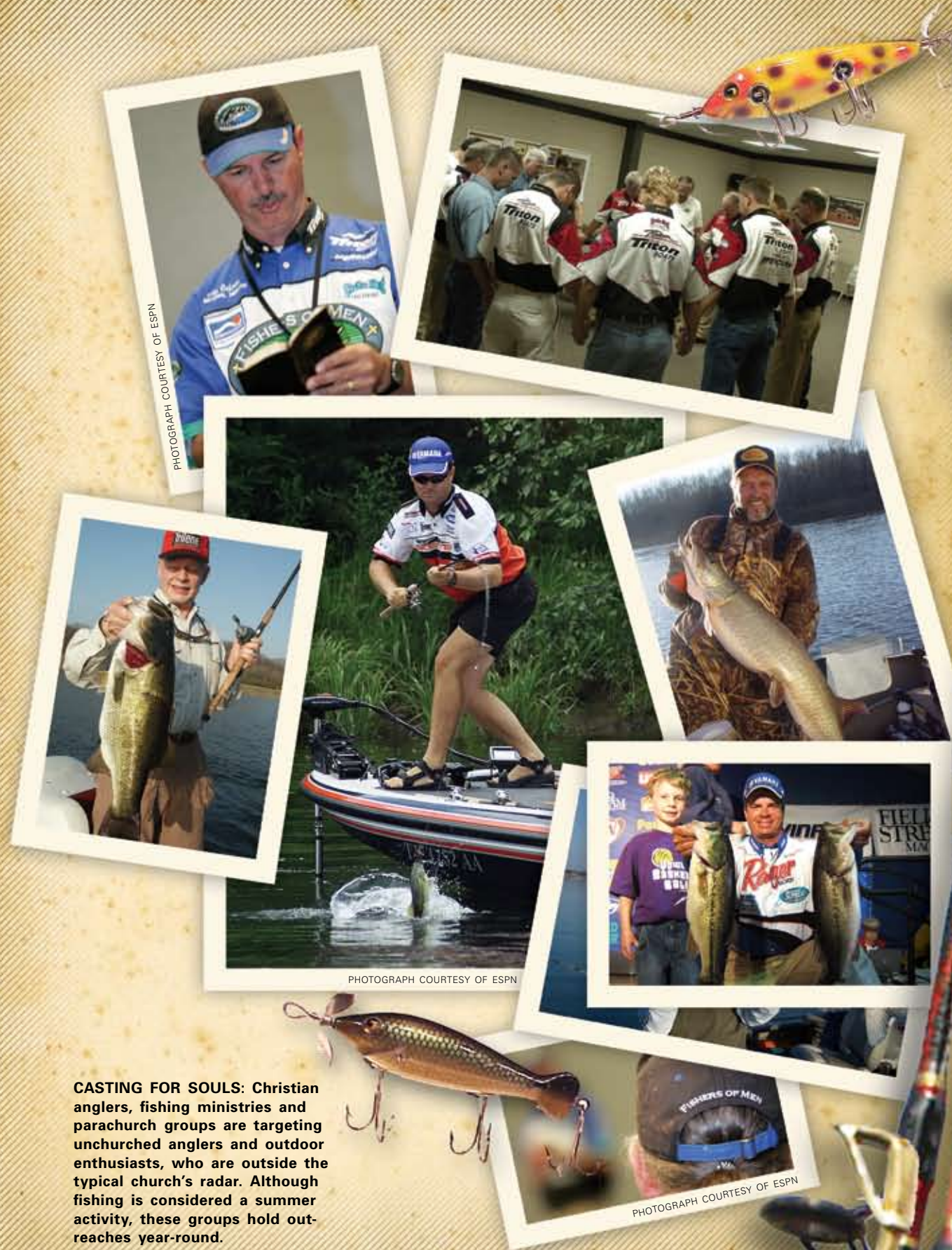
An Overlooked Mission Field

Having the same piscatorial interest with the anglers enabled Grassi to hook them into encountering Jesus. Men often miss church to go fishing, but a growing number of ministries and parachurch groups are going fishing to have church.

Terry Chupp, founder of Georgia-based Team Jesus Ministries, an outdoor-based evangelistic ministry, says anglers are an untapped mission field.

"Soul-winning is like fishing," explains Chupp, 64, an ordained Southern Baptist minister and former professional bass fisherman. "Sometimes you catch them on the first cast. But often you must make multiple casts or attempts to see them caught. The Holy Spirit sets the hook and Jesus does the cleaning. I'm trying to obey what Jesus said in Matthew 4:19, 'Come follow Me and I'll make you fishers of men.'"

Chupp adds that there are "lots of fishermen to catch out there." The U.S. National Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that there are almost 46 million recreational anglers nationwide.



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CASTING FOR SOULS: Christian anglers, fishing ministries and parachurch groups are targeting unchurched anglers and outdoor enthusiasts, who are outside the typical church's radar. Although fishing is considered a summer activity, these groups hold outreaches year-round.

Fishing's popularity has also turned it into the next NASCAR—a bona fide competitive and spectator sport. Florida-based Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS), a 39-year-old organization that operates bass-fishing tournaments nationwide, has more than 550,000 members, making it the largest fishing organization worldwide.

This year's Bassmasters Classic, considered the Super Bowl of fishing, drew nearly 22,000 fans in Orlando, Fla., and more than 9.5 million viewers watched ESPN's telecasts.

Additionally, well-known professional fishermen such as Jimmy Houston, Shaw Grigsby, Hank Parker and Al Lindner are committed believers who host popular TV fishing shows.

Their programs are typically about fishing tips and techniques. Lindner's *Angling Edge*, though, features an inspirational message at the end. Lindner, Minnesota's most famous angler who co-founded the In-Fisherman media empire in 1975, noted that the majority of viewers "love the inspirational close."

"The other day, two men stopped me for my autograph," says Lindner, 61, who sold In-Fisherman in 1998. "They shared how much they liked the program. Then one of the men said, 'But that God stuff at the end needs to be left in church.' I said, 'I'm glad you love the show, but the God whom I serve isn't behind four walls that I go visit on Sundays. He's with me 24-7.' Both of them shook their heads and walked away. But I guarantee you that they won't forget what I said. I planted a seed. I don't know who's going to water it."

Although fishermen are often portrayed as beer-drinking, tobacco-chewing, profanity-using and non-churchgoing guys, Lindner believes they are receptive to the gospel.

"Guys who spend a lot of time fishing are easier to reach," explains Lindner, who was inducted into the Professional Bass Fishing Hall of Fame in 2005. "They're much more open

Hobby Evangelism 101

Here are 10 ways God can use your downtime for a higher purpose.

1. Ask God how He can use your passion for His work. Pray for success.
2. Intentionally invite a non-Christian to participate in your hobby. Demonstrate Christ's love.
3. Visit online forums that relate to your activity. Share your testimony and faith.
4. Start a blog (see blogger.com), and write about your hobby and faith.
5. Create a gospel tract (see attracts.org) based on your activity.
6. Distribute tracts that tie into your pastime, such as leaflets by a well-known NASCAR driver or bass angler.
7. With your men's church-group, plan a sportsmen's outreach event, such as a car show or deep sea fishing trip that is purposely evangelistic.
8. Find Bible verses that relate to your interest, and look for creative ways to share them. For example, Jonah 1:17 says, God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah.
9. Give away a book tied to your hobby that's written by a famous Christian athlete or personality.
10. Invite a nonbeliever to watch a TV show or DVD featuring the testimony of a noted Christian sportsman.

to the gospel because they have a real appreciation of creation. So when they hear of the Creator, it makes sense to them. Most fishermen don't deny God's existence."

For the last five years, Linder has witnessed this firsthand, while speaking at numerous wild-game dinners.

"These events are usually the most successful outreach of a church," Linder says. "They can pack the house. The response is phenomenal, with lots of salvations and rededications."

Earning the Right To be Heard

When Grassi founded Let's Go Fishing Ministries, now known as Outdoor Connection Ministries, 25 years ago, it was the only outdoor-based ministry in the country. Today, he says there are numerous ministries that target fishermen and hunters.

"Men are the most unreached part and weakest link of the church," says Grassi, 62, an ordained minister whose ministry offers programs and resources to help churches reach men. "Why? Because we have not been relevant to them. The fastest-growing area in most evangelical churches is sports ministry. A big part of that is outdoor sports. The church is realizing that fishing and hunting have acceptability in our culture. It truly is a backdoor to the church."

Jim Putnam, senior pastor of Real Life Ministries (RLM), a nondenominational church that has 6,000 members, says his congregation has 15 different outdoor sports ministries, using "a relational environment in a small-group setting."

"We meet guys in the middle and don't expect them to come to the church," explains Putnam, 40, noting that RLM is hiring a sports and outdoors minister this year to respond to the need. "Jim Grassi is teaching our church to use our passion and gifts to reach other men with similar passion."

Grassi adds: "If you reach out in love through your passion such as fishing,

you form a relationship. You then have earned the right to be heard."

Pro bass angler Alton Jones, who leads Bible studies at Fellowship of Christian Anglers Society (FOCAS) meetings in the BASS circuit, agrees. He says "there's an automatic barrier in place" among professional fishermen.

"As Christian anglers, we have to be prayerful and intentional to come up with ways to break through the barrier and get beyond the competitive part of fishing," says Jones, 43, who estimates that there are about 30 believers out of 100 anglers who compete in BASS. "We try to reach into the soul of a person. That's done through selfless humility and demonstrating Christ's love in any way we can."

Jones put that principle in practice with a top-tier, well-known fisherman who went through a difficult time fishing earlier this year.

"I had been praying for him for a while because God had him on my heart," he says. "I called him out of the blue and told him, 'I know you're going through a hard time and if you need a friend to talk to, I'm here for you.' He never returned my voice mail.

"A couple of months later when I saw him, he told me that the call meant a lot to him," Jones continues. "It opened a door for us to talk about spiritual things. I talked to him about the importance of having a life where your foundation is Jesus Christ and the stability that a relationship with Christ provides when I encounter storms in my life. He has not yet come to faith, but the door is open."

In 1983, Jimmy Houston started FOCAS to encourage the spiritual lives of professional bass fishermen through evangelism and discipleship. Hundreds of anglers and their families have accepted Christ, Jones says.

Walking the Walk

Bass-fishing pro Jay Yelas says the scriptural teaching and fellowship from FOCAS helps him and other Christian anglers in their stance for Christ.



SCRIPTURE VERSED: Bass-fishing pro Jay Yelas led a Bible study during the Bassmasters Classic—the Super Bowl of fishing—in February.

"We are in the limelight, so a lot of guys watch us closely," says Yelas, 40, who won the Bassmasters Classic in 2002. "It's very important to not just talk the talk, but to also walk the walk."

Randy Yarnall, who became a full-time pro fisherman three years ago, credited the genuine faith of Yelas, Jones, Grigsby and other Christian fishermen for spiritually impacting him.

"I've watched them constantly," Yarnall, 50, says. "I try to learn from them. I was interested in the Christian way. Was I headed in the right direction was my question? I really feel now I am."

After fishing a tournament poorly in Alabama in April, Yarnall came across Chupp through his friend and fellow angler Lee Bailey Jr.

"I started talking to Terry and the conversation led into whether I was ready to be saved," Yarnall recalls. "I had four horrible tournaments in a row where my mind wasn't settled. There was something wrong. I couldn't put a finger on it. I had always thought that Jesus was in my heart, and I thought I was fine. It turned out I wasn't. After Terry and I prayed, my mind

was settled. All of a sudden, things started to become clear. It's amazing. I don't want to sound weird, but Jesus touched me.

"What Terry and others like him are doing is making an impact in the lives of men because they're there when we need them," he continues. "Terry was there when I needed him most and Jesus knew that."

Grassi notes that the New Testament is filled with angling references, and Jesus frequently taught and performed miracles with fishing as the backdrop.

"Jesus was a man's man," says Grassi, whose ministry has seen thousands accept Christ through conferences, family retreats, fishing clinics and sports shows. "For that reason, he went to eight fishermen for 12 of His disciples. Why? Because fishermen understand patience, perseverance, faith and creation. Christ utilized water as a place to bring people to. Water calms the spirit and softens the heart. For Christ, water was a place to open up people's hearts to discuss relationships."

In the same manner, South Carolina-based Fishers of Men (FOM) utilizes water and fishing to reach men and their families for Christ. An

evangelistic ministry, the nonprofit organization aims to make converts at bass tournaments while amateur fishermen compete for cash and prizes in a family-friendly environment.

National director Al Odom started FOM in 1998 after God prompted him to reach out to men he was fishing

with in local bass tournaments. FOM is interdenominational, with local churches hosting Friday night pretournament meetings. Participants receive a free meal, door prizes and an inspirational message.

“When you take guys who haven’t been to a church in 10 to 20 years and

you bring them to a church, there’s a level of apprehension,” Odom, 47, explains. “One of our goals is to reduce that apprehension so that the Holy Spirit can work in their lives. We want our anglers to feel comfortable, so we encourage them to come comfortably dressed in T-shirt, sandals and ball cap. We don’t sing hymns or take communion, and we stress to our inspirational speakers, ‘Don’t beat them up.’”

The approach has worked—FOM has witnessed thousands of conversions and recommitments to Christ, and the ministry has more than 4,000 members in 25 states.

“Thanks to this ministry, I went from being a pew warmer to God using me to speak into men’s lives,” Steve Patrick, a FOM regional director who runs a sawmill in Tennessee, 44, says. “It’s nontraditional ministry. It’s amazing and exciting how God can use bass fishing to reach lost men.” **NM**

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Angling for God

Outdoor Connection:

outdoorconnection.com

Team Jesus Ministries:

teamjesusministries.org

Fishers of Men:

fishersofmenministries.com

Al Lindner:

lindnermedia.com

Fellowship of Christian

Anglers Society:

focaspros.org

Sportsmen’s Outreach:

sportsmensoutreach.org

Jay Yelas:

jayyelas.com

Randy Yarnall:

randyyarnall.com

Sportspersons Ministries

International:

spi-int.org

Man Adventures:

manadventures.com