

# Hot rod ministry rolls out of Northeast Texas church

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PARIS—James McNeal believes his drive to the [National Hot Rod Association's](#) winners' circle began in the choir loft of Immanuel Baptist Church in Paris.



James McNeal, a deacon at Immanuel Baptist Church in Paris, is the National Hot Rod Association champion.

When he obeyed God by following the example of the young men in his Sunday school class and joining the choir, McNeal maintains, he received God's blessing—all the way to the finish line.

McNeal was bitten by the drag racing bug at age 15, but his history at [Immanuel](#) goes back all the way to his birth. He now serves the church as a deacon, high school boys' Sunday school teacher and choir member.

Not exactly the resumé that might be expected of the national super pro drag racing champion, but for McNeal, it all fits together well.

"I look at my racing as an opportunity for the Lord to use to help someone else see Christ," he said.

While his witness may not be overt, McNeal believes his presence at the track makes it different than it might be otherwise.

"When I walk up, their language might be one way, but out of respect for me or just for whatever reason, they change their language. But really, only God knows what he is doing through my racing," McNeal said.

His victory at the national championship in Pomona, Calif., signaled God has a plan for his life in the racing world, he continued.

“One of the most exciting things about this win that I’ve got is that God gave me his best, and I feel like it’s an affirmation from him that he’s using it,” McNeal said.



James McNeal (second from right), a layman at Immanuel Baptist Church in Paris, won the National Hot Rod Association’s championship race in Pomona, Calif. (PHOTOS/Courtesy of James McNeal)

Occasionally, situations at the track allow him to more overt in his witness, he noted.

“Sometimes people don’t want unsolicited advice, but sometimes that opportunity does arise where you can give people some good advice. I always let people know the bottom line of it is that if you don’t know Jesus, that’s the big problem,” McNeal said.

His exploits at the track also have helped him at church, he said. At the beginning of his tenure as the high school boys’ Sunday school teacher, he admits he had a little trouble finding a point of connection. A fieldtrip to the drag strip in Ennis helped significantly.

“I’m a different person than I was before that,” he said. “And so now when I teach my lessons, it’s coming from someone that’s made a connection with them. And I do something that’s pretty cool to them.”

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James McNeal, a deacon at Immanuel Baptist Church in Paris, Texas, talks about how his NHRA championship intersects his faith.

While McNeal believes he may be making a bigger impact on the boys since the day at the races, he knows their example on a day at church has changed him as well. He looked up one Sunday morning and saw three of his boys—including his son—singing in the choir.

“God started touching my heart, saying: ‘You know, you’re supposed to be up there. You know you should’ve been up there for years,’” McNeal recalled.

The next choir practice, he was in his seat ready to go.

Not only does McNeal believe God blessed his voice and made him a better singer because of his obedience; he believes it also made him a better driver.

“Knowing I was where I was supposed to be just put a peace in my life that’s still with me—at work, at home, everywhere I go,” he said.

“This win, this national championship that I’ve won, I want to give a lot of credit to that. Because I submitted, and I should be ashamed of myself, because whenever I will do it God’s way, he is so quick to bless me. I feel like when I got in that choir ... he was so quick to bless me, so quick to give me his best.”