

Meet IBOC's Marine Biologist, Steve Burkett

Each week, Pastor Rickie Rush talks about the aquarium tanks, and each week church members are mesmerized by the astounding colors, intriguing sea life, and impressive design of the enormous tanks that surround the Inspiring Body of Christ (IBOC) sanctuary. If you've attended service, you probably understand the purpose behind the tanks—the connection between bringing people from different backgrounds to IBOC and slowly acclimating them to the church, much like fish are brought from all over the world and slowly introduced to the tanks. Maybe you have even seen one of their incredible dive shows and “met” a few of the creatures that inhabit the tanks. Perhaps you've had a chance to meet some of the divers and marine biologists themselves.

Steve Burkett is the marine biologist and aquarium curator for IBOC. He manages the aquarium department, consisting of two full-time marine biologists, three certified divers, and several volunteers. He oversees tasks that include water quality maintenance, feeding, cleaning, ordering and stocking supplies, and ensuring the overall health of the sea life that call the tanks home.

Burkett has a degree in marine biology and has worked in the field from Texas to Wisconsin. He has been a fixture at IBOC for more than 8 years. Landing at IBOC was a true blessing for the Burkett family. Moving to Houston from Milwaukee, Burkett was part of a research team at an area hospital before Hurricane Ike hit, destroying nearly everything in its path. With a one-year-old, Burkett and his wife knew Houston wasn't the best place for them any longer. During this time, a position opened up at IBOC for a marine biologist, and Burkett's wife happened to have family in the Dallas area.

Burkett believes the move to Dallas and to IBOC was the best decision for his family. Not only has he experienced personal development, he has also experienced the growth of the IBOC team. Burkett has played a critical role in the development and success of the aquarium and in turn has seen the mission of the aquarium fulfilled daily as thousands of people walk through the doors.

“I enjoy all of it,” he says, speaking of his position and daily responsibilities. Burkett is always on his toes, as something new and exciting is always happening with the tanks. It makes coming to work each day that much more enjoyable.

Even the tasks that aren't the most glamorous— such as cleaning the tanks—are made worthwhile when Burkett sees the look on the kids' faces as they press against the tank in awe. “Their faces drop when we feed a fish,” he says.

Most are coming to experience everything that IBOC offers and to experience the message that God imparts to Pastor Rush on a weekly basis. People are also curious about the origin of the aquarium and hope to experience it for themselves. As the largest private aquarium in the world, IBOC has received global recognition.

In fact, people even recognize Burkett when he's out in public. It isn't the same sort of jaw-dropping attention the children give when at dive shows, but he's approached at the grocery store and other places in town.

“You're the church fish guy!” they'll say. “What's that all about?”

What's truly amazing is how the practices in the tanks transfer over to the congregation. Pastor Rush often talks about the importance and meaning of quarantine, decontamination, and restoration, not

only as it pertains to maintaining the tanks, but also how it relates to making church-goers fishers of men. Not only do the fish in the tanks come from all over the world, the members of the church come from all different backgrounds with different opinions, socioeconomic statuses, ages, and so on.

Much like the fish are quarantined first before entering the tanks with other fish, IBOC makes it a point to slowly acclimate new members so they can grow into the new environment. The ministry brings people in—people who may be facing a world of hurt—and helps bring them to restoration while smoothly transitioning into the congregation. After all, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” isn’t sprawled across the aquarium entrance for nothing.

The fountain you see located in front of the main sanctuary also carries this message. Utilizing the natural aquifer located under the property, the ministry is blessed with a “cost-free” source of water for the aquarium and tanks throughout the church. The water that runs through the fountain also serves as a constant reminder that when God gives a command to go out and become fishers of men, He will provide every resource necessary to accomplish it!

“He is the eternal encourager,” Burkett says of Pastor Rush. “Regardless of what he’s got going on, he often finds an escape by going and encouraging everyone else. He may be going through something, but you’ll never know because he’ll come and encourage everyone on the team. It’s rare to not see him in the hall with a smile.”

So what does Burkett say when he’s asked about being the church fish guy?

“I always tell them to come and see and worship or do both,” he says. “It’s almost impossible to describe IBOC and the aquarium to people. They have to check it out for themselves. They’re going to be amazed either way.”