

Christian artist Marisol performs on the main stage Saturday during San Diego CityFest at Mission Bay Park. JAMES GREGG U-T PHOTOS



40,000 ATTEND CITYFEST EVENT



Seven-year-old Davonte Shelton (right) reaches for a target with some help from Tyler Stephens, 13, and Davonte's brother Deshaun, 9, as the three played at CityFest. The event offered free food, activities, concerts and evangelical Christian messages.

Christian gathering offered everything from music to motocross — and prayer, of course

NINA GARIN • U-T

It's natural for San Diegans to have some confusion about San Diego CityFest, the big event held Saturday at Mission Bay Park.

After all, the festival

shares its name with a popular summer street fair in Hillcrest. And the pretty blue posters peppered from Escondido to Chula Vista didn't give much detail about the event.

But there was no mistaking the mission at this

particular CityFest, put on by international evangelist Luis Palau: spirituality.

The giant Christian gathering, which featured everything from BMX demonstrations to rock concerts, attracted more than 40,000 people to Mission Bay Park. And along with the music and motocross, there was plenty of prayer.

Here are some tidbits

from Saturday's event:

Just who is Luis Palau?

Palau is an Argentina-born Christian evangelist who once worked with Billy Graham and now has his own ministry with offices around the world. Palau, who is based in Portland, Ore., is noted for his accepting views on homosexuality. "They're human beings; they're free to

choose," Palau said. "And we are friends."

How did he pull off this gigantic event? Though CityFest is run by the Luis Palau Association, most of the planning and organization was done by local churches and businesses.

How much did it cost to put on CityFest? \$1.1 million.

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Why San Diego? The event was held to celebrate the end of Season of Service, a mission of local volunteerism. About 50,000 San Diegans did everything from feed the homeless to pick up trash at San Ysidro elementary schools.

Biggest attraction: Besides Palau, the most popular appearances of the day included the Latin band Tercer Cielo, rockers Newsboys and the R&B crooner Kirk Franklin. But among the most beloved were "Veggie Tales" characters Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber wandering around the kids' area.

Why do people love "Veggie Tales"? One Oceanside father has an idea: "It's just funny and goofy but with a good message," said David Piester who was there with his wife and four kids. "I like that it has some adult

humor in it, but it's pure for the kids and fun-loving."

Accessorizing: The "Not of This World" booth, which sold T-shirts for \$10, had a big crowd. Beginner Bibles were on sale for \$20.

A moment of confusion: Though most people were aware that this was a Christian event, Pacific Beach resident Elise Perelman was caught by surprise: "I'm Jewish and I thought this was a secular event. The name sounds secular," she said. "I would have been fine with a few religious things, but this was overwhelming. I don't feel comfortable with my son making a Jesus crown, especially since it's the High Holidays."

How many CityFests are there? These events take place around the world. There's one scheduled in Uganda at the end of the month and another in Chile in October.