

RELIGION WATCH

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URBAN-SUBURBAN CONGREGATIONAL CONNECTIONS GROWING

In current thinking about the problems confronting American cities, there is new attention being paid to establishing links between urban and suburban institutions, particularly churches. Such partnerships (or "twinings") between inner-city and suburban congregations are not new, but the interest in such forms of cooperation seems to be growing and finding proponents on diverse points of the religious and political spectrum. For instance, in *The American Character* (Winter), the newsletter of the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center, Robert Royal writes that "reconnecting urban and suburban institutions--churches and other private associations--might restore to both sides realism and purpose."

The strong urban base of American Catholicism has been a catalyst in the growing number of partnerships between suburban and urban Catholic parishes based around common social ministry and dialogue about racial prejudice and misunderstanding, according to the Catholic magazine *Salt of the Earth* (March/April). These parishes often take the view that "working together for a common good is one way to begin a process of tearing down prejudices...while creating a foundation for constructive interaction across long-standing racial and economic barriers," writes Bob Zyskowski. The formula for these partnerships often involves meeting together for prayer and discussion which seeks to apply Catholic social teachings to local issues; and establishing direct contact between people of different cultures and social classes. In Ohio, a parish in suburban Kirtland has formed a partnership with an inner-city Cleveland parish, and together they created a job-placement office. The parishes also hold retreats and missions together and exchange leaders.

The experience and success that inner city poorer parishes have in community-based organizing is often attractive to suburban parishes that are also beginning to experience such similar problems as crime and poverty. In St. Paul and Minneapolis, such partnerships have developed into a larger, more powerful interfaith Action Organization that is being formed by the merger of the inner-city and suburban coalitions working on social justice issues. But most of the inner-city and suburban parishioners interviewed see the establishment of dialogue and communication between urban and suburban regions as the most important byproduct of the partnerships. In New Orleans, the parish partnership program organized a series of dialogues on race. During the O.J. Simpson acquittal, such a forum served as "one of the few places

where blacks and whites could discuss the matter freely," according to Zyskowski. (The American Character, 1015 15th St., N.W., Suite 900, Washington, DC 20005; Salt of the Earth, 205 W. Monroe St., Chicago, IL 60606)

**PROMISE KEEPERS'
IMPACT GROWING AT
CONGREGATIONAL
LEVEL**

Promise Keepers, the fast-growing evangelical men's ministry, is becoming integrated into congregational life, according to World (March 2), an evangelical newsweekly. In its five years of existence, Promise Keepers has drawn more than 720,000 men to stadiums around the North America to listen to inspiring messages about achieving Christian manhood. Less well-known is the way Promise Keepers is modeling new relationships between evangelical churches and parachurches, organizations which are sometimes viewed as competing with congregations. Currently there are more than 8,000 PK small groups meeting locally and using PK-endorsed materials, inside and outside the church. These groups usually have a "Key Man," a local church liason who answers not only to his pastor but to a PK "ambassador", a regional representative of the group, and then on to others up the PK hierarchical ladder.

In an informal survey of participants (of 100 pastors) at a recent PK-clergy conference conducted by the magazine, it was found that a large majority say they have PK groups in their congregation. This relationship between PK and the church has introduced a new parachurch paradigm of not only complimenting local church ministry, but becoming part of it--something that such organizations as Billy Graham's ministry have not done, according to church historian Robert Godfrey. Most of those pastors surveyed by the magazine say that PK--nationally and locally--has complimented rather than competed with their ministries. Yet, writer Joe Maxwell adds that "new evangelical superstars are being created by PK with new, spin-off parachurch organizations. In their efforts to strengthen the local church, PK also is promoting a whole new set of Christian organizations outside of the local church." (World, P.O. Box 2330, Asheville, NC 28805)

**WOMEN IN
BUDDHIST
LEADERSHIP
CHANGING
RELIGION?**

The growing number of women in leadership in American Buddhist groups is reshaping the teachings, liturgies and structures of this religious community, according to Common Boundary (March/April), a magazine on spirituality and psychology. While men have traditionally been the key leaders in both Asian and American Buddhism, the leadership and sexual scandals that shook several prominent Buddhist groups in the U.S. during the 1980s (often involving student-teacher or guru relationships), has led to changes in the old order, writes Barbara Graham. A series of conferences for women in recent years have been instrumental in strengthening the female presence in Buddhist communities. Female leadership and the concurrent growth of feminism in these communities has led to the "reworking of liturgy, the emphasis on emotional healing as a necessary compliment to spiritual practice," and new attention to the "sacred feminine," according to Graham. She adds that the "most significant, overarching trend in the feminization--and Americanization--of Buddhist practice has to do with the question of lay practice versus monastic practice, the kitchen versus the retreat center." The Buddhist monastery and, in America, the meditation hall have often been viewed as the centers of spirituality for Buddhists. But to accommodate the raising

of children, many women have brought spiritual practice into the home and daily life.

The emphasis on psychological wholeness in American Buddhism [at least among non-ethnic, convert-based Buddhism] has also been influenced by women and is likely to be the source of debate and controversy in world Buddhism. The traditional concept of dissolving the self and transcending suffering has been modified by many women and other American Buddhists to include the value of emotions and psychotherapeutic techniques to achieve enlightenment. Buddhist women are more likely to put an emphasis on the importance of the body and the physical world, leading to a growing concern with environmentalism and social activism in American Buddhism. The traditional hierarchical nature of Buddhism that emphasizes the teacher-student relationship is also being challenged by Buddhist women groups that are pressing for a more democratic, egalitarian emphasis on community; in some cases the teacher role is being replaced by the concept of being a "spiritual friend." Graham adds that the "loosening of strict guidelines that govern the transmission of lineages" of often male leaders [especially important in Tibetan Buddhism, whose continuity depends on the mystical recognition of reincarnated masters] is "critical if women are ever to assume equal power in [American Buddhism]." (Common Boundary, 5272 River Rd., Suite 650, Bethesda, MD 20816)

REFORM VERSUS CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM-- WHO'S WINNING?

For some time there has been a debate in the American Jewish community as to which branch of Judaism, Conservative or Reform, will "win" the largest and most solid constituency. Many observers have viewed Reform Judaism, with its more liberal approach that has aggressively reached out to intermarried couples and made other innovations to include more people in the Jewish community, as the winner, according to Moment magazine (April). Reform benefited from a significant shift to the left among American Jews, as seen in a 1990 Jewish population survey showing that while only 1.2 million said they were raised Reform, 1.7 million called themselves Reform in the survey. Conservatism remained static at 1.4 million adherents. The number of Reform congregations grew to about 900 in 1995, up from about 800 a decade ago. The number of Conservative congregations has dropped from 850 congregations 10 years ago to 800 today. But other analysts do not see uncontested victory for the Reform movement. Sociologist Egon Mayer says that Reform does well in outreach and bringing in those outside of the Jewish community through intermarriage, but it "does not appear to be doing nearly as good a job with its own [core population]."

The 1990 survey also showed that those raised within the Reform branch of Judaism are less likely to be observant and synagogue members than those who migrated to Reform from other branches or non-affiliation. While the "core" population of Conservative Judaism also showed less involvement, they were more likely to be involved than their Reform counterparts. Stephen Bayme of the American Jewish Committee argues that the rate of conversion among the non-Jewish partners of intermarried families in the Reform movement is low. Only a small percentage of the children of mixed marriages where the non-Jewish partner does not convert end up living Jewish lifestyles. "It is in Conservative synagogues where we are seeing young in-married Jewish families who are trying to create a real Jewish atmosphere for themselves and their children," Bayme says.

Even some Reform leaders--many of them young-- criticize their denomination for blurring Jewish distinctiveness in their outreach to non-Jews. Rather than targeting the intermarried, the Conservatives are strengthening their outreach to "in-married" Jewish families through a "Jewish Living" campaign that emphasizes ritual observance and the expansion of its Solomon Schechter day school system. Many of such efforts blend tradition with "user-friendly" worship forms, such as starting "magnet" synagogues marketed to singles and other target populations and the use of alternative, small-group fellowships. (Moment, 4710 41st St., N.W., Washington, DC 20016)

**JEWISH-CHRISTIAN
RELATIONS ADVANCE
ON THEOLOGICAL
FRONT**

Jewish-Christian reconciliation is advancing on both sides, although there have been recent setbacks, according to Inside Israel newsletter (Vol. 16, No. 3). Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevi writes that the Vatican's move to recognize the existence of the nation of Israel and other seemingly minor developments, such as the issuing of a guidebook to Catholic textbook writers on how to handle Jewish subjects, are now beginning to have an impact in Catholicism. Halevi also cites other such positive developments as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's official repudiation of Martin Luther's anti-Jewish statements and a new evangelical Sunday School curriculum, called '29 AD, which stressed the Jewish life of Jesus and his disciples and other Jewish traditions. But within some mainline Protestant groups there is considerably less movement toward reconciliation, according to the Halevi.

One such example is the new Psalter of the Anglican Church in New Zealand, which has removed both the words "Israel" and "Zion" from the text. The reason given for the change was so that the book would "not be tainted by Zionism." The new more conciliatory attitudes are not just on the Christian side, according to Halevi. There are some Jewish thinkers who are now acknowledging the "need to re-examine Jewish attitudes toward Christianity." One of the more dramatic moves comes from Orthodox theologian Irving Greenberg. He has been exploring a Jewish understanding for the Christian belief of God's incarnation as man-- one of Judaism's major objections to Christianity. Greenberg has written that in Jewish terms, "One can conceive of a divine pathos that sent not only words across the gap but life and body itself. I say this not as a Jew who accepts this claim, but as one who has come to see that is it not for me to prescribe to God how God communicates with others." (Inside Israel, Box 22029, San Diego, CA 92192-2029)

**RLDS MOVES
FURTHER FROM
MORMON
TRADITION**

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) is gradually moving away from its Mormon heritage and finding a new identity as a "peace church," according to Sunstone (March), an independent Mormon magazine. The RLDS has been a sister denomination to the mainstream Mormon Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, although the former church body's church doctrine has been closer to traditional Protestantism. The most recent sign of the 250,000-member denomination's move away from its past was its decision to name the first non-descendent of Mormon founder Joseph Smith as president. "The church has never been without a Smith as its head, but it is not an overriding mandate," says Gail Mengel, director of the church's women's ministries. The 135-year-old church is considering a name change--to Community of Christ, which

advocates say better embodies the denomination's ideals of world peace and love. Mormon specialist Jan Shipps says that "the RLDS [is] moving away from being distinctive as Mormons to being distinctive as a peace church. They are not trying to be generic Protestants." (Sunstone, 331 S. Rio Grande St., Suite 206, Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1136)

CURRENT RESEARCH: *Recent Findings On Religious Attitudes And Behavior*

**CELL GROUPS--URBAN,
UPSCALE AND NO
CURE FOR
SLOW GROWTH**

* Cell group churches have been hailed as the wave of the future for many years, but such small group-based congregations appear to work best in urban areas and in already-growing churches, according to researcher Mikel Neumann. In studying the cell churches in Caracas, Bombay, Ghana, and inner-city Chicago, Neumann, a missionary scholar-in-residence at Wheaton College, found a pattern emerging among such groups: they are mainly urban and they appeal to people with high levels of education and a high socio-economic standing, according to an article in the Canadian evangelical magazine Faith Today (March/April). Although growth of the cell church model in North America (and western Europe) remains comparatively slow as compared to Third World regions, Neumann did not find that Western culture presented special barriers for the growth of cell groups.

He found, however that cell congregations do not inevitably spell rapid church growth; there is no evidence that dividing a "static," non-evangelizing church into cells will cause a membership increase. Rather, such congregations were growing before they made the change to cell groups, usually under the leadership of a dynamic pastor. Neumann adds that adopting a cell structure "turbocharges" growth that is already taking place in a congregation by eliminating the direct dependence of growth on a charismatic pastor and transferring it to dynamic cell groups. Neumann also found that cell groups tend to modify cultural extremes among their members, bring diverse urban populations closer together in their mind-sets. "In North America we come out high on the individualistic scale. In the cell group that's modified. In a more collective society, [the small group provides] more attention to individual needs." The article concludes with the forecast that cell group-based churches may grow in North America under rapid urbanization, especially when "many urban areas in North America today will not even allow a church building to expand." (Faith Today, M.I.P. Box 3745, Markham, Ont. L3R 0Y4 Canada)

**CHURCH
ATTENDANCE
DECLINES
FURTHER WITH
BABY BOOM LOSSES**

* Church attendance has declined for the fifth year in a row, dipping below the 40 percent mark, according to a survey by the Barna Research Group (February 28th news release). The survey found that less than four in 10 (37 percent) Americans said they had attended a church service in the last seven days. This 1996 figure has declined by one-quarter from the 1991 level and is the lowest level measured since Barna began tracking religious involvement in 1986. The most significant decline was among the baby boomers. Only three in 10 (31 percent) had attended church in the last seven days. In the years 1991 through 1995, more than four in 10 (42 percent), on average, had attended church in a given week. In 1991, half of all boomers (50 percent) had attended church in the past seven days. (Barna Research Group, 647 West Broadway, Glendale, CA 91204-1007)

**MANY EVANGELICALS
FAILING TEST
ON ORTHODOXY**

* In the last several years, the Barna Research Group has been regularly

polling evangelicals on their knowledge and adherence to Christian doctrines and has found a strong disparity between such beliefs (or the lack of them) and the high percentage of commitment to the evangelical faith. A recent poll (March 18 news release) found that while the majority of born again Christians (87 percent) indicate their religious beliefs are very important in their lives, eight in 10 (84 percent) hold a non-evangelical view on at least one of eight statements of biblical teaching. Half of the respondents express agreement with the statement that the devil or Satan is not a living being but a symbol of evil." Three in 10 claim that "Jesus Christ was a great teacher, but he did not come back to physical life after he was crucified." In contrast to the evangelical belief that the only basis for admittance to heaven is by confessing one's sins and accepting Christ as savior, 39 percent agree that "if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven." Barna notes that in many cases non-Christian Americans had personal beliefs that paralleled those of born-again Christians.

**CHURCH OF
ENGLAND
EVANGELICALS
ALSO HAVE
PROBLEMS
KEEPING YOUTH**

* Although evangelicals in the Church of England are the fastest-growing segment of the church, they are having less success at drawing and keeping youth, according to Quadrant (March), the newsletter of the London-based Christian Research Association. A new analysis of the 1989 English Church Census divides Church of England parishes into broad, mainstream, and charismatic evangelicals and all others. It was found that 35 percent of evangelical Anglican churches grew compared with 26 percent of other Anglican churches. There were found to be more evangelical Anglicans in urban environments and suburbs, but far less in rural and remote areas. Evangelicals have more people under 15 (the charismatics do especially well with this age group) as well as attracting those in their twenties. But evangelical Anglicans did not do significantly better than other churches in keeping their teenagers. It was also found that where the clergy are older in evangelical churches, there are significantly fewer children under 10 in church or Sunday school and more older worshippers. The newsletter adds that "clergy may need to recognize that skills change with age, and reexamine their children's work to see if they are still attracting children." (Quadrant, Christian Research, Vision Building, 4 Footscray Rd., Eltham, London SE9 2TZ)

**CATHOLIC
ATTENDANCE FALLS
IN ENGLAND, WALES**

* Although the Catholic population is growing in England and Wales, fewer Catholics are attending Sunday Mass, according to The Tablet (March 2), a British Catholic magazine. Between 1981 and 1995, the Catholic population grew from 4,257,789 to 4,404,690 (much of the growth took place between 1992 and 1993, leaping by almost 250,000). Yet, between 1988 and 1995, estimated Sunday Mass attendance fell by almost 200,000 from 1,385,408 to 1,190,307, according to the 1996 Catholic Directory. A church official, however, says that not all Catholics attended Mass every Sunday and for every 100 people who attended on a given Sunday, a different 100 people might attend on another day. (The Tablet, 1 King St. Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London, W6 0Q2 England)

**AUSTRALIA'S
CHARISMATIC
GROWTH, WITH
THE HELP OF
TORONTO
BLESSING**

Australia is experiencing an upsurge of charismatic growth largely due to North American influence, though without the divisions and tensions that have recently racked the ranks of charismatics in the U.S. and Canada, according to a report in Charisma magazine (March). Charismatics and

Pentecostals are finding a growing number of converts (often through well-attended crusades) and congregations being planted (reportedly one every five days in the Assemblies of God) thanks largely to the Toronto blessing, a phenomenon where participants experience such "manifestations" as falling, weeping and laughter. The Toronto blessing has become a divisive issue in North America, evident in the recent expulsion of the "mother church" of the blessing from the Vineyard Churches over charges of excessive emotionalism and unbiblical behavior (such as participants allegedly making "animal noises").

What is noteworthy about the charismatic revival in Australia is that the Toronto blessing has been embraced by the mainstream Pentecostal Assemblies of God and the mainline denominational charismatics (such as the Anglicans and Baptists), as well as by the independent charismatics, the group which has largely experienced and fostered the phenomenon in North America. This unity in support of the blessing (which is often called the "river of God," or "fire of the Spirit," rather than the "Toronto Blessing") has given a new visibility to Australian Pentecostals and charismatics, who number approximately 300,000. The magazine adds that many Australian charismatic leaders now "believe that their nation has a pivotal role to play in God's plan to win Asia, post-communist Europe and the South Pacific." [It should be noted that the Toronto blessing has also found widespread acceptance in England and other countries where Pentecostals and charismatics are a small minority.] (Charisma, 600 Rinehart Rd., Lake Mary, FL 32746)

SCHISM LOOMING IN EASTERN ORTHODOXY?

Eastern Orthodoxy is experiencing an increase in political divisions that may eventually result in a major schism in the Orthodox world, according to news reports. The most recent division in Orthodoxy centers around the conflict between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople over which church body has jurisdiction over Orthodox Christians in Estonia. There have been similar disputes in recent years over jurisdiction in other Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe, such as Moldova, that have followed in the wake of the fall of communism and major realignments of nationalist loyalties, reports Ecumenical News International Bulletin (March 12). The conflict over Estonia has for the first time shut down relations between the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church and Constantinople, which are both important centers of Orthodox authority.

The significance of this breach may be far reaching. The British Catholic magazine The Tablet (March 9) adds that the growth of nationalism in Eastern Europe and former Soviet states is leading a number of Orthodox communities to challenge the Moscow Patriarchate's authority. "The existence of a possible alternative focus of loyalty represented by Constantinople has supplied a theological rationale for these shifts. The prospect now exists that the other Orthodox churches, such as in Finland, Ukraine and even countries like Belarus, will alter their allegiance, or split into warring pro-Moscow or pro-Constantinople factions...It is becoming clear that the collapse of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Empire has set up divisive political and social stresses between churches, which are stronger than the ancient Orthodox instinct for koinonia." (Ecumenical News International, P.O. Box 2100, 150, route de Ferney CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland)

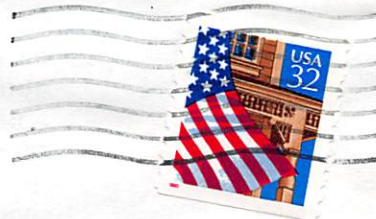
**CHINA SEEKS
JAPANESE-STYLE
BUDDHIST REVIVAL**

China's recent conflict with the Dalai Lama reveals a new Chinese strategy to "tap into a growing Buddhist revival across Asia" in order to create moral and spiritual values in their nation, according to the Pacific News Service (March 11-15). The tensions between Beijing and the Dalai Lama recently came to a head when Chinese leaders rejected the Tibetan Buddhist leader's choice of a six-year-old boy to fill the second highest post in Tibetan Buddhism--known as the Panchen Lama-- for their own six-year-old candidate. At the same time, Chinese leaders have sought to discredit the Dalai Lama by exposing the religious leader's associations with Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese group accused of gassing the Tokyo subways last year. Although the Dalai Lama has been trying to disassociate his movement from Aum since the attacks (Tibetan leaders had grown increasingly critical of the Japanese group since 1990), a Chinese government-sponsored magazine is charging the Buddhist leader of using Aum and its leader Shoko Asahara to reform Japanese Buddhism and destroy Japan's Buddhist clergy who have maintained close ties to China.

Such ties have deep roots, as many of the Japanese sects (such as the large and fast growing Soka Gokkai) trace their origins to temples founded in China, according to writer Yoichi Clark Shimatsu. Many of Japan's Buddhist sects also belong to a tradition that is "deeply hostile to the Tibetan clergy" due to conflicts dating back to the 13th century. "Many Japanese Buddhists anticipate a Buddhist revival of China-- one in which Mao's populism and Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms will combine with Buddhist values of family and community to create a vision of an earthly utopia," writes Shimatsu. An example of such support could be seen in a recent visit to China by the head of a Buddhist temple from Japan who "beamed his satisfaction over that country's commitment to agriculture, education and health care." China is likely to reciprocate such interest, as Beijing "looks to a Buddhist revival to fill the spiritual void in the Asian heartland so long as it does not challenge the nominally secular authorities. Such a revival could provide the major impetus into the Pacific Century. Like all Utopias, it could also be fraught with disaster," Shimatsu concludes. (Pacific News Service, 450 Mission St., Rm. 204, San Francisco, CA 94105)

Religion Watch

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