

# RELIGION WATCH

A Newsletter Monitoring Trends In Contemporary Religion

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## URBAN RELIGION-- PLURALISTIC WITH WEAKENING TIES TO NEIGHBORHOODS

The religious and ethnic pluralism in urban America is becoming increasingly visible and accepted, but such pluralism may also be a factor in the tendency of congregations to have less connections to their neighborhoods, according to recent research. Harvard Today magazine (September/October) reports that non-Judeo-Christian faiths are becoming increasingly part of the religious mainstream in American cities, especially evident in interfaith organizations. The magazine reports on the work of the Pluralism Project, a study headed by Diana Eck of Harvard University. In examining ethnic and religious pluralism across the U.S., Eck finds wide public acceptance of such religious minorities as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Zoroastrian communities. Most of the first generation immigrant religious institutions are largely invisible. For instance, the first generation of American mosques can be found in places like a former watch factory in the New York City borough of Queens. "The past decade, however, has also seen the beginnings of a striking new visible landscape," with new mosques and Islamic centers found in the urban centers of Manhattan and Phoenix, as well as in the suburbs. Across the country new houses of worship are appearing in such heretofore unlikely places as in the Middle West and the South.

Urban inter-religious councils that were once largely Jewish and Christian are now multi-religious, even in such largely Christian cities as Tulsa, Oklahoma and Lincoln, Nebraska. Often the inter-religious nature of these councils mediate conflicts involving the new pluralism. The Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., brought Jews and Muslims together in the wake of the Hebron massacre of 1994. Because of a new relationship of trust between these religions in the city, the head of the Washington board of rabbis offered prayers on New Hampshire Avenue in front of the Muslim Community Center. Because of the large degree of ethnic and religious pluralism in academia--students from non-Judeo-Christian faiths at Harvard represent over five percent of the student body--universities have become laboratories for the testing and dissemination of teaching on religious pluralism. Graduate schools are retooling their programs to prepare teachers in these fields. Eck says that the study of American Christianity is being altered by its use of many of the tools of critical research used on non-Western religions, such as language studies, textual studies, and translations.

Meanwhile, there is an increasing tendency for urban congregations to have fewer connections to their immediate neighborhoods, according to a recent study by the Religion in Urban America Program at the University

of Illinois at Chicago. Urban areas are in a period of change; growing ethnic pluralism has changed neighborhood boundaries and the postindustrial restructuring of the labor market has created greater transiency and fewer incentives to base most of one's activities within one neighborhood. The project's survey of 60 congregations reveals three basic patterns of how congregations relate to their neighborhoods. One group or type of congregation--representing a large number of Catholic parishes-- is still closely linked to their surrounding neighborhood, with members coming from the community and most primary relationships and outreach taking place within the neighborhood. The second type of congregation functions as a community in itself without being related to a particular neighborhood. These congregations spanned the religious spectrum--from mainline Protestant to Jewish and Muslim, except for Catholics--and their primary relationships and identity were based on ethnic and religious factors.

The last group of congregations also had weak ties with their neighborhoods but generated few close relationships between members. These congregations--which ranged from a large Catholic parish and evangelical megachurch to Hindu temples-- addressed public or city-wide (rather than local) concerns and attracted mobile urban dwellers whose religious commitments are based more on choice rather than family or community ties. While these congregations may not alleviate the social isolation of neighborhood residents, they reflect current urban trends and may serve the needs of many in today's cities whose moral values are not derived from primary communities. Although the survey may not be representative of all American urban congregations, it does illuminate the changing relations of congregations to their neighborhoods in cities, according to the project's director, Lowell Livezey, who presented this preliminary research at the conference of the Association of the Sociology of Religion in New York in August. (Harvard Today, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, MA 02138-4037)--*This report was written with Erling Jorstad, RW contributing editor*

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**METROPOLITAN  
COMMUNITY CHURCH  
GROWING,  
INTENSIFYING  
GAY RIGHTS  
ACTIVISM**

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) is becoming an established denomination that is growing rapidly among homosexuals and taking a more activist position on gay rights issues, reports the Washington Post (September 29). The MCC is the largest U.S. denomination ministering to mostly homosexuals and its steady growth is somewhat of an anomaly among liberal religious groups, writes Laurie Goodstein. The 42,000-member denomination finds more worshippers at its services than official members, compared to most mainline denominations that count fewer at Sunday services than on their official membership rolls. Last month the 28-year-old denomination moved into a \$3.5 million dollar headquarters in West Hollywood, Calif. Denominational officials said MCC members in the U.S. donated more than \$11 million in offerings last year, exceeding donations to large secular gay political organizations such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. One of the nation's fastest-growing churches is the MCC's Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, which has quadrupled to 1,734 members in the past eight years. The MCC is an eclectic denomination blending liturgical worship with evangelical and charismatic teachings and practices and liberal theology.

Inclusive language is used in most congregations, such as referring to the Trinity as the "Parent, the Child and the Holy Spirit."

While most ministers have been trained and ordained in other Protestant denominations, "an increasing number of new ministers have been trained within the MCC," Goodstein writes. The congregations often walk a "fine line between refusing to condemn certain kinds of behavior--there is a spiritual support group for 'leather people,' for example--and yet clearly encouraging committed, monogamous relationships," she adds. With the growing number of couples who have children, either through adoption or artificial insemination, many MCC churches are experiencing their own "baby boom," establishing Sunday schools for children. MCC congregations have been very active in performing homosexual marriages (called "holy union" ceremonies). The recent vote by Congress allowing states to deny recognition of gay marriages is viewed as a violation of religious freedom and is drawing some MCC clergy to publicly fight this decision. Daniel Zingale of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay organization, says that "in the way that black churches were essential in advancing civil rights, you'll see the MCC emerge as an important force in the struggle for gay rights."

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#### **AMERICAN EVANGELICALS TURN TO HUMAN RIGHTS DRIVE**

American evangelicals have recently become active in pressing for human rights among their fellow believers around the world-- a crusade that is finding growing support by the U.S. Government, reports the Washington Post (September 22). The growing concern about religious freedom and human rights violations among evangelicals first found public expression last January when the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) released a "call to action" on the issue, citing such violations as China's imprisonment of pastors, and Muslim oppression of Christian minorities in Middle Eastern and African countries. While evangelicals involved in the current human rights drive admit that the problem is not new, they say that the evangelical community has been largely silent on such issues partly out of fear of jeopardizing missionaries and other Christians evangelizing abroad.

The mounting number of documented cases of Christian oppression in restricted countries--compiled by such groups as Freedom House's Puebla Program on Religious Freedom--compelled evangelicals to speak out on the issue, says Richard Cizik of the NAE. Laurie Goodstein reports that evangelical leaders are "seeking to elevate the cause to a national campaign modeled on the Jewish community's ultimately successful efforts in the 1970s and 80s to free Soviet Jews." One recent evangelical rallying call on the issue was the establishment of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, observed by more than 100,000 American churches. In response to such activism, the Clinton administration is forming an advisory committee on religious freedom to be housed in the State Department. In mid-September, the Senate unanimously passed a nonbinding resolution condemning "egregious" abuses of "Christians around the world" and calling on responsible governments to stop such persecution. A similar measure was to be passed by the House of Representatives in late September. One White House official said that today's situation is more complex than that of the Soviet Jews, who wanted to leave an oppressive country. It is far more difficult to influence foreign countries to change the way they treat religious minorities.

**CHRISTIAN  
PSYCHOTHERAPY  
DRAWING  
CRITICISM FOR  
METHODS,  
TREATMENTS**

Christianity Today magazine (September 16) reports that while the Christian psychotherapy movement has shown enormous growth, there is also a growing tide of criticism of its programs. Since the 1970s, Americans have become deeply involved in Christian-oriented therapy to deal with such concerns as self-esteem, family values and self-help. The movement's strength today is represented by such conglomerates as Minirth-Meir/New Life Clinics with over 600 employees in 25 inpatient units and 55 outpatient units. Another organization, Rapha, works in cooperation with 3,500 member churches--which is a growing trend in Christian counseling.

Yet critics, such as Christian counseling pioneer Gary Collins, think the movement has become too cost-conscious as managed care programs set the pace for the administration of psychotherapy. Others believe it is too involved in some highly controversial areas, such as repressed memory treatments, healing touch and hypnosis therapy. Conservative critics such as Paul Vitz and John MacArthur argue that Christian psychotherapy can lead to narcissism and become too humanistically oriented. Both practitioners and critics agree the movement is at a crossroads. It can continue its current course, with the approval of large numbers of satisfied clients. Or it can respond to its critics, keeping its message more directly in harmony with formal Christian doctrine. (Christianity Today, 465 Gundersen Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188)--By *Erling Jorstad*

**JEWISH GROUPS  
FACING CLERGY  
SEXUAL ABUSE  
ISSUES**

While cases and allegations of sexual abuse have centered on Catholic and Protestant clergy, the problem is present to a similar degree among Jewish rabbis, writes Debra Nussbaum Cohen in the Daily News Bulletin of the Jewish Telegraph Agency (September 17 and 18). Although there are no official statistics, one study conducted in the mid-1980s found that among the 60 largest Reform synagogues, allegations of rabbinic sexual misconduct resulted in nearly as many pulpit changes in a 20-year span as deaths and retirements combined. Experts on clergy sexual misconduct estimate that the incidence of rabbinic sexual exploitation is about the same as among Protestant ministers (which one 1992 study estimated as high as 39 percent of mainline clergy having had sexual relationships of some type with congregants). Many rabbis and Jewish leaders argue that the Protestant figures cannot be applied to the rabbinate. They point out that the traditional view of the rabbi as being a teacher does not carry the connotations of power found among pastors and priests. Other specialists and observers of clergy sexual abuse, such as Rabbi Howard Jaffe of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, however, say that in reality most rabbis function today more as pastors than strictly as teachers.

Cohen reports that critics, victims and a small group of rabbis working on the issue charge that Jewish organizations and denominations are still ineffective in dealing with rabbi sexual abuse. The Reconstructionist and Reform denominations have enacted policies that deal with the issue, as well as openly discussing such concerns at public gatherings. Instances of sexual abuse have rarely been brought to the attention of the leaderships of Conservative and Orthodox Jewish organizations, although such cases have been made public by victims. In many synagogues of all denominations, "rabbinic perpetrators often move to another job within

their movements or even stay in the same pulpit after a slap on the wrist from their rabbinical organizations," Cohen writes. The victims often go away and divorce themselves from the Jewish community and, in some cases, convert to other religions. A complicating issue in Jewish synagogues is that it is acceptable for single rabbis to date their congregants--a practice that activists are challenging. Cohen also notes that the four major rabbinical seminaries do not offer full courses devoted to issues of rabbinic sexual ethics and behavior. (Jewish Telegraph Agency, 330 Seventh Ave., 11th fl., New York, NY 10001)

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**AMERICAN JEWS  
RETURNING  
TO JEWISH-BASED  
ACTIVISM**

There is a revival of liberal Jewish social activism that puts the accent on Jewish identity, according to Fellowship (September/October), the magazine of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation. Jews are "reclaiming the symbols of Judaism" in their social activism "that have been publicly captured by right-wing religious groups," writes Carolyn Toll Oppenheim. Since the civil rights movement, "most Jews seeking radical social change had turned to grass-roots secular movements or worked as individuals with Quakers, Unitarians, or in interfaith movements with no organized Jewish presence." Much of the new activism has developed under the banner of the Jewish renewal movement, which links the rituals and teachings of Judaism with liberal and radical social concern, especially environmentalism [represented by such a publication as Tikkun; see November '94 RW for more on this movement].

But also many "liberal Jews whose primary identification with Judaism--social activism--had previously been expressed apart from any Jewish communal group" are now working together with other Jews, some of them affiliated with congregations. Examples of such activism include members of Jewish congregations in San Francisco "showing up at budget hearings protesting social service cuts; In Minneapolis, the Jewish Metropolitan Organizing Project is working on state legislation to redress the inequalities in resources between the cities and suburbs. (Fellowship, Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960)

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**WICCA TAKES  
MORE ACCESSIBLE,  
PUBLIC  
EXPRESSION**

Wicca, a Neopagan faith mainly centered on goddess worship, is gaining a more public face, as well as seeking to pass on its teachings to the next generation, according to an article in New Age Journal (September/October). Wicca has generally been considered the largest of and fastest growing of the Neopagan movements, with estimates of the numbers of participants ranging from 50,000 to 800,000. While Wicca has largely attracted women, more men are involved today. The most significant change in Wicca is the shift to more public practice, according to sociologist Mary Jo Neitz, who has studied the movement since 1987. Large, well-attended festivals often serve as doorways to Wicca as much as regular meetings. There are also "public teaching covens," where inquirers can learn about Wicca without necessarily joining. "Wiccans have also begun forming large worship groups," with one example being the Aquarian Tabernacle Church near Seattle, writes Erica Manfred.

The concern to make the faith accessible is also evident in such seminaries as Our Lady of Enchantment in Nashua, New Hampshire, which offers classes, home study, and priesthood training, as well as a 12-

lesson witchcraft correspondence course given through the Church and School of Wicca in New Bern, North Carolina. The tie between Wicca and the more mainstream Unitarian Church through the denomination's Covenant of Unitarian-Universalist Pagans has given Wiccans more acceptance as well as a channel through which to pass on the faith to their children, Manfred writes. She notes, however, that most Wiccan covens still tend to meet privately to guard members' identities, as well as to preserve the intimacy of the group. (New Age Journal, 42 Pleasant St., Watertown, MA 02172)

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

##### **MERGED CONGREGATIONS FACE DECLINE, NEED GOAL-SETTING**

\* The increasing mergers between mainline congregations may intensify membership declines, but those churches that approach mergers with clear goals for the future show the best signs of growth and stability, according to a recent study. The study, Merging Successfully (published by the Alban Institute) by Carol Gregg, was conducted among 216 Presbyterian congregations that were formed by way of a merger between 1983 and 1993. Mergers between congregations are not always cases of "absorption"--when smaller struggling churches are joined with larger congregations. Only 38 percent of mergers fell into this category, according to Gregg. Fifty six percent of the mergers studied were congregations of equal size (from having less than 100 to over 200 members) who joined forces in order to strengthen their congregational life and denominational witness in their communities.

Gregg found that the majority of merged congregations have declined at a higher rate than their denomination. While the Presbyterian Church (USA) has declined an average rate of -1.24 percent per year since 1983, the average decline rate for merged congregations was -5.7 percent. It is noted, however, that these declines do not stem from conflict or an unwillingness to merge; most members supported such arrangements, believing that their mergers have worked. Those merged congregations that have been most successful have clear goals for the future, as, for instance, in planning a new building. The most important factors for successful mergers are communication and a sense of stewardship-- the concern to share ministries in order to save and wisely use resources-- among members; pastoral leadership was found to be secondary to such factors. (Alban Institute, Suite 433 North, 4550 Montgomery Ave., Bethesda, MD 20814)

##### **ALMOST 10 PERCENT OF U.S. POPULATION CHARISMATICS, PENTECOSTALS**

\* Attempting to find out how many charismatics and Pentecostals there are in the U.S. has been difficult, mostly because these Christians can belong to other non-charismatic denominations or congregations independent of any church body. But recent surveys that identify charismatics-Pentecostals by their religious experience--speaking in tongues and self-identification with these movements--rather than denominational affiliation find that 7.2 percent of Americans can be considered "core" members of these "Spirit-filled movements." Researchers Corwin Smidt and Lyman Kellstedt find that nine percent of Americans claim the gift of tongues and 12 percent identify with the movements. Nearly half of these core members identify with evangelical Protestantism, while only 10 percent are in mainline denominations. About 20 percent each come from the black Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, according to the evangelical digest Current Thoughts & Trends (October). While these movements have "broad appeal and staying power,"

the differences among them prevents them from exerting a strong impact on society, according to the researchers. (Current Thoughts & Trends, 7889 Lexington Dr., Colorado Springs, CO 80902)

**INDEPENDENT  
CONGREGATION-  
PLANTING  
FLOURISHES**

\* The same issue of Current Thoughts & Trends cites research by church growth specialist Lyle Schaller showing that the biggest increase in the establishment of congregations has come from the independent, nondenominational sector. About 3,000 of such new churches have formed annually, or 75,000, between the period of 1968 and 1993. These churches' identities are found more in style of worship, zeal for outreach and missions, theology and teaching, and the personality and priorities of the founding pastor rather than in denominational heritage.

**UNITED  
METHODIST  
CLERGY GRAYING,  
DECLINING**

\* Clergy in the United Methodist Church are becoming older and their ranks are thinning, even with the influx of women into the pastorate, according to a recent study. From 1974 to 1994, the number of men ordained in the church fell from just under 700 a year to a little under 400. For women, the numbers increased significantly, although not enough to offset the decrease in male clergy, according to the study, "United Methodism and American Culture," directed by Duke University Divinity School. For both male and female clergy, the totals fell sharply in the last two years of the study, 1993 and 1994, reports Ecumenical News International Bulletin (August 21). Meanwhile, the average age of new pastors at ordination has risen dramatically; from 1974 to 1993, the average age for male clergy in the church rose from 28 to 36. The average age for female pastors during the same period rose from 28 to a high of 43, before falling to 41 in 1993. (ENI Bulletin, P.O. Box 2100, 150, route de Ferney, CH-1211, Geneva 2, Switzerland)

**GROWING  
DISAFFECTION  
FROM WHITE  
SOUTH AFRICAN  
CHURCHES**

\* While there has been a dramatic increase in the number of black Christians in South Africa, there is a growing drift away from the white mainstream churches, according to a recent book on South African religion. The book, "Meeting the Future," co-authored by theologian Jurgens Hendriks, finds that between 1980 and 1991, the percentage of Christians in the white population dropped from 91.7 percent to 77.9 percent, reports Ecumenical News International Bulletin (September 25). Hendriks writes that the decline in white churches began around 1985, the final years of apartheid, when many members left churches that they felt had become increasingly politicized in the struggle. The situation was exacerbated when the Dutch Reformed Church, which had provided a theological rationale for apartheid, recanted at the end of the 1980s, confusing many white Afrikaners. Others left because they felt the churches were not doing enough for the disadvantaged. Hendriks says, "We are seeing the same trends which Europe experienced just after World War II and the United States in 1965." Meanwhile, the figures also show a sharp increase of black Christians (no statistics are provided in the report), especially those linked to the African independent churches.

**SERIOUS  
DECLINE  
IN CHURCH  
ATTENDANCE,  
CONGREGATIONS  
IN WALES**

\* There has been a "severe" decline in Welsh churchgoing in the last decade, according to a recent report from the Welsh Churches Survey. Wales has been known as the land of churches with one congregation for every 600 people--twice as many as in the United Kingdom as a whole. But since 1982, the number of churches in Wales has dropped 13 percent. This rate is a quarter of the closure rate in the UK. The total number of people going to church has dropped significantly from 1982 to 1995. In 1982, 14.6 percent of the population attended church, compared with 8.6 percent in 1995--again, a larger decline than is found in England and



Scotland, according to Quadrant, the newsletter of the British Christian Research Association. Wales also has the lowest proportion of children under 15 (17 percent) in church in Britain. Almost one-third of Welsh churchgoers are 65 or older, compared with 23 percent in Scotland and 19 percent in England. The Union of Welsh Independents, the Welsh Baptists and the United Reformed Church have the largest proportion of older churchgoers, while the smaller and newer denominations have the smallest. Those congregations holding services in Welsh (34 percent) also have the largest proportion of older people and the smallest congregations, averaging 20 people. (Quadrant, Christian Research, Vision Bldg., 4 Footscray Rd., Eltham, London SE9 2TZ England)

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