

**Against the Grain:  
The Word of God Community from 1967-1987**

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*For my friends who are just as curious as me, and for my family*

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## INTRODUCTION

America today, in 2009, is divided. Americans currently face a war of ideas and values: a culture war. The battlegrounds are the institutions of government, schools, media, and the family, and the fierce disagreements are over abortion, homosexuality, birth control, and truth. Two forces face each other: liberal (progressive)<sup>1</sup> and conservative (orthodox).<sup>2</sup> This division began long before 2009 and is part of decades of cultural polarization; historians trace the roots of this battle to the radical changes of the 1960s and 1970s. I argue that out of this turmoil sprang these two major groups—both of which passionately defend their beliefs and their values against the other group. In popular history the sixties and seventies are seen as radically progressive decades and a failure for conservatives. One friend casually remarked, “Where did these conservatives come from? Didn’t they go through the sixties and seventies too?” Yet the roots of both groups (progressive and conservative) emerge from the same period—the sixties and seventies. It is precisely these decades that gave birth to the modern conservative groups as well as the radical progressive groups. Historians have described the seventies not so much as a radical decade as a polarizing decade.<sup>3</sup> It was the leftist groups that received all the media attention, but the new right conservative movement was quietly picking up steam too and defending the cultural and tradition values that were seemingly rejected in the sixties.<sup>4</sup> But these two groups were not entirely separate from the start as I will show. The radicalism of the sixties produced

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<sup>1</sup> James Davidson Hunter uses the term “progressive” in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). I will use “liberal,” “progressive,” and “leftist” interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Hunter uses the term “orthodox”; I will use “conservative,” “orthodox,” and “traditional” interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. by Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>4</sup> And in 1980, after over a decade of radical ferment, it was conservative Ronald Reagan who was elected to the presidency, overwhelmingly in fact. And since Reagan, other conservatives have held the office, just as other liberals have.

morally conservative groups as well as liberal groups. That is to say, some conservatism of our time was born out of the countercultural turmoil of the previous decades. Today, there does not seem to be any clear majority in America, and so the culture wars rages on.

This paper recounts the story of a local Christian organization whose roots lie in the tumultuous decades of the sixties and seventies: the Word of God Community. Although this group adopted a radical community<sup>5</sup> lifestyle, its worldview and cultural outlook came to reflect those of traditional Christianity, strengthening overtime. In its ecumenical character, it exemplifies a broader American trend away from strong denominational identification to a stronger identification with Christians of other traditions who share a similar worldview, more so than with members of their own churches. The Word of God provides an interesting example of a group with conservative values whose focus was religious and cultural rather than political. They poured energy into living a particular way of life, seeking to embody their own cultural ideals rather than be carried by the flow of mass culture. They embodied a distinctive response to their discontent with society by forming a sub-society within it. Although this study only examines the first twenty years of the history of this group (1967-1987), the group, its past and current members, and its ideas have continued to influence American culture, particularly in south-eastern Michigan (see epilogue).

In the late 1960s, as Americans in general moved away from the primacy of their denominational identity (often rejecting all the old morals and traditions associated it), the Word of God Community was born out of radical changes of the 1960s but came to re-embrace religious identity and foster an environment of traditional moral values. The Community was composed of people who participated in the anti-institutional and creative

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper I will differentiate between “Community” (the Ann Arbor organization), and “community” (the ideal of committed, supportive, relational environment).

impulse of the sixties and seventies but came to adopt traditional values instead of rejecting them like many other groups. On the one hand, they began as Christian counter-culturalists, caught up in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements and rejection of the status quo in society. On the other hand, they grew into an organized body of Christians who upheld traditional Christian beliefs and values within a community life. They formed an identity based on shared experiences and beliefs, and they established stable communal relationships by making commitments to one another. Though the Word of God Community emerged from the radical discontent of the sixties culture, it diverged from other radical movements by becoming a bulwark of shared religious identity by embracing and defending traditional moral values.

### **Religious Context**

The Word of God Community was a Christian organization in Ann Arbor that arose from within—and eventually fostered—the Charismatic Renewal movement. The Charismatic Renewal movement<sup>6</sup> emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian and was characterized by lively prayer meetings with expressive, exuberant, and often emotional praise. The movement encouraged spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues (glossolalia) and prophecy, demonstrating such gifts regularly. Charismatics spoke of having a personal relationship with God, a prayer life characterized by spiritual experience, and energetic worship. The Word of God Community began as a charismatic prayer meeting in Ann Arbor in November 1967. It was started by Catholics, but soon attracted Protestants, as well as people from non-Christian backgrounds. The group grew rapidly in size, hosting

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<sup>6</sup> Charismatic Renewal is a term that indicates the impact of the Pentecostal movement on the Catholic Church. The Duquesne Weekend of Feb. 1967 is the event that is often hailed as the beginning of the Charismatic Renewal, although there are important precursors to this event.



many hundreds of people (people who had heard of the radical, new, and exciting events) at their weekly prayer meetings.

By 1973, merely six years after the birth of the Charismatic Renewal, there were close to 1000 prayer groups in America alone, including nearly 150 more internationally. Some 50,000 Catholics were thought to be seriously involved in the movement, not to mention Christians of other denominations.<sup>7</sup> It had become an important international movement, and it continued to grow. Though outwardly expressive and energetic, what set the Word of God Community apart from the rest of the movement was their additional desire for—and success in—deeper, longer lasting, face-to-face relationships. They expressly desired to be more than a weekly prayer meeting: they wanted to live with each other and share possessions and even their whole lives—that is, everything in their lives—with each other. In short, they wished to become a community. In this way they created a sub-culture that protected themselves and their children against the secular forces in American society (though they did not fully recognize this benefit until years later). In 1970 a core group of participants and leaders, who had already been meeting in addition to the primary prayer meeting, decided to form an official organization which they called The Word of God Community. The Community grew rapidly, eventually boasting some 1600 adult members with equally as many children. They participated in a common lifestyle of daily prayer, shared resources, biblical study, prayer meetings, educational courses, community service, weekend retreats, and evangelistic outreach.

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<sup>7</sup> Edward D. O’Conner, *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1971), 16-17.

## Cultural Context

The Word of God Community was born in the midst of the turmoil of the 1960s. Before any arguments can be made about the Community, it is necessary to understand the social ferment of the time that helped birth them. In addition to the context of their formation (the sixties) they lived through other periods in American history and must be compared to the cultural developments of later decades, that of the seventies and eighties. There are two major movements to which I will compare the Word of God Community: the countercultural youth of the sixties and early seventies and the Christian New Right that emerged from the seventies into the eighties. In addition to a brief overview of these groups, this paper will outline another broad and significant change in America: namely that of the identity shift from religious affiliation to ideological affinity.

### *America Before the Sixties*

To understand some of the social turmoil of the sixties, it is necessary to briefly outline American life before the sixties. In his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*,<sup>8</sup> William Herberg describes an America of the 1950s that was highly religious,<sup>9</sup> that is, a time in which almost all Americans primarily identified themselves as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. The identification with one's own religious tradition was strong while ethnic identity (among the second and third generation immigrants) was weakening: "With the religious community as the primary context of self-identification and social location, and with Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism as three culturally diverse representations of the same 'spiritual values,' it becomes virtually mandatory for the American to place himself in one or another

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<sup>8</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, revised ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> Highly religious in name, although religious beliefs apparently had little effect on everyday life decisions; see Herberg, 73.

of these groups.”<sup>10</sup> All three groups, while distinct from the others and often deeply skeptical of the others, shared common American values and ideology: an American way of life: “It is the American Way of Life that supplies American society with an ‘overarching sense of unity’ amid conflict.”<sup>11</sup> Despite different religious beliefs, the regular societal values, the “American Way of Life,” was shared by almost everyone.

These American values defined the period. Herberg describes these American values saying, “The American Way of Life is individualistic, dynamic, pragmatic. . . . [I]t defines an ethic of self reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement. . . . [I]t is humanitarian . . . optimistic. Americans are . . . generous. . . . [T]hey believe in progress, in self-improvement. . . . But above all, the American is idealistic.”<sup>12</sup> Democracy was a theme that tied these values together. On a practical level these ideals meant participating in the democracy, serving the poor, observing religion, and promoting “freedom and justice for all.” In addition to some of these qualities, Herberg said, “Americans tend to be moralistic: they are inclined to see all issues as plain and simple, black and white, issues of morality.”<sup>13</sup> Morality and values shaped the prominent American way of life.

Herberg makes a strong point about the American misconception of ideals and fulfilling those ideals: “Because Americans are so idealistic, they tend to confuse espousing an ideal with fulfilling it and are always tempted to regard themselves as good as the ideals they entertain.”<sup>14</sup> For example, because Americans valued justice then tended to think they were just. This breakdown between ideals and reality was a key aspect of what would spark

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<sup>10</sup> Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

the sixties' counterculture; the American youth saw an incongruity with the ideals Americans espoused and what America was fulfilling.

### *Sixties Counterculture*

In the sixties, Americans—the youth in particular—became impatient with the chasm they saw in American society between their American ideals and the reality. To them America's cultural values were hypocritical, and moneyed interests were corrupting society. They were fed up with society and government. Frances Fitzgerald makes some keen observations about sixties and seventies communities in her book *Cities on a Hill*. Though Americans had claimed to be tolerant and generous and compromising, “In the sixties this picture [of the common virtues of the American Way of Life] changed. It was shattered in one way by the bitter conflict over the Vietnam War and all the other angry confrontations of the period: Americans, it seemed, were not always tolerant and pragmatic; the United States was not always a consensus society.”<sup>15</sup> The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement exposed an image of America that the youth rejected.

American youth rejected the image of America that they saw. They turned against all forms of American authority. Stephanie Slocum-Schaffer says of sixties' counterculture in her book *America in the Seventies*, “Nearly every form of established authority was a target for challenge by disillusioned youth and minorities—from general laws, to the church, to their very own homes.”<sup>16</sup> In their eyes, these institutions were bankrupt. Youth showed their desire for a better America by protesting what they saw and often trying to recreate their own

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<sup>15</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, *Cities on a Hill* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 173.

version of America. Youth left their churches and broke away from the expectation of their parents. Most of all, these discontent youth changed themselves.

In addition to the perception of America's failure, the sixties' counterculture youths shared an optimism that they could change America, that they could not only bring new ideals, they could also live out those ideals. According to Fitzgerald, this called for radical change: ". . . all of these movements put together seemed to be on the verge of effecting a major cultural transformation in the country, changing the whole society radically at once."<sup>17</sup> Although this change was never fully realized, it was nonetheless part of the hope and goal of sixties movements: to change America radically. Even though the whole of America society did not fully change, the sixties generation was successful in changing itself: "Looking back, however, it's apparent that in the sixties and seventies, white middle-class society changed more decisively than it had in many decades—perhaps even since the turn of the century."<sup>18</sup> The American middle-class was losing its traditional identity;<sup>19</sup> people, particularly young people, were redefining themselves.

In this time of societal discontent new movements thrived. One has only to look briefly at the sixties to find dozens of new groups, communities, and movements. Examples include the hippie movement, the gay rights movement, the Jesus movement, the feminist movement, the growth of Californian mega-churches, war protests, et cetera.<sup>20</sup> Not everyone joined a radical group, but the proliferation of such new and radical groups was staggering.

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<sup>17</sup> Fitzgerald, *Cities* 19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps because of a shift from industrial occupations to informational occupations and the increase of university education; see Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 60-100.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2003), 2. Oppenheimer argues for the disunity (distinctiveness) of these groups spread over time.

For many groups, rejecting institutions and hypocritical ideals led to another step: some of these groups sought radical moral change. In addition to political and societal discontent, youth movements—like the hippies—rejected older views of sexuality, gender roles, and religion: “The dominant sector of society—the white middle class—transformed itself quite deliberately, and from the inside out, changing its costumes, its sexual mores, its family arrangements, and its religious patters.”<sup>21</sup> The youth had participated in the Civil Rights movement and protested the war, but some of them also embraced changes to sexuality, religion, and family. Taboos and tradition were regarded as old-fashioned, out-of-date, and hypocritical. Anything could be changed (and most of it should be!). Despite the seeming rejection of traditional values in this period, some of the college-aged youth of that period retained the Christian and American values with which they had been raised (democracy, Christianity, care for the poor, sincerity, truthfulness rather than hypocrisy, justice for all, freedom, etc.), but which they felt were being betrayed (by politicians, corporate greed, hypocritical religion, etc). Youth were coming out of the woodwork rejecting authority and proclaiming a better way; they rethought politics, social order, family arrangements, religion, and values.

### *Conservative Response to the Counterculture*

Other groups, of course, saw the changes of the sixties and seventies and reacted strongly, particularly to the moral changes. For this paper I look specifically at the Christian New Right (as opposed to the New Right in general). Recent studies like *Rightward Bound* have traced the roots of conservative political institutions to the early seventies. “Toiling in the political wilderness [of the 1970s], an incipient New Right took shape, organizing

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<sup>21</sup> Fitzgerald, *Cities*, 390.

suburban housewives, small businessmen, crew-cut collegians . . . .”<sup>22</sup> In the center of changing political and cultural spheres was religion: “One cannot begin to understand the sea change in American political culture in the 1970s without grasping the centrality of religion to that transformation.”<sup>23</sup> Outside major cities and college campuses, communities of Americans struggled against the tide of counterculture. This reaction would eventually culminate in political groups, including Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, a religiously-motivated political coalition.

Fitzgerald describes Falwell’s church which looked like the quintessential-fifties portrait of American. They hadn’t changed, but the world around them had: “The people in Falwell’s church look so much like those [fifties] television-commercial Americans it was as if the images had walked off the screen twenty-five years later. Only now it was they who looked exotic.”<sup>24</sup> This church typified an ideal fifties family life; in fact, it looked like they had never left the fifties. Falwell would preach against the dangers of big cities and modern immorality to his traditional American congregation. Through the seventies, Fundamentalist churches like this had experienced a large scale revival.<sup>25</sup> Part of this fundamental or evangelical worldview pitted itself against the “evils” of America: materialism, anti-Americanism, and loose morals and sexuality. Groups such as this reacted to the sixties’ counterculture because they were never part of it, and they defended traditional American morals and the traditional American Way of Life against this impact of counterculture. In a way, groups like Falwell’s Church began to feel like they were countercultural, that is, they went against the grain of American society.

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<sup>22</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, and Julian E. Zelizer, intro. to *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence,” 29.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzgerald, *Cities*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald, *Cities*, 14.

Large sections of the evangelical revival were just as concerned for conservative politics as they were for Christian morals. Fitzgerald claims, “Falwell’s church was the wellspring of his politics. . . .”<sup>26</sup> Religion, in fact, is often discussed as a means of political values—the Catholic vote, the Christian Coalition, etc. Examples of the marriage of politics and religion are plentiful.<sup>27</sup> Originally Falwell had kept out of politics, but “In 1979, having rethought his skepticism about politics, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority to rally evangelicals behind candidates committed to a ‘pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, and pro-America’ agenda. Falwell summed up his strategy succinctly: ‘Get them saved, baptized, and registered.’”<sup>28</sup> By the end of the seventies and into the eighties, conservatives like Falwell used their religion to propel them into politics. Sunday sermons gave opinions on American politics, and well-known ministers publicly endorsed candidates (on both sides). Politics became a way of returning America to the way it had been.

### *Shifting American Identities*

The overarching changes in America are bound up with a shift away from a religious denominational identity. This change affected both the counterculture and the New Right reaction. Though this section began with the Herberg’s classification of Americans as Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, the sixties and seventies youth generation barely identified with—in fact, many rejected—their denominational heritage. Though the fifties were an affirmation of religious identity tied closely to an “American way of life,”<sup>29</sup> the sixties

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, many history books, which study or reference religion in the seventies, emphasize the connection between religion and politics.

<sup>28</sup> Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence,” 44.

<sup>29</sup> Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, 81.



witnessed a drastic and decisive departure from religious identity and common spiritual values of the fifties. Something drastic had changed in American culture. The young generation rejected the traditions of their parents and hit the road. Fitzgerald says, “Their parents and their elders were living lies—they were stuck in their role-playing and in their absurd social conformity. For the young the supreme virtues were those of openness and risk taking: all institutions of society were empty and had to go.”<sup>30</sup> A major theme of new movements was precisely that: new. Old forms, institutions, and values had to go, and one of the first institutions to go was the church. Young people left the churches of their parents in search of their own community and identity—an identity no longer enthusiastic about religion. Even among Christian groups—like the Jesus movement—young Christians left their old churches for new, non-denominational (or loosely denominational) churches and preachers.

Many of those who felt little denominational affinity began to find a sense of community within their political groups or social causes—those formed around a common ideal or ideology. Out of this seventies storm came a “host of new and important religions, all the political and social movements of the late sixties and early seventies, literally hundreds of communes and other experiments in communal living . . . the drug culture . . . and so on.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of identifying with the church of their parents, many youth found identity with those who shared similar beliefs (not generally theological beliefs but rather cultural beliefs). Even those who stayed in their churches increasingly began to identify primarily with their cultural and political values (conservative or liberal). Young people still

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<sup>30</sup> Fitzgerald, *Cities*, 408.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

wanted and needed identity and community,<sup>32</sup> and they looked for it among those who shared similar ideas and values, or experiences regardless of what religious background they came from. It was a belief that they could define their own approach to religion that characterized the generation.

### *The Word of God Community*

The Word of God was connected to, but distinct from, these three themes: sixties progressive counterculture youth, Conservative Christian New Right, and changing denominational identities.

The Word of God Community shared roots with the countercultural movements of the sixties, but they did not participate in the moral changes in regards to sex, family, and religion. Some members of the Community were involved in anti-war protests, using their religious work in the Community as an alternative service to the draft. Many members were against Richard Nixon, often aligning with the political left and believing that America had gone in the wrong direction.<sup>33</sup> Some even participated in the University of Michigan's Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and joined in the student seizure of the newly built Administration Building in November of 1968.<sup>34</sup> To them, American's cultural values were hypocritical, and moneyed interests ruled. They rejected the lures of materialistic society,<sup>35</sup> proclaimed the love of God, and lived communally. This period is properly viewed as idealistic and romanticist, with the youth yearning for a past golden age and trying to create

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<sup>32</sup> This is a theme of society since the industrial revolution which brought masses of people away from the stable cultures and communities of their local villages into the whirlwind of modernizing cities; see Chapter Three.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Williamson, personal correspondence, March 18, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Williamson, personal correspondence, March 29, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> For a short time Steve Clark, one of the early leaders, owned only what he could carry in his backpack.

an ideal society. Like other sixties movements, they believed that being radical was the solution to America's problems—this was one attraction of Marxism—but this group was attracted to a radical return to their Christian roots. In this way, they strongly identified with the idealism they saw in early Christianity. At the same time, they sharply differed from the extremes of counterculture, and they upheld traditional morality, promoted celibacy apart from marriage, and defended a traditional view of family, arguing for a particular and defined communal lifestyle.

The Word of God Community shared the Christian New Right's concern for Christian morality and family, but they never fully shared the political vision of this group. By the eighties, they emphasized the importance of the family, and they stood against the drug culture and free sex. They promoted some form of gender roles in marriage and sexual abstinence outside of marriage. They defended traditional biblical interpretation against the tide of "liberal reinterpretation." In all of this they saw the moral changes in America—brought about in the sixties and seventies—as decay. However, unlike the Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition, the Word of God was not politically based or motivated, and though they shared many beliefs about upholding traditional morals, they did so with little or no focus on the political realm. Instead of seeking acceptance in American politics, they invested in their own Christian sub-society where they could live the Christian values they embraced, and they looked for recognition among the major Christian denominations.

Lastly, the history of the Word of God Community was emblematic of the broader American shift away from denominational identity toward ideological identity. On the one hand the Community started as something outside traditional religious structures; it began as a Catholic Prayer Meeting—still connected to a student parish—but it was led and organized

by lay people. Additionally, the group quickly became ecumenical: Protestants, Catholics and messianic Jews all prayed and served together. They formed around a common experience and ideology. On the other hand, while their primary experiential identity was ideological and not denominational, the group encouraged denominational loyalty and fidelity, never claiming that their group was sufficient for Christian living.

### **Sources, Methodology, Limits**

The majority of primary source material for this paper comes in the form of published material. The Word of God Community formed its own publishing company, Servant Publications, which published hundreds of books. Most of this paper is built upon selections from the books that deal specifically with values and experiences they shared. Such books were written by leaders regarding their own beliefs and practices and express beliefs that were taught in the Community. The second chapter uses mainly archival sources—in particular three reports put out by its leaders—about the early events and the progress of the Community. Between these two kinds of sources, therefore, this paper deals primarily with an intellectual history, that is, a history of ideas, produced mainly by the leaders of the group. Less information was available about the ordinary members of the Community and their experience or participation in community life. When the paper speaks of “The Word of God Community,” it refers to the official approach taken by the leadership of the Community expressed in its documents and publications. Along the way there were dissident voices, most of whom left the community, but the scope of this paper prohibits exploration of the dissident voices.

The Word of God Community was a large organization with a complex history. It played an important part in the Charismatic Renewal movement, a religious revivalist movement having a major impact on American religion. Regrettably this thesis cannot cover many of the important books they published or events they sponsored which also have significant implications. The Ann Arbor group served as an influential example for the movement and therefore plays a significant role in the religious history of that movement. But this is not a theological thesis and therefore does not address some of the interesting and radical theological aspects of the Charismatic Renewal. There are many other fascinating aspects of the Community (theology of Charismatic gifts, gender roles, sexuality, authority, common life, ecumenism etc.,) but they are more than can be examined in this paper.

### **Thesis Roadmap**

The paper is divided into three main sections. They are chronological and follow the beginning of the Word of God Community and the development of its identity and values. Each deals with a different stage in the development of the Community and expresses an important part of the whole picture. The first chapter (1963-70) specifically discusses the pre-history, social context, and shared experiences and beliefs out of which the Ann Arbor group grew.<sup>36</sup> Chapter two (1970-80) examines the transition of the prayer group into an official organization called the Word of God Community. This chapter discusses what core beliefs they shared and how they were strengthened (and formed) by the choice to rebuild community through formal public commitments to each other. The third chapter (1980-1987) looks at the Community at the peak of their success, analyzing how they approached

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<sup>36</sup> I use the word “group” because during this period they were still a loose association of people connected to the weekly prayer meeting and had not yet become an official, organized community.

the outside world and related to American culture and politics. In particular it mentions the impact of their ecumenism and the important role it has in representing and redefining the shift for Americans to identify more with common cultural and ideological values than with denominational heritage.

## CHAPTER ONE: A Prayer Group of Radicals: Birthing a Vision

The Word of God Community began as a Christian renewal movement. In November of 1967, four men started a charismatic prayer meeting in the apartment above Campus Corner in Ann Arbor.<sup>1</sup> Within four months, this weekly prayer meeting grew from ten people over 100 people, and after two years there were 400-500 people attending prayer meetings regularly, and it had long outgrown the apartment.<sup>2</sup> Something was going on that attracted hundreds of people, Christians and non-Christians alike. What could explain such unprecedented growth? Who were these people and what drew them together, and more than that, what held them together?

The Word of God Community grew out of the social ferment of the sixties. As college students, they were critical of the status quo, both within society and within their churches. Like other countercultural youth, they sought radical solutions to the problems of society. But the solution to society's problems was not found in social change; rather it was found in a spiritual change. Ralph Martin, one of the founder of the Ann Arbor prayer group, said, "'Wisdom' that remains simply on the political, economic, educational, medical, scientific, psychological plane ends up missing the most important point, that the source of man's problems is spiritual at its core and can't be dealt with except in a spiritual way."<sup>3</sup> The group resonated with the idealism and radicalism of early Christianity—the true roots of their faith. Their community formed outside church structure, cutting across denominational lines, indicating the lessening of denominational importance. Their identity was strengthened by

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<sup>1</sup> "A Report on the 'Word of God.' a Charismatic Community in Ann Arbor, Sept, 1971," Thomas Yoder Papers; Box 1, *Reports 1970-1972*, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 2.

<sup>2</sup> "A Pastoral Report on the Catholic Pentecostal Community in Ann Arbor, April 1970," Thomas Yoder Papers; Box 1, *Reports 1970-1972*, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Martin, *Unless the Lord Build the House . . . : The Church and the New Pentecost* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1971), 27.

their ideals of seeking Christian renewal and baptism of the Holy Spirit. They created a sub-society—a Christian community—within which they could live out their ideals and values.

The birth of the Word of God Community weaves together these themes: cultural and spiritual discontent, the embrace of a radical solution, the weakening of denominational identity, and the forming of community around ideals and values. These themes link the Word of God Community to the ethos of the sixties.

This chapter starts by explains the mood among young people in the sixties and the events that led to the first prayer meeting in Ann Arbor. Then it examines the shared values that drew young Christians together: a desire for church renewal, an experience of the Holy Spirit, and a desire for Christian community.<sup>4</sup>

### *Descriptions of Counterculture*

The youth of the 1960s were discontent with the America they saw. Their parents claimed to idealize fairness, justice, tolerance, and democracy, but college students did not see the evidence of these values in America. The Civil Rights movement showed them that America was not yet fair, and the Vietnam War showed them that Americans were not tolerant. These young people felt betrayed by the disjunction between their American values and the reality they saw. Peter Williamson, an eventual leader of the group, described his experience: “Our generation was critical of the status quo, of our government, of our society. We were concerned about poverty, the war, hypocrisy in leadership, corruption, phoniness in

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<sup>4</sup> This was the vision of the leaders: a desire for church renewal first, followed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Building community as an idea was present early on but strengthened and defined after experiencing the Holy Spirit. However, people who came along to the prayer meetings experienced these themes in a different order. The general experience was as follows: first they experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, then they gained a desire for community, finally catching a vision for church renewal. I chose to narrate the experience of the leadership.



conventional relationships, formalism in church life, etc.”<sup>5</sup> Out of this discontent the Ann Arbor group formed.

To these youth, something was very wrong with America, and the way to solve it was radical change. Counterculture groups sprang into being all over the American landscape. Speaking of sixties communities, Frances Fitzgerald says, “Uncomfortable with, or simply careless of, their own personal histories and their family traditions, they thought they could shuck them off and make new lives, new families, even new societies. They aimed to reinvent themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Slight modifications were not the solution; a radical reinvention was needed to restore American to—or recreate its—its ideals. Hippies reinvented sexual norms and communal living; homosexuals left home and moved to San Francisco to found their own type of community; Marxism grew in popularity because of the radical character of its vision. When old institutions no longer provided the support that young students looked for, they created their own support communities. These young college students wanted to change the world, and what is more, they believed they could.

While in the fifties Americans identified with their religious grouping, this identification was weakening among American youth. In the fifties Will Herberg argued that denominational identity was the strongest—Americans identified primarily as being Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. By the sixties Americans were changing: movements were characterized by a rejection of traditions of their parents and a belief that they could create the world and the life they wanted. The tripartite division (Protestant, Catholic, and Jew) no longer held the weight among most Americans that it had merely ten years before. This shift

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Williamson, personal correspondence. March 18 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, *Cities*, 23.

occurred across American culture, impacting those who left their churches, rejecting Christian faith, and equally impacted those who still identified themselves as Christians.

In place of a broad identification with one's denominational affiliation, the radicals of the sixties identified with those who shared their ideals—political or cultural—and while some groups shared a vision to remake the whole of America<sup>7</sup>, some groups chose to create smaller sub-societies in which they could live out their own shared values. Many found identity by rallying around a political or social ideal like Civil Rights or free love or peace. For the youth of the sixties, *ideas* had tremendous power. These new groups and communities formed around shared values, ideas, and ideals. College students were getting involved in political movements and war protests or “dropping out” and joining the hippie movement. Though American ideals of tolerance and democracy continued, many groups rejected all the traditional moral values in place of “progressive” ones.

### **Prior to the First Ann Arbor Prayer Meeting**

When prayer meetings started in late 1967, they immediately exploded in size, but this event did not happen in a vacuum, nor did it begin at random. Two men in particular, Steve Clark and Ralph Martin, shaped the Ann Arbor prayer meeting and its later result: The Word of God Community. These two, along with their two coworkers, Gerry Rauch and Jim Cavnar, were dedicated to renewing faith and life in the church; their experience (before moving to Ann Arbor) set the ground work for the Ann Arbor community. Without their dedication, the group would not have taken the direction it did, nor, most likely, would have been as successful as it was. These men were dedicated to church renewal and forming

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<sup>7</sup> Like Civil Rights, war protests, or environmental groups.

Christian environments; they were zealous, radical, and involved, and they were open to cross-denominational dialogue.

The very first meeting in Ann Arbor was a Catholic prayer meeting led by these four young Catholic men. It was not a mass, there was no priest, monk, or liturgy; it was a group of Catholics who sought renewal of the church and had a renewal to offer it. Though they were connected to Saint Mary's Student Chapel, they were expressing their faith in an atypical way. Clark and Martin had recently come to Ann Arbor from East Lansing where they had tested their intense college ministry on the campus of Michigan State University. They were joined by their friends Gerry Rauch and Jim Cavnar whom they had known from their time at Notre Dame University.

Steve Clark and Ralph Martin worked part time for the Cursillo movement—a Catholic movement focused on bringing Catholics into vibrant Christian life and on training laypeople (non clergy) to be effective leaders in the church. “The urgent work of the church was to teach Christians to live their Christian lives intensely, by restoring a fundamental understanding of what it meant to be a Christian.”<sup>8</sup> To these young people, standard church life was not enough; this movement sought to bring the kind of ideal life that young people thought should typify Christianity. Clark and Martin had been involved with Cursillo since it came to Notre Dame in 1963. (In fact, Steve Clark helped bring the first Cursillo weekend to Notre Dame.) Their involvement in Cursillo and their dedication to the vision and approach of Cursillo greatly formed the foundation for their later ministry as the primary leaders Word of God Community.

The Cursillo movement, to which Clark and Martin belonged, promoted church renewal by putting on weekend retreats and forming tight-knit small groups. Their weekend

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Manney, “Before Duquesne: Sources of the Renewal,” *New Covenant* (February 1973), 15.

retreats brought Catholics into a vital Christian life and trained them to be leaders and disciples.<sup>9</sup> The movement even expressed notions of a return to the early Christian style of living. Clark, who had encountered Cursillo as an undergraduate at Yale,<sup>10</sup> brought the Cursillo weekend to South Bend in 1963 while in graduate studies at Notre Dame. He, with the help of others, worked to further the mission of Cursillo in South Bend. A group of these young Catholics, who had experienced the Cursillo weekend, banded together to pray regularly and live out an intense Christian life. These “Cursillistas” (as they were called) met regularly to pray, to sing folk-praise songs, and to invite classmates to come to future weekends and prayer times—and as they did these things, over time they formed strong relational bonds.<sup>11</sup> This tight-knit group was socially involved and radical. “Several members of the group participated in Martin Luther King’s march in Selma, Alabama, and many others were involved in local Civil Rights projects.”<sup>12</sup> They were young and radical and had an optimistic belief that change was possible.

Clark and Martin moved to Michigan State University from Notre Dame in 1966, and there they participated in events that would shape their later ministry. They moved to East Lansing to work for the headquarters of Cursillo, and throughout their time there they traveled the country, giving leadership workshops for Cursillo.<sup>13</sup> During this time, they never lost contact with the Notre Dame group (some of whom had move to Duquesne, Pennsylvania). In East Lansing a number of things happened that affected their future

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<sup>9</sup> Manney, “Before Duquesne,” 16: “The Cursillo Movement tended to be identified with the three-day weekend, a powerful and often shattering experience of the reality of Jesus. The follow-up part—Christian community—was less dramatic and much harder to sustain [though it was still an ideal of the founders].”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14-15. Clark learned about it before leaving for a mission trip to Mexico. In Mexico he saw Christians who had participated in Cursillo weekends and was impressed by their character.

<sup>11</sup> Manney, “Before Duquesne,” 17: “One evening, in 1965, there was an instance of glossolalia. It was stopped by the leader of the meeting, who did not understand it.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16.

ministry and gave it fresh life. One was their interaction with Protestants; the other was their experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Their ministry was an experiment in Catholic Church renewal, and as an experiment they were open to new modes of renewal. They began with the Cursillo leadership-training model and an emphasis on creating Christian environments. While in Lansing they expressed openness to other methods of ministry, including non-Catholic ones. They visited a training event for Campus Crusade, an exclusively Protestant organization. Ralph Martin later (with amusement) described the shock of the Campus Crusade leaders when they learned Clark and Martin were Catholic.<sup>14</sup> Even before they came to Ann Arbor, Clark and Martin were open to observing and learning from Protestants—something strikingly uncommon for Catholics in the mid-sixties. They were not seeking to build up the Catholic Church alone; they saw faith in Christ as a primary goal.

Out of this Protestant connection they read a book called *The Cross and the Switchblade*<sup>15</sup>—a book that would change their lives. Written by David Wilkerson, a Pentecostal minister, the book described the “baptism of the Holy Spirit”<sup>16</sup> from personal experience and what a radical life in the Spirit looked like. This description of Christian living and baptism of the Holy Spirit was new to Clark and Martin, and they were immediately intrigued. The book was a significant influence for the beginnings of the Charismatic Renewal. They also read a related book called *They Speak in Other Tongues*,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ralph Martin, *Hungry for God: Practical Help in Personal Prayer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 10.

<sup>15</sup> David Wilkerson, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, Special sales ed., 1993 (New York: Jove Books, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> The “baptism of the Spirit” is a term used to describe a religious experience whereby God himself, as the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, comes upon a Christian. It is typically associated with speaking in tongues, prophecy, and/or an experience of God’s love or the reality of Jesus. The New Testament talks about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the gifts (in Greek, “charisms”) of the Holy Spirit (hence the name: the Charismatic Renewal).

<sup>17</sup> John L. Sherrill, *They Speak with Other Tongues*, Spire ed. 1966 (Westwood, NJ: Spire Books, 1964).

which spoke about the early Christian experience of speaking unknown languages (a gift associated with the baptism of the Spirit). Clark and Martin became very interested in the concept of this “baptism of the Holy Spirit.”

The baptism of the Holy Spirit became an important phenomenon that would change their lives and ministry and influence hundreds of thousands of people world wide. This experience and terminology (baptism in the Holy Spirit) had been associated with the Pentecostals,<sup>18</sup> but in the early sixties this experience rapidly spread to other Protestants who brought it back into their denominational churches.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-sixties this Pentecostal movement had affected mainline Protestant denominations, but it had not yet touched the Catholic Church in America—not until the Duquesne weekend.<sup>20</sup> The Duquesne weekend is the event that is famous for introducing this movement into the Catholic Church. The leaders of the Word of God Community had strong links to the leaders of the Duquesne weekend and the ensuing Charismatic Renewal.

Through their Cursillo connections at Notre Dame, Clark and Martin had been involved in a network of Cursillistas, some of whom had move to Duquesne University. Clark and Martin passed along their two new books to friends at Duquesne who expressed a similar interest in what the books offered for the renewal of Christian life. Two of their Catholic friends visited a Presbyterian Pentecostal prayer meeting in Chapel Hill, Pennsylvania, to find out more about this experience.<sup>21</sup> These Catholics invited one of the Pentecostal speakers to speak at an upcoming college retreat they were hosting. On this weekend in Duquesne, Pennsylvania, a large group of Roman Catholics experienced what

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<sup>18</sup> Pentecostals are named after the day Pentecost on which the disciples were baptized in the Holy Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Sherrill, *They Speak with Other Tongues*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Duquesne is just outside of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

<sup>21</sup> Patti Gallagher Mansfield, one of the participants of the Duquesne Weekend, wrote in an online article: <http://www.ccr.org.uk/duquesne.htm>.

Pentecostals called “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” Clark and Martin quickly heard about the events of the Duquesne weekend and traveled to investigate.<sup>22</sup> Out of this small beginning, the new Charismatic movement began to spread quickly throughout the Catholic Church.<sup>23</sup> Because of the widespread experience they saw at Duquesne, they decided to adjust their ministry approach in East Lansing to include this baptism of the Spirit.

They brought the baptism of the Spirit to Michigan State University, but when they encountered resistance from the local student parish they took their ministry elsewhere. When difficulties arose with one of the campus priests, who was wary of the charismatic aspect of their ministry, Clark and Martin moved to Ann Arbor where they had been invited to work with St. Mary’s student parish. Steve Clark, Ralph Martin, Jim Cavnar, and Gerry Rauch wanted to bring this new ministry to Ann Arbor. Ralph Martin explained in a talk he gave in fall 1970<sup>24</sup> that “We decided to pray to see what the Lord wanted to do.”<sup>25</sup> What they resolved was that God wanted to baptize people in the Holy Spirit. “We decided to forget all that we knew about building community and just pray.”<sup>26</sup> In fall of 1967 Steve, Ralph, Gerry, and Jim began to pray in their apartment above Campus Corner Party Store (prior to public prayer meetings). According to Martin “things just started happening.” People came to their apartment looking for help or wanting to talk about serious life issues. Martin talked about being put into a position of having to explain “the simple gospel message.”

After attending a Catholic Charismatic, all-Michigan “Day of Renewal” Prayer Meeting in Williamston, Michigan, they came back and said, “Let’s start a prayer meeting in

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<sup>22</sup> Martin, *Hungry for God*, 12. They visited Duquesne in March 1967, within a month of the Weekend.

<sup>23</sup> Manney, “Before Duquesne,” 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ralph Martin, recorded talk to the Word of God Community Weekend, Oct. 30, 1970; Thomas Yoder Papers; Box 3, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Ann Arbor.”<sup>27</sup> In November of 1967 they opened their apartment on Thursday nights for a weekly Charismatic Prayer Meeting. The rapidity of its growth cannot be overstated. Soon they outgrew the apartment above Campus Corner and moved from location to location as the numbers swelled into the hundreds. Young university students latched on to this exciting movement in Ann Arbor. People, young and old, came from Detroit and all over Michigan for these prayer meetings.

Out of these important events and beliefs, a large Christian community grew; at this point the group remained connected to St. Mary’s Student Chapel, but later it emerged as its own distinct organization.

The years leading up to 1967 were formative years for Clark and Martin. They lived out a radical desire for Church renewal through the Cursillo model of bringing Catholics into a vital Christian life and forming intentional Christian grouping. They expressed openness to dialogue with Protestant and from this connection they gained experience of interdenominational work and access to the Pentecostal baptism of the Holy Spirit. These experiences became key components to the success of the Word of God Community.

### **The Heart of the Ann Arbor Prayer Group**

The group formed mainly out of young students who shared in their generation’s cultural discontent and found refuge in the ideals and experiences of the prayer meeting. When the prayer meeting began in 1967, the University of Michigan was alive with social protests and political activism. The prayer meeting was an answer to students’ disappointment with both society and the church. In it they experienced the love that they did not see in American institutions, societal structures, or traditional churches. From the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



beginning, this Catholic prayer meeting attracted Christians of other backgrounds. Instead of forming around a particular denomination, they formed around a set of shared ideals and experiences, outside of regular church life.<sup>28</sup> In particular, they formed around three key components: a desire for church renewal, an experience of the Holy Spirit, and close relationships in the prayer group. Jim Manney, a member of the Ann Arbor group, reported of its leaders, “Although their backgrounds are varied, they shared at least two common interests before experiencing the baptism of the Spirit: a fervent concern for a fundamental renewal of the Church along evangelical and communitarian lines, and a high degree of theoretical agreement about the right shape and strategy for this renewal.”<sup>29</sup> The leaders on the one hand, were dedicated to church renewal, found new life in the Holy Spirit, and fought to build Christian community. The participants, on the other hand, followed a different sequence; first they experienced the Holy Spirit and then grew in their desire for community and church renewal.

### *Church Renewal*

Young people were increasingly dissatisfied with the substance and content of their churches. In many ways there was a correlation between religion and American society, and dissatisfaction with society generally meant dissatisfaction with religious life. As Martin argued, “Not many have been able successfully to distinguish for themselves the essentials of Christian faith from its manner of institutionalization and formulation.”<sup>30</sup> Christianity

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<sup>28</sup> They first found spiritual renewal outside their churches, but they quickly brought that renewed life into their churches

<sup>29</sup> Manney, “Before Duquesne,” 13.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *Unless the Lord*, 50-51.

claimed to be a life giving religion, but young people asked, “Where is the life?”<sup>31</sup> For those who did not resonate with their institutional religious service, two main options lay before them: to leave organized religion or to transform religious life. Many young people left their churches in the turbulent sixties.<sup>32</sup> Other young people sought to change or transform their churches. The Catholic Church, at least, was already going through rapid changes in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Most attempts to further transform Catholic Church life were liturgical,<sup>33</sup> though some attempts were made to give additional roles for women in the service.<sup>34</sup> The Ann Arbor prayer group also sought to transform church life—in fact this was one of their key reasons for existing—but they pursued a unique way of achieving it and often criticized some alternate approaches to church renewal.

Before the original leaders experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they sought renewal in the Catholic Church. American churches were not offering the Christian life these young leaders desired. The Cursillo movement, of which the leaders were a part, focused on Christian renewal. Steve Clark wrote,

There are many other examples which illustrate the trend to de-emphasize Christ, but one is of particular importance for what we are considering—the tendency to identify more with society as a whole or with some segment of society rather than with the Church. Will Herberg in his book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* tells about how he gave talks at Catholic schools and would ask the students, “are you a Catholic American or an American Catholic?” They would almost always answer “a Catholic American,” revealing that they consider themselves Americans first and Catholics second. . . . Christians do not identify themselves primarily as Christians.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>32</sup> Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> James M. O’Toole, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 204-224.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Building Christian Communities: Strategy for Renewing the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1972), 101-102.

Clark was concerned about the trend that showed Americans identifying more with their American value system than with their religion. As a Catholic, Clark believed that his primary identity should come from being a Christian and from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To identify with one's religion meant more than attending church on Sundays (which to Clark was as much a cultural act as it was a religious act.) Being a Christian meant bringing Christianity into the whole of a person's life. This meant in thinking, in daily life, in relationships, in time, in money, in sexual matters, in conversations, in living arrangements, in service to others, etc. Clark and Martin were dedicated to this vision of Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Ralph Martin's book *Unless the Lord Build the House* outlined a clear picture of what the Word of God Community meant by church renewal.<sup>37</sup> Ralph Martin, one of the four original leaders, became an important figure and leader not only within this prayer group but for the whole Charismatic Renewal movement. Thus, the books he wrote were for a wider Christian audience, while at the same time they were representative of the beliefs of the Ann Arbor prayer group. The purpose of the book was to analyze the various renewal attempts within the Catholic Church as well as to analyze some of the basic blocks to Christian renewal.

In that book Martin indicated that he saw the renewal efforts in which he was involved (namely, the Word of God Community<sup>38</sup>) as distinct from other Catholic approaches; it was the *true* product of the Second Vatican Council. Martin saw himself and

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<sup>36</sup> One of the most influential books they read was Douglas Hyde's *Dedication and Leadership* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966). Hyde was a former Communist who converted to Christianity. He taught Christians how to be dedicated leaders, using Marxist leaders as the example of radical dedication. Though Clark and Martin weren't communists, they adopted a radical, whole-life approach to leadership that helped their group succeed when radical Communism was growing in college campuses.

<sup>37</sup> *Unless the Lord Build the House* was a short book that expanded a of series of talks given by Martin in May of 1970 to over 1600 people on a charismatic weekend conference about renewal in the church.

<sup>38</sup> While they did not officially become the Word of God Community until the fall of 1970, that term will be used to describe what was merely an Ann Arbor prayer meeting until 1970.

the Community as something distinct from the typical Catholic Church while at the same time remaining within the Catholic Church. His three elements for “authentic renewal” include a) preaching the gospel, b) living in the Spirit, and c) building community.

First of all Martin connected the Charismatic Renewal movement to the Second Vatican Council’s call for updating the church; however, Martin strongly disagreed with the typical ways the updating had taken place. Martin had traveled across America speaking in many different Catholic environments, and he saw most Catholic parishes as “renewing” the church in unhelpful ways. Martin described the typical renewal attempts as “misdirected,”<sup>39</sup> having “tragic results,”<sup>40</sup> full of “theological jargon,”<sup>41</sup> and “of the world.”<sup>42</sup> The Church, he believed was not meant to begin with structural or liturgical changes. He believed that

*This widely accepted approach to renewal is not only fundamentally wrong in its basic presupposition, but because it has been so extensively accepted and acted upon throughout the Church, indeed being the overwhelmingly dominant response to the call for renewal crystallized by Vatican II, it has produced a seriously distorted Christianity through the Church [emphasis original].<sup>43</sup>*

The American church was failing to seek the new Pentecost for which Pope John XXIII had called.<sup>44</sup> And the efforts they made for renewal were giving Catholics the wrong idea of what it means to be a Christian. All this shows something important about the way Martin viewed himself and the Charismatic Renewal. First of all, he was speaking to the Catholic Church from within the context of the Catholic Church. Secondly, though he worked outside normal church structure, he felt connected to the Catholic Council. Thirdly, he openly expressed disagreement with the way church renewal was being carried out in

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<sup>39</sup> Martin, *Unless the Lord*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>44</sup> Pope John XXIII’s statement at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, in Martin, *Unless the Lord*, 62.

America. Martin held no titles or position of authority within the Catholic hierarchy, but he felt at liberty to criticize the church and its methods. His criticisms are not the criticisms commonly associated with the early seventies. Martin argued for stricter literalism of the Christian message: he was not criticizing the church for holding outdated beliefs or moral teachings (like some countercultural Catholics). He criticized them for missing the point and being taken in by modern distractions.

The purpose of the Council was said to be “updating” the church in the modern world, but Martin did not think that most American efforts at renewal had produced good fruit:

Now, six years after the close of the Council, we might do well to ask: are all our parish councils, associations, synods, workshops, conferences, due process systems, multi media religious education programs, computerized and publicized diocesan finances, plainly dressed bishops, married deacons, inner-city priests and nuns . . . producing a modern *Church* . . . or a poor imitation of the modern world?<sup>45</sup>

The American Church was making the Church more like the modern world, a world that young people were rejecting en mass. Martin agreed with many other Catholics and with the Second Vatican Council that renewal was needed in the church. However, he disagreed about what the end result should look like and how to go about getting there. Martin, and the Community, looked not to the modern world but to early Christianity for renewed church life.

Martin saw authentic renewal as a return to radical Christianity, and that meant a return to early Christianity. In his book he summarized his beliefs, “I gave . . . [an] exegesis of the early apostolic preaching found in Acts, as it presents the basic way of salvation

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<sup>45</sup> Martin, *Unless the Lord*, 10.

through Jesus of Nazareth, and presented it as the basis of all else.”<sup>46</sup> The problems with the church were vast, and a radical return to the pure and simple style of early Christianity was the basis for genuine renewal. Martin argued that a life changing experience was needed to truly be a Christian disciple; this was the call of a disciple:

Following Jesus in his relationship to his Father, of perfect obedience, spending nights in prayer; following Jesus in the utter orientation of our lives toward serving him and his kingdom, opening up to him all our resources of intellect, will, and material resources, time; submitting to him our thoughts and plans concerning career and marriage; following Jesus in calling men to repentance, to return to God.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the many Catholics who identified primarily as Americans, being a Christian meant surrendering every aspect of one’s life to God: time, sleep, marriage, intellect.

In addition to preaching this radical but “pure” Christian Gospel, Martin sought church renewal in genuine Christian community and the power of the Holy Spirit: “Christian community is the response, individually and collectively, of a people to the Word of God [the Bible], a decision to submit totally to that Word together, consciously and explicitly, and to allow the Lord to build a people, a community.”<sup>48</sup> And this was the kind of thing God was doing: “God is drawing together people across parish and religious order [sic], lay-clerical bounds, and urging them, to begin now to be something together for him.”<sup>49</sup> For all this to come about, for genuine renewal to sweep the church, God had to pour out his Holy Spirit like he had in the early Church. He said, “Frankly, Church renewal, indeed, depends on our experiencing a new Pentecost, as Pope John prayed as he opened the Council. Nothing less

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 63.

will produce Church renewal.”<sup>50</sup> Spiritual renewal through a new Pentecost was what Martin believed would transform the church.

The American Catholic Church was failing Catholic Christians. Martin called for an evangelical, that is, gospel based, response to the problems with the church. This message, coming from a Catholic, drew Catholics as well as Protestants who also resonated with this scriptural and radical approach.

Even though Martin did not identify with the American Catholic approach to renewal, he did not abandon his Catholic identity. He sought renewed religious life outside of standard Catholic institution, but this spiritual renewal did not take him further away from being Catholic, he felt that it made him more Catholic (or at least enriched his participation in the Catholic Sacraments). His connection to Protestants had the same effect. In a book written just three years later he said, “Today I remain a Catholic, not through inertia but by conviction, yet I have been immeasurably strengthened and formed by my contact with evangelical Protestantism and the twentieth-century Pentecostal movement.”<sup>51</sup> While Martin did not agree with some theological and pastoral approaches that were common in the Catholic Church, he nevertheless remained part of the Catholic Church as an individual, although he continued to learn from Protestants through his contact with them in religious life outside traditional churches.

The Ann Arbor prayer group participated in these efforts to create a vital movement within Christianity, abandoning both the traditional patterns and “worldly” approaches to renewal in order to recover the Christianity of the early church. The group formed out of this shared vision for radical Church renewal and discipleship.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>51</sup> Martin, *Hungry for God*, 12.

## *The Holy Spirit*

First and foremost, the Ann Arbor prayer meeting saw success because of the common experience of the Holy Spirit. If the desire for church renewal expressed the disjunction between Christian values and the reality of church life, the baptism of the Holy Spirit expressed the radical solution found in returning to the early church. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was part of the early Christian experience, so it drew participants of the prayer meeting back to the spirit of early Christianity. Young people could not identify with the structure of their parents' churches, but they were fulfilled with the complete transformation that this spiritual experience brought. They wanted something tangible, something exciting, something radical. All this they found in the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The phrase "baptism of the Holy Spirit" comes from the New Testament. At the beginning of all four gospels, John the Baptist describes the distinguishing character of the ministry of Jesus: "he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." That prophecy was not fulfilled in any of the four gospels during the earthly life of Jesus but was fulfilled by the spiritual experience on Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost the disciples were gathered in an Upper Room, and while they waited there was a might wind and tongues of fire descended on each them, and they began to speak in other languages (Acts 2:3-4). This event, Peter explains, is due to the risen, exalted Jesus pouring out the Holy Spirit from heaven (Acts 2:33). This experience is mentioned throughout the rest of the New Testament, and it was this same kind of experience that Charismatics claimed to have.

The charismatic expectation, the exuberant worship, and speaking in tongues were things that set this prayer meeting apart from other Christian services. This experience came apart from location: that is, prayer meetings met in apartments and gymnasiums, not,



generally, in a church sanctuary. Such an experience is hard to document, and in the first three years of the Ann Arbor prayer group they published very little, and what they did publish was very short. They started by producing pamphlets about their new spiritual experience. Most of these pamphlets were the result of a talk or series of talks, so while the first pamphlets did not appear until 1969 (a year and a half after the prayer group started), the material is a compilation of talks that had appeared earlier.

For example one of the first pamphlets produced (in 1969) was called *Prayer Meetings* by Jim Cavnar. Though not published until 1969, the pamphlet acknowledges that its contents were from a talk given on January 21, 1968, only a few months after the first prayer meeting. Although the materials that are examined in this chapter were produced in 1969, 1970 and later, the themes were present from the beginning. The first pamphlets after *Prayer Meetings* were *Spiritual Gifts*, by Steve Clark (1969), *Confirmation and Baptism of the Holy Spirit*, by Steve Clark (1969), and *Baptized in the Holy Spirit*, by Steve Clark (1969). All of them focused on the spiritual phenomenon of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit that happened at these gatherings of prayer. This common experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was one of the core elements around which the group was built.

In *Baptized in the Holy Spirit* Steve Clark explained the significance of this spiritual experience. Clark was the most theologically oriented of the group, and his knowledge of Scripture and church history brought theological reflection and intellectual analysis to the experience of the Spirit. Even the fact that he wrote such a pamphlet indicates that it was new for most people and therefore undefined. His writing conveys both the exuberance of this experience while also cautiously defining it more concretely against misinterpretation. In short, his writing was a critique of traditional churches and their lack of life and openness

to spiritual renewal, while at the same time being a guidepost for those who had this experience and giving it theological roots so as to make it more understandable to those still outside the Charismatic Renewal.

Clark stated that the churches of his day had lost awareness (or even abandoned) this core Christian truth. He claimed the Bible supported this spiritual experience but that Paul's writing about the baptism of the Spirit (Galatians 3:1-5) made little sense to the modern parish because, "Paul simply takes it for granted that the Christians to whom he is writing have had these experiences."<sup>52</sup> However, it seemed evident to Clark that most Christians in a modern parish had no familiarity with this experience. He had to look outside the normal parish for this experience. He claimed that others were also looking outside, and so this experience was becoming common again:

Nowadays in the Church it is again beginning to be possible to refer to people's experience of the work of the Spirit among them and expect them to know what is meant. As the charismatic renewal grows into all parts of the Church, people are beginning to experience the Spirit given so freely and miracles being worked through faith. In other words, they are beginning to experience the life of the Spirit.<sup>53</sup>

The renewal began outside the church, but it was coming into the church, changing it to this new vision of Christian life. Their experience was giving people a context in which to understand the Bible's statements about the Holy Spirit.

Many pages of *Baptized in the Holy Spirit* are dedicated to citing various references to the Holy Spirit in the Bible and what it had meant to the early church.<sup>54</sup> These were the same experiences Christians were having in Ann Arbor and across the world: "The whole New Testament is alive with the fact that the early Christians were able to experience the

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Baptized in the Holy Spirit* (1969 reprint, East Lansing, MI: Tabor House, 2003), 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Luke 24:49; John 14:16, 17, 26; Acts 1:8; 4:31; 7:55; 8:29,39; 11:28; 13:2;16:6-7; 20:21; and 1 John 4:13.

presence of the Spirit in them and his work among them. And it is this experience which is returning with the charismatic renewal.”<sup>55</sup>

This meant two things. First, he was explaining what this experience meant theologically because there was little-to-no context for a modern America Christian to reference this terminology. It was new. Second, it meant that these Charismatics did not really see the experience as something new, but only as new for them, because they traced this experience to the very earliest experience of Christians.

For Clark, traditional churches did little in the way of changing lives, but The Holy Spirit entirely changed the way that Christians lived:

Most Christians today are not living the life of the Spirit. They live their Christian lives on the basis of doctrine. They were taught about Christ and about how to live as Christians. . . . But they do not feel that they are in much contact with him. They do not experience his presence nor do they see things happen which they can tell are his working. The life of the Spirit changes that.<sup>56</sup>

Charismatics criticized their churches for living by doctrine instead of focusing on a personal relationship with God. God was accessible and personal and involved in people’s daily lives. American churches were living out of knowledge alone, and not out of a personal experience too. This new view—and experience—of God changed everything for these Christians. It changed their lives and brought them directly to God; it reinvigorated their religious life.

Clark began to guide those Christians who had had this experience. Clark used his theological background to define the “experience” for new Charismatics: “When I talk about ‘experiencing’ things I do not necessarily have something emotional in mind. . . . We say something is ‘an experience’ if we mean that it is a great event or a striking happening. We

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<sup>55</sup> Clark, *Baptized in the Holy Spirit*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

can, however, have experiences that are not especially emotional.”<sup>57</sup> Already Clark was demonstrating a distinction between his movement and other sixties movements. This spiritual experience was more than an emotional, feel-good experience, or drug-related experience. It was meant to be life-changing whether or not it was emotional.

This experience led to a changed spiritual life: “Friends of mine began to tell me about a new ability to pray as the result of the Holy Spirit. They shared about praying for people for healing, and the results that came from it. They told me about the gift of prophecy, and how it was returning to use.”<sup>58</sup> A radical experience produced new behavior. With this new direct experience of God, anything was possible. People at the Ann Arbor prayer meetings regularly prayed for miracles and healings and therefore were not surprised when remarkable things happened (although they were excited about it).

Even though this group formed around this spiritual experience, they did not uphold this experience as the summit of Christian life. The experience served a purpose for these Christians—to personally know God and to live more fully for Him: “When a person is baptized in the Spirit, the Holy Spirit not only comes to that person in a new way, but he also makes a change in him. His life is different because his relationship with God has been changed. God is in him in a way in which he was not before.”<sup>59</sup> As Christians, they embraced the fullness of Christian ideals. What was different between the sixties generation and its predecessors was their *motivation* to live the Christian life. Their parents’ generation, which had grown up in the Great Depression and through World War II, was characterized as being motivated by the sense of duty.<sup>60</sup> Duty was their job both at home and for their

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>60</sup> Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), 231.

country, and it became their approach to religion. Duty did not motivate the sixties' generation in the same way; personal experience and deep conviction did. Instead, they used the freshness and newness of their experience to enrich the other aspects of their Christian faith.

This experience was important, but it was a means, not the end, to the Christian faith. Much of the rest of the pamphlet by Clark warned against misunderstandings and excess. Although his beliefs in the Holy Spirit experience made him “unorthodox” to many mainstream Christians, Steve Clark saw himself as returning to a traditional and orthodox doctrine. Doctrine and morality were important; the spiritual experience was not meant to replace that but to supplement it, to bring life into it. The end result was not different from what average Christians believed: living a holy life, walking in love, etc., even though the means by which these Charismatic Christians came to that end result was drastically different.

The institutional churches were concerned about this spiritual experience. It was not just happening in the Ann Arbor group—thousands of Catholics and Protestants were involved in the Charismatic Renewal. The leaders of the Ann Arbor prayer meeting wrote these pamphlets and other articles partly to convince the institutional churches of the validity of their experience. They searched for this experience through the rest of church history and presented a theological rationale to the institutional churches for the experience.

The group was formed through these exciting and life-changing experiences. They saw the baptism as life-encompassing, a whole hearted response to the Christian Gospel. There was a need for radical change in society and this experience was radical because it was rooted in the early church experience.

## *Community*

The third major ideal and attraction of the Ann Arbor prayer group was community. Community and communal living was a theme in some sixties counterculture, and thus the Ann Arbor prayer group's desire for community fits them squarely within that theme in the counterculture. These Christians saw themselves as distinct from normal—and corrupted—American society. America could not live up to its own ideals, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, these Charismatics believed they could live the Christian life that the Bible called them to live. To live these ideals meant living in close connection with those who shared the same experience and vision: it meant forming a committed community.

While baptism in the Holy Spirit may have been a means, Steve Clark had a strategy for the main goal that he outlined in his book *Building Christian Communities: Strategy for Renewing the Church*. In this book Clark acknowledged the goal of renewal and his belief that the only way to true renewal is through the person Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup> He outlined practical steps for this kind of renewal: Christians should invest their efforts to build communities.

His belief about the importance of community was tied to his belief and experience of the Holy Spirit: “The life of the Spirit also involves an experience of a new kind of community life — a community living ‘in the Spirit.’ The life of the Spirit is not meant to be an individual life.”<sup>62</sup> It was the Holy Spirit that confirmed the need for community. In *Building Christian Communities*, Clark demonstrated the practical need for community in American society. Before the Charismatic Renewal began, while an undergraduate at Yale, Clark had seen the need for supportive Christian groups and from then on had worked hard to

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, *Building Christian Communities*, 98, 104.

<sup>62</sup> Clark, *Baptized in the Holy Spirit*, 4.

build them.<sup>63</sup> Jim Manney claimed, “Over the years, this stress on the importance of community became much more than a principle of good pastoral practice. It became the keystone of an audacious strategy aimed at the radical Christian transformation of whole environments where Christians would flourish.”<sup>64</sup> These Christians were not just adding a dab of novelty to religious life; they were rethinking the whole structure that should accompany it.

Christians needed to be able to adapt to the radical changes of society. America was changing, and the church was changing, especially after the impetus of the Second Vatican Council: “Now [the American Catholic Church] is in the middle of rapid social change. It is, in fact, changing faster than most other groupings in American society.”<sup>65</sup> To begin with, it was adapting the social aspect of the church that Clark was most concerned about, not changing doctrine or dogma.

For Christians to hold on to their faith through social changes they needed Christian community. Clark argued that social or environmental identities were of great importance, and, indeed, that these were the most important issues facing the Catholic Church. “If Christianity is going to change men, it is going to have to realign social relationships. . . . Human beings do not function independently; they change in groups. The target has to be to form Christian communities, Christian social groupings.”<sup>66</sup> Creating a Christian environment—a social grouping—is what Clark and the other leaders of the Community had set out to do in Ann Arbor, a grouping whereby people could live the vital Christian life. “The normal person needs a Christian environment if he is going to live Christianity in a vital

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<sup>63</sup> Manney, “Before Duquesne,” 14.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Clark, *Building Christian Communities*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 23.

way.”<sup>67</sup> Church on Sunday was not enough, now that society itself did not support a wholehearted Christian lifestyle.

Clark recognized a shift in American culture that was causing a need for a different style of Christian life. Since the time of Constantine, the church had become enmeshed in, and interwoven with, society: to be a Christian and to be a member of society could virtually mean the same thing.<sup>68</sup> As American society drifted away from Christian values, Christians needed a Christian independent social grouping again. In many ways it needed to return to the Christian sub-culture (or community) of the early, pre-Constantine, church.

American society was experiencing a shake-up, and the other visible movements of the day showed a distinct departure from Christianity. Clark said, “When society as a whole cannot be expected to accept Christianity, it is necessary to form communities within society to make Christian life possible.”<sup>69</sup> The people who experienced the vital Christian life—Charismatics—could no longer identify fully with American society, a society which they saw as rejecting Christianity. Although they were participating in some countercultural trends, i.e., forming communes, looking for life outside the traditional streams, and forming a new identity; in fact it was because of the moral values they maintained that they were distinct from society. Their Christian experience, even though it was mainly outside the church sanctuary, sharpened their minds towards the fullness of Christian life, including biblical moral values. Their Christianity was not just about an emotional experience and good relationships—it led them to consider full conversion and living the vital Christian life. (The relationship of values and community identity will be further discussed in the next chapters.)

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 23-24.



The prayer group adopted this vision of whole-life, committed community. In addition to the rapidly growing Thursday nights prayer meetings, the leaders gathered together those who had shown commitment to the group, and they started a smaller prayer meeting. “In January of 1969 a regular Monday prayer meeting was begun for those around the University who had been baptized in the Spirit and who were becoming more strongly knit together. This ‘core community’ originally numbered about 50 but now has grown to about 150 in a year and a half.”<sup>70</sup> These core Charismatics were looking for more than their spiritual experience in a prayer meeting: they were hungry for strongly-knit Christian relationships. And this desire for community was not just for a few. This committed core in the community grew at a similar rate as the larger open prayer meetings.

Clark did not think this strategy was important merely for his local community; he called the whole church to adopt the strategy. “An ‘overall’ approach’ involves taking stock of the whole situation of the Church and trying to understand what should be done to make advances in the whole situation.”<sup>71</sup> Such an approach again shows that the Ann Arbor prayer group saw itself as distinct from the Catholic Church, and yet the Catholic members felt in some way connected to the Church (and likewise for Protestants and their churches). They did not find the resonating answers for their identity within the traditional church, and so they looked to Christ himself, to the Charismatic renewal, and to community. However, from their new position they called the rest of the church to follow. They had not left the Church; they had improved it and were still concerned for changing it. Part of the narrative of this chapter is concerned with denominational identity. Young people were not looking to the denominational church for religious experience and life and found it instead in the para-

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<sup>70</sup> “A Pastoral Report, April 1970,” Thomas Yoder Papers; Bentley Library, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Clark, *Building Christian Communities*, 9.

church prayer meeting. This departure from denominational identification is an important part of the changes of the sixties and of the Word of God Community, but it has more implications than can be addressed here.

## **Conclusion**

In the midst of social upheaval and radical counterculture, the Ann Arbor prayer group sprang up out of these three things: the desire for renewal in the church, a spiritual experience of the Holy Spirit, and—out of their desire and experience—a need for community. The prayer group attracted students who were countercultural, who were looking for radical change and radical solutions, all of which they found in this Christian countercultural group. Their three ideals propelled the group from being a small prayer meeting to a large prayer meeting and from being a large prayer meeting to a group of committed members determined to live the Christian life together and dedicated to the renewal movement. From there they were propelled into national recognition.

The participants of the prayer meeting shared a powerful new religious experience. This shared experience brought Christians together from across traditional divides. Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and even Jews<sup>72</sup> all found an invigorated life in the charismatic prayer meeting. Their common charismatic experience brought them close together and connected them to Jesus and to the first Christians and the church of Acts. These people resonated more with this spiritual experience and religious message than they did with their traditional churches. The people who joined the core community chose to participate more actively in a religious organization that they themselves created and made thrive. At the same time they did not completely forsake their

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<sup>72</sup> That is, Jews who converted or were already messianic Jews.

denominational heritage; for the most part they still remained members of their church, even if participation in it was less than their participation in the Community. A belief that such a group could exist outside any church and not claim to be a church in itself was radical, and those who participated in it were radical too, because they believed they had found the radical approach that gave them life and identity.

## CHAPTER TWO: A Community of Radicals: Living the Vision

The Ann Arbor prayer group grew rapidly. By 1970 there were 400-500 participants at any given meeting.<sup>1</sup> The leaders estimated that from December 1967- April 1970 between 2500 and 3000 people had come to the Thursday night prayer meetings.<sup>2</sup> People were coming from east coast and west coast states—and even internationally—to see and experience this new phenomenon. Early reports of the Community suggest that on average, at any given prayer meeting, 15 percent of the people were new, and two-thirds of the new people were from outside Ann Arbor.<sup>3</sup> The meeting was getting too large for the Ann Arbor “originals” to maintain any sense of solidarity with the group. Indeed, it grew to the point where leaders asked regular out of town guest to start their own groups elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The people who were involved from the earliest meetings wanted to be a part of a committed body with stable relationships, a place where they could differentiate between those who were just visiting and those who were committed to the goals of the community. In January of 1969, after a little over a year of Thursday night prayer meetings and rapid growth, early participants started a second, smaller prayer meeting on Monday nights: the “Core Community” of about 50 committed people. This number, of those who desired this more intimate community, also grew quickly, eventually taking the name The Word of God Community.

Although the Ann Arbor group grew out of the cultural discontent of the sixties—demonstrating an openness to radical solutions and an optimistic, do-it-yourself mentality typical to sixties movements—they quickly diverged from many other countercultural

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<sup>1</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers; Bentley Library, 4.

<sup>2</sup> “A Pastoral Report, April 1970,” Thomas Yoder papers; Bentley Library, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Steve Clark, recorded talk on the “History of the Sword of the Spirit,” Word of Life Community meeting, November, 2007.

movements. In addition to dissatisfaction because of the failure of institutions and government, some countercultural groups found a radical solution in complete rejection of all or most societal norms—especially the morality of their parents’ generation—claiming sexual liberation, using drugs, and denouncing societal limitations. The Word of God Community on the other hand found their radical solution in a return to early Christianity, and the Christian ideals they rediscovered led them away from the extra consequences of some countercultural groups. The Community did not accept the ideas of free sex, drug trips, or the complete restructuring of the family.

The Word of God Community focused on living a particular way of life, seeking to embody their distinct cultural patterns, rather than be carried by the flow of mass culture. They did not look to politics to create the world they wanted. Their distinctive response to their discontent with society was to form a sub-society within it—fostering an environment where they could live out their values. In particular, the Community developed a) educational courses to define and propagate their ideals and way of life, b) a culture of living communally in Christian Households, and c) an embodiment of their ideals by serving the Charismatic Renewal, the local city, and each other. This chapter begins by describing the move to become an official Community and then discusses the role that formation courses, Households, and service had in the life of the Community.

### *Seventies’ Cultural Context*

Sixties counterculture had rejected the institutions and structures of their parents, leaving social structures like the American family in ruins. In the seventies the activism and violent protest of the sixties had faded, but some changes remained, taking on more

sophisticated forms.<sup>5</sup> In general, traditional American family life was broken by the radical changes of sixties counterculture. Slocum-Schaffer remarks,

Changes in family patterns and activities were prominent during the 1970s, and they reflect a gradual shift in cultural values. In fact, sociologist Arlene Skolnick has written that by the middle of the 1970s, “American family life had been shaken by a series of social changes as broad and traumatic as any that had occurred in the past. . . . Standing about in the ruins of structures that had, little more than a decade before, seemed stable and changeless—lifelong marriage, sexual morality, parental authority, the ‘traditional’ family—Americans groped for an explanation of what had shattered them all”<sup>6</sup>

The general American trend was a disintegration of traditional family life and morality.

Even though the extreme visible activism settled down in the seventies, the impact of the moral changes remained. However, the Word of God Community stood apart from this general trend; in fact, they reaffirmed family life and traditional morality.

### *Moving Towards Structure*

Rather than get swept away into the tide of society that was rapidly disintegrating, the prayer group desired to form stable, close-knit relationships with each other; they desired to be a committed community. The new Monday night core meeting was created for the more committed people as a way to develop stronger relationship in a smaller group, but it too was quickly growing. It had no formal system of acceptance or official mission. In a society characterized by individualism and social mobility, these young Christians desired stability and commitment and were willing to sacrifice some personal freedom and independence for the sake of their Christian ideals. Part of their Christian ideal was to embody the kind of radical dedication to each other that they saw in the early church. Since the spiritual life they found was outside the institutional church and since the church seemed bewildered by the

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<sup>5</sup> Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

changes in the sixties, mere participation in their traditional churches did not satisfy this desire for dedicated Christian community. The prayer group saw a growing desire to formalize the way of life they had discovered.

During the summer of 1970, Steve Clark and Ralph Martin wrote a formalized description of what being a member of the Community should (or could) look like and how new people would be incorporated into the Community. Their outline consisted of a system of leadership structure, initiation, and opportunity for formalized commitment. That fall the core community discussed these ideas and voted to accept Clark's and Martin's proposal to become a *Covenant Community*: "In September, 1970 the Community agreed as a whole at its Fall Conference to join itself together by covenant, and to have a more clearly understood and formalized leadership (coordinators, servants, handmaids). Along with this went the process of bringing people into the life of the community."<sup>7</sup> The covenant involved a public commitment to the Word of God Community (their new name) and to the *vision* of the Community.

As an official Community—more than a random collection of individuals for a weekly prayer meeting—they were able to more clearly define and articulate who they were and what they believed, and—more specifically—how they viewed Christian life. They were able to “commit” themselves to living a particular way of life. With a well-defined vision, structure, and beliefs, they could invite people into their new life together. After having fulfilled the necessary requirements to join (discussed later in the chapter), people would stand up in a meeting and proclaim their public commitment to Christ, to the Word of God

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<sup>7</sup> "A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971," Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 2.

Community, and to living this Christian way of life.<sup>8</sup> This way of life included a commitment to each other, to regular meeting, and to living in and supporting the Community. By this time St. Mary's Student Chapel no longer had direct involvement with the Community. It had become an autonomous group.

This committed way of life continued to attract people, primarily college students. In spite of—and perhaps because of—the formalized commitment, the Community continued to grow. In an early report Clark summarized the paradox of their situation: “At a time when traditional forms of Christianity are showing less and less appeal, when convert rates are falling off, when young people are showing less and less interest in the Church, an orthodox Christian community is growing rapidly and becoming well known on campus, in town, and around the world for its success.”<sup>9</sup> They had formed a new organization outside of traditional institutions, and people were attracted to the radicalness, intensity, and dedication they saw in it.

From 1967-1970 the Ann Arbor group had been a loose association of people who came—frequently or infrequently—to prayer meetings. Now, in addition to the popular Thursday Prayer Meeting, there was a committed covenant Community with increasingly defined way of life. The Ann Arbor Word of God Community quickly became an internationally famous Christian group.

### *A Radical Recipe*

As the prayer meeting grew into an organized Community, three key aspects helped them achieve their ideals and continue to grow: formation courses, Households, and service.

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<sup>8</sup> They would read aloud from the 1970 Word of God Covenant, a full copy of which is included in the appendix.

<sup>9</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 18.



On the one hand, a newness and excitement existed in the first few years, and that novelty helped attract people to the group. (It was not the only thing that drew people, but it certainly contributed.) After a few years, the prayer group had been established and the group moved in a new direction—towards a covenant community. This change also came with some novelty and excitement, for the idea of covenant was quite new. Making the transition would not have been possible without the use of formation courses, Households, and service. These three aspects helped the group transition from a sporadic prayer group into an organized, committed Community—a community that grew in strength and influence through the seventies and eighties.

In addition to helping the group become organized, these core aspects formed an identity for individuals, and they provided key expression of social needs that American society failed to offer. As denominational identity diminished, more groups formed around common beliefs and shared values. The formation courses became a method of conveying values and helped the group form around a common identity despite the different denominational backgrounds of the members. Society itself was losing the close-knit family structure and the stability that comes from the family unit. This identity and stability were strengthened in the Community by the use of Households—where members would share intense livening situations and develop close relationships with other Community members.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, service and outreach helped the Community grow by providing people an outlet for their desire to serve others in the larger community. The service the Community provided drew outsiders into the Community. If the Community had exclusively focused on building up internal life, they would have ceased to grow and exercise influence in Ann Arbor and

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<sup>10</sup> Lifelong commitment to the Community also helped develop this close-knit communal feeling.

across the Charismatic Renewal, but, because they valued service and outreach, they continued to grow and interact with their surroundings.

### **Formation Courses**

Though young people who began Community had shared in the cultural discontent of the sixties and were open to radical solutions, they diverged from the trajectory of other countercultural groups by returning to Christianity and Christian morals. The Community began to use informal educational courses to define and teach their Christian beliefs and to strengthen their religious and moral ideals. After a few years of growth, and lots of interest in their movement, the Community saw a need to systematically explain what the baptism of the Holy Spirit was and what it should mean for the life of a Christian. Everybody who came to a prayer meeting was encouraged to attend an explanatory course called the Life in the Spirit Seminar which gave a clear explanation of what the baptism of the Holy Spirit meant and looked like. As the prayer group grew into a Community—increasing the scope and vision of their common way of life—they also offered programs like the Community Weekend and the Foundations Course to explain further aspects of their distinct, Christian way of life.

Soon, successful completion of the courses was required before a person could make a full commitment to the Community. Since these courses helped shape a group identity around their common set of beliefs and values, they offered a clear window into the identity and values of the Community.<sup>11</sup> The courses formed a bond of common belief (ideology), shared by the whole Community. They focused on theological teaching, Christian morals,

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<sup>11</sup> The Word of Life Community, one Community that came out of the Word of God Community, still uses the same courses (only slightly altered) for people wishing to join their Community.

and Christian lifestyle. They did not define every aspect of what a person should believe—the group still comprised various denominations with a variety of theological positions—and they did not promote a political agenda.

### *Life in the Spirit*

The Life in the Spirit Seminar was a seven-week course designed for anybody new to the Charismatic Renewal. The purpose of the course was to present the basic Christian beliefs, to provide an opportunity for the participant to give his or her life to God, and to receive the Holy Spirit. Though these courses were originally used in Ann Arbor, they rapidly spread throughout the Charismatic Renewal in America and the world. Hundreds of thousands of manuals were printed and distributed worldwide. The course was meant to be interactive, with short explanations given by a leader and discussion groups to help answer questions and doubts. As the Community gained experience, they adjusted the course in minor ways, but the emphasis always remained the same. Here is what the course outline looked like around 1971:

#### Life in the Spirit

1. Introduction: What you can expect. God's love and his desire for a personal relationship with everyone
2. Salvation: The basic Gospel message, centering on Jesus Christ
3. The New Life: The gift of the Spirit and what it means to be baptized in the Spirit (Spiritual gifts)
4. Receiving God's Gift: Turning to the Lord, repentance and faith, and being baptized in the Spirit
5. Praying for Baptism of the Spirit: Those in groups who are ready are prayed with. Each one is counseled individually during the week prior to being prayed for
6. Growth: How to grow in the new life, especially regular prayer and community
7. After the Seminar: More on spiritual growth and dealing with difficulties, and how to move forward<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971," Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 7.

These talks explained basic Christian beliefs about God and man. They covered such concepts as “God created the world,” “God loves you and has a good plan for your life,” “Man messed up God’s plan by disobeying God,” and “God provided a way for Mankind to return to him through his son Jesus.” A major part of the course covered the unique role of the third person in the trinity—the Holy Spirit—and how God sends the Holy Spirit to help Christians enter the full life God has for them.

The course focused on personal relationships to God, what the role of the Holy Spirit was, what it meant to experience the Holy Spirit, and growing in daily prayer, scripture reading, and overcoming spiritual obstacles. It taught similar things to Clark’s pamphlet *Baptized in the Holy Spirit*, but it presented the material in a conversational and interactive way. Like the pamphlet, the seminar talked about the Holy Spirit in relation to the rest of the Christian’s life.

The basic purpose of the course was to bring people into a living relationship with God and to instruct them in the necessity for an alternate lifestyle, the Christian life. It informed the participants of what to do in order to live the Christian life. Anyone could attend the Life in the Spirit Seminar, since that involved no additional requirements, but the course itself encouraged participants to get involved in a Christian group. If they wanted to take another step toward Community, they were invited to attend the Community Weekend.

### *Community Weekend*

After going through this introductory Life in the Spirit Seminar and receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, many people wanted to get more connected to the Word of God

Community. The next step was to attend the Community Weekend.<sup>13</sup> The point of the weekend was to *experience* Christian community life, albeit for only a weekend. The weekend offered talks and explanations about Christian community, but the major goal was for a person to have a mini-experience of community life. Four talks were presented on the weekend:

1. The Word of God: Its history and the meaning of its name
2. Christian Community: What a Christian community is, the body of Christ, the relation of our community to the churches
3. A Common Way of Life: What is involved in the covenant of our community: common life and order
4. Growing into Community Life: The community as a community of service, what it means to be “underway”<sup>14</sup>

This weekend focused on the need for Christians to join together with other Christians in order to fully live as Christians. American culture idealized individualism, but the Word of God Community believed that while God worked in the lives of individuals, God also worked with people as a group. Christians were not meant to be Christians alone, and meeting with other Christians on Sunday was not enough. Therefore, explaining the need for community in a Christian’s life and how to go about actually living in the Community was important. This is what the course explained, but the real attraction was the experience of living community. People experienced genuine love; and they saw others making sacrifices to serve and care for them. In short, after having an experience of the Holy Spirit in the Life in the Spirit Seminar, they would experience one ideal of Christian life: living community.

On this weekend, abstract ideas and beliefs were made concrete. The Community believed not just in abstract beliefs, but in putting those beliefs into action. In this way the

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<sup>13</sup> Depending on when the next Community weekend was held, participants might join the Foundations course first.

<sup>14</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 7.

community provided a solution to the problems they saw in other institutional churches. Even though the churches preached love and care, they neither exemplified it nor offered practical places to express it. The Community sought to embody the ideals they proclaimed, and the weekend is one example of how they did that. It also provided an expectation of living out Christian beliefs such that when participants went along to the next course (the Foundations Course) they would be eager to put those beliefs into practice.

### *Foundations in Christian Living Courses*

New members had made a decision to commit their whole lives radically to God, and they were eager to learn how to do that within this new context. Those still interested in joining the Word of God Community attended the Foundations Course(s)—normally described as the “how-to” of Christian Life. These courses took the next step in Christian teaching, supplementing the teaching of the Life in the Spirit course and teaching Christians how to begin to apply this new faith to the whole of their lives. The outline of the first Foundations Course is as follows (circa 1971):

#### Foundations I

##### A) Basics

1. Love of God
2. Love of neighbor
3. Faith
4. Knowing God’s will

##### B) Overcoming Obstacles

5. The world and Christian Community
6. Overcoming the “flesh” (emotional healing)
7. Repairing wrongdoing
8. Overcoming the work of evil spirits

##### C) Christian personal relationships (basics)

9. Finding your place in the Community
10. Sex marriage, living single for the Lord (celibacy)

11. Being unmarried
12. Relationships outside the community<sup>15</sup>

This course taught Christian morality, and it was very much traditional morality. So while the Community began as part of the counterculture, they parted with the radical moral changes that some of the counterculture brought about. Their radical solution to their disappointment with society came in the form of a return to Christian morality and to living out that morality. The course focused on “Relationships.” It was the key word for the course, exploring two different spheres of relating (besides the over-arching theme of relating to God): relationship to the outside world and relationship to Christians in community.<sup>16</sup>

Christians related to the world by approaching it cautiously. The sixties movements had redefined the meaning of relationships—man to woman, child to parent, person to institution/authority. Not all of what the world offered was good for a Christian. Worldly—cultural and countercultural—stereotypes and images of what people should live like did not match the Christian truth. The Community also defined and redefined ways of relating. Their conclusion diverged from general countercultural views. A Christian was supposed to be distinct from the “world.” The complaint of the Community was that the church life of their parents’ generation had been too much like the world. The Community characterized what they saw as evils in society and chose against those evils.

Christians were meant to relate to other Christians by loving them, by avoiding—or repairing—conflict, and by devoted service. The courses encouraged Christians to make major life decisions based on commitment to love and serve their brothers and sisters. Each person had certain gifts to offer the group and was encouraged to find his or her place in the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> The second Foundations Course dealt more specifically with one-on-one relationships. The first course was meant to help people understand their own role in the community, which I included one’s state of life.

Community. Another new way a Christian was to approach life concerned marriage and one's state of life.

The idea of lifelong celibacy was promoted in the Community. Those who wished to serve God radically were encouraged to consider a celibate life so that they could devote more time and energy to the work of building Christian communities. Far from the cry of "free love," this group saw sex and sexuality as part of a sacred relationship. Sex was reserved for marriage<sup>17</sup> or was given up for the sake of serving others. This emphasis on celibacy demonstrates a radical break from even broad American culture. A group of celibate men even formed an organization, a brotherhood, called the Servants of the Word. As an organization they were committed to lifelong celibacy and committed to serving the Ann Arbor word of God Community and the Charismatic Renewal in general.

The second Foundations Course dealt more specifically with individual relationships. Living in the Community meant having many intense relational environments. Members saw each other in two weekly prayer meetings, courses, weekends, service team meetings, as well as in their own homes. This course helped people to relate well to one in their intense lifestyle.

Foundations course IIA (for all)

1. Personal relationships in the modern world
2. Reconstructing relationships
3. Headship-subordination
4. Improving relationships I
5. Improving relationships II
6. The fruit of the Spirit and our emotions<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In a strange way, because the hippie community focused on sexuality and opened the door to "free sex," the end result was that they cheapened its value. The Community, instead, removed sex from being the focal point of life, and thereby increased its value.

<sup>18</sup> "A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971," Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 8.



Up to this point all attendees had met together to hear the same talk. Halfway through the twelve-week course the group would split up into three groups: one for single men, one for single women, and one for married couples. The same general topics were discussed in each group, but they were approached differently depending on different genders or marital status. According to their teaching, marriage meant a different thing for a man than it did for a woman.<sup>19</sup> Even Christian maturity looked different for a woman than for a man.

#### Foundations Course IIB--Single Men

1. Christian Maturity
2. Marriage
3. Celibacy [called “Single for the Lord” by the Community]
4. Moving to it [Making a Decision]
5. Sex
6. Being a Christian man

#### Foundations Course IIB--Single women

7. Being a Christian Woman
8. Marriage
9. Celibacy [called “Single for the Lord” by the Community]
10. Remaining unmarried
11. Sex
12. Christian Maturity

#### Foundations Course IIB Married Couples

7. Ideal of Christian Life in marriage
8. Husband and wife relationship I
9. Husband and wife relationship II
10. Parents and children
11. Life in Christian Community: options for married couples
12. General discussion: future directions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Feminist movements were gaining steam in the seventies, arguing for the equality—indeed often the *sameness*—of men and women, sometimes arguing that there was no distinction between the sexes except physical differences and the differences due to cultural stereotypes. The Community was diverging from the extremes of the Feminist movement (though in general they advanced the place of woman in their Community) and was returning to some traditional gender roles, holding, at least, that the sexes were distinct. Steve Clark later wrote a book called *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1980) in which he discussed the roles of each gender according to scripture and social sciences.

<sup>20</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 8, 9.

In an age of general confusion about how a person was supposed to live, the Community created a detailed and specific outline of Christian beliefs, values, and morals. On one hand the Community diverged from the traditional American society they saw by emphasizing the need to live out unique Christian ideals in daily life. On the other hand the community diverged from countercultural streams by emphasizing the need for traditional Christian morals and values.

These beliefs were inculcated within the framework of Community. Living, not learning, was not the goal of the courses. The teaching was practical, so it was meant to be applied to daily living and decision-making. The Community was the place to live out these values and cement them in place. In particular, people had a chance to live out the values in their homes or households.

### **Households**

A common picture of sixties includes the Volkswagen bus, covered in bright colored flowers, full to the brim with young, curiously-dressed (to us today) hippies. These unique vehicles became living space for the traveling hippies. They were centers of common, shared life. During the sixties communal living grew in popularity across America's countercultural groups,<sup>21</sup> and communal living was also prominent in the Word of God Community. However, the life in a Word of God Household was vastly different that what took place in a VW Bus. In traditional American life, the nuclear family was the basic unit of living. As more students flocked to university, the view of living arrangements changed.

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 88.

The focus of the Community was living a particular way of life, seeking to embody their cultural values rather than be washed out by the flow of mass culture. They formed a distinctive response, forming a sub-society, both as one large community, but also in smaller face-to-face interaction. One of the central beliefs of the Community was that being a Christian should affect every aspect of a person's life. To understand how this full-life looked, the Community examined early Christianity as described in the book of Acts.<sup>22</sup>

One of the things they saw was that the early Christians lived together and shared regular meals together. They began to put this into action by living together in apartments and houses around town. Then, married couples began to open their doors for students and graduates. More and more people in the Community began to live together in houses: out of this practice emerged the concept of Household Life. Households became major "centers of Christian growth and service" and "the basic unity of life of the Community."<sup>23</sup> Households soon became the norm for Community life in Ann Arbor, and the vision was adapted to different living situations: dorm households, non-residential households, and households for married couples.

### *The Goal of Household*

In a Household, the people of the Community found the permanent, stable, face-to-face community they were looking for. They were already meeting multiple times a week for prayer, study, training, and discussion, but they desired more. These people sought a group where they could live out their beliefs and values in daily life. Households were more than practical living situations with like-minded friends: they became the expression of a lifestyle.

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<sup>22</sup> They also saw examples of household living in other groups like Graham Pulkingham's Episcopalian Church of the Redeemer in Houston, Texas

<sup>23</sup> "A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971," Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 6.

The word “community” has many different meanings. In the Word of God Community, it meant an organization. But it also, perhaps more importantly, meant personal support and care from a group of people. Such *personal* support and committed relationships were impossible in a large group of hundreds of people. When the Word of God Community continued to grow after becoming an official organization, they desired to keep their large common unity, but they also knew that smaller groups were needed to effectively support individuals. In the summer of 1971 they created sub-communities, breaking the community into four groups of about 75-150.<sup>24</sup> These sub-communities acted as smaller groups of care within the larger Community. The leaders also recognized the need for even smaller groups of the size of a large family, 6-10 people. According to Clark, Households fulfilled this need:

[Households] are small groups that live together and so are distinct from other small groups, but they are nonetheless small groups. Consequently, they have need of being part of a larger community which supports them and which they can support. In an age in which Christian family life and religious community life is breaking down, it becomes all the more crucial to realize the role of a community in the stability of households.<sup>25</sup>

Clark, in *Building Christian Communities*, was contrasting the differences and advantages of both the large community (anything larger than 30-40 people) and the small community. Both sizes supported one another because each addressed needs the other could not. With the growth of the larger community, Clark was primarily addressing the need for small-group identity, and he connected that small-group identity with the Household.

Households were encouraged because they formed the basic unit of community. The leaders were concerned with the strength of relationships and personal support for the

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<sup>24</sup> “A Report on the Word of God, Sept 1972 Supplement,” Thomas Yoder Papers; Box 1, *Reports 1970-1972*, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *Building Christian Communities*, 65.

individual. When the prayer meetings grew, they created the core Community. When the core Community grew they created sub-communities, but even the sub-communities did not provide basic daily interaction that the leaders felt to be important. Throughout all of this, Households were encouraged by the leaders because they formed the necessary daily, face-to-face relationships. Clark said,

Our aim is to have everyone in the community in a grouping of 6-10 people who have a commitment to support and help one another and who meet together regularly (more often than once a week) for some kind of prayer and sharing. It is in Households that we care for guests, help new people grow in Christian life, help people with serious emotional and psychological problems, and often share the gospel message.<sup>26</sup>

Households became the basic unit of living and building blocks of Community life.

To be a member of Community meant to invest one's whole life—not just to attend certain events but to participate in a lifestyle that involved daily relating and serving.

The purpose of the Households was committed, small-group relationships. People wanted to live every aspect of their lives as Christians. For this reason Households also acted as the primary support of morality. A 1971 anthropology report of the Word of God Community described the aspects of Households: “It must be made clear by [the] entrant that they really want to live Christian lives, for certain types of behavior are unacceptable in a Christian household: no drugs are allowed, sexual intercourse in the house is forbidden [for unmarried people], and bad temperaments are discouraged.”<sup>27</sup> In these smaller groups, people could help each other live as Christians in a world that did not value Christian ideals.

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<sup>26</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 2.

<sup>27</sup> “The Word of God: A Catholic Pentecostal Community,” Anthropology Report, 1971; Bentley Historical Library, Vertical File, “Word of God,” University of Michigan. 10.

### *The Pattern of Household*

Households had a common structure. While the structure was flexible due to particular circumstances and to special services individuals performed, the goal was the same. One example of a house structure was given in the anthropology report:

The members go to Monday and Thursday prayer meeting together. At 7:00AM and 11:00PM every day, they pray together as a house. They go out to dinner and to movies together on occasion. Every Wednesday they have a sharing night on which they discuss how to live Christian lives. There is a house meeting every Monday night. . . . Dinner is the one meal that everyone eats together. . . . On Tuesday there is a mass for the North sub-community, of which this household is a part.<sup>28</sup>

Life was busy and full- it was all encompassing. Besides multiple Community events, individuals often served as part of a team: an evangelism team, a service team, or the music team. Each team would meet to plan their service.

Beyond constructing a weekly schedule, each household would arrange the living space to suit their purposes. In some cases, all the beds were piled into one room. Space was made for a prayer room and for living space. Stereos were usually left off (or were often completely absent), as were televisions: The anthropological study of the community described a household of single men as follows:

The house has been rearranged so that now all the members sleep in one room, which contains three bunk beds. There is one prayer room and one study room. The basement has been arranged so that each person has his own study place. There are no truly private rooms in the house. Under the present arrangement, the members talk more to each other and are definitely together more than previously. The members use the stereo very little, so as to keep a peaceful atmosphere.<sup>29</sup>

Houses were meant to be places for brotherly relationships, refuge, quiet, and peace. These living situations were radical in that the people consciously chose to construct the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10.

environment to diverge from youth-cultural norms and provide a helpful, life-giving environment.

### *The Service of Household*

Each house was committed to one or two specific services. The primary service was the hosting of guests. Hundreds of guests came through Ann Arbor every year, wanting to see both the charismatic prayer and the communal lifestyle. Households were extremely generous with their space, food, and time, hosting people from all over the world. Guests might stay anywhere from a few days to a month, although in general they were encouraged not to stay more than a week.

As the Community grew, so did the number of their guests. In their first year (9/69-9/70) they hosted 727 guests (14 stayed on in the community). The following year they hosted 890 (33 of whom stayed), and the year following that they hosted 1,009 guests (38 of whom stayed).<sup>30</sup> They hosted all sorts of people. For example, in their first year of hosting people, “63 of these were priests, 51 were nuns, and 12 were [monastic] brothers. 35 were couples who brought 19 children with them who were counted in the above guest total. 433 of the total stayed 3 nights or more.”<sup>31</sup>

Guests came as individuals, couples, or friends, but they also came for conferences. Clark and Martin, as well as other Word of God leaders, were highly involved with the broader Charismatic Renewal. They participated in (or led) the service teams to help serve the broader movement. Because of the visibility of its leaders, Charismatics all across America heard about Ann Arbor and looked to it as an example. Major leadership

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<sup>30</sup> “A Report on the Word of God, Sept 1972 Supplement,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 4.

<sup>31</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 12.

conferences were held in Ann Arbor, and quite often the participants of these conferences stayed with a Household.

A household could have other forms of service too. Dorm Households functioned primarily to do outreach in the dorms. They hosted parties, led Bible studies, visited hallmates, and most especially invited friends to the exciting Thursday prayer meetings.

### **Outreach and Service**

The Community embodied their Christian ideals through service and evangelism. Though they had created their own mini-society, they made their contribution to the “external” America by serving in their local community and inviting people to join the way of life that had brought them fulfillment. As they grew they provided more local service, serving in soup kitchens, providing free medical assistance, and doing other kinds of service. The major service of the Community was inviting people to participate in their radical lifestyle. Emphasis on *community* was endocentric, that is, it focused inwards on the life of the Community itself. But the Community also looked outward. Other well-known groups that focus on developing their own community are more insular, such as the Amish or Mennonites. Every culture has groups that retreat from the world and create self-sufficient communities which have little-to-no interaction with the rest of the world. In one sense the Word of God Community was like these groups, attempting to be self-supportive, living with each other, committing themselves to each other, creating a nourishing environment, and being distinct from the world outside. But their service and outreach were directed toward interaction with the world, and that distinguished them from insular communities. Their



mission was not only to foster community but also interact with, serve, and evangelize people.

### *Evangelism and Hospitality*

Students active in the Community were encouraged to live in the dorms because the dorms were the best place to meet new people. The charismatic experience was something to be shared and spread. Members saw their Christian faith as a universal truth that anyone and everyone could accept and live by. To see them as exclusionary and uninterested in the problems of the world would be to misunderstand them. Certainly, they were concerned about the world and its problems, but they saw the ultimate solution as an internal change brought about by a personal relationship with Jesus, an encounter with the Holy Spirit, and a life of Christian community. These were the things they shared. The Civil Rights movement sought to fix a hurting world by establishing just laws, but the Community was also interested in making a better world, even if their solution was primarily apolitical, directed at internal changing the heart.

For those who did not live in the dorms, or who did not feel particularly gifted at invitational evangelism, there were other ways to serve. The more the Community grew, the more opportunities arose for hospitality or leadership. A person could also serve in a leadership role: leading Household, leading a Life in the Spirit Seminar, or leading music for prayer meetings. In the earliest years, however, the major forms of service were hosting guests and inviting people into the new life of the community. A Community report stated, “We have been discovering increasingly that sharing our life is a major means of service. We can help people more by sharing with them a whole new life, by taking them in, than we

can by starting special projects.”<sup>32</sup> Service projects developed later on, but the Community saw hospitality and outreach as its primary service.

The Community doubled in size consistently for the first few years, therefore supporting new people was a major area of service. “One of the major areas of service is with new people. . . . This would be easier if all we provided was a program, but we are a community, and we are committed to loving each person individually and sharing our life with them, and we are committed to giving each person personal help.”<sup>33</sup> The Community was motivated to care for each person and to create a fulfilling life for every individual. Achieving this in a large organization was a difficult task, but the main leaders set it as one of their primary goals.

### *Service*

Even though community-sponsored service projects were rare in the first few years, the people in the Community found ways to serve. An early account, prior to the establishment of the official Community, explained the various kinds of service that individuals participated in:

There have been . . . spontaneous clothing collections for the poor. . . . A number of individuals are involved in programs like tutoring, Big Brothers, and hospital visitation sponsored by University groups. . . . Some have worked with Michigan migrant programs, one went to Mexico on a summer project. Last summer a group pitched in to find and clean up an apartment for a Latin American couple coming to spend a month in Ann Arbor to get medical care for their two children. Once a group of twelve volunteered to help scrub and clean a bakery owned by a non-English speaking family in Ann Arbor which was threatened with closure by the health officials.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> “A Pastoral Report, April 1970,” Thomas Yoder Papers, Bentley Library, 16.

The Community grew out of a group of people (and a generation) who were zealous for serving. When they were small, people participated in spontaneous self-motivated projects, and as they grew they were able to create service programs and places of service.

As more people joined, more opportunities became available to serve the basic needs of the Community: “One form in which our commitment to service is expressed is in the supporting services with the Community. . . . People serve as typists, secretaries, facilities men, bookkeepers, purchasing agents, duplicators, hostesses, ushers, babysitters, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Out of these unpaid services, more organized attempts at service projects started. Babysitting developed into a child-care service so that parents could attend church on Sundays and meetings during the week.

Increasingly the Community found ways to serve the local city of Ann Arbor. In the summer of 1972, the community formalized a charity team, a coffee house, and an art service. “The Mercy Team has begun to operate and is developing community involvement in a variety of areas of need in Ann Arbor, including the needs of the sick, the aged, and the retarded.”<sup>36</sup> People who joined community wanted to put their Christian ideals into practice (which countered the hypocrisy they felt was so prevalent in their parents’ generation). They were invested in the ideal of service to the needy. The mercy team was a start, but, as the Community grew through the seventies and eighties, they developed bigger means of serving the local Ann Arbor area as well as supporting charity for the poor around the world. As the finances and abilities of the Community grew, they formed Christian schools, charities for the poor, counseling for pregnant women, free medical facilities, and other services to Washtenaw County and to third world countries.

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<sup>35</sup> “A Pastoral Report, Sept 1971,” Thomas Yoder Papers; Bentley Library, 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Evangelism remained a major area of service, as did support for individual Community members, but the Community expanded their formal service to the poor and needy. Their service and outreach made them distinct from insular groups and demonstrated the way Community desired to live out their own ideals.

## **Conclusion**

In the early seventies, as the Word of God Community grew as an organization, becoming its own institution, they drifted away from the countercultural groups of the sixties by embracing Christian morals and beliefs. They moved beyond being a loose association of people connected by a weekly prayer meeting; their life became more defined, more structured, and more effective at their (now articulated) mission. As an institution, they formed a bond of unity around shared beliefs and values, brought their ideals into every aspect of their life, and demonstrated generosity and care through their service. In all this, they had created the life that they desired, the kind of life they felt America had failed to offer them.

The courses served to cement their common beliefs, thus forming an identity around a common ideology. Their emphasis on Household life met the need for face-to-face, stable relationships and natural groupings that society lacked, helping them survive longer than most counterculture groups (more on this in the chapter three). Their service expanded to meet more than their own needs and to include the needs of the poor and the helpless. Eventually their organized service to the Ann Arbor area became substantial. All of these traits separated their course from those of other groups in the counterculture and set them on a track to emerge as a morally conservative force in the eighties.

### **CHAPTER THREE: A Radical Alliance: Spreading the Vision**

Throughout the seventies the Word of God Community grew in its influence on culture. The Community gained experience and established a reputation among a variety of Christian groups as a valuable and stable organization. It had proven that it was more than an upstart group that would fade with the passing of sixties and seventies radicalism. From their established position, they began to exercise influence on broader cultural issues. The ideals and approaches that they had embodied early in their history shaped the way they influenced other Christian groups.

In the sixties, the Word of God formed out of a reaction to mainstream American society and lifeless churches, but in the eighties they faced a new challenge. Their response to weakness in institutional American churches had been to focus on renewal in spiritual life. Now, as the lines in the sand shifted, the Word of God found itself facing a different cultural opponent, and it began allying with various traditional churches. Instead of lifeless churches and bankrupt society, it was now facing a broad social trend that weakened traditional family life, reinterpreted scripture, and proclaimed relativistic moral truth.

In response the Community spearheaded an alliance of Catholic, evangelical, and Eastern Orthodox Christians. This diverse group of people met together almost annually—eight times in all—for the Allies for Faith and Renewal Conferences. At these conferences they discussed cultural, moral, and theological issues in America, and together they laid out a plan of Christian engagement with society. Each conference produced a book that was dealt with the issues presented at the conference. This paper will make use of the first book in particular: *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry* by

*Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics*.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these cooperative events, the Community published its own books on cultural and social issues.<sup>2</sup>

The roadmap of this chapter is as follows. The first section places these conferences in a historical context, explaining the changes in America to which these conferences were responding. The following section outlines the unique role that the Community played in creating these conferences, and how the character of the Community shaped the vision of these conferences. The last section explains the scope of the conferences and highlights some specific values they advocated.

### **Cultural Realignment**

The American cultural landscape was different at the start of the 1980s than it had been 20 years earlier, and that created a new context for the Community to interact with society. In the 1980s the Community exercised influence on culture in a way that it had not before. The Allies for Faith and Renewal created a vision for Christian engagement with American society. To understand the impact of these conferences on society and culture, it is necessary to explain the way American culture and society had changed through the seventies.

By the 1980s America had become significantly polarized, and the culture wars emerged. The sixties movements that had seen the growth of countercultural or activist groups had produced a whole set of new values in American culture. While fewer people

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta, eds., *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry by Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Steven B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*; Ralph Martin, *Husbands, Wives, Parents, Children: Foundations for the Christian Family* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1978); Ralph Martin, *A Crisis of Truth: The Attack on Faith, Morality, and Mission in the Catholic Church* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1982). The Community also sponsored the *Living as a Christian Series* from roughly 1974-1984 with around 20 short books addressing practical aspects of living a Christian way of life in a modern secular world.

dressed like hippies and followed the extremes of counterculture; countercultural moral values had influenced broader society. By the end of the seventies, those values were solidifying. In the fifties, Americans had been divided according to their religion: Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. The sixties witnessed a lessening of these identifications and a growth in identifying with people of shared values. In the seventies, people who traditionally had not mixed now mixed easily around their new shared values. This trend spread throughout American culture and created a deep rift. James Davidson Hunter explains this realignment in his book *Culture Wars*:

[T]he significance of the trend toward expanded pluralism does not reside in this disintegration [of Judeo-Christian consensus in American public life] alone but rather in its consequences: in the wake of the fading Judeo-Christian consensus has come a rudimentary *realignment* of pluralistic diversity. The “organizing principle” of American pluralism has altered fundamentally such that the major rift is no longer born out of theological or doctrinal disagreements—as between Protestants and Catholics or Christians and Jews. Rather the rift emerges out of a more fundamental disagreement over the sources of moral truth.<sup>3</sup>

According to Hunter, the theological disagreement of Protestants and Catholics ceased to be the major divide in America; it was replaced by a divide between views on values and the sources of moral truth.<sup>4</sup> Hunter describes two emerging camps as the progressives on one side and the orthodox on the other.

This divide between progressives and orthodox deepened throughout the seventies—and was concerned with moral truth and the source of its authority. The battle was, therefore, not just about what society should look like, but about what authority America should use to derive its social values and moral truth. Traditionally American values were derived from a

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<sup>3</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> By sources of moral truth Hunter means that orthodox Americans held the traditional interpretation of scripture to define moral truth. Progressives looked to a different source; for them, moral truth came from ideals of contemporary beliefs like reason and the value of an individual.

conservative interpretation of the Bible as well as enlightenment beliefs, and writings of the founding fathers. Cultural progressivists leaned upon a different source for their moral and cultural beliefs:

Within cultural progressivism, by contrast, moral authority tends to be defined by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism. . . . In other words, what all *progressivist* worldviews share in common is *the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life* [emphasis original].<sup>5</sup>

This ability to reinterpret or resymbolize is easily seen in many sixties countercultural groups. Counterculture was caught up in the anti-institutionalism and radicalism that allowed participants to entirely recreate their worldview and ideas about society and religion. It was not, however, just the people who took part in radical groups that adopted some of the countercultural cultural values. And not all countercultural groups identified with the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life. The Word of God Community had grown out the sixties counterculture but came to defend a morality that was based on a traditional understanding of the authority of Scripture.

By the eighties, the cultural change had reached a new level, indeed it often seemed mainstream. Even within religious traditions there was a great ideological divide: “now the conflict in each tradition has extended beyond the realm of theology and ecclesiastical politics to embrace many of the most fundamental issues and institutions of *public* culture: law, government, education, science, family, and sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> This shift happened across denominations. People within a denomination were divided over issues of public culture. The foundation of identity was no longer in the shared doctrines of a church, but in shared beliefs on moral authority. Rather than identifying vertical lines (Figure 1) of Protestant,

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<sup>5</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



Catholic, or Jew, Americans identified along the horizontal (Figure 2) spectrum of culture or politics: conservative/orthodox or liberal/progressive.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1  
American Identity in the 1950s

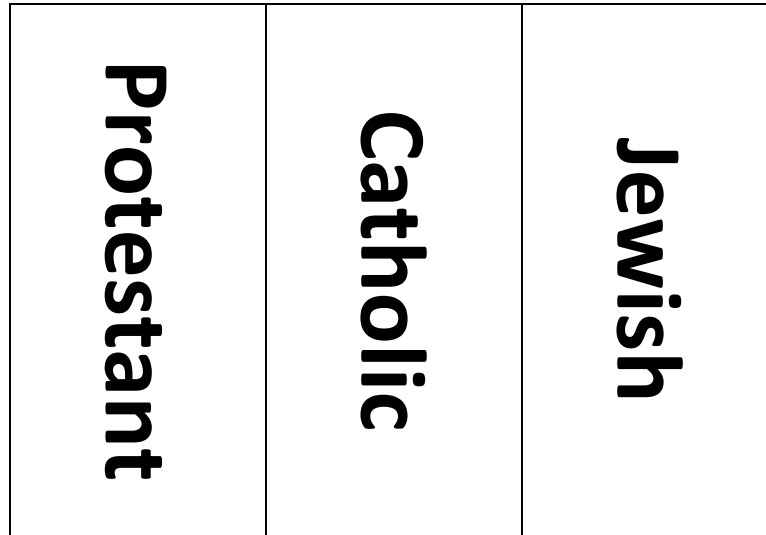
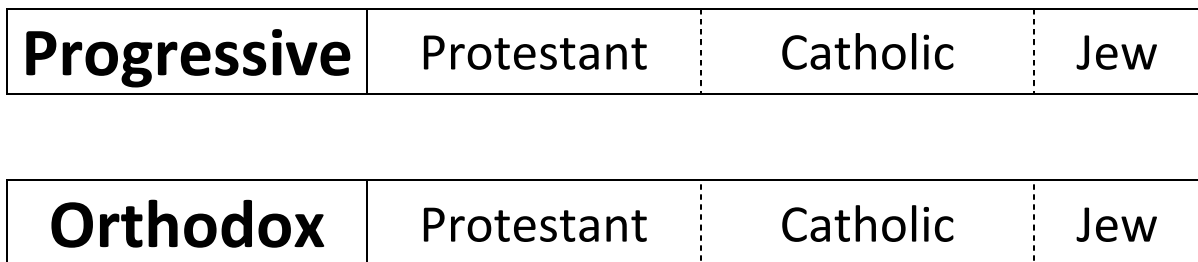


Figure 2  
American Identity by the 1980s



This shift is demonstrated in the formation of new alliances around a common system of beliefs, new alliance which form the two sides of the culture war. Progressive

<sup>7</sup> Not that people walked around saying, “I’m a progressive,” but that when it came to making life decisions and voting, these beliefs were stronger than the beliefs associated with a denomination.

Presbyterians identified more with Progressive Catholics than they did with orthodox Presbyterians, and they worked with those who shared their cultural values. Hunter says,

These affinities [of progressives of different traditions and among orthodox of different traditions] express themselves institutionally as a “new ecumenism”—a new form of cooperative mobilizations, in which distinct and separate religious and moral traditions share resources and work together toward common objectives.<sup>8</sup>

Hunter gives numerous examples of these cooperative endeavors by different religious organizations.<sup>9</sup> In fact Hunter argues, “The new ecumenism, then, represents the key institutional expression of the realignment of American public culture and, in turn, it provides the institutional battles lines for contemporary culture war.”<sup>10</sup> This shift is vastly significant and important in America, because it formed the new dividing lines of the culture war. This shift is important for this study because of the influential role the Word of God Community took in the formation of this new-ecumenism.

In summary, American society had changed and new lines were being drawn between those with orthodox, traditional beliefs on cultural and morality, and those with progressive beliefs. A new opponent had arisen and had become mainstream: progressive society (Christians and non-Christians). In this new world the Word of God Community extended significant influence, drawing together orthodox Christians from different denominations to join them in going against the grain of mainstream society.

### **The Community’s Impact on the Conferences**

This identity shift is important for this study because of the unique role the Word of God Community played in the development of one new alliance. Because of its distinctive

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<sup>8</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

history of early ecumenical adoption into corporate shared life, the Word of God community was in a special position to sponsor a new alliance and spread their vision of Christian lifestyle. Since the Community was a key sponsor, the beliefs and ideals of the Community shaped the nature of the alliance and its vision. A little further explanation of this identity shift is necessary.

In general, the liberal progressive churches participated more readily (and sooner) in this new ecumenism than orthodox churches. Since they shared a common approach to reinterpreting religious history for relevance to the issues of modern life, progressives focused less on the traditional dogmas of their church, choosing instead to focus on their new values. Such cooperation among orthodox churches was much rarer. Hunter says, “The number of formal coalitions drawing together orthodox patterns is far fewer in number primarily because of their commitment to the primacy of theological distinctiveness.”<sup>11</sup> In general, Orthodox communities were committed to their theological distinctiveness and were therefore more invested in perpetuating and guarding their beliefs than in engaging in the new cultural debates.<sup>12</sup>

However, despite the scarcity of ecumenism among the orthodox, The Word of God Community sponsored an orthodox alliance. Hunter specifically described one orthodox alliance:

A few [orthodox alliances] do exist: one of the most important is the Center for Pastoral Renewal, which actively seeks to draw together theologically conservative Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox leaders for the purposes of forging a new orthodox ecumenism. The center sponsors annual Allies for Faith and Renewal conferences in which orthodox Christians of all confessions come together to work through common problems.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>12</sup> However, their traditional strategies were no longer working as more and more people left their churches.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The Center for Pastoral Renewal that Hunter mentions was a noteworthy group that brought together orthodox Christians of various denominations. This Center for Pastoral Renewal arose directly out of The Word of God Community—its key leaders were members of the Community. Therefore, it was specifically the Word of God Community that gave birth to this unique organized cooperation between orthodox Christians of different traditions. But why did the Community sponsor this Conference and how were they able to pull together Christians who were less inclined to focus on ecumenical cooperation?

### *Vision for the Conferences*

This new alliance—the Center for Pastoral Renewal and Allies for Faith and Renewal—was the initiative of the Word of God Community, and therefore it was The Word of God itself that gave birth to these cooperative conferences. The first product of the conferences—the book *Christianity Confronts Modernity*—clearly acknowledged the role of the Community in the vision of the project: “The scholarly and pastoral dimensions of the meeting grew out of the character and concerns of the sponsoring organizations—The Word of God . . . , *Pastoral Renewal* . . . , and the Center for Christian Studies. . . .”<sup>14</sup> *Pastoral Renewal* was a journal for Christian leaders published by members of the Word of God Community. The Center for Christian Studies was also sponsored and staffed by Word of God Community leaders.

The vision for the Allies for Faith and Renewal conferences was to respond to societal changes that impacted Christian churches. Church membership and participation was decreasing, particularly in mainline churches.<sup>15</sup> Increasingly the popular cultural ideals

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta, pref. to *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 9.

did not resonate with the message of religion. At first, this pattern was minimal, as with the countercultural groups—which were a minority—but more and more these cultural changes spread, and as they spread they affected Christian religious life in America. But why were these cultural beliefs drawing Christians away from Christianity, and where did these values come from? The Community pulled together other orthodox Christians for the sake of discussing these very questions and for the sake of helping other churches resist these negative trends.

The title of the first Allies for Faith and Renewal book, *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, speaks directly to the purpose of the Conference: for Christians to engage and confront modernity. Peter Williamson, a leader of the Word of God Community and editor of the book, wrote, “The purpose of the colloquy was to achieve a better understanding of the situation of all Christians’ vis-à-vis contemporary secular society.”<sup>16</sup> For the participants, there was a clear rift between modern society and Christianity. For hundreds of years, western society and Christianity had been mutually supportive, in the period known as Christendom.<sup>17</sup> Beginning around the Enlightenment, a falling out formed between the assumptions of modern society and those of Christian theology and beliefs. In addition to these longer-term changes, the recent changes of the sixties and seventies had sharpened the divide between secular society and Christianity.

These conferences attempted to comprehensively analyze a wide spectrum of changes that had taken place in the modern world. The broad term they used to cover all these

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<sup>16</sup> Williamson and Perrotta, *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Kinzer, “Christian Identity and Social Change in Technological Society,” in *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry by Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics*, ed. by Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981), 21.

changes was “modernity.” Modernity had influenced all of society. Peter Williamson, defined modernity in the following way:

In the discussion that follows and throughout this book, “modernity” refers to the set of challenges in social structure and consciousness which have accompanied the rise of technological societies since the mid eighteenth century. . . . It is important to understand that in this volume “modernity” means something broader than ideology—the complex of technical, social, and intellectual changes which presents Christians with both problems and opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

While the sixties had brought new ideologies (which were perhaps the ultimate spark for this conference), modernity was broader than modern ideology, and it pervasively influenced society. Because it was new<sup>19</sup> (and advancing quickly in the last half of the century), it was creating a different world, vastly unlike the previous one. This new world created both new challenges and new opportunities for Christians. Williamson denied that all of modernity should be rejected; rather he believed that it was necessary to think critically about its culture, values, and circumstances and not to embrace them carelessly. Though ideology was a major aspect of modernity, modernity was more than that—it was a multifaceted change affecting the whole of a person’s life.

The Conferences response was to protect Christians—of all traditions—from American secular society. Contemporary society posed challenges to the Christian way of life shared by the participants. Secular society contained certain values that opposed, challenged, and undermined the values and beliefs of Christians. The Community continued to grow through this period, and as a growing orthodox force they were in a position to help other churches survive these societal changes. The conference, therefore, convened to

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<sup>18</sup> Williamson, intro. to *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Generally speaking for Christianity.

understand what those values were, where they came from, and how Christians could confront them.

### *A Unique Contribution*

Because of this group's particular history and because of its success through the seventies, the Word of God Community was able to make a unique contribution to discussing problems in society. In particular, three aspects of their history (which set them apart from most Christian churches) shaped the conferences. The first was the Community's ecumenical nature. The second was their experience with and vision for Christian sub-societal environments, and the third was their broad, multifaceted approach to Christian living.

### Ecumenism

As described above, ecumenical cooperation among Christians of orthodox persuasions was rare. Because the Word of God Community formed ecumenically, and because they returned to traditional Christian ideals and beliefs, they were in a unique position to sponsor these cooperative conferences between orthodox Christians of different denominations. As an ecumenical group, The Word of God gained experience with interdenominational cooperation through the seventies. Leaders came from different denominations and knew how to interact in a way that was sensitive to the unique beliefs of other denominations while focusing on issues common to all. The Community had focused on beliefs and values that all Christians share, generally placing less emphasis on theological

differences (although they held that these distinctions were still important).<sup>20</sup> In that way the community could articulate shared beliefs and use their experience to lead and organize a multi-denominational endeavor.

This group was making new strides in their discussion about the challenges of modern society. The first conference was the first major gathering of orthodox Christians across denominational lines: “It was the first time that such a large number of evangelicals and Roman Catholics have met for theological and pastoral discussion on this subject.”<sup>21</sup> Out of the Community’s ecumenical nature this unusual and difficult alliance was established.

The conferences called for continued and even greater corporations between orthodox Christians. It called for a greater alliance between Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox who shared a common approach to biblical authority.<sup>22</sup> One chapter of *Christianity Confronts Modernity* set out the path for alliance:

The time is ripe for new evangelical alliances, one that will embrace Bible-believing Christians in all branches of Christendom. The burgeoning biblical renaissance that we see in the Cursillo and Charismatic movements in the Roman Catholic Church can become part of this new alliance so long as we focus upon a common goal and a common enemy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Originally the prayer group drew together Christians of different denominations around a shared experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit—the other values grew after that. As part of Allies for Faith and Renewal they worked with other Christians who did not share this experience. As the Community grew they identified more with common Christian values (the formation courses) instead of finding commonality primarily in the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Community recognized a need for cooperation with a larger group than just those with the same spiritual experience.

<sup>21</sup> Williamson and Perrotta, *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> In the past, approach to biblical authority separated Catholics and Protestants. But now new lines were being drawn and orthodox Protestants and Catholics felt they shared more similar views on biblical authority than they did with liberal Christians who often denied that the Bible was the inspired words of God.

<sup>23</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, “The Challenge Facing the Churches,” in *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry by Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics*, ed. by Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981), 218.



Evangelicals, (in a new definition which now encompassed all “Bible believing” Christians whether Protestant or Catholic) could put aside old differences to fight a common enemy, that is, the effects of modernity.

### Christian Community

The Word of God Community’s vision for developing committed Christian environments shaped the impact of the conferences. From early in their history, the Word of God Community valued communal living, forming a sub-society within which they could exemplify their ideals and from which they could best interact with society. Their vision for the impact of Christian community strengthened through the seventies as they gained experience. And they brought this vision to the conferences as part of the ecumenical nature of the conferences.

Mark Kinzer, a leader of the Community and a presenter at the first conference, offered a pastoral solution to the negative influences of modern society: form Christian communities. First and foremost, Christians needed to recreate natural groupings in order to cultivate Christian values in a mini-subculture. Kinzer said,

The first pastoral priority is to build and strengthen natural groupings within the Christian people [families, groups of Christian Families (Clusters), and Christian Communities] . . . to provide people with teaching and counsel on practical aspects of daily Christian living . . . to equip Christians to deal with the powerful formative influences of mass technological society . . . to restore processes of initiation and discipline to the local church community. . . . Initiation must be more than just a transmission of information or the evocation of an initial commitment; it must be the movement from one way of life to another, the transferal from one kingdom to another.<sup>24</sup>

His strategy underscored the need for Christians to see themselves as distinct from American culture—an early vision of the Community. To be a Christian is to belong to a separate

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<sup>24</sup> Kinzer, “Christian Identity,” 38-40.

kingdom. These were not Christians seeking a better political America; rather these were Christians seeking a more distinctive Christianity, one in which they could embody their values.

### Diverse Approach

Another way the Community influenced the vision of the conferences was in its broad vision of Christian service. The Community, because of its size, had offered many different services for a member to participate in. All members were encouraged to “surrender the whole of their lives” to the service of God. This belief gave Community members a vision of serving God within their various careers. This vision for broad ways to build the kingdom of heaven shaped the conferences. The Conferences were also designed to involve people with different occupations and different ways of strengthening Christian life.

The kinds of people that were invited indicated the kind of response the Word of God hoped to have: multifaceted, both theologically and pastorally. The Conference participants were diverse not just because of their different denominational backgrounds but because of the wide variety of occupations and services. There were theologians, pastoral leaders, authors, leaders of organizations, historians, ecumenists, scripture scholars, priests, and even a Trappist monk.<sup>25</sup> “The presence of both academics and pastors made for wide-ranging discussion, and it allowed a sharing of views between two types of Christian leaders whose efforts are too often separated.”<sup>26</sup> The conference drew together two main streams: the theological (ideas and beliefs) and the pastoral (method of action). Each of the participants added something either to the theological analysis or to the practical application of these

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<sup>25</sup> Williamson and Perrotta, *Christianity Confronts Modernity*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

beliefs. This kind of approach brought Christianity out of the world of abstract theology into the practical needs of normal Christians. They aimed at understanding society and equipping religious leaders who worked directly with regular Christian people: pastors, priests, mentors.

### **The Scope and Content of the Conferences**

The Allies for Faith and Renewal embodied a distinctive response to the changes of modernity. It was not political, it was not separatist, and it was not denominational. The rest of this chapter will look at a) how they chose to think about their own times; b) how they diverged from mainstream culture on the nature of truth; and c) how they proclaimed a distinctive response to cultural changes—neither uncritically accepting them like progressives, nor responding reactively to them as did some groups on the Christian New Right.

#### *Analysis of Cultural Changes*

The conferences first sought to analyze and understand the nature of changes within society since the coming of modernity. It looked for an overview of these changes from the last two hundred years and not just recent changes. Mark Kinzer presented an analysis of society that observed key changes with the coming of new technology and ideology, particularly looking at how those changes impacted the Christian way of life.

#### Technological Changes

Mark Kinzer discussed *practical* cultural changes that had affected Christian living and how Christian pastoral leaders could engage them. Growing technology, while neither

intrinsically good nor bad, had changed society in a way that presented a new opportunity and a new challenge to live a Christian way of life.

There are five aspects of life in modern technological society that especially weaken the Christian people's ability to think and live in a distinctively Christian way. They are as follows: (1) The breakdown of natural groups, (2) the specialization of knowledge and expertise, (3) the pervasiveness of the media, (4) mass education, and (5) the collectivization of labor.<sup>27</sup>

Kinzer gave a broad analysis of each of these areas. His analysis involved more than mere ideological shifts of the sixties and seventies and changes in America; he believed the problems went deeper. He was not establishing cultural opposition with postmodern progressives, but analyzing fundamentals that had impacted all Americans, liberal or conservative, progressive or orthodox.

Kinzer's observations about the breakdown of natural groupings are especially interesting because he provides the clearest solution for this breakdown.<sup>28</sup> His analysis borrowed from such sociological observers as Jacques Ellul, Peter Berger, and Robert Nisbet. "The formation of the modern nation-state and the establishment of a modern technological society have resulted in the partial or total breakdown of natural grouping."<sup>29</sup> These natural groupings are built around cohesive relationships and are personal, stable, and cohesive.<sup>30</sup> Such groupings existed before the Industrial Revolution in "the conjugal family . . . the extended family, the local church or parish, the village, the town, the guild, and the traditional neighborhood."<sup>31</sup> The Industrial Revolution and subsequent technical advances took people out of these stable groupings and—with increased mobility—made stable

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<sup>27</sup> Kinzer, "Christian Identity," 24.

<sup>28</sup> "The term 'natural groupings' (borrowed from Ellul) refers to social bodies of small to moderate size which are based on stable cohesive personal relationships" (Kinzer, "Christian Identity," 24).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

relationships difficult. One problem with the breakdown of this formative identity was the difficulty for an individual to resist social influence: “An individual can be influenced by forces such as propaganda [mass influence] only when he is cut off from membership in local groups. Because such groups are organic and have well-structured material, spiritual, and emotional life, they are not easily penetrated by propaganda.”<sup>32</sup>

The major issue, Kinzer claimed, was that Christian churches no longer formed stable groupings because of increased social mobility and because of a lack of “involvement [in] the entirety of people’s lives.”<sup>33</sup> Because of this, Americans were being swayed by the pervasiveness of media and new ideologies. Christian community was a modern solution to this problem of post-industrial society. The Community’s own recognition of the importance of community—grouping around shared values rather than institutional form—had grown significantly, and now they were spreading that vision to other orthodox Christians.

### Ideological Changes

Modern ideologies and societal changes, in addition to modern technology, had influenced Christians in many ways. Kinzer said, “There are five areas which show particularly strong secular influence: family life, sexuality, personal relationships and emotions, entertainment, and finances and possessions.”<sup>34</sup> These were the particular changes of the sixties and seventies that turned America away from its traditional way of life (but even the American way of life was not the ideal Christian life).

The West had begun to move into a modern era following the ideological changes of the Enlightenment and the technological changes of Industrial Revolution. Increasingly,

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, quoted in Kinzer, “Christian Identity,” 26.

<sup>33</sup> Kinzer, “Christian Identity,” 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

traditional Christian worldviews no longer dominated the government and cultural institutions. The recent changes of culture and society of the modern period brought Christianity back to the place it had before Christendom. Kinzer claimed,

Fourteen hundred years of Christendom had left the Christian Churches unprepared to deal with a largely non-Christian society. The Church was so identified with society as a whole that it could not conceive of returning to its ancient diaspora form of life. Therefore, the de-Christianization of society was accompanied by the de-Christianization of the Church.<sup>35</sup>

Kinzer assumed a fundamental and irreconcilable split between Christianity and society. His goal was not to return society to a pre-modern union with Christianity, but to protect Christianity from the harmful societal changes of modernity. Therefore, Kinzer called Christian leaders to return to another model of Christian living found in the earliest era of the Christianity, what he called “diaspora Christianity” (30-312A.D) where Christians lived as sub-societies within the hostile Roman Empire. The modern change back to diaspora Christianity was not a failure, he claimed, but a new opportunity for Christian impact: “The Christian way of life must be adapted and applied to each new environment in which it is lived.”<sup>36</sup> With this in view he called Christians to rethink how they interacted with the greater American culture, that is, to act distinct from society instead of assuming American society embodied Christian beliefs.

### *Founded on Scripture*

In his book *Culture Wars* Hunter described the split between progressives and orthodox as based in a disagreement over the source of moral truth.<sup>37</sup> The Allies for Faith conferences articulated the orthodox view of truth. While Kinzer provided at least part of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 44.

analysis of societal changes facing Christians, Steve Clark explained the foundation for the source of authority for Christians: he defended an interpretation of the Bible that is free from secularist presuppositions.

The Word of God Community's social values were based first and foremost primarily in *spiritual* values: that of objective, eternal truth which came from a higher authority. Their defense of Christian ideals was a broad defense of Christianity in general. Their view of truth became the foundation of all their values and beliefs. This faith in the objective revealed truth was the foundation for their existence. The modern world de-emphasized that faith, or at least brought new challenges to the faith. One area under attack was biblical scholarship; the method for studying, analyzing, and interpreting the Bible. Some modern scriptural criticism and theology undermined the truths upon which the Community stood. As part of their response to the modern world, the Community sought to defend biblical scholarship from secularist trends, calling for sound scholarship grounded in Christian faith.

First Clark admitted the need of an authority for the Christian way of life and posited the Bible as the main source of divine authority: "A common way of life has to be based on something authoritative. . . . The authority behind the Christian way of life is God. . . . The will of God is written in scripture. Scripture, therefore, is the authority behind the Christian way of life."<sup>38</sup> This view looks at the heart of the divide in America. It is a battle over truth and authority. Clark clearly defined the Word of God Community's belief in the authority of the Bible.

To deny biblical authority outright was one thing, but many problems came from a more subtle reinterpreting the meaning of the Bible. Clark said,

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen B. Clark, "Modern Approaches to Scriptural Authority," in *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry by Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics*, ed. by Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981), 164.

The Christian way of life has been undermined very seriously by theological secularists, people who profess to be Christians but who reinterpret Christianity in a way that empties it of its core content—the supernatural intervention of God in the world in Christ—and that undercuts its authority by denying and ignoring the authoritative revelation of God as expressed in the teachings of Christ and his Apostles.<sup>39</sup>

The battle therefore was not wholly with the non-Christians, but also with Christians who approached scripture from a non-Christian bias and (knowingly or unknowingly) were weakening the foundations of Christian lifestyle. Clark described these people as being shaped by the contemporary philosophies and ideologies instead of using Christian truth to shape their ideologies.<sup>40</sup>

All truth is based on a higher authority; for Christians that authority is God. “The scholar submits to the recognized authority of the text and its author.”<sup>41</sup> The authority of the Christian scripture is God. God is the source of all truth and conveys it objectively in his words, the Bible. Clark compared this view to the modern secular view (progressive approach) that says that “the scripture is only or primarily to be treated like any secular text,”<sup>42</sup> that is, a text without any particular authority. The authority that secular progressives give to a text is based on how much *they perceive* it to be true. In other words, the progressive holds that truth is relative to the individual. For Clark, the Community, and the alliance of orthodox Christians, truth was something that comes from outside, a higher authority: God. Truth does not change.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 172.



## Cultural—Not Political—Action

The conferences covered a broad spectrum of ways to respond to societal changes; their responses were primarily cultural and ideological rather than political. The Conferences addressed such diverse realms as psychology, sociology, biblical interpretation, politics, ecumenism, pasturing, gender issues, American justice, government, sex, euthanasia, religious liberty, family, and leadership. In all these areas, there was a focus on shaping Christian environments instead of broader society. In other words, they laid out a pastoral and philosophical plan of action for religious leaders but not for political action. This thesis began by discussing two kinds of groups that the Word of God was similar to and yet distinct from: countercultural groups and the Christian New Right.

The developments observed in the second chapter and the vision described in this chapter connected the Community to the core values of the Christian New Right. Both groups were concerned for the preservation of Christian morals, both saw a shift in society away from Judeo-Christian values, and both saw the scripture as the source of moral truth. However, the evangelical Christian New Right had become increasingly political, even more so than some of the sixties leftist movements (many of which were also political). Boyer said, “Ironically, however, many evangelicals [in the seventies], while targeting different issues, soon outdid their political counterparts in political engagement.”<sup>43</sup> The Word of God Community diverged from Christian new Right groups like the Moral Majority by envisioning a community-based cultural change and a spirit-based internal change instead of a political solution. This difference was substantial and significant. If Jerry Falwell wanted

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<sup>43</sup> Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence,” 44.

to get Americans saved, baptized, and registered to vote,<sup>44</sup> the Community wanted to get Americans converted, baptized (in the Holy Spirit), and brought into Christian communities.

The Allies for Faith and Renewal Conferences shared conservative moral values with the Christian New Right, but radically differed in approach. They sought to preserve their values and even defend their values in American; however, they argued for this on the basis of faith and internal change instead of arguing on a more universal stage of cultural pragmatism and external institutional change. This indicated that they were seeking a religious response, not a broadly American response. They did not follow an agenda to restore all of American society to Christian values. What they proposed was an agenda for Christians with specifically Christian motivations. The allies saw their work as distinct from the Christian New Right, saying in *Courage in Leadership*:

The conferences have been explicitly focused on Christ, on loyalty to him, on dedication to his cause, and not merely on shared values in the realm of public policy. This distinguishes the Allies conferences from some other initiatives bringing together theologically conservative Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox in recent years in regard to issues such as abortion, pornography, religious liberties, euthanasia, parental authority of children, and freedom of choice in schooling. In cooperating on such issues Christians have necessarily argued their positions by appealing to social advantages and shared values in the tradition of Western political thought, not Christian beliefs.<sup>45</sup>

The participants of the conference (and the Word of God Community) generally shared conservative views in regards to the issues mentioned above. However, instead of arguing by pragmatic and practical reasoning (so as to persuade society as a whole), these leaders were free to defend their values purely for a Christian audience. Their primary vision was to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Perrotta and John C. Blattner, eds., *Courage in Leadership: A Call to Boldness in Preaching, Teaching, and Pastoral Care* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988), xv.

create supportive sub-societies for Christians to maintain their own values rather than to reshape mainstream American culture.

One participant of the first conference, Dale Vree, specifically addressed the issue of a political approach and described two popular Christian approaches to modern problems. On the one side were the progressive liberation theologians, and on the other the conservative New Christian Right. “Liberation theology and the Christian New Right in America are two leading examples of how political ideology can invade Christian theology. Both serve as object lessons on how *not* to do Christian social ethics.”<sup>46</sup> The Allies neither fully joined the ranks of the Christian New Right nor the liberation theologians. Instead the Allies for Faith and Renewal united with the New Right on defending traditional Christian morals, but proposed a different approach. They even agreed with the Left regarding areas of social concern, but they diverged from both by providing an internal cultural response as opposed to an external political response.

Vree disagreed with the values, theology, and methods of the liberation theologians (and the liberation movement). He saw them as placing worldly salvation above spiritual salvation: “The object of liberation theology’s desire is *political* liberation. Whatever stands in the way—even the Bible and Church tradition—are regarded as of secondary importance to... revolutionary action.”<sup>47</sup> In his views, politics and poverty were important, but not more important than belief. Christian actions should be derived from biblical and traditional

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<sup>46</sup> Dale Vree, “Ideology Versus Theology: Case Studies of the Liberations Theology and the Christian New Right,” in *Christianity Confronts Modernity: A Theological and Pastoral Inquiry by Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics*, ed. by Peter Williamson and Kevin Perrotta, (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1981), 57.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Christian sources, not the other way round. He chided this movement for putting all their hopes in comfort and equality in this world, a world in which we will still die.<sup>48</sup>

However, while critical of liberals and liberation theology, Vree was equally critical about the American Christian New Right movement:

But while liberationists linger in their self-made ghettos, a new liberation theology has arisen in America that promises to liberate people from spiritual maladies, the lure of cults and immorality, medical problems, and financial insecurity—as well as from high taxation, federal regulations, national humiliation, the Communist menace, and SALT II. This new liberation theology in America goes by the name of the “Christian New Right.”<sup>49</sup>

Vree criticized the New Right for being too caught up with worldly concerns, even if they took the opposite views of the liberation Christians. The Christian New Right, despite their defense of Christian values, had erred by mixing social and moral values with a *political* agenda.

Although Vree disagreed with the Christian New Right’s political emphasis, he did agree with them on many issues. “I would join with most orthodox Christians in applauding the Christian New Right’s defense of the traditional family, and its opposition to pornography, prostitution, abortion, amoral sex education, ‘gay’ liberation, salacious television, women’s ‘liberation,’ the ERA and secular humanism in the schools.”<sup>50</sup> The issues that the Allies shared with the New Right were social and moral. While much of the New Right was aimed at social values, they fought for political values just as strongly.

Despite the shared values of the Christian New Right, they had failed by mixing ethics and politics, making political stances ethical issues. To Vree, their fatal flaw came

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<sup>48</sup> “A liberation theology that ends with human death is neither Christian nor liberating” (Vree, “Ideology Versus Theology,” 64-65).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 69.

from the “assumption that America has been chosen by God to carry out his purposes.”<sup>51</sup> Because of this assumption, the New Right had turned all political issues into religious issues and all religious issues into political issues. For them, creating a strong military was just as important, in a religious sense, as the preservation of the family. He concluded that “It is obvious that it is right-wing ideology more than Christian morality that is the governing principle of the Christian New Right.”<sup>52</sup> The problem was not that Christians had used their faith and gotten involved in politics. Rather, he disagreed with the New Right because they had turned non-ethical issues into issues of Christian ethics.

It must be said that Vree’s views were not fully characteristic of the whole conference. According to conference organizer, Peter Williamson, at the last minute Dale Vree decided not to attend the conference, so his paper was read by someone else. When the time came for discussion, some participants sympathetic to the Christian New Right expressed vigorous disagreement with his paper. The Reverend Charles Simpson commented, “I admire Dr. Vree’s technique: there are quite a few sermons I’d have liked to send for someone else to read.”<sup>53</sup> While others at the conference may have disagreed with Vree (and were sympathetic to the Christian New Right), the primary purpose of the Allies Conference was an ideological rather than political solution to the problems they saw.

The beliefs of the Word of God Community are demonstrated by more than the Allies conferences alone. These conferences provide one window of analysis for understanding the Word of God Community. Clearly the leaders were primarily calling for a focus on internal community life and Christian living. That is to say, these leaders were not like Jerry Falwell who, even though he started by criticizing ministers who involve themselves in politics,

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Williamson, personal correspondence, March 18, 2009.

eventually became more known as a political spokesman than as a Christian minister. The Christian New Right married politics with religious faith. For them, to be a leader meant to inform people how to vote. The Word of God Community leaders rejected that political stand, while at the same time opposing the cultural trends of amoral sex education, abortion, and pornography. As leaders they focused on how to help individual Christians deal with these dilemmas. Political action was secondary to cultivating Christian community, but it was not discouraged. For example, the Community founded the Pregnancy Counseling Clinic where expectant mothers could get advice and support which did not recommend abortion. Members of the Community were involved in political parties or movements, but that was due to their personal initiative and not because of any policy of the Community as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

By the eighties the Word of God Community had emerged as a cultural influence. Though they began as a countercultural group, they diverged from the moral consequences of the sixties counterculture, identifying closely with other orthodox Christians. Their participation in counterculture put them in a unique position to draw together orthodox Christians into a religious alliance against relativist and progressive America. Though they defended the same moral issues as the Christian New Right, they rejected Jerry Falwell's vision of political salvation. Instead they embraced a cultural and religious vision for engaging with and protecting against secular culture.

The primary solutions to the new problems Christians faced—though not the only solutions—were to increase the amount of cooperation between orthodox Christians, to focus

on supporting local Christian bodies with this analysis in mind, and to address as many of the areas of secular influence as possible. This chapter has briefly looked at the nature of these responses. They encouraged a vision for Christian life as being countercultural instead of adopting main-stream American culture. Only an identification break with mainstream culture could help create the natural supportive groups that Christians needed to defend against non-Christian ideologies. In this way the Community was again going against the grain of American society. Cooperation with orthodox Christians would help these countercultural groups strengthen each other against the tide of secular society. And a multifaceted analysis of issues would give Christians a vision for the way to interact with different aspects of society.

The Allies for Faith and Renewal conferences, sponsored by the Word of God Community, were important because they were a rare example of cooperation between orthodox denominations which tended not to cooperate as readily as progressive churches. These represented a larger subset of society that remained conservative in their values and remained out of the eye of the media because of their lack of direct political involvement.

## CONCLUSION

Two decades after World War II, Americans began to identify less and less with their religious tradition. Identity began to shift from vertical lines (Protestant, Catholic, or Jew) to horizontal lines (conservative or liberal). Traditionally within any religious group, there was a spectrum of beliefs, but there was general agreement on moral issues, and faith had been most important.

Today, opinions on morals and culture have changed significantly. Common cultural beliefs and values now draw liberal Catholics and liberal Jews together and conservative Protestants and conservative Catholics together. This is a major change from the fifties. Historians of the sixties and seventies attribute some of the radical changes of the time to the lessening of religious identity. People, young people especially, began to identify more with countercultural values and causes—political or social—than they did with their religious heritage. When the sixties movements died away, their countercultural morals did not; in fact, they became increasingly mainstream. Americans were divided over their views of morality and cultural values.

With a weakening of a religious group identity, people lacked a group identity, a community with similar values and circumstances. Some people found temporary identity by grouping around a social cause, or even joining an upstart religion, but by and large these social causes and religious sects petered out, and people were left without stable group identities.

Though the Word of God participated in the shift away from denominational identity and the radical nature of sixties counter culture, they reaffirmed their Christian identity and traditional morals. Just as importantly, they lasted. They lasted in large part because of their



vision for commitment and the strength of their stable daily communal lifestyle. Because of the intense and formative nature of the Community, members held strongly to their shared values and continue to affirm them in spite of the way secular society contradicted them. This, then, answers the question of my friend which began this paper: “Where do all these morally conservative people come from? Didn’t they go through the sixties and seventies?” Yes, in fact they did, and more than that, they participate in many of the countercultural aspects of these decades. However, they reaffirmed a religious identity and became just as radical on behalf of moral values and religious identity as they had been for sixties counterculture.

The first chapter places the Word of God Community within the counterculture, going against the grain of American society. It shows how the prayer group began and how it grew around the baptism of the Holy Spirit, community, and church renewal. These values tied into the themes of the counterculture. The second chapter shows how the Word of God became its own organized entity and solidified its traditional moral values through the use of educational courses, through small group formation, and through a lifestyle of service. They went against the grain of moral trends. These three characteristics of the Community not only shaped and reaffirmed their values, but they also strengthened a natural group identity that broader American society lacked. Because of this stability, the group lasted well beyond most sixties movements. Finally the third chapter narrates the impact the Community came to have on the broader cultural landscape by drawing together other orthodox Christians of traditional values, going against the grain of mainstream society. This series of Conferences was not the only way they impacted America more broadly, but it was one of the most significant. The alliance they formed gave new strength to other orthodox churches against

the tide of progressive theology and changing American morals. Their strategy sets them apart from politically based groups, though as individual they did not abandon politics.

The Word of God Community is an interesting study for two reasons: One is that they are an example of a group that began as part of sixties counterculture but over time came to identify more with the conservative orthodox Christians. Second is that they were highly influential and continue to have significant influence to this day. From their very beginning they strongly influenced the Charismatic Renewal, a large a movement impacting hundreds of thousands of Christians in American and worldwide. In the eighties the extended influence by drawing orthodox Christians into an alliance—strengthening the orthodox strategy and vision, and Christian way of life. And, in spite of an organizational split in 1990, they still have an influence today, particularly in Southeastern Michigan

## EPILOGUE

The Community, whose formation and values and structure I have related in this thesis, has had and continues to have an influence on culture and society. The formation and values and structure of the group are important because they have affected many people—Community members and former Community members—who still exert influence in different ways.

In 1990 the Word of God Community split, forming two separate Communities: the Word of God Community and what would become the Word of Life Community. With the split, their visible presence diminished in Ann Arbor; however the impact of their ideas and organization still has extensive influence in Southeastern Michigan. Some of the ways they have left an impact in Ann Arbor, in Southeast Michigan, across America, and across the world are mentioned below.

During all these years Word of God was involved in extensive community building in other locations as well as networking with other similar communities that formed on their own. They kept seeking to link other similar communities into some kind of federation. The Sword of the Spirit, which began in 1983, was the final attempt. Today the Sword of the Spirit is comprised of over 65 communities like the Word of God, in 24 counties with over 10,000 people involved.

The Split of 1990 was, in part, or a disagreement of the Community's relationship to the international organization the Sword of the Spirit. They disagreed about a few issues: how much authority the Sword of the Spirit should have in overseeing local communities; how pastoral leadership was being exercised at a variety of levels; and how intense

community life should be. For the most part these disagreements were between key leaders and not regular Community members.

When the split happened it resulted in two local communities (Word of God Community and the Word of Life Community). However, a majority of members dropped out of active community life at that time. Nevertheless, people, both among those who dropped out and among those who remained in either community, continued to have substantial impact.

A) Though the Community ceased to be an organizational whole, the large, “virtual” community survived in the following new groupings:

Churches that grew out of community life: Christ the King Catholic Church, Ann Arbor and Milan Vineyard Churches, Cross and Resurrection Lutheran Church, and Covenant Presbyterian Church (in addition to the two communities).

Huron Valley School, Hope Clinic, and Family Life Services—all begun by members of the Word of God—still have significant roles in Ann Arbor.

Renewal Ministries, founded by Ralph Martin, continues seeking renewal within the Catholic Church. Renewal Ministries has a television ministry, puts on conferences, and organizes missions in the UNITED STATES, Canada, Eastern Europe, the Far East, and Africa.

Former members are actively involved in other local Christian organizations like Young Life.

The Word of God Community helps to sponsor Christian cooperation between churches of Washtenaw County in Pastors Alliance for County Transformation (PACT).

International Sword of the Spirit Communities and their various outreaches—including University Christian Outreach (UCO) for college students—continue to grow.

B) Individuals have also gone on to have impact in Ann Arbor and abroad:

Key individuals who worked for the Community's publishing company, Servant Books, ended up with substantial editorial roles in religious publications: Bert Ghezzi at *Charisma*, *The Word Among Us*, *Our Sunday Visitor Press*; Jim Manney at Loyola Press; Cindy Cavnar at St. Anthony Messenger Press; Peter Williamson as the editor of a new Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture; Kevin Perrotta, Louise Perrotta, and Jeanne Kun with books and articles, especially on Scripture; Martin and Clark with continuing book publications.

In addition, past or present members of the Word of God occupy various significant roles in the Washtenaw County as lawyers (Robert Magill, Karen Valvo, Juliet Pressel), professors, teachers, real estate agents, doctors, engineers, etc. Many of these bring values they learned in the Word of God to bear on their business and professional lives.

To date there are few involved in political roles: one judge (Richard Conlin, belonging to a family of lawyers and judges), one County Commissioner, and in the last election, one attempted run for congress (Jack Lynch).

Some Community members have had or continue to have important roles in business and society including management and staff for Advantage Computing Systems, Superior Text, Domino's, and Service Brands.

C) The Community left its impact within their local denominations:

Well over 150 individuals went into the ordained ministry or some other full-time ministry, not to mention those who act as elders or deacons at their churches.

Many left America as missionaries and are involved in influential roles internationally: Mark Holstegge went to Amsterdam, and Andrew Williamson to Vanuatu, to name just two. Many others became involved in short-term missions for Renewal Ministries and for Hope Clinic International, to evangelize and teach and/or to bring medical assistance.

Some individuals became involved at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit: Fr. Mike Byrnes, Vice Rector; Dave Kelley, Vice President for External Affairs; and Ralph Martin, Director of Evangelization Programs. Faculty at that seminary includes Fr. Dan Jones, Dr. Dan Keating, Dr. Peter Williamson, Susan Cummins, and Jerry Rauch.

Former Community members can be found among the Catholic priests in the dioceses of Detroit, Saginaw, Lansing, and Minneapolis-St. Paul (including a seminary rector). In addition to these there are many Catholic seminarians coming from the next generation (many from Christ the King Church).

These are a few of the people who are still influential in Ann Arbor, Southeast Michigan, and around the world. Their time in The Word of God Community formed their values and vision for Christian life. As they have scattered through the region, the impact of the Community broadens. This provides just one more reason to study the Word of God Community, their vision, their values, and their history.

## APPENDIX

The Word of God Covenant—September 28, 1970

God is making a covenant with us. He is offering to be our God, and is asking that we be His people. He has confirmed and further revealed His call to us by giving us a name, the name by which He Himself calls us, “The Word of God.” In order to respond to what God is doing among us, in order to be that people He is calling us to be, we desire to give our whole lives to Him, to follow his Son Jesus, and to live in the Holy Spirit, no longer simply as individuals, but as members of a people, members of “The Word of God.” We know that in order for us to be truly a people of one mind and heart in our response to God, we have to serve and care for our brothers and sisters in “The Word of God,” and we have to understand and accept those things which make our life together as one body possible. We need to meet together with the community when the community meets. We need to respect and support the pattern and order of our life together. We need to support the life of the community with our material and financial resources. All of this is to take responsibility for being members of the same family, the same body.

We understand that this commitment to be His people as a member of “The Word of God” does not deny our responsibility to the Christian Church in which we were raised or are presently a part. We further understand that this commitment to respond to God as a member of “The Word of God” is not necessarily a life-long commitment, but one which may be dissolved or modified for a certain individual in response to changing circumstances, although certainly not without diligent prayer and counsel.

It is with great joy and thanksgiving and praise of God then that we commit ourselves to serve God and give our lives wholly over to His Son and living in His Spirit, as a member of “The Word of God.”

Suggested Response:

“I want to give my life fully to God and live as a member of ‘The Word of God.’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Covenant of ‘The Word of God,’ September 28 1970,” Thomas Yoder Papers; Box 2, *Covenants*, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

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