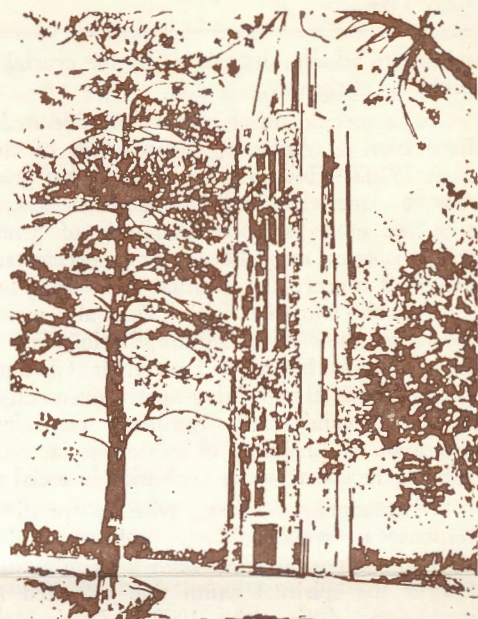


RELIGION

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KSR COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAMS FUNDED

A series of four panel presentations exploring Standards of Community Morality is being sponsored by the School of Religion beginning March 23, 1974, and continuing every other week. On a grant from the Kansas Committee for the Humanities, these discussions will bring academic humanists into dialogue with Lawrence community leaders. The program is directed by Thomas Budesheim of the religion faculty.

Two parallel Institutes on Teaching About the Bible in Public Education are scheduled in 1974: one at Fort Hays State, June 3-14; one at Lawrence, June 10-17. Primarily for public school teachers, the Institutes will analyze the legal, proper, and significant study of the Bible in the secular program of education. Director of both programs is Lynn Taylor; local coordinator at Hays is Allan Miller. A Dane Hansen Foundation grant makes the program possible. Information is available from the School of Religion.

LIBERATED CHURCHES: A PROFILE

Timothy Miller and Norman R. Yetman

During the past decade there emerged across the country a substantial number of grass-roots Christian congregations and communities that have been called by many names: underground churches, liberated churches, experimental parishes, floating parishes, and so forth. Characteristically, these groups have been small (rarely over 100 members); they have been led by laity as well as (or instead of) ordained clergy; they have eschewed purchases of real estate and other encumbering marks of permanence; and, most significantly, they have become contemporary symbols of commitment to the Christian faith without acceptance of its traditional institutional structures and rituals. At this writing the movement appears to be declining, but its critique of established religious organizations has been fundamental. In this sense, at the very least, liberated churches have been an important artifact of the American religious scene and therefore deserve analysis.

Our attention was directed to liberated churches during the late sixties, when they were rapidly expanding. Since little serious research has been conducted on the movement, we sought to construct a profile of the "typical" participant in

liberated churches. In this article we will delineate several prominent elements of that profile. First, however, we must describe the subject of our investigation more precisely.

Liberated churches began to attract wide-scale public notice about 1968, when numerous articles on the movement appeared in the popular press. During that year Malcolm Boyd, a long-time activist Episcopal priest, published a collection of articles entitled *The Underground Church*. This book was not a manifesto for the movement, but, together with publicity from articles elsewhere, it apparently inspired formation of local groups throughout the country that sought to implement concerns for "modernized" liturgy and for theologically-based education and social activism. The general portrait that emerged from these writings was one of spiritually hungry and socially concerned laymen acting in concert with a few clergy disenchanted with mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism. For the most part, they were middle class, college educated, professional, white liberals seeking a religion shorn of untenable doctrines and outmoded practices and—most importantly—

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willing to address unhesitatingly the crucial social and political problems of the day.

As a specific social movement, liberated churches seem to have been a transitory phenomenon of the late 1960's and early 1970's. However, the impulse that generated them is not new to American Christianity, which has, over the centuries, seen the emergence of thousands of groups critical of the religious status quo. Like their predecessors, liberated churches exhibited concern for spiritual community and a deep commitment to the Christian faith. They also were committed to the ideal that their faith had implications for social action. The most obvious historical forerunner (if not precise historical parallel) was the social gospel movement, which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries proclaimed the Christian responsibility of solving social problems through involving the church as an institution in social action.

Movements, of course, arise in specific social contexts in response to specifically-felt problems and needs. Liberated churches appear to have been a manifestation of the reaction against the spiritual ennui that engulfed American religious institutions during the 1950's. During that decade rising church membership and extensive building programs were paralleled by a superficial surge of piety and neglect of the prophetic role of the church in social reform, one that historically has been a critical ingredient of Christianity. Moreover, the mainstream churches were lethargic in recognizing and responding creatively to problems posed by technology, cybernation and mass society. Most importantly, they appeared oblivious to the moral and religious implications of racism and the war in Southeast Asia. Insofar as it was perceived that America's traditional religious institutions failed to speak to these challenges, the time was ripe for a movement that would attempt, at least, to deal with them.

Three distinct categories of liberated churches developed. Perhaps most stable were experimental Roman Catholic parishes, which operated with approval of the local bishop and frequently with services of a full-time priest, but which deviated from the conventional pattern of a geographically based parish and strict norms for worship and other religious activities (e.g., confession). Roman Catholics also comprised the second grouping, "illegal" communities, which adhered to some traditional Catholic forms (e.g., celebration of the eucharist) but which operated without ecclesiastical approval and occasionally violated clearly defined Church regulations (e.g., rules barring divorced persons from participation in the Mass).

The third general group was Protestant, and consequently the factor of "illegality" was not usually an issue. In most cases such Protestant communities could simply be called "new churches," since they were not actually outside the liberal pale of Protestantism. In all three groupings, however, there were some similar patterns. Worship tended to be relatively informal; modern, or at least non-traditional, religious art and music were stressed. Social action was emphasized and social education often featured in-depth workshops on specific issues (e.g., racism, ecology). In many instances there was intensive concern for and programs dealing with interpersonal relations, frequently involving sensitivity training.

As we have indicated, we were interested in obtaining information on those involved in the movement. Because of the geographical dispersion of such groups across the country, we employed a questionnaire, which was circulated among members of several diverse liberated church organizations, to obtain data. We contacted fifteen liberated church organizations and leaders across the country and asked their assistance in distributing the questionnaire to their membership. In a dozen

cases our contact persons were able to persuade some local coreligionists to complete the questionnaire.

Unfortunately, the response rate was low; slightly more than one-fourth of the questionnaires were returned. Although this low response rate precludes definitive conclusions, we believe the data provide a more substantial basis for generalizations about the movement than the highly impressionistic accounts that have previously appeared. Not only was the sample geographically dispersed, but returns indicated that respondents from each group ran the gamut from active participation to minimal or almost nonexistent involvement in the movement. Another liability of our study was that we did not obtain comparable data on a control group of individuals who were not involved in liberated churches. There have been substantial data obtained recently on the social characteristics and belief patterns of American religious participants. However, because of space limitations, we have made only minimal comparative statements here. This article will be primarily concerned with providing a description and interpretation of our data.

Membership in the liberated churches was drawn overwhelmingly from mainstream Protestant—Baptist, Presbyterian Methodist, Episcopalian, Congregational—and Roman Catholic churches. Better than three-fifths of our sample was Roman Catholic in background, reflecting the strong Catholic interest in the movement that had previously been noted. However, a striking feature of our data was that Roman Catholics differed little from Protestants, either in social characteristics or in beliefs. Where there were discernible differences among liberated church members (e.g., on theological issues), these did not follow, but rather cut across, denominational lines.

Social Characteristics: Upper Middle Class Families

Liberated Churches appear to have been overwhelmingly a family phenomenon. The typical adult member of such a group was relatively young (the median age of our sample was 38) and attended with spouse and children. The strong family orientation of these groups meant that the typical pattern of female participants exceeding males did not occur; slightly more than half the sample were men. Most married members were parents, with a median of three children. Most of the groups conducted children's programs and featured frequent all-family activities.

Participants in the liberated church movement were overwhelmingly—almost exclusively—upper middle class. More than two-thirds reported family income greater than \$10,000; more than half the small percentage (18%) who had incomes of less than \$7500 were members of the clergy—priests, nuns, and ministers—or students. The educational attainments of our sample were high: nine of ten attended college, nearly three-fourths (72%) had graduated from college, and more than half (56%) had earned advanced degrees (M.A., Ph.D., M.D., B.D., etc.). Similarly, the membership held high status occupations. Excluding housewives, more than half (54%) were professionals (doctors, lawyers, professors) or semi-professionals (school teachers, nurses).

The study was conducted primarily in urban areas simply because this was where most groups had been established. However, more than half the respondents reported rural or small town backgrounds. Moreover, most had strong backgrounds in organized religious activities. They reported that during their youth religion was an integral and regular component of their family's lives. Over 90 per cent were raised in families that attended church at least once a week.

Attitudes and Beliefs: A New Combination

Why did individuals establish or join liberated churches? What motivations and objectives did they have? Far from being a radical phenomenon, the movement was theologically conservative and traditional. Two-thirds agreed with the statements "God knows what we are doing at all times" and "Jesus Christ, through his death, bore the sins of the world," while only one-sixth agreed that "the Bible is a book of great literary quality, but has little divine significance." On the other hand, a strong fundamentalistic strain was demonstrated by the fact that more than one-third of the respondents agreed that "the Bible is completely and everlastingly true," while an additional 15 per cent were uncertain.

But this theological conservatism was not reflected in the members' attitudes on political and social issues. Indeed, the striking feature of our findings was their overwhelmingly—nearly unanimous—liberal, activist orientation. It appeared that the primary unifying element in the liberated church was its commitment to reformation of the social order—the elimination of racism, poverty and war. For instance, but four per cent of the respondents agreed that the Bible sanctioned racial separation. At a time (1970) when the nation was torn with strife over issues involving race and the war in Southeast Asia, 94 per cent agreed that Christians had the responsibility to recognize the right of conscientious objectors not to bear arms, while eight of ten agreed that dissenters should be allowed to protest and demonstrate freely.

Our respondents were, therefore, overwhelmingly critical of the institutional church's performance on social issues. While the membership projected a strong traditional, conservative, even fundamentalistic, strain theologically, they rejected the conventional church as an ineffective means of implementing the Church's professed ideals of brotherhood, Christian love, and equal justice. Five of six rejected the ideas that the Christian Church should be primarily concerned with vital matters of faith and less with social issues and that the Church was doing enough to achieve racial equality for Black Americans. They concurred in equal proportions with the notion that the Church was guilty of racism. Finally, three-fourths agreed that the churches should be committed to raising living standards of underdeveloped countries.

Thus the ties of liberated church members to the Christian faith were strong, but equally so was their criticism of institutional forms through which it has traditionally been manifested. We asked respondents to explain their participation in liberated churches in their own words. The following are typical comments.

I couldn't see where Christian principles were being put into action in the institutional church. The institutional church seems to lack freedom, trust, and feelings. It's really great to associate with people who are really trying to become true Christians.

We wanted a community that was Christ-centered and strongly involved in social action. We were fed up with the 'brick and mortar' battles in the institutional church—with the lack of human concern and involvement.

Reforms promised by Vatican II in 1965 have not happened quickly enough in the structured church.

These comments reinforce the idea that the liberated church movement is primarily a conservative phenomenon, an attempt not to reject Christianity, but to purify it, to revitalize it, and to make it more relevant to issues and concerns of the contemporary world. Participants perceived the Church's mission

to be not merely to save individual souls but to reclaim and save the world as well. This combination of theological conservatism and social liberalism and activism isolates liberated church members as a distinct group. Glock and Stark in *Religion and Society in Tension* have pointed out that in America theological conservatism has tended to be correlated with political and socially conservative beliefs. The thrust of the liberated church movement appears to run counter to this pattern.

Liberals and Conservatives in the Movement Itself

Although perception of the failure of the institutional church was pervasive—indeed, it provided the *raison d'être* for the formation of liberated churches—the indictment of the Church emanated from different sources. One of the most interesting aspects of our data concerns differences within the movement. About one-third of our respondents unanimously agreed with the three theologically conservative belief items included in the questionnaire, while nearly one-fourth unanimously disagreed with them. Comparison of these two groups (which we have here characterized as "conservatives" and "liberals") revealed an interesting pattern relative to their involvement in liberated churches. As noted above, the common denominator—one in which both liberals and conservatives concurred—was the strong social action orientation and the feeling that the conventional churches had not effectively confronted issues of social justice. However, the major point at which conservatives and liberals differed was in their participation in and ties to the institutional church. While less than 20 per cent of the liberals reported active (once a week or more) involvement in a mainline church, more than 75 per cent of the conservatives did. Similarly, conservatives overwhelmingly reported feeling an "inescapable need" for conventional worship and a preference for religious marriages, traditional funerals, and baptism in regular churches, each of which were preferred by only a small minority of liberals. Many conservatives, in their extended comments, indicated that liberated church activity was for them only a supplement to their continuing involvement in conventional churches, providing a few services otherwise unavailable. Thus for the conservatives who are deeply immersed in the institutional church, liberated churches appear to have been undertaken as an adjunct to their traditional religious activities. For liberals, on the other hand, liberated churches appear to have represented final attempts to achieve religious community and involvement in the wake of total despair over mainstream churches.

Today, less than three years after we obtained these data, the liberated church movement appears to have dramatically declined. A follow-up survey in 1973 revealed that most of the original dozen groups have disbanded, mainly since mid-1972. Although idiosyncratic factors may have played a role in some cases, two factors—changes in national receptivity to social and political activism and the ambivalence of many toward their relation with the institutional church—appear impressionistically to have contributed to this decline. Since social activism was the primary unifying element in liberated churches, the elimination of the major social issue—the war in Southeast Asia—may have undercut the primary source of groups' cohesion. Similarly, support of efforts to improve race relations has entered a new stage that lacks the clear-cut instances of racism that earlier excited moral indignation and collective efforts at change. Issues (e.g., busing, affirmative action) are much more complex and much less clear-cut than in the heyday of the movement. Activism in this context is much less dramatic and infinitely more frustrating.

Equally difficult was the problem of the ambivalent rela-

tionship of liberated churches to conventional religious bodies. Some Catholics, for example, were unable to resolve the question of open communion (should anyone be allowed to receive communion in a liberated Catholic parish, even if it contradicted Church law?). Others (both Catholic and Protestant) felt a need for professional clerical leadership, which in turn required a substantial budget and organization and thus minimized the distinctiveness of liberated churches. Finally, even worship practices, one of basic areas of reform in liberated churches, posed problems when participants found it difficult to maintain a liturgy at once dramatically innovative and theologically sound.

Although we have but impressionistic data for groups in our sample, it appears that when liberated groups have disbanded, participants have either returned to active participa-

tion in conventional churches or have totally divorced themselves from organized religion. This pattern was recently noted in a *National Catholic Reporter* editorial concerning research on liberated church members in Oklahoma City. Data from our own study indicate that for many, activity in liberated churches did not supplant, but rather supplemented, their participation in conventional churches. For those for whom liberated churches were the sole organized religious activity, however, the demise of these organizations would suggest a total cessation of religious involvement. For these individuals, liberated churches may have been the final way station in pattern of waning religious activity. In any event, our speculation points to the need for further research on the dynamics of participation in American religious organizations and movements.

KSR FACULTY CHRONICLE

Mary Collins of the Kansas School of Religion prepared one of the papers distributed in advance to the participants of the invitational conference TEN YEARS AFTER, a meeting of liturgical scholars to assess the present situation regarding ritual worship in the United States in the wake of the many ritual changes introduced after the authorization of liturgical change at the Second Vatican Council.

The group heard Robert Taft, American-born Jesuit and director of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, advise them to acknowledge that divergences in Christian initiation and eucharistic rites among American churches are not genuine differences in rite, but rather variations on the one Western rite that have arisen since the Reformation. From the viewpoint of Eastern Christianity, the resolution of worship tensions resulting from the "great Western schism" of the 16th century are local problems to be dealt with in the West.

Eugene Brand, Coordinator for Worship of the Lutheran Church in America, endorsed the present collaboration in research among American liturgical scholars. He noted, however, that as a result of the distinct ritual emphases and over-emphases in his own and other traditions, the result of collaboration in research will not be a single standard ritual for all American Christians. Continued diversity of expression and forms is foreseen for the future as each church involved in the present liturgical movement contends with its own peculiar problems.

Walter Burghardt, associate editor of *Theological Studies*, challenged the participants to examine their own presuppositions about necessary and desirable continuity and discontinuity in the content and forms for Christian ritual worship. Langdon Gilkey, theologian at the University of Chicago Divinity School, proposed that the emerging cultural re-evaluation in the United States of the earthly, the bodily, the natural, and the human, was disposing people to new openness to sacramental worship which celebrates the presence of the transcendent power to save incarnate in the world itself.

An outgrowth of the conference was the decision to establish a professional association for American liturgical scholars for the purpose of encouraging research and for promoting interdisciplinary collaboration of liturgists with anthropologists, psychologists, and those in cognate fields.

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