

In bar or car, praise the Lord

is the third article in a series on charismatics and leadership in the charismatic movement.

By Rick Casey

Special to the National Catholic Reporter

ARBOR, Mich. — The five-year-old God community here, with about 200 members, is the oldest, largest, most vital and most important of the growth of "covenantal communities" springing up from the Catholic pentecostal movement. Yet little has been written about this highly structured community where members pray together daily in small groups, tithe generously and live by a strict moral code under the watchful eye of often youthful "elders."

Leaders here, as in the estimated 20 other covenantal communities in the country, refer to themselves as "coordinators" rather than "elders," and consciously set out to use the New Testament as a guide for structuring a community similar to those of the early church. But they stress that they are not "priests" and so use nonchurch terms to avoid confusion in the public mind.

Confusion could easily arise. In addition to tithing (five per cent of income recommended) to the community, members attend about two community services a week.

The leaders, most of whom are laymen and proclaim loyalty to the church with sincerity, are quick to note that members come from more than 50 parishes (55 per cent of the members are Catholic and nearly 45 per cent Protestants) and attend services at their own homes regularly and are encouraged to invite other five per cent to them. Still, many of these attend their parish or church services with a deep fervor since joining Word of God, a community itself is unmistakably the result of their religious devotion.

The style of this devotion is a pentecostalism typified at the Thursday night prayer meetings run by the community at three separate locations because the group has grown so large. The style spills over into frequent praises of the Lord in conversation.

At a public prayer meeting, I joined about 20 members for beer and conversation at a restaurant. When I raised my glass and said "cheers," one member clinked it and responded, "To the Lord." On the way home at about midnight the member, O'Mara, was worried that the car ran out of gas. When a gas station was nearby he exclaimed, "Providential! I believe it is clearly and unmistakably the will of God for this filling station to be here."

While the intense pentecostal experience of feeling God at work in their

lives brought the community together and continues to fuel it, the Word of God and similar communities also represent an effort by national leaders to place less emphasis on such pentecostal "gifts" as praying in tongues, prophecy and healing, and to place more emphasis on personal relationships. And while members continue to engage in tongues, prophecy, healing and even an occasional mild exorcism, the main business of the community has been to develop and live up to teaching on how to live together.

The community is divided into 75 "households" of various types, each with a "head" who is responsible for the spiritual growth of those in his household. Many households consist of a nuclear family together with several single persons living in a large house. Several consist of a group of single men or of single women living together. Other "households" are groups of individuals who live separately in houses, apartments or dormitory rooms at the two universities here, but meet at least weekly for a common meal and prayer.

Those most fully involved in the community are members of households where property and incomes are held in common.

The community has its own hierarchy, topped by three men called "head coordinators." They are Bruce Yocum, the youngest at 26, Ralph Martin and Steve Clark, both in their mid-30s.

Clark is the top authority. A shy man who prefers to keep a low profile, he has a reputation for brilliance and single-mindedness as an organizer and as an ecclesial politician. He was one of the founders of the charismatic renewal and remains its most influential leader.

He has played a key role in maintaining good relations between movement leaders and the nation's Catholic bishops. Like Yocum and about a dozen others known as "the brotherhood" at Word of God, he is committed to celibacy and lives an ascetic life in an old, run-down house.

Martin is a soft-spoken man with intense, pale blue eyes, who can become fiery in his speeches and writings. Yocum has a collegiate straight-forwardness, and is seen as the community's chief prophet.

Below them are 11 coordinators, each of whom heads a geographical district. Then there are the "heads" of the 75 households.

The leadership of Clark, Yocum, Martin and the 11 coordinators is self-perpetuating, though they consult yearly with members about who should lead.

Perhaps the teachings stressed most at Word of God have to do with "headship and submission." Briefly summarized, it is believed God has a plan for each person. In order to be able to submit himself to that plan, a person must develop a spirit of submission, shown by submitting oneself to authority.

Each person in the community submits himself to his household head; household heads to their district coordinators; coordinators to one of the three head coordinators. Martin and Yocum submit themselves to Clark, who in turn submits himself to Yocum.

Each head takes a daily interest in those under him, serving as a sort of combination confessor and religious superior. He corrects them when they show sinful tendencies and advises them concerning such decisions as careers and marriage. Since a spirit of submission is valued highly, the authority held by a head is extensive.

Respect for authority is not limited to the spiritual realm. Jim Russo, a member of Ralph Martin's household, was a founder of the pacifist Catholic Peace Fellowship at the University of Michigan and continued through the years to refuse to pay federal income tax as a protest against militarism.

"There was an awful lot of pressure from

the others in the household about this," he said. "If I came late for dinner two days in a row, they'd say, 'Well, he has a spirit of rebelliousness. He doesn't even pay his taxes.'"

Russo recently quit his job as a computer engineer at a company which just acquired a defense contract. When he began his new job Martin, his head and a former conscientious objector himself during the Vietnam war, urged him to begin paying taxes again. Russo agreed to do so. "Coinciding with the end of the Vietnam war, it makes some sense," he said.

For many members, like 31-year-old Gail Lancaster, who also has Martin for a head, submitting to headship is "in many ways very peaceful."

O'Mara acknowledged that there have been and will be problems and abuses, but described the importance of headship: "Authority works to set people free to serve God rightly in very small ways, not only in heavy ones: scheduling of recreation, orientation of chores to peace and growth for all, reconciliation right after minor disagreements, counsel about spiritual reading, etc. The majority of

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CLARK: Top authority — Rick Casey photos



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YOCUM: Seen as chief prophet.

A chaste courtship ritual emerges

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exercises of headship in this community are casual, deal with minor phenomena, involve no major commitments. Only in the aggregate do they add up to a vital element in our life."

The top leadership at Word of God, unlike that which led True House at Notre Dame into scandal, is open, collective and appears mature beyond its years. Still, given the phenomenal growth of the community, these men are becoming removed from the bulk of the members and authority problems exist. Jesuit Father William Sneek, a close and sympathetic observer of Word of God, refers to these as "growing pains."

One member, Tom Yoder, said these problems are beginning to surface as more members talk about them "who had previously, with some reason, been afraid of retaliation by their heads."

Russo has become deeply involved in dealing with the authority problem. He said he, in talking to people around the community, has found that many of them are afraid of their heads.

Russo decided to start talking to people about the authority problem only after considerable prayer. "The Lord told me to go ahead and blunder through this thing," he said. "I'll make mistakes." He also discussed it with Martin, his head, who told him to go ahead.

"I've been trying to speak truth to people, to say, 'You're a son of God. If someone isn't treating you right you can tell him in love,'" said Russo. "The teaching on authority is good, but we've had a lot of abuses and still do."

"In the area of housing, people are there because coordinators ask them to be. You leave if they tell you to," he said. "People have been told to quit their jobs, or not to marry someone. In some cases heads make decisions without consulting people. They may put a household together just by looking at salaries and jobs and time."

"The authority of the head of a household is not meant to be absolute," he continued. "Headship should extend to the common life, but should not extend to who your friends are, where you can work, what you can read. We've lost a sense of that. The very words give it away. I have a 'head,' like I don't have a head on my body?"

"It's a serious problem. For example, it's quite common for people to be told not to associate with old friends, even within the community. Over in the university area there are arbitrary punishments. Like, you were late to dinner so you have to go to bed an hour early for a week."

In some cases, heads even have told members to quit going to confession to a priest whose advice differed from theirs, said Russo. Martin confirmed that a recent memo from the coordinators to the heads sought to stop that problem.

Despite these problems, Russo is convinced he ought to stay. "To grow a community like this in a few years is a fantastic thing," he said. "The problems are small by comparison. People have been helped here. The Lord is using it. If there is a problem, we can't pitch the whole thing."

If the community's teaching on submission goes against the trend of the times, so does its teaching on sexuality. Neither feminism nor sexual liberation have any place here.

Combining Genesis with St. Paul, leaders here and elsewhere in the movement insist God made women to be the help-mates of men. There is much emphasis on keeping sex roles distinct. In some households women are discouraged from wearing blue jeans and men from wearing flowered shirts.

The headship of the father over those in his family is greatly emphasized. In households centered around a nuclear family, the father is automatically household head.

At breakfast one morning recently,

Ralph Martin's wife asked his permission to share something with the others in the household. He gave her permission, and she told of her "dread" at the possibility that she might have to pull up stakes and move their two children to a new country where Ralph may do missionary work.

"I knew that wasn't the way I was supposed to feel," she said. "I was supposed to feel excited and joyful."

She said that at a meeting of coordinators' wives the night before she had told the other women of her dread. She said they prayed over her and she especially



MARTIN: In his basement office. — Rick Casey photo

liked a prayer that went, "God, give her a pilgrim's heart and help her realize she is a citizen of the kingdom of God and not of any place."

Rules regarding sex and modesty are strict. Women do not go braless, wear halter tops or backless dresses. Dating is viewed as an artificial situation which leads to sexual temptation.

"Brothers and sisters" in the community are, however, encouraged to show affection to one another, mostly by hugging. Hugging is practiced enough so that there are two varieties, and each has been named.

The "side-arm swipe" is a chaste arm-side-ward-around-the-shoulder hug which is known to some as a "brother and sister" hug. This version appears to be used most. The other is "full-front-forward," and is pretty much the garden variety hug to be found around the world.

Though there is no dating, the community averages nearly two weddings a month between members. The festive wedding celebrations result after several months of courtship known as "moving toward marriage."

According to community teaching, single members should first pray over the question of whether they should marry or be "single for the Lord." When a member decides he is ready for marriage he watches

for a suitable mate in the community initiative is largely with the man.

Typically, if a man is interested in marriage, he will discuss it with his head. If the head approves, he will discuss it with the woman's head to get her judgment. If all goes well, the man then asks the woman if she would consent to a period of time during which they will spend time together and consider whether they should marry. During this time, the heads are kept informed on the progress of the relationship. The proposal is sometimes a complete surprise to the woman.

Courtships are short, usually two to three months. Since sex is considered inappropriate before marriage, necking and petting in courtship are discouraged as being frustrating. Sexual attraction is not considered a large factor in determining compatibility.

"The primary thing I'm looking for is not an attraction or feeling that this was made in heaven," said Nancy Russo, who said she was "available." "It's not there is a unique relationship, but should go through my mind and does this man want to serve the Lord? What is the Lord expecting of him? Support that? Can I put myself behind God asks him to do? Will he make a head for me?"

"I'd like to like him," she said and laugh. "That enters in."

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