

# PRAISE THE LORD:



Members of the Messianic Communities Church in front of the Maples building in Island Pond.

## The Community Goes Forth to Meet the World

By Yvonne Daley

*Photographs by Vyto Starinskas*

**I**n the big room decorated with a ring of red cardboard cardinals and children's art, 30 people have gathered for evening service. Levah Shameah asks to speak what is in her heart.

The words come out haltingly, punctuated with the graceful finger movements of sign language.

"I really love that preaching, where it says that 'perfect love casts out fear,'" she says, her hair — like that of the other church women during prayer time — covered with a kerchief and her face flushed with conviction and joy. "I know here in the Messianic Communities I am making friends who will love me forever."

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*Yvonne Daley is a staff writer for the Rutland Herald.*

The hearing-impaired woman, whose name means "hears with the heart," has lived with the Messianic Communities for more than a year, first at their home in Lancaster, N.H., and more recently here in Island Pond.

On this day, she is telling her brothers and sisters in the community of her life prior to joining the church. She speaks of rejection, of feeling unworthy and unloved, of broken promises and countless disappointments, of making friends only to have them turn away from her.

But she says that since she has come to live in this religious community, giving her life to Yahshua (the Hebrew word for Jesus Christ), fear has been cast out of her heart and she has become truly happy.

Her words, spoken in a kind of reverie, are followed by those of others who have gathered for this evening "sacrifice" or time of resolution, prayer and recommitment to God that is at the center of life in the Messianic Communities.

On this night, the worshipers will thank "Abba" (Hebrew for Father) for giving the members of this community the spiritual power to live together, for showing them how to live on the earth in a way that they believe will bring eternal salvation.

And there will be prayers for their members who will be spending the night at a rock concert in Massachusetts, seeking converts and spreading the word.

For the members of the Messianic Communities believe they have a message, that they are a chosen people who have been called to live together as apostles, forsaking personal possessions and otherwise living in the manner described in the Holy Scriptures, as examples to the rest of mankind.

They also have a deep conviction that their children are their most important products and that parents are commanded by Yahshua to train them to be totally submissive. For this reason, church members are instructed to discipline their children with a thin rod or balloon stick to correct transgressions that might include squirming during diaper changing or lying to a parent.

The church's beliefs on discipline have been a cause of controversy for more than a decade. It was 10 years ago this month, on June 22, 1984, that Vermont State Police, armed with a court-order, arrived at dawn at the church's homes in Island Pond in the Northeast Kingdom, seeking to take custody of 112 children.

State officials had been hearing stories of child abuse from defectors and wanted to examine the children to determine if they were being physically and emotionally abused. Before the day was over, however, the children were back home with their parents after the late District Judge Frank Mahady ruled that the search warrant issued by the state was unconstitutional.

But the raid and national attention did little to dissuade church members of their beliefs. Whether at court hearings or at rock concerts, they feel compelled to discuss the life they have chosen and the reasons why.

As the 10th anniversary of the raid approaches, church members are planning to sell all but one of their homes in Island Pond and continue their pilgrimage to far-flung locations where they are establishing new communities and businesses.

Church leaders say their goal is to be visible in more populated areas, to interact more openly with their neighbors, inviting them into their homes and letting their lives be an example of the way God intended humans to live.

The church now numbers more than 2,000 members — there were about 200 in 1984 — and has already established communities or group homes in Bellows

Falls, Burlington and Rutland; in Dorchester and Hyannis, Mass.; in St. Joseph, Mo.; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Navarrex, France; Parana, Brazil; and Auckland, New Zealand.

Other communities are planned for Rhode Island,



Children and adults gather to sing and pray at one of the Island Pond homes owned by the Messianic Communities.

California, Guatemala and several European countries.

To support all this the church runs numerous lucrative businesses. It will maintain its discount shoe store in downtown Island Pond, begun as a cobbler shop and now a successful enterprise that attracts customers from all over the Northeast.

(A curious aside on the shoe store is that it is managed by church elder Tom Wall with his father, Jim Wall, 70. The elder Wall has not joined the church but his wife and Tom's mother Lottie has.

The couple lived here for several years in the 1980s then left because of Jim Wall's unhappiness with the communal life. But Lottie was unhappy for the seven years that she was away.

"Nothing else made sense to me after I lived this life," she said. "Because we love each other and he knew how much I loved the life here, we moved back."

Jim Wall says he respects church members' views and they allow him his.

"I believe in just about everything they believe in," says Jim Wall. "Maybe I'm selfish. I like my independence. They give me a lot of slack."

While the shoe store will remain here and the church plans to open a coffee shop/deli in downtown Island Pond in the near future, it plans to move two of its other successful businesses located here to other com-

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munities. The soap-making operation will be located in Rutland and the printing shop will be relocated to Rhode Island.

The church's first enterprise in Island Pond was the Common Sense Restaurant, a coffee shop and deli that burned down several years ago.

The church will continue to operate its farm and carpenter business in Bellows Falls. In Dorchester, the church runs a carpentry, furniture and crib-making business and plans to open a coffee shop.

Coffee shops are planned for some of the other locations as well. These will not only provide church members the opportunity to make money but also to talk to customers about the Messianic Communities.

The church also runs a futon business, making futon mattresses, bed and couch frames, as well as plumbing and heating endeavors. And, at its Hyannis store, church members operate the highly visible Strictly Vermont products store.

"In some ways, the change to be more visible is more one of appearance than actuality," said Ed Wiseman, one of the church elders. "People saw us as isolated because we were here in Island Pond. It was here that we came together and built a foundation."

## A Day in the Life

Wherever they have located, church members have rented or purchased large homes that allow them to live communally — another of the characteristics of their life.

In so doing, members of the Messianic Community say they are living the command of the Bible, as outlined under Acts 2:42-47: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer ... and all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they were selling their property and possessions, and they were sharing them with all as anyone might have need."

When newcomers join, they give all their possessions to the church, selling those things that aren't needed to pay off debts or giving them away.

Church members turn over their earnings to the church and do not file personal income taxes. The church files a tax report with the IRS.

Married couples have their own rooms, but single males and females may share rooms and several children often sleep in the same bedroom. Meals are prepared and served communally. Household chores are often delegated by the household head — who is always male — with women and children doing most of the housework, although men are not adverse to such tasks as washing dishes and changing babies.

It's not uncommon for the men to spend much time with the children. As soon as they are old enough, men may bring a child along with them on a job, assigning tasks to the youth. The church has an ambitious apprenticeship program in which children are taught skills from sewing to carpentry.

Day begins with singing as designated household members wake the others with religious songs. Before breakfast, there is the hour-long "sacrifice," in which all members take part. Children do not speak during the celebration but they know all the words to the songs and pay strict attention to the preachings.

Work is important in the church, following the old "idle hands are the devil's workshop" doctrine. Women make most of the clothing for church members.

Children are home-schooled. The curriculum teaches "creation" rather than science but otherwise teaches course material similar to that of most schools. The difference is that religious doctrine is purposefully folded into the other subjects and morals are drawn from any number of situations.

School books are carefully chosen by a committee and church members have been busy writing their own texts. These include simple picture books for young children to a longer collection of stories called "The Oak," which tells the story of the Messianic Communities from their days as the Vine Church in Chattanooga, Tenn. to their adventures crossing the Bay of Fundy or making new communities in Brazil.

Even seemingly harmless books like "Little House on the Prairie" are discouraged. One church member explained that the books were rejected because they describe "an independent life. Our children are not being raised to live an independent life."

Children are encouraged to write their own stories — often tales of adventures traveling to one of the other communities or variations on one of the proverbs. "We think if they are always going to other resources, reading other's books and stories, it stifles their creativity," said parent Bruce Carver.

Play — for adults and children — is delegated to evenings and weekends, especially the Sabbath, on which church members do not work. Even the shoe store closes down for the day.

To prepare for the Sabbath, members clean households thoroughly on Friday. After the evening sacrifice, a large special meal is prepared and enjoyed casually.

Then, church members join together for an evening of singing and dancing with music played by church members. Many of the children also know how to play instruments.

Dances are Hebrew circle dances; children generally know the steps and take part, dancing with their parents and other children to songs that praise God and reaffirm

the goodness of their lives.

On the day of the Sabbath, older children and unmarried adults may watch younger children to allow married couples private time together. Families sometimes spend the day together picnicking or playing ball.

On the evening of the Sabbath, church members break bread together and give more testimony to their beliefs, praising God and one another, and confirming their conviction in the rightness of their actions.

Then, they dance some more.

## A Chosen People

Central to any understanding of the Messianic Communities is accepting that they consider themselves God's chosen people. As proclaimed in The Gospel According to St. Peter, they think of themselves as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession ..."

Church members live a very deliberate life, restricting their behavior to the kind of actions that are encouraged in the scriptures. These beliefs go beyond a simple command to treat one another fairly, honestly and with respect.

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A church member and her child are taken into custody during the 1984 Island Pond raid.

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For example, because the Bible says that "a woman shall not wear men's clothing," women in the church generally wear loose-fitting, feminine clothing such as flowing skirts or ballooning pants.

They do not cut their hair because the Bible says not to. When they pray, they cover their hair with scarves as a sign of submission to God.

While their sisters in the outside world may criticize these actions as setting back the women's movement, women of the church argue that feminism is one of the causes of the ills afflicting the earth.

According to one of their publications: "Just as Mother Earth was created to encompass and shield its inhabitants, so was woman created to surround and support man. God never intended for woman to do anything else: it is her definition. When woman stopped doing this, a curse came upon the earth."

Church members also believe strongly in virginity until marriage and that sexuality should be confined to marriage between a man and a woman.

And because the Bible says "if there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act," they do not condone homosexuality.

They also believe that a husband was made to rule over his wife. For this reason, only males may become elders in the church. Decisions are made jointly but males have the final word. At prayer services, it is the males who raise their hands to accept God into their hearts. The women keep their hands free to control children or administer to their needs.

In other ways, following the Bible, the church members attempt to lead the kind of life that is described in the scriptures. They work with their hands, watch no TV, do not listen to popular music, do not read novels or fiction, do not encourage their children to aspire to college, shun personal possessions and generally do not take part in local or national politics.

In so doing, they believe they are living a life of total devotion to God and thus will be a light to the rest of the world, an example of how mankind was commanded to behave.

And while they believe they are the chosen people — one of the 12 tribes of Judea who will live in the City of God or Israel at the end of the world — they also believe that there are other people who will survive the end of the world as we know it.

These are people who, while they did not live according to a strict adherence to the scriptures, instinctively did good deeds and lived righteous lives. In the Bible, these people are referred to as The Nations.

While the people of the Messianic Communities believe that these people will not join them in the City of God into the millennial reign of the Messiah, they also teach that they will not be condemned to hell. The people of the Messianic Communities believe it is their role to be a light, an example to The Nations.



Attorney Jeanie Swantko and her husband, elder Ed Wiseman, offer bread to a photographer during a dinner at one of the church's Island Pond homes.

scriptural admonition: "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

In the weeks and months that followed the state raid of the church, there were public meetings where angry local residents railed against church members and church members responded with long diatribes and quotes from the Bible. News stories portrayed their community as either a beatific version of the movie "Jesus Christ Superstar" or a monstrous haven for child abusers.

In court, allegations of hours-long sessions of physical discipline of children were made and then retracted. And, after years of wrangling, the state Department of Education dropped truancy charges against parents and accepted the church's curriculum, changing Vermont law on the issue in order to do so.

All the while, the issue of whether the children of the Northeast Kingdom Community Church — the name used by this religious group 10 years ago — were being abused was never resolved.

Over the years, the question has been raised intermittently, usually in the context of a child-custody case. Most recently, the church's views on child discipline have been aired in courts in Rutland and Hyannis.

In the Rutland case, Stuart Lavin, a part-time college professor, asked the court to award him custody of his four daughters who had been living with their mother after his former wife, Rosemary Lavin, joined the church in February taking the couple's

## Abuse or Proper Training

But the doctrine that has caused them the most grief is their adherence to the



The Friday night dances at the Messianic Communities Church in Island Pond are part of the church's weekly celebration of the Sabbath.

four youngest children with her.

Stuart Lavin told the court he did not believe in corporal punishment and wanted his daughters to have access to cultural, social, political and religious opportunities that he felt would be denied them as members of the church.

In Hyannis, Massachusetts Department of Social Service officials issued subpoenas to church parents earlier this spring after they concluded that nine children were at risk of being abused. A probable cause hearing in the case is scheduled for later this summer.

In both instances, church members readily concede they use the rod to punish their children and also strictly control what the children read, hear and do. They say they do so because they do not want the children to be corrupted by evil thoughts and actions.

According to their teachings, they want their children to "fear going out into the world where Satan would rule over them and cause their (spiritual) death."

Parents are instructed to tell their child what he has done wrong and make sure the child understands the transgression before administering punishment. However, they are also told they do not owe their child an explanation for their instructions.

Corporal punishment is used so that the child will respect a parent's word and authority. The rod is used rather than the hand, so that a child will fear the rod and not the parent. Older children, who do not respond to strikes with the rod, may be struck with a paddle on the behind as punishment for serious transgressions.

The church believes it is essential that a child accept the rulership of his parents, totally yielding himself to their control. The reason is that the Bible says that when God speaks, he will address the children. The church wants children who will be totally responsive to the word of God.

Also, the church believes that parents represent God's authority and character to their children. This places a responsibility on parents as well. If a child considers his parents are fair, he will consider that Yahshua is fair. In the same token, if his parents punish him for wrongs but also care for him and mean what they say, the church believes that the child will learn that, while God will punish wrong-doings, he also cares for them and means what he says.

In the same way, the church teaches that it is good for a child to admit his guilt. Confession, the church preaches, "not only resolves the child's guilt, it also prevents any build-up of animosity between parent and child. ... The child's confession tends to eliminate the parents' alienation and makes forgiveness possible."

The church also instructs parents on how to approach sexual education. "When is the right time?" a church teaching says. "When they start asking questions."

The church directs parents to give clear, simple answers to questions, using proper terms. Children should know what a penis and vagina look like and their function. They should also be taught that "the sexual act was created for pleasure," not just to procreate.

Thus, the church teaches neither a frank openness about sexual matters or nudity nor shy prudery. They don't condemn masturbation but teach a goal of forsaking immediate gratification for the more lasting satisfaction in marriage.

As the teaching on the subject says: "Occasional masturbation can be a passing phase in the development of normal sexuality. The child is entering adulthood and their purpose for living is to marry and have children."

Indeed, in all their teachings, the church aims to lead children to see marriage and procreation as the true joys of their lives.

## Court Cases

Over the years there have been several cases in which some church parents have chosen to violate court orders commanding them to give custody of their children to parents living outside the church.

Stuart Lavin used that fact as justification for not returning his girls to their mother after a court-approved visitation. He said he feared he would never see the girls again because he had been challenging the church's child-rearing practices.

As part of his case, he asked Michael Ossip of Palm Beach County, Fla., to testify. Speaking to the Family Court by phone, Ossip told Judge Silvio Valente that he had spent thousands of dollars trying to find his daughter Jessica, now 14. He said his former wife and church member, Lynn Delozier, took the girl into hiding after he was given custody of the girl six years ago. He has not seen his daughter since.

Jeanie Swantko, a former public defender who joined the church eight years ago and represented Rosemary Lavin in the Rutland custody case, said church members normally recognized the court's authority in these matters.

In the rare case that a church member has violated a court order, the parent did so without urging from other church members and only because they had an overwhelming conviction that to do otherwise would cause irreparable harm to a child, Swantko said.

## The Role of Government

This acceptance of the authority of government is one of the most remarkable changes in church teachings since 1984. In the mid-1980s, church members did not recognize the authority of the state, the courts or police.

At that time, they did not register births and deaths, did not comply with the Department of Education regulations and in other ways ignored state and federal



Jonathan Reid hugs Levah Shameah after a prayer service at the Messianic Communities Church in Island Pond.

laws. They believed they answered to a higher authority: God.

But, "now we understand the authority of government," explained church member Robert Chambers. "Our vision has become more clear about the relationship of Israel to The Nations. Government protects and rewards those who do good and punishes those who do bad," he said.

"We began to catch on to this when Mahady stood up and said, 'This isn't right,' about the raid. Since then, we've learned how to work with the governments in whatever country we've been in," Chambers said.

As another example of the authority of government, church members believe in the death penalty. Citing Genesis, which says that "whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made man," church members believe God instituted human government to ensure that murder and violence would not consume the earth.

This growing acceptance of the authority of government led the church to recently write against David Koresh and the actions of the Branch Davidians in one of its publications.

"The Branch Davidians died by the sword. They chose to go to war with the government by not surrendering to them. But servants of the Messiah do not fight in wars. Anyone who takes part in war is not a part of His kingdom, His people, His priesthood," according to the pamphlet.

Both the Branch Davidians and most fundamental Christians fail in following the preachings of Jesus that the faithful should be "in the world, but not of the world," members of the Messianic Communities believe.

For just as they distinguish themselves from groups like the Branch Davidians, the Messianic Communities also are quick to separate themselves from fundamental Christians. Of the latter, Wiseman says: "They are concerned with doctrine, not how they live their lives. Their lives are completely integrated in the society around them. You can't tell them apart from the rest of society."

## Divine Intervention

On June 25, at Bellows Falls, members of their community from near and far will gather at the church's Basin Farm to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the raid. They view Mahady's decision as divine intervention, as a message from God that they are on the right path.

And after the party, they will return to their homes across the country and overseas. They will continue administering to young people at Grateful Dead concerts and proselytize at coffee shops and anyplace else where someone is willing to listen.

They hope that in so doing — as they have written in one of their publications — they will "silence the ignorant men. No one has to be ignorant about us any longer. We are always available to give an account of the hope we have found in Messiah."