Journal of Contemporary Religion, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1997

The Northeast Kingdom Community Church of Island Pond, Vermont: Raising Up a People for Yahshua's Return

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ABSTRACT *The Messianic Communities (formerly known as the "Northeast Kingdom Community Church" or simply as "Island Pond") is one of the more dynamic and long-lived groups originating from the Jesus Movement. It is also one of the more under-studied, a result of both the members' reluctance to indulge the idle curiosity of journalists and researchers, as well as ongoing problems with litigation. This paper represents a preliminary attempt to describe the group and place it within the broader context of American religious history.*

Introduction

The Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s gave rise to a number of Christian sects, many of which had a communal orientation. As with many of the non-Christian new religious movements to emerge during this time period, many of the Jesus groups existed only briefly before breaking up or else being reabsorbed into the American religious mainstream.

A few groups did manage to survive, however. This article examines the Messianic Communities (formerly known as the 'Northeast Kingdom Community Church' or simply as 'Island Pond'), one of the more dynamic and long-lived groups originating within the Jesus Movement. It is also one of the more under-studied, the result of both the members' traditional reluctance to indulge the idle curiosity of researchers and journalists, as well as ongoing problems with litigation. This article is a preliminary attempt to describe the group and place it within the broader context of American religious history. It will also demonstrate the curious phenomenon in which a religious group may be forced into a sectarian stance, even as it affirms most of the precepts held by the larger culture.

American Revivalism and Cultural Stress

Periodically during the history of the United States, the nation has gone through times of religious ferment. One of these periods, described and analysed by Nathan Hatch in his book *The Democratization of American Christianity*, began soon after the birth of the nation, as the citizens began to affiliate *en masse* with the Methodist and Baptist denominations, resulting in a numerical eclipse of more established groups, such as the Episcopalians and New England Congregationalists (Hatch, 1989: 19). Periods of revival have continued to occur in the

United States to the present as new, vigorous groups have emerged to challenge the authority of older—and more respectable—denominations.

The reasons behind such shifts in the American religious landscape continue to be debated. Eyewitnesses to these upheavals have frequently been puzzled by and often unsympathetic to what they have witnessed. This has probably been caused in part by elements of self-segregation: the people who tend to comment have often been relatively leisured cultural elites and knowledge workers, while the participants themselves, though leaving records in the forms of letters, diaries and devotional tracts, have frequently been too busy 'getting saved', preaching or simply working to make ends meet, to engage in the kind of systematic reflection and analysis understandable to outsiders.

This divide has often resulted in mutual misunderstandings, with cultural elites and ministers of established churches either dismissing such movements as being inconsequential, scandalous or perhaps even subversive. The participants, for their part, have often held views that can best be called 'populist'. Members have often been unappreciative of the sophistication (and occasionally, the elitism) of formally trained clerics, preferring instead a gospel message that is both easy to understand and readily applicable to their lives. At times this gospel can be accompanied by supernatural authorisation—conspicuously lacking in more mainline denominations—in the form of radically changed attitudes, dreams and visions.

Of course, merely to state that America undergoes periodic waves of awakenings and revivals begs the question of what triggers such events. William G. McLoughlin, drawing on the anthropological work of Anthony F. C. Wallace, suggests that revivals are the result of periods of "cultural distortion and grave personal stress" which cause fundamental social norms and values to be called into question when the norms no longer correspond to the people's collective experiences (McLoughlin, 1978: 2–8). Revivals then occur as the society searches for and then seizes upon a new, more functionally useful world view that allows the society or at least subgroups within the society, to cope with the new cultural stresses. McLoughlin suggests, for example, that the Puritan awakening of 1610–1640 instilled within the newly arrived colonists with a spirit of collective cohesiveness, combined with the self-discipline, self-testing and "seriousness of purpose" necessary to allow them to colonise New England successfully. Later, as New England's Puritan regime began to decay, the First Great Awakening served at least in part to integrate the colonies in spirit and purpose into a proto-nation with a common destiny. This process of reevaluation and national re-integration would occur again with the Second and Third Great Awakenings that took place during the early 1800s and again at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, the American nation was again undergoing a period of cultural stress. The period of unity and prosperity following the end of World War II came to an end with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr, along with the escalation of military activity in Vietnam and the radicalisation of both the civil rights and student protest movements. The disappointments of this period encouraged many, particularly the youth, to question many of the values and mores of the larger culture; this in turn led to widespread experimentation with alternative lifestyles and religions.

A number of these seekers, however, did not find fulfilment in their experimentation with drugs, sex and eastern religions; rather, they combined traditional Christian doctrines of charismatic Evangelicalism with hippie aesthetics and lifestyles. The Jesus Movement resulted, with sizable numbers of youthful long-haired, counter-culturally attired Christians travelling around the United States and Europe, passing out psychedelic 'Jesus Papers', performing Christian folk, rock and rock operas and organising large numbers of Christian coffee houses and communes. While many of these endeavors were rather ephemeral in nature, some continue to the present day, though in modified form. Much of Jack Sparks's Christian World Liberation Front, for example, has now become a part of the Antiochean Orthodox Church, with many members now leading more or less conventional lifestyles. The Chicago-based Jesus People USA has also affiliated with a more mainstream denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church of America; this group does, however, continue to lead a communal existence and participates heavily in the Christian 'heavy metal' rock subculture.

The Messianic Communities, the subject of the present article, have followed a different path: restorationism, or literally attempting to restore and continue the primitive Jewish/Christian church described in the Biblical books of Luke and Acts. Nor is this simply a doctrinal restoration. For the Messianic Communities restoration is not simple adherence to an abstract doctrinal stance; rather, it is a way of life that embodies all aspects of the life of both the individual and the community. Diet, dress, art, politics and—most of all—relationships between each other, and the relationship of the community to its God, form a way of life dedicated to ushering in the Millennium.

History

As alluded to earlier, the Messianic Communities trace their historical origins to the Jesus Movement. In 1971, Elbert Spriggs, a 33-year-old personnel manager and former school teacher, felt that God was calling him to do something more with his life than work in textiles. He responded by travelling across America to Glendale, California, where he attended a short-lived charismatic church. Upon the church's disbanding, Spriggs travelled to Wyoming, where he met his wife-to-be, Marsha. After returning to California again for a short period, the couple moved back to Spriggs's home town of Chattanooga, Tennessee. There, still feeling a burden to share their faith in Jesus, the couple prayed for a small house in which to set up a Christian coffee shop. This prayer was soon realised in a shop called the Light House, a ministry that experienced explosive growth. Like other Jesus People youth ministers of the time, Spriggs attracted a number of young persons who were not only saved, but also wished to stay on; the group soon found itself emulating the primitive Christian Church in its sharing of personal goods. The original coffee shop ministry soon grew to include five houses supported in part by a small health-food café called the Yellow Deli.[1]

The early success of the group brought its own problems, however. Spriggs and his group experienced some cultural conflict with the established churches of the area, as they tended to bring anybody into the church who was willing to attend, thus violating unspoken local class and race conventions. For the group, however, the parting of the ways with establishment Christianity came

when sometime in 1975, members arrived at the Presbyterian Church that they were attending and found that the service had been postponed on account of the Super Bowl. Spriggs and his associates withdrew in disgust to begin holding their own meetings and baptizing converts, actions which further alienated the surrounding Chattanooga community, as Spriggs was not officially ordained by any denomination.[2]

Pressure from deprogrammers and deteriorating community relations persuaded the community to think about moving. In 1977, Spriggs and his wife travelled across the United States looking for other Jesus People groups, a quest that was relatively unsuccessful. The following year, however, the leader received an invitation to visit Island Pond, Vermont, from a group of Christians in the region who had been disappointed by their own experiences with institutional Christianity and the problem of ministers leaving to pursue higher salaries. By 1980, the rest of the ministry, which had by this time expanded to include several hundred members running seven delicatessens in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia, had finished selling its property and moving to Island Pond.

This move, too, was not without its trials. The sudden appearance of a counter-cultural, religious, close-knit group in the small economically-depressed town presented a number of difficulties. The group, now calling itself the 'Northeast Kingdom Community Church', lost some members during an initial period of economic hardship. The town, too, felt a sense of threat as the new arrivals had the potential to dominate the town politically and economically. Rumors, gossip and mis-information about the community—particularly about possible child abuse—grew, a situation unintentionally aggravated by the Church's unwillingness to indulge the curiosity of journalists or state officials. This was particularly true after 1982, when church members lost a series of child custody battles due to their unconventional lifestyle and a case of a drive-by shooting remained unsolved. The information void was filled, however, by anti-cultists and disgruntled defectors.

Misunderstandings grew between the group and the larger society until 1984, with the much-publicised raid on the community. At this time, roughly a hundred state troopers in bullet-proof vests descended upon the community in the pre-dawn hours to take custody of the children and examine them for abuse, the culmination of an extensive covert operation involving both the Vermont police and the state's department of social services. The haste with which the plan was executed, however, resulted in a number of state actions of dubious legality. For example, the state had issued a blanket detention order, filling out individual warrants after the children had supplied their names to the arresting officers.

It is thus possible that the case would have been overturned anyway on constitutional grounds of illegal procedure. Also, among the children detained was the child of a public defender, who was merely visiting the community at the time. Such a legal showdown did not occur; instead the judge presiding over the case noted that the children involved had been detained solely in order to provide evidence for charges of abuse, and that no concrete evidence other than hearsay could be produced by the state of abuse at that point. He then dismissed all of the cases set before him (Ewald, 1991).

In fact, the raid had two salutary effects. The first was that the community itself became aware that its shunning of contact with local authorities had been misconstrued as hiding illicit activities, rather than simply as a concern for privacy. On the other hand, the state officials themselves appear to have been shocked at how easily their own good intentions had been translated into strong-arm tactics of dubious legality. Since that time, a number of compromises have been reached. For example, the church is no longer required to fill out forms listing the names of the students; however, local educational officials are welcomed to the community, where they can personally learn the names of the children and watch them being taught. This and other similar solutions appear to have left both parties more satisfied than in the past.

The Community Today

Indeed, legal problems aside, the community appears to have, for the most part, flourished during its 22-year existence. Today, the entire group probably has between 1000 and 1500 members, roughly half of whom are under the age of 18. Most of these persons are distributed among some 20 colonies, roughly half of which are in the New England region (the balance being in Missouri, Virginia, California, Florida, Manitoba, England, France, Germany, Brazil and Australia); at any particular time there may also be one or two small 'wayout houses', which are tentative missionary outposts housing a few married couples and 'walkers' on hitchhiking missionary tours.[3]

In contrast to Chattanooga, the communities are now economically diversified, with each multi-family household economically independent. While members may at times work as semi-skilled and skilled day laborers, particularly when starting up a new outreach, each settlement attempts to support itself through one or more cottage industries. These industries are generally based upon goods and services that the community itself uses, such as soap, candles, futons, printing and, with the addition of the Basin Farm settlement, food.

Yet, merely to describe the communities' legal history and economic base is to overlook the underlying motivation of what drives the group. It is the Messianic Communities' conviction that they are the literal restoration of God's people on earth, the restoration of the Messianic Jewish New Testament community of the first century AD.

The group's realisation of this messianic role evolved over time and was based upon a combination of axiomatic statements drawn from the Bible, empirical evidence, personal experience on the part of members, and reflection. As stated earlier, the Messianic Communities began as one of many Jesus Movement ministries. Like other Jesus People, the Light House members did not worship a remote, impersonal God, but a God who is both present and who delivers on His promises. In the case of the Light House and the Northeast Kingdom Community Church, this was manifested by a radical loss of loneliness, alienation, and feelings of dirtiness that come from compromising one's principles. These were replaced by a clear conscience and the certitude that one can trust one's fellow believers.[4]

The community found, however, that the surrounding Christians did not share this commitment to community in the same way that they did, preferring to tolerate racism, support Super Bowls, and look down on unconventional

fellow believers rather than confronting the question of what it means to be one of God's people in a seriously flawed society in a fallen world. Further investigation by the community led them to conclude that institutional Christianity's falling away from the way of Christ was not merely a local thing. Instead, everywhere that members of the group looked, they saw compromise—even among their former Jesus Movement colleagues such as Keith Green and Billy Graham.[5] Indeed, examination of the Bible showed that the Primitive Church had expected the apocalypse in the near future, but instead had ended up fighting a losing battle against creeping corruption and compromise, as seen in the letters of Paul to the Corinthians. In short, the communities concluded that the church had quit being the church and sold its birthright for a mess of pottage—in the form of allowing itself to be co-opted by Emperor Constantine, if not before.[6]

Yet even if the church had failed because of sin, the community realised that the Holy Spirit had not. Evidence could be seen of this in the existence of the group itself, which proved to the members that people could, in fact, live as the early church had. Eventually, the answer became clear: the other churches had it wrong; humans were not supposed to be sitting on their hands, hoping for a 'personal relationship with Jesus Christ' and waiting for the end times. Instead, they should be doing what the early Primitive Church ought to have done, but failed to do: with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the group will prepare the way for the end times, culminating with the institution of the Kingdom of God on earth.

It is this sense of preparation that drives the community as it readies itself to play its part in the coming Messianic millennium. In practical terms, the preparation entails the following:

1. There is a sense of physical and cultural restoration. In attempting to restart the New Testament Church, the group has developed a physical and artistic culture that is its interpretation of first century Messianic Judaism translated into 20th century terms. For example, the communities are divided into 'tribes' according to the geographic region in which they are located;[7] they are also sabbatarian, keeping the Jewish Sabbath. Men, following Jewish practice, grow full beards. Much of the music, too, is based on Israeli folk songs. Most of the members of the group have been given Hebrew names by their fellow members. However, the community does not follow such customs slavishly. While the group regards the name 'Jesus' as an English corruption of the Jewish Messiah's name, they have not opted for the common Hebrew transliteration of 'Yehshua' either. Instead they have chosen to call Him 'Yahshua' [YAH' shoo ah'], thus preserving the original Hebrew meaning of Jesus' name: *Yah* [= I am] and *Shua* [= mighty and powerful to save].[8]

This sense of restoration extends to food and dress as well. Food, for example, is a cross between rural cooking and health food since, according to the community, it only made sense for people in God's kingdom to be healthy. Another innovation is the group's convention of men leaving their shirts untucked "to hide their form"; the reason for this is that women are expected to dress modestly, so it is regarded as only fair that men dress similarly.

2. Of much greater importance to community members than simple physical restoration, however, is the restoration of proper relationships. The core of this re-ordering is found in the combination of two of Christ's statements. The first

is the dual great commandment: one must love God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength; and one must love one's neighbor as oneself. The second is that one should be willing to lay one's own life down for one's friends. Within the community, these translate into morning services (called 'sacrifices') in which members can look at each other and say to each other, with conviction, that they will lay down their lives—that is, their own desires and aspirations—and instead be concerned with the needs of others. For example, when asked why the men of the community raise their hands during the morning prayer, Yoneq answered:

> The reason that we hold up our hands is because Paul said that he wanted all men in every place, or locality, to hold up hands without wrath or dissension.... The whole body of Messiah has to be one, without dissension or differences of opinion.... Lifting up your hands is just a sign of surrender, a sign showing that you have good conscience. And who would lift up their hand if they knew that they had something on their conscience that wasn't forgiven, or who had something against their brother or sister?[9]

3. Children play a crucial role in the life of the community. The community has been portrayed in the media as harsh disciplinarians, an assessment that might appear to be confirmed by some of the sermons preached within the services. Closer examination shows that this is not exactly the case. The community has a uniform code of discipline that does include corporal punishment, but the group's goal in enforcing this is to instil in the children clear expectations with respect to punishment. Discipline is also intended to encourage rather than to subjugate, with the goal of children becoming responsible by the time that they are 13.[10] This goal is reflected in the education program as well; children are schooled until they are 13, after which they enter into part-time apprenticeship.[11]

The Messianic Communities' goal for the children is greater than merely turning out solid citizens, however; they also play an essential role in the group's eschatology. The Bible states that the sins of the fathers will also be borne until the third and fourth generations. The community interprets this as meaning that those 'in Messiah', i.e. persons living in the community, who do not wilfully and flagrantly enter into sin, will be effectively sanctified after three or four generations.[12] Thus, in about 50–70 years the community will be able to send out 144,000 pure virgin males to preach during the final ingathering of souls before the second coming of the Messiah.[13]

This seemingly abstract bit of theology actually has very concrete ramifications for the community: the children of the present generation will be less sinful than their parents and subsequent generations will be even less sinful. As one father put it,

> I had girlfriends before I came to the Community and we were not celibate! Sometimes I have flashbacks of the past; something just pops into my head—but they were relationships that just were not meant to be! Our children will not have that problem. They will have one wife, one husband. They will be single-minded and pure.[14]

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper we suggested that the Messianic Communities are part of a long tradition of American revivals that occur periodically when a significant proportion of the society become dissatisfied with cultural norms. Indeed, within the Island Pond communities most of the members—and even the organisation itself—has tried organised Christianity and found it lacking. In response, the community has developed a sectarian faith with a culture that might be described as a cross between Messianic Judaism and Anabaptism. This culture allows the members of the Communities to maintain a stable, morally rigourous collective lifestyle within the permissive, individualistic ethos of the larger American culture; at the same time, the boundaries are low enough to allow the group to maintain businesses and to recruit new members.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of this culture, however, is the Messianic Communities' moral aspirations. Most parents in America hope that their children will have better lives than themselves. Often this has been viewed in terms of simple economic gains, though some individuals and groups also hope that the children may have better moral and religious lives than themselves. Island Pond has taken this a step further: they are attempting to build a new society which they hope will usher in the Kingdom of God on earth, but which they see as already (to use the Communities' vocabulary) 'bearing good fruit'—persons can live in the community living lives of complete openness and filled with a sober joy. Furthermore, members expect that the children growing up within the community will be raised from birth with the something that the parents wish that they had had themselves: the ability to speak with absolute conviction and clarity of conscience.

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NOTES

1. Elbert Spriggs [known within the community as Yoneq], personal interview, 25 June 1994.
2. Spriggs, interview.
3. Recruitment rates seem to have slowed since the group's formative period; most growth now appears to come through a high intra-group birth rate. The Messianic Communities do welcome visitors. A particularly successful missionary venture has been its outreach to followers of Grateful Dead concerts and similar gatherings; for this the Messianic Communities outfitted a large bus in which they used to follow the musical group when they went on tour. At concert sites community members would provide free medical services to fans, pass out literature and invite people to visit their communities. Members estimate that as many as 20 new members per year have been gained in this way.
4. See, for example, "Pretenders No Longer", in *Eleanor Rigby and all the Lonely People* [Island Pond]: Messianic Communities, n.d.: 24–26; also, the tract *Loving with All Your Heart* [Island Pond]: Messianic Communities, n.d.: 1–7.
5. See, for example, "Billy Graham: Tell It Like It Is", in *When You Wish Upon A Star*. [Island Pond]: Messianic Communities, [1993?]: 4–5; and "When You Wish Upon a Star", in *Wish Upon a Star*, 6–13.
6. Kharash, personal interview, 24 June 1994.

7. Fewer than twelve tribes exist at present, though more are expected to be added as the group grows and as colonies are established in more diverse locations abroad. Interestingly, some members interviewed feel that it is possible that the number of tribes may ultimately exceed the biblical number of 12.
8. "The Name above All Names", in *The Stone*. [Island Pond]: Messianic Communities, 1994, 72–75.
9. Spriggs, interview. Two key issues within the communities are those of *unity*, or 'being of one heart and one mind', and *fellowship*. It is important to note that 'fellowship' in this context includes actions as much as it does beliefs. Persons within the group who are experiencing a lack of faith, but who are endeavoring to share in the life of the community are rarely asked to leave, on the grounds that faith may come later. Leaving the community is regarded as a very serious matter; to paraphrase one member, fellowship within the community is similar to fellowship with God, and you cannot have fellowship with God without also having fellowship with one's brothers and sisters within the community.

   Responses to people leaving the group vary, depending on the circumstances. The community may visit a person who is thought to have left in a moment of weakness; however, people who leave in order to return to an addiction or to a lifestyle deemed immoral by the community may be required to wait before being readmitted, in order to demonstrate their sincerity. The community will also seek to be reconciled with former members that the community elders deem may have been treated unfairly during their time within the group. On the other hand, persons who attack the group after leaving are generally avoided.
10. Elbert Spriggs [Yoneq], sermon preached 25 June 1994 at the Messianic Community at Basin Farm, Bellows Falls, Vermont.
11. At Basin Farm, for example, one 15-year-old was observed running his own forge, with minimal supervision and turning out wrought-iron candle holders of good quality. The children themselves claim to like the system; they also point out that of all the children whose parents have spent time in the community but then left, the majority have returned to join the community once they have come of age.
12. The word used by the community is actually 'blameless', rather than 'sanctified'. Members of the community are quick to point out that this does not mean that children of this future era will be without sin. Rather, they will be fully sensitized and obedient to God's will. They will also be more aware of the sins that they do commit and will thus be able to repent of them quickly, rather than falling into the further sin of 'reasoning'—the Communities' word for trying to rationalise one's sins and shortcomings away.
13. Susan Palmer, "The Children of Island Pond" (unpubl. ms). The communities regard calendar systems as only approximations; thus, the year 2000 does not play a major role in their thought. While the group suspects that the end times may be close at hand, they also believe that the Messiah will not return until He has a people (i.e. the Messianic Communities) to whom to return. The number 144,000 comes from the book of Revelation, chapters 7 and 14. As mentioned elsewhere, the Messianic Communities are organized on a tribal basis. It is expected that each tribe will contribute 12,000, for a total of 144,000. Interestingly, the message that these men will preach will not be primarily concerned with personal repentance and redemption. Instead, it will be a final call for persons who simply acknowledge God as the creator and who would preserve their basic humanity by fleeing from a man-centered, technocratic, amoral one-world government.

   The Messianic Communities possess a very rich and detailed eschatological vision which unfortunately can only be hinted at in an article of this length. For example, unlike many conservative Christian sects, the Messianic Communities do not believe that those who have never been evangelised will be automatically consigned to Hell. Instead, there will be two judgements. Those under a covenant with God (i.e. the members of the Messianic Communities) will be judged first, with the righteous among them going on to rule over the restored earth spoken of in Rev. 21: 1; this rule will be from Heaven and in full fellowship with Yahshua. Unbelievers who were never exposed to the message will be judged separately; this group will include Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Catholics [sic] and others who, through no fault of their own, never heard the message. The Communities believe that such persons will be judged by their deeds rather than by their beliefs, as detailed in Revelation 20: 12 and also Romans 2: 13–16. Those judged wicked will then be sent to the lake of eternal fire, while the righteous will live among the 'nations' on the restored earth (Rev. 21: 1). Especially virtuous persons in this group may be selected to be Kings of the nations, referred to in Rev. 21: 24. (Note, however, that

they will still be earthly rulers, and in submission to those 'in Messiah' ruling over the earth from Heaven.) Most Protestant Christians are expected to be judged along with the unbelievers, as they are not perceived by the Messianic Communities as living under the covenant; however, the Communities seem to feel that Protestants may be judged with more strictness than the other groups due to their greater access to the Bible.

14. Cited in Palmer, "The Children of Island Pond" (op. cit.)

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