

Shift Seen in Charismatic Activities

By Religious News Service

Leaders of the charismatic renewal in various parts of this country say their movement is entering a new phase with the 1980s.

Their prayer meetings, which emphasize "charisma" or "gifts of the Holy Spirit" such as prophecy, healing and speaking in tongues, have gained increasing acceptance within the Roman Catholic and the mainline Protestant churches — Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran and others.

At the same time, attendance at these prayer meetings is dropping; fewer people are replacing onetime regular participants, many of whom are apparently exercising their Christian commitment within more traditional structures.

During the past year, the question of whether the charismatic renewal has "peaked" was being asked in numerous Christian periodicals. The question was prompted by the decreasing numbers at prayer and regional conferences. Some analysts speculated that the peak after a decade of growth had come in 1977 when a conference in Kansas City, Mo., brought together 50,000 charismatics from every theological tradition.

However, a Religious News Service survey of renewal leaders brought back a virtually unanimous response — what is happening is not so much a decrease in numbers but a diversification of activities for those who came into the movement in the past decade.

"There's a greater infiltration into the system," says Dan Malachuk of the Logos Journal, ecumenical charismatic monthly published in Plainfield, N.J. He also reports that charismatics have begun to operate as "persuaders rather than evangelicals within the system. And that's a big difference because they don't come on like gangbusters."

The Rev. Mr. Kevin Ranaghan, leader of the Catholic Charismatic

Renewal's national service committee, wrote in the May issue of its New Covenant magazine that "many large prayer groups have decreased in number of participants, but there seems to be a growth in the number of smaller groups."

Deacon Ranaghan, a permanent deacon, points out that of 2,800 prayer groups in his committee's latest directory, 1,300 are new listings.

Renewal leaders also cite a recent Gallup Poll which revealed that there are 29 million charismatics in the United States today — 19 percent of the total population.

Dr. J. Rodman William, a Presbyterian minister and professor at Melodyland School of Theology, Anaheim, California, said he was "astounded" at the figure. "It shows a great number of people are not identifying themselves as charismatics to church leaders or to charismatic groups," he observes. He also thinks some of these people have come to identify themselves as charismatic through television programs of the so-called "electronic church."

Richard Denny, executive director of the Lutheran Charismatic Renewal Service in Roseville, Minn., reports that "there are many Lutheran churches around the country which have just opened their doors and received the renewal movement."

The ninth International Lutheran Conference on the Holy Spirit in Minneapolis in August expects an attendance of 15,000, a drop of several thousand from last year, according to Denny. He also says that after prayerful reflection, the organizers for the first time are including such topics of social concern as homosexuality, ERA, inflation, cults and abortion.

In the past, charismatic gatherings have shunned such potentially divisive topics to concentrate solely on "praising the Lord" through prayer, worship and healing services.

Father R. Robert Hargreaves, pastor of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Cumberland, R.I., also believes many people "have gone through a stage where they felt they needed prayer meetings and now are moving into other ministries. I see more people talking about the Lord at their jobs, with their friends and in their families."

Father Hargreaves recalls that initially there was a lot of enthusiasm for the movement in his parish: "Like a child with a new toy, we were attracted by the glitter," he says. "But we soon came to realize it was an occasion for us to grow spiritually and to move to a deeper level."

Robert Turbitt, prayer group leader at Sts. John and Paul Catholic Church in Coventry, R.I., agrees. "I have never met anyone yet who was a charismatic and then decided that he or she is no longer a charismatic," he asserts.

Father Raymond Kelly is pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Providence, the first Catholic parish in Rhode Island to commit itself formally to the renewal nine years ago. He recalls that 500 people used to come to the weekly meetings at St. Patrick's; attendance is now about 300.

But there are now 35 prayer groups around the state, Father Kelly explains, so people can go to one closer to home. For example, at St. Francis Xavier's, East Providence, a predominantly Portuguese parish which had no prayer meeting three years ago, there is a group with weekly attendance of 400.

Father John Randall, a former assistant at St. Patrick's and now pastor at St. Charles Borromeo, says he doesn't think the movement has peaked but it does seem to have lost some of its "fire."

Father Randall, a well-known charismatic author and member of the national service committee, says the loss "is not something I'm

happy about. I would like to see the fervor regained, but I can't say I see that on the horizon."

However, he is encouraged that many things once considered peculiar to charismatics have now become normal in the Catholic Church, such as Bible study, shared prayer and praise.

"I don't think it will be too long before the things that characterize the charismatic renewal will be among the 'givens' of Catholic life," he declared.

Among other developments within the charismatic movement have been efforts to heal tensions that developed as Christians from the more institutional churches began to participate in the forms of prayer used for half a century in the Pentecostal churches.

Among Catholics, this took the form of divergences between those who wanted to see the group more closely tied in with parish life and those interested in the type of ecumenical fellowships that have developed at South Bend, Ind., and Ann Arbor, Mich., and which emphasize lay leadership.

Deacon Ranaghan, leader of the People of Praise, the Interdenominational South Bend group, emphasizes that its members remain active in and faithful to their individual denominations while fostering strong interpersonal relationships among themselves.

But some other groups springing from the charismatic movement have gone off on their own and disassociated themselves from official church structures. In Glenmont, N.Y., the Emmanuel House of Prayer, once connected with the Catholic Church, has become a non-denominational commune that has refused interviews with the Albany Catholic diocesan newspaper regarding its status.

By contrast, the charismatic Holy Family Renewal Center in Little Falls, N.Y., is aligned with the diocese and invites others to join in worship experiences and offers classes in scripture and prayer.

Another point of division that has developed within the charismatic community is the question of "shepherding" — the concept that those in prayer circles make a "covenant" to follow the spiritual direction of the group as a whole or even of single leaders. Critics caution that such groups could go the isolated way of cults unless care is taken.

"I have committed myself once to the Lord Jesus Christ, and all belongs to him," argues the Rev. David J. Du Plessis, the veteran Pentecostal minister. He criticizes covenants as divisive.

Du Plessis has had a running debate with another Protestant charismatic leader, the Rev. Bob Mumford, a Baptist who directs Christian Growth Ministries in Fort

Lauderdale, Fla., who has been a strong advocate for "covenant" fellowships.

The latest issue of the Logos Journal contains a report of a "public reconciliation" between Du Plessis and Mumford which took place at a conference in Dallas in February.

Mumford apologized at the Dallas reconciliation for "any valid or real hurt or injury" caused by the controversy in the last five years, but maintained that his group's principle of discipleship and authority was one of the "radical answers" needed to correct what he called the "superficial" state of the church today.

Du Plessis responded, "We don't have to agree on all points in order to have intimate fellowship with each other."

Logos Journal described the reunion of the two clergymen as an example of "reconciliation in spite of difference of opinion."

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On the Right Side

Here's How To Encourage Vocations

Why such a dearth of vocations?

Only God knows. But we can speculate. My personal conclusion is that it's the poor way we develop our youth, into a kind of irresponsibility. Abp. Sheen, commenting on the 12-year-old Jesus' encounter in the temple, said, "Americans have the longest maturation period of any country in the world." On the occasion of confirmation, we go through pious platitudes about "entering adulthood in the Church" and about "the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit" which will move the confirmed to do great things for God and neighbor. I usually listen in shame, knowing full well that hardly anyone really expects those to be confirmed to be more zealous or devoted Catholics. Many even quit instructions after confirmation. And do you realize that hardly any of the confirmed use Sunday offertory envelopes, and do not carry their share in the support of the Church? I don't blame the youngsters. They have not been trained by their parents, pastors, and schools to assume their personal responsibilities to support the Church. This would be a good project for parish councils to develop. In the "Youth Market" section of the Business Periodical Index you can read of the vast sums spent by youth on rock and roll records, recreational gear, clothing, etc. In fact, drop in at McDonald's and watch the cash flow from cheerful young pockets. Those same pockets rarely flow in the support of religion, which is a good index of priorities. The most earnest evangelizers I know are the Witnesses of Jehovah.

What do they do?

Will Whalen's pamphlet on the Witnesses reads: "Jehovah Witnesses are expected to read. Maybe this does not startle you, but I have observed that many Catholics who seek to become active in parish and apostolic organizations imagine they can become informed Catholics without bothering to read Catholic books, magazines and newspapers. Somehow they suppose that all they need to know about the faith will be gleaned from the 10-minute Sunday sermon and an occasional lecture. A short conversation reveals that they have no familiarity with the major moral and religious issues of the day. They have no familiarity because they do not take the time and make the effort to read." For this reason, I wrote in the April 16 Courier: "If 1,200,000 Knights of Columbus and their families kept their sights on the national and international Catholic scene as well as the local (through reading Columbia) the whole Church would get a needed jolt. I met P.G. Knight Ray Neary at Father Devereaux's funeral, and he said: 'I was glad about your article on the Knights of

Columbus magazine. I hope councils will promote that."

What do Witnesses do?

"The average Kingdom Hall in this country includes fewer than 65 people. Once a congregation passes the 250 mark, plans are made to split it. Every member knows everyone else. The Witness is encouraged to keep his needs modest, do his part as a missionary, and contribute to the upkeep of the Kingdom Hall. Even members who are invalids or elderly try to carry on their missionary work by telephone or mail. Last year the average U.S. Witness logged 11 hours a month in door-to-door preaching. This in addition to attendance at the five regular meetings each week in the Kingdom Hall... 6,000,000 people receive copies of The Watchtower twice a month. Although we Catholics have the certain teaching of the Church and the grace of the Sacraments, how can the Holy Spirit work in apathetic, inert Catholics who just "go to Mass on Sunday"? We'll have vocations when our young men burn to proclaim Christ and Him crucified through personal involvement and sacrifice.

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