Religion News Writers Association
Templeton Award
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Westerville, Ohio 43801-2019

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

Once again 1995 was the Year of the Religion Writer. With Republicans on Capitol Hill seeking to dismantle 60 years of social welfare programs and discredit the ideology behind them, with evangelicals badly divided over the issue of where religious faith leaves off and secular politics begins, with the siege of Waco raising new questions about the proper limits of religious tolerance, with Catholics debating whether they owe their pontiff homage, obedience or neither, newspapers once again were compelled to turn to their religion writers for answers, or at least informed analysis.

Once again The Washington Post turned to Laurie Goodstein. On a broad range of subjects dealing directly with religious matters and touching and the related issues of politics, social welfare, families and finances, she again intelligently and dispassionately guided her editors and her readers through the maze of issues, questions and emotions. Five stories in no way can capture the depth and thoughtfulness of her work, but they do illustrate some of the reasons why we regard her as the best in the business and are proud to nominate her for the 1995 Templeton Award. The five stories are:
BREAKING NEWS STORY:

"Promise Keepers Men's Movement Packs RFK Stadium;" (May 28, 1995)

Goodstein captured the mood and motivations of the 52,000 men who filled a football stadium in Washington, D.C., to be part of Promise Keepers - a men's only, evangelical movement that truly came of age in 1995. Although much of the media covered Promise Keepers events last year, Goodstein's account stands out both for its compassionate portrayal of men searching for meaning in their lives and for balanced reporting that doesn't fail to critically focus on an oft-praised movement. As the rally wound down late Saturday afternoon, Goodstein scooted back to the newsroom to compose her article on a tight deadline, and managed to write it onto Sunday's front page. "The event here drew lunch-bucket men and expense-account men," she wrote, "white carpenters and black CPA's, teenagers and grandfathers. They wore ponytails and buzz cuts, cowboy boots and Birkenstocks. They arrived on the Metro and Harley Davidson motorcycles, in charter busses and minivans."

FEATURE:

"For Non-Believers, Having Children Forces Them to Confront Their Ambivalence about Religion;" with sidebar: "A Powerful Force Pulls Dropouts Back;" (June 4, 1995)

For these stories, Goodstein examined non-religious families...a surprisingly large segment of our society, but one rarely written about because they tend to be private about their beliefs. And because they cannot be found gathered in a church or a synagogue, Goodstein sought out people to interview for her story in day care centers, toy stores and Little League fields. Parents and their children talked to her with brutal honesty about how their lack of conventional religious belief has affected their lives. She found that many of these professed secularities think more about spiritual matters than regular churchgoers do, as they struggle to imbue their children with values and answers to existential questions without the comfort of a catechism for guidance.

ANALYSIS:

"Some Evangelicals Warn about Mixing God and Politics;" March 27

With the ascendancy of the Christian Coalition, many reporters and commentators have depicted conservative evangelicals as a monolithic Republican voting bloc. But in an analysis piece early written last year that was well ahead of the curve,
Goodstein picked up rumblings in evangelical circles warning against being too closely associated with the Republican Party and its policies. In convention centers, church halls and seminaries, conservative evangelicals voiced fear and dismay that the church could become associated with social policies that appeared to lack compassion for the poor. This is the kind of behind-the-scenes reporting about the evangelical community that is not often found in the secular media. And yet, understanding this debate among evangelicals is key to analyzing the political behavior of religious people in an era when faith and politics are so intertwined.

PROFILE:

"Thou Shalt Not Lie: Ellen Cooke, Treasurer of the Episcopal Church, Lived a Grand Illusion;" June 16, 1995

This is the most in-depth profile of former Episcopal Church treasurer Ellen Cooke...who probably holds the record for embezzling from a mainstream Protestant church. Her theft of $2.2 million shook not only Episcopaliens, but the larger world of religious and charitable organizations, as people asked how a trusted insider could have stolen so much money over so many years. Goodstein pieced together this account from interviews with dozens of church employees and volunteers, bank representatives and auditors, and Cooke's friends, relatives and foes.

WRITER'S CHOICE:

"The Ordination Situation; Shortage of Catholic Priests Leads to Shift in Church Power from Ministry to Laity;" (Oct. 3, 95)

The priest shortage is not news, but Goodstein's story...using the Pope's visit to a Yonkers, N.Y., seminary as a peg...is comprehensive and breaks some ground on just how dire the shortage is and how it affects parishes. It's a typical Goodstein feature: meaty, full of compelling facts and quotes, yet written in a very straightforward, accessible style that grabs the reader and doesn't let go. Yet another illustration of why we believe Laurie Goodstein is the finest religion writer in American journalism.

Sincerely,

Glenn Frankel
Deputy National Editor
More than 52,000 men paid $55 apiece for a seat at RFK Stadium and the secrets to becoming a successful modern man: Don't cheat on your wife or your taxes, hug other men, kiss the children, read the Bible at bedtime and invest in God.

A burgeoning Christian men's movement called Promise Keepers has made saving souls a masculine pursuit -- especially for men inclined to believe that church is the province of women and children. Promise Keepers packed RFK stadium for 13 1/2 hours of preaching, praying and hymn singing on Friday night and all day yesterday; the group expects to draw half a million men to stadium-sized events in 13 cities this year.

"You don't come here and feel like you're losing your masculinity because of your faith," said Tom Berlin, 31, pastor of Toms Brook United Methodist Church in the Shenandoah Valley.

Surveying the crowd, Berlin marveled that while every small worship group he has started in his church drew about "10 women and two men," he had no trouble rounding up 15 men for the Promise Keepers weekend. "Here, you come hear male role models, real men," Berlin said. "Most men are looking for role models, for heroes."

Promise Keepers has caught on like a tent revival in summer since former University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney and a friend first envisioned filling sports stadiums with men rooting for Jesus to seize their souls. The first conference in Boulder in 1991 drew about 4,200 disciples. It remained a Colorado event until last year, when Promise Keepers visited seven cities, attracting 278,000 men.

This year the group has already sold out tickets to seven of its 13 events. The Washington, D.C., weekend is the first and only event scheduled for the East Coast. Until now, Promise Keepers has been a bigger phenomenon in the South and the West, strongholds of conservative evangelical Christianity.

Few religious revivals have such reach. The event here drew lunch-bucket men and expense-account men, white carpenters and black CPAs, teenagers and grandfathers. They wore ponytails and buzz cuts, cowboy boots and Birkenstocks. They arrived on the Metro and Harley-Davidson motorcycles, in charter buses and minivans.
"You came here empty. You came here confused. Your buddies brought you," evangelist Luis Palau told the crowd, his image projected on screens flanking the stage. "and suddenly you make your decision to say, 'Jesus be my God' . . . and think of the change in your life. Your wife is going to notice. Your kids are going to notice."

They stood and sang the words, "I'm not a creature of brute chance or lies. . . Now as His man, I'm destined for the skies." They had learned the hymns from the cassette tapes mailed to them in advance with their conference registration packets. The tunes were an intentionally multiracial mix of gospel, traditional and salsa, and most men sang heartily, some in T-shirts saying, "A real man sings REAL LOUD."

"A real man, a man's man, is a Godly man," said McCartney, the founder of Promise Keepers, speaking at the kick-off news conference. "A real man is a man of substance, a man that's vulnerable, a man who loves his wife, a man that has a passion for God, and is willing to lay down his life for Him."

The Promise Keepers staff and budget have doubled every six months for the last four years, peaking now at 150 people on a $22 million budget. Their operators take orders for New Man magazine, books on living Godly lives, cassettes and CDs and Promise Keepers golf shirts and baseball caps.

Some 65,000 men have filled out commitment cards vowing to keep the "Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper" -- honor Jesus Christ; have close male friends; practice spiritual, moral, and sexual purity; be faithful to wife and children; support the church; defy racial and denominational barriers; and go out and encourage the world to do the same.

The genius of Promise Keepers "is the disciplined lifestyle they set before these men as a challenge," said Robert M. Franklin, director of black church studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. "Men like tests, they like competition, so there's this dynamic at work."

"They make demands on these men, and they provide significant psychological rewards," Franklin said. "There's the conferring of a kind of nobility, of being on the right side, that makes them different from all the men who are indifferent to their spouses and children."

Before the stadium gates opened, 50 women made rounds praying over each seat and anointing each one with oil. But once the gates opened, all women disappeared but a few volunteers and concession stand workers, and signs saying "men's" were posted on the women's restrooms.

But it wasn't a football atmosphere. "It's amazing how you can walk through here and no one's drinking beer and no one's swearing," said Andy Ziegenfuss, 18, a high school senior from Allentown, Pa.

"There's no competition here," said Rich Church, 49, a computer salesman from Woodstock, Va. "There's no women here, so you don't have to impress anyone. Too many guys are caught up in a male ego kind of thing. This is going to put them on the same level."

Promise Keepers asks women simply to stay away from the rallies. "Something
special happens when men come together in the name of Jesus Christ," the group's brochures say. "We have discovered that men are more apt to hear and receive the full instruction of the sessions when they are within an all-male setting."

In the District, the group's gender-exclusive event in a publically owned stadium breaks no laws, said Randy Thomas, attorney consultant for the D.C. Sports Commission. The city's human rights provision, which bars discrimination, makes exceptions for religious or political organizations that limit admission to promote the principles of their cause, Thomas said.

Some women's groups criticize Promise Keepers, but not for holding men-only events. "The problem is the message . . . that men must take back control of the family, be the head, the boss," said Rosemary Dempsey, national action vice president of the National Organization for Women, in an interview last week. "It's a not-very-well-cloaked misogynistic message."

Critics cite a passage from the book "Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper" by Tony Evans, directed to men who have abandoned or ignored their families. "I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back; I'm urging that you take it back . . . Treat the lady gently and lovingly. But lead."

Promise Keepers President Randy T. Phillips said that Evans really teaches that what a man has to "take back is not a dominant role of hierarchical husband and father, but [to become] a man who's concerned, with passion and sensitivity, who is listening to his wife and kids."

The group also has been tainted with the tinge of politics since founder McCartney supported Amendment 2 in Colorado, an anti-gay rights initiative, and held a news conference in which he called gays undeserving of the same legal rights as "people who reproduce." He also has spoken out against abortion.

The group's leaders insist that Promise Keepers is about evangelism, not politics. But there is no doubt that Promise Keepers is part of the pantheon of conservative Christian, morally absolutist cultural and political groups converging in this country, said W. Stephen Gunter, professor at the Candler School of Theology.

Most of the speakers selected to preach at Promise Keepers events "are very conservative," Gunter said. "A large number would be Republican in their political inclinations, or if they are not Republican they would be fiscally conservative."

The group planned a men's march on Washington for 1996 -- a presidential election year -- but rescheduled it for 1997 to avoid the appearance of political intent.

The men at RFK stadium yesterday talked not of politics but about personal struggles to change careers, overcome addictions, handle their anger, or to remain disciplined Christians. The evangelists on the stage talked consistently of commitment to God.

Asked to huddle in small prayer groups and share their prayers with one another, many men turned in their seats to faces they did not know. They
prayed in clusters for several long minutes, some holding hands, some with arms looped over shoulders, some standing distant with hands in their pockets or hooked on belt loops.

And when they broke apart, the men shook hands, or hugged, and many wiped tears from their eyes. One punched the air with his fist.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
In convention centers and church halls, magazines and seminars, influential evangelical Christians are warning that God's church has become dangerously intertwined with the earthly agenda of the Republican Party.

The backlash comes as conservative Christian organizations are becoming increasingly powerful players in political wrangling over such apparently nonreligious issues as reforming welfare, cutting taxes and reducing the federal government's authority.

"To wrap ourselves in the flag of any one particular party is very dangerous," said the Rev. Don Argue, president-elect of the National Association of Evangelicals. "And there has been quite a movement that has identified evangelicals as part of the Republicans and part of the extreme right. Although evangelicals may hold some of these same positions, they are very, very reactive to being identified with one particular party or one particular ideology."

Call it the Screwtape effect. In a tale by C.S. Lewis, a favorite writer of faithful Christians, a senior devil named Screwtape instructs his nephew on sure-fire ways to corrupt a Christian. One of the best, Screwtape advises, is to find one swept up in the political "partisan spirit" and "gradually nurse him on to the stage at which religion becomes merely part of the cause."

Conservative columnist Cal Thomas, a former leader of the Moral Majority, cited Screwtape last week at a convention of Christian activists in Florida. He told them the good works of the church "are compromised when the Gospel is politicized, when the pulpit becomes a tool of political organization." He received a standing ovation.

The evangelical world "is by no means monolithic," said Duane Litfin, president of Wheaton College. "You will find people who are clearly evangelical in their philosophy who are on the right wing or the left wing."

The term "evangelical" is often used erroneously as a synonym for conservative or fundamentalist. The label broadly refers to those who believe in a personal relationship to Christ — instead of relating through clergy or denomination — and who are committed to spreading the Gospel among nonbelievers.

Although liberal evangelicals have in the past criticized co-religionists for
excessive entanglement with Republicans, what is different now is that the critics include solidly conservative evangelicals as well.

Unlike columnist Thomas, most have kept their criticism private. Part of the reason for their ire is that they believe evangelicals have been the source of some of the most vicious and irresponsible attacks on President Clinton.

In particular, many sources said they abhorred the Rev. Jerry Falwell's decision to continue to market on his television program a set of videotapes alleging that Clinton had dealt drugs and ordered people murdered in Arkansas. Although they disagree with Clinton's policies on issues such as abortion and homosexuality, these evangelicals say he is, after all, the president and deserves respect.

They also expressed concern that by putting so much effort into lobbying and legislation, evangelical Christians appear to send the message that government -- and not the church -- can solve the nation's moral and spiritual problems.

They point to James C. Dobson, president of Focus on the Family, who recently sent a harshly worded letter to Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour warning that Republican presidential candidates not opposed to abortion are unacceptable to Focus's 2 million constituents. And the Christian Coalition, founded by television evangelist Pat Robertson, announced it would commit its 1.5 million members and $1 million to lobby in support of the GOP's "Contract With America."

Anticipating objections, several state Christian Coalition organizers said they had been prepped on how to respond to Christians who might ask: Where does the Bible say that God supports a balanced budget amendment or the unfunded mandates bill?

Noted Christianity Today, a Magazine of Evangelical Conviction: "Although religious leaders for generations have spoken in favor of bills before Congress, rarely has a religious organization been so closely identified with partisan politics and a legislative agenda as has the Christian Coalition with the new GOP leadership and its contract."

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, responded that "the Christian Coalition is not and never has claimed to be a church or a ministry. It is an explicitly grass-roots lobbying organization representing people of faith and seeking family-friendly public policy."

"I don't really view the contract as a Republican proposal" because it has won support from some Democratic legislators, Reed said. "I don't think anyone is operating under the false assumption that the church is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party, particularly when you have the Catholic bishops criticizing Republican welfare proposals, Marian Wright Edelman [of the liberal Children's Defense Fund] quoting from the Bible, and the National Council of Churches condemning the balanced budget amendment. . . . There is a diversity of religious voices out there."

The National Association of Evangelicals, representing 45 denominations with 15 million members, has in recent decades developed a reputation as a reliable
ally of the religious right. But last month at its annual convention in Louisville, an NAE committee considered a resolution designed to recast the group as more neutral and nonaligned.

The resolution said in part: "Partisan political activity is properly an individual matter, and Christian citizens are free to be as partisan as they may choose to be. For the church, however, political partisanship is not proper and poses great problems. A church should not endorse or oppose political parties or candidates, but should remain faithful to its spiritual mission."

It would have passed if it had been presented to the convention in time, president-elect Argue said, adding, "There was very strong support for it."

Among the reasons that concerns about partisan entanglements are arising now is that some white evangelical groups, such as the NAE, are making efforts to reach out to African American and Hispanic evangelicals. Mistrust is deep in part because during the civil rights movement, "a lot of the white church reacted with skepticism and removed themselves from the struggle," Argue said.

Now the Republican Party is pushing positions that many say are likely to broaden the breach between whites and minorities, such as ending affirmative action, denying aid to immigrants, cutting crime prevention programs and ending welfare for teenage mothers. Evangelicals say they are uncomfortable being associated with positions that could eventually be judged un-Christian, as was opposition to the civil rights movement.

"There is a tendency now to turn to ... selfish issues -- cutting welfare, eliminating gun control -- rather than what I would consider the moral issues," said Norman G. Wilson, director of the department of communications with the international center of The Wesleyan Church, an evangelical denomination with about 1,700 churches worldwide. "There are a lot of middle-class evangelical Christians that could get all wrapped up in getting their taxes cut and saving money, rather than the moral issues" such as abortion and homosexuality.

No one in this debate is saying that individual Christians should not be involved in local or national politics. "I'm involved in any way I can be to help minorities," said the Rt. Rev. L.H. Ford, presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ, a predominantly African American denomination with 8 million members. "What was David? He was both prophet, king and priest."

But the warnings about equating God's agenda with a party agenda are not likely to go away, said John Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

"We're going to hear the criticism more and more as we go into '96," Green said, referring to the upcoming election year, "because the real political groups among evangelicals have only had their appetites whetted. And they're going to be big players in '96, win, lose or draw."
Ellen Cooke left no doubt that she came from a monied family -- a background befitting the chief financial officer for the Episcopal Church's national headquarters in Manhattan.

Friends had heard her "Gone With the Wind" accounts of relatives hiding their jewelry in the draperies during the Civil War. Colleagues knew about her chauffeur, her antiques, her weekend flights to Virginia to her farm with the tennis court and deep-water dock. Churchgoers knew that when the New Jersey church her husband pastored lacked a coat rack or a new altar, the Cookes' largess could cover it.

So last month, people who thought they knew her were stunned to learn that the money Cooke had spent so freely was neither hers nor her family's. The hard-working woman whom colleagues thought of as "Mrs. Episcopal Church" had embezzled $2.2 million over five years while serving as the church's treasurer, at the same time she helped to sack nearly 100 staffers because of apparent "budget shortfalls." Prosecutors in the U.S. attorney's office in Newark are investigating, the Internal Revenue Service is on the case, and criminal charges are likely.

The scandal has also wrecked the career of Cooke's husband, until last month the pastor of St. John's Episcopal Church, a prominent McLean parish. The bishop of Virginia announced yesterday that Nicholas Cooke III has resigned from the priesthood.

Church and bank officials have slowly reconstructed exactly how Ellen Cooke duped them. She manipulated trust funds and trust. She exuded absolute confidence and control. She was feared and despised by co-workers who would have jumped at any opportunity to see her fired. But no one who knew Ellen Cooke knew what she had to hide.

Says Vincent Currie Jr., chairman of the church's administration and finance committee, "I'm on a long list of a hundred people who would have said, 'If you said you thought she was stealing, you'd be lying.'"

Just as no one suspected Cooke's financial dealings, few questioned the portrait she drew of herself. But the swindle appears to be Cooke's grandest deception in a lifetime built on illusion.

She had no family fortune. Ellen Fahey Gerrity was the oldest of six children.
in a Vienna, Va., household often wanting for money and affection.

She had no degree in economics from Georgetown University; she never went there. She flunked out of George Washington University after only two terms.

She handled hundreds of millions in investments for the church, but she had no background in high finance.

Finally, she had no aristocratic Episcopalian bloodline; her roots were working-class Catholic.

Mrs. Cooke

The 12-story headquarters of the Episcopal Church occupies prime real estate on Manhattan's East Side. Contradicting stereotypes of stuffy Episcopalians, it is an informal place where laypersons call priests by their first names and even the church's leading cleric — Presiding Bishop Edmond L. Browning — is referred to by many as "the PB" or just "Ed."

Ellen Cooke, however, insisted that she be addressed as "Mrs. Cooke" and signed her correspondence "Mrs. Nicholas T. Cooke III." Some co-workers assumed that Cooke, 51, was simply proud of her second husband, an affable priest marked early on as "bishop material."

She dressed primly in flowered Laura Ashley dresses and matching headbands, white stockings and a Dutch-boy bob. She ran the treasurer's office, say co-workers, like Marie Antoinette.

Initially this looked like progress. Before she arrived in 1987, department heads spent without regard for their annual allotments. Cooke made sure they stayed within their budgets. She demanded to see canceled checks or receipts even for expenditures of less than $3.

She won respect for narrowing the gap between the salaries and benefits of the mostly female lay employees and the predominantly male clergy who worked at headquarters. She computerized the accounting procedures.

Meanwhile, Cooke undermined the church's own version of separation of powers. She held not one potent position, but two: She was both executive officer for administration and finance appointed by the presiding bishop, and the treasurer of the church, elected by the General Convention of clergy and laity. Cooke persuaded the church's corporate legal counsel to combine two positions that, traditionally, had kept each other accountable. The church's laws were rewritten to accommodate her.

"It all seemed so reasonable at the time, in the interest of eliminating redundancy and overhead," said Barry Menezes, formerly the senior executive for planning and development and now a church consultant.

In a few short years, Cooke commanded sole control over nearly every function of church finance. She oversaw the investment of trust funds. She granted and withheld scholarships. She paid the heating bills.
"She probably exercised more control over the church center and beyond that into the national church than any other single person," says Pamela Chinnis, president of the church's elected House of Deputies.

"She controlled everything in this building, including the temperature we worked at," says Nan Cobbe, an editor at Episcopal Life magazine.

Program Director Diane Porter recalls being at a meeting of the National Council of Churches where a list of annual contributions to the council from each denomination was circulated. "For the Episcopal Church there was a big fat zero," said Porter. But she knew she had submitted the request for a wire transfer to Cooke six months earlier. Porter says she confronted Cooke and found the request in her briefcase.

Colleagues assumed she was simply overworked. Some hesitated to challenge her because they were dependent on her — after all, Cooke had successfully steered the Episcopal Church through years of downsizing and belt-tightening. The presiding bishop, known to champion laywomen, stood by Cooke when anyone complained, though even that relationship started to unravel at the end.

Still, everyone knew she served the church with total devotion. Many nights she was the last to leave. Sometimes her husband would come in from New Jersey for dinner with her and would wait "like a schoolboy," says Porter, occasionally until after 10.

Her spacious corner office faced Second Avenue. One door opened onto a hallway that led directly to the presiding bishop's office, giving her unparalleled access to the man and his accounts.

Cooke had attained a stature that her co-workers believed suited her origins: She talked of debutante balls, her father's prominence in publishing and her family's inclusion in the Social Register.

But to her family, Ellen Cooke's high perch in the Episcopal Church was a source of marvel.

Life at St. Luke's

John F. Gerrity disciplined his six children "with the techniques he learned from the Marine Corps," says his son Kevin, a journalist in Kansas City. His wife, Evelyn, suffered from grand mal epileptic seizures that sent her to the hospital on occasion. As the oldest of four boys and two girls, Ellen served as substitute mother.

"There was a tension in the air as if something were going to break or things were going to get out of control," Kevin Gerrity says. "We were not blessed with great coping skills. We reacted to pressure in sometimes thunderous ways."

John Gerrity had been a staff writer at The Washington Post for about a year when he and four other Post newsman enlisted in the Marines in May 1942 as combat correspondents. He was wounded in action in Guam. At home, his leg riddled with shrapnel and his foot mangled, he sometimes tried to drown the pain.
in drink. He returned to writing but didn't always have a staff job. For seven years he supported his large family by freelancing, recalls Kevin Gerrity, who says, "I grew up knowing that times were lean and we had to be cautious."

Yet John Gerrity gave his elder daughter a glimpse of high society, squiring her to cocktail parties and dinners that her mother refused to attend out of fear her husband would get sauced, the son says. Ellen "learned the proper way to mingle. She was a fast study," he says.

Ellen graduated from Georgetown Visitation School, a Catholic girls school adjacent to Georgetown University. On her resume she claims a BS in economics from Georgetown, but she never enrolled there. She attended George Washington University for two semesters but was put on academic suspension when she earned one B, one D and four F's. School records show she never re-enrolled.

Nevertheless, she managed to climb through the Episcopal Church bureaucracy, beginning with a part-time job in 1969 in the business office of Washington National Cathedral. The same year, the 26-year-old progressed to business manager at the National Cathedral School, and in the early '70s was made assistant treasurer of the Diocese of Massachusetts. She had married the Rev. W. Christopher Koch, an Episcopal priest 16 years her senior, in 1971. After more than a decade, the marriage broke up; she was left with two sons of her own and one from her husband's previous marriage.

She was 41 and still living in the Boston area when she married Nicholas Trout Cooke III, 30, a seminarian from Richmond, in 1985. He had been a practicing attorney with a University of Virginia law degree, but told friends he felt called to the priesthood. When he was made assistant rector at Christ Church in Alexandria, Ellen Cooke took the job of assistant treasurer at the Diocese of Virginia.

Within six months, she was promoted to treasurer of the national church on the recommendations of the bishops of Boston and Virginia. (In both those dioceses, her successors have searched for any clues that she misused funds, and found none.) Nicholas Cooke was made rector of St. Luke's, a landmark church with Tiffany windows in a section of Montclair, N.J., where spring brings the power-tool buzz of gardeners manicuring the lawns of palatial Tudor homes.

After first living in the large rectory adjacent to the church, the Cookes paid $ 465,000 for the historic Crane Homestead, abode of Azariah Crane, son of Montclair's first settler. It was built in 1740 and is only three blocks from the church. It is actually a compound with a four-bedroom main house, a separate three-bedroom cottage in the rear and a two-car garage, all linked by a long lawn planted with tulips and towering trees. With this property and the Virginia farm, the Cookes owed $ 6,000 in monthly mortgage payments. Yet they spared no expense renovating the Montclair house with a wraparound porch, deluxe kitchen and the finest in wallpaper and tile, according to those who know of their expenditures.

At St. Luke's the Cookes rearranged things to their liking because they could pay for the changes. When the Rev. Cooke wanted to relocate the altar among the pews to signal that the priest is one among the worshipers, he quashed any resistance by paying to build a sliding altar. In honor of a former warden, the Cookes donated an ornamental metal screen that some parishioners resented
because it blocked their view of the Tiffany windows.

Yet many parishioners adored the Cookes, and regretted only that they never seemed to set down roots in New Jersey. They frequently spent time at their riverside farm in Ottaman, Va. For years they kept their Virginia license plates -- "RITE 1" and "RITE 2." They sent the children to private schools, though Montclair's integrated public schools are a point of pride for its residents.

To her siblings, among them a carpenter and a taxi driver, Ellen Cooke appeared the family high achiever. She seemed free of financial worries and emotional demons -- one brother wandered the streets for years until he was institutionalized, and two others have wrestled with depression. Ellen's sons were bright, well-adjusted and engaging. Her salary was $125,000, her husband's was $70,000, and Kevin Gerrity figured they could afford to live so well because "along the way she had made some wise investments."

Sudden Riches

No one was more shocked and delighted than the members of St. Luke's Episcopal Church to discover that they suddenly were blessed with the funds to hire two part-time assistant rectors. William Lashbrook, the church's senior warden -- the equivalent of chairman of the board -- heard the news while standing on the steps of the church one Sunday in March last year. Ellen Cooke ceremoniously handed him a check for $24,000 and a letter from church headquarters saying that St. Luke's had been awarded a grant from the national church for "ministry in changing communities." The letter and the check were signed "Mrs. Nicholas T. Cooke III."

Sure, it was a little surprising, recalls Bruce Stransky, treasurer of St. Luke's. The church had never applied for the grant. And the Rev. Cooke hadn't mentioned it to the church's board of directors.

"At the time he [Lashbrook] thought it was 100 percent legal, and so did I," says Stransky.

They were unaware that in the previous five years while Nicholas Cooke served as rector, a windfall of $66,000 in checks from the national treasurer's office, all bearing Ellen Cooke's signature, was deposited into the Rector's Discretionary Fund controlled by her husband. Most church rectors have such funds to be used for people in need -- widows facing eviction, the unemployed who fall sick, the neighborhood homeless.

Now a committee of priests in the Diocese of Newark has been convened by the bishop there to investigate how Cooke used his discretionary fund. He freely wrote checks but did not fill out the stubs. When he left St. Luke's, $500 remained in the account.

Shell Game

When Presiding Bishop Browning fired Ellen Cooke, it was not for embezzlement. The two had clashed repeatedly over the budget in public meetings last year, and several months of mediation sessions for the staff with a trained
negotiator didn't reduce the friction. Browning allowed Cooke to resign in December 1994 after eight years of service, leaving the impression it was necessary because her husband had been transferred to St. John's Episcopal Church in McLean.

Before she left, Cooke received and cashed a check for $86,000. She told the human resources director at the church it was for back pay and vacation pay, and that she would provide documentation to authorize it. When a month later she still hadn't, the presiding bishop was informed.

Investigators from the accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand called in by the church discovered that Cooke had concocted an elaborate shell game.

Wealthy Episcopalians have left their church 955 trust funds and securities, all worth about $226 million. Only in retrospect did colleagues think it strange that Cooke knew the account numbers of many of these trusts by heart.

She regularly transferred the interest on some of the funds to the church's operating account at the First American Bank, now First Union, in Washington. The church had not always banked at First American. Cooke moved its accounts there in 1990, after she and other church officials expressed dissatisfaction with the service they received at the church's New York bank.

For Cooke, there was one other advantage: She and her husband maintained their personal accounts there.

From the church's operating account, Cooke would periodically write checks made out to First American Bank to be transferred to another account there. On the surface this too appeared entirely innocent, "since it was a normal and appropriate practice to transfer funds between the various church accounts," as the presiding bishop said in a statement last month.

But most of these checks were deposited into Cooke's personal account.

Other times the deposits had the account number of the presiding bishop's discretionary fund, a unique pocket in the elaborate garment of church assets. Discretionary funds are considered the assets of the presiding bishop and so went unaudited by the church's outside accountants. Cooke then wrote more checks from the discretionary fund and deposited these into her own account.

Through these conduits, Cooke diverted $1.5 million over five years. The presiding bishop himself was unaware Cooke was plundering his account because, he said in his statement, she "prevented others from having access to the presiding bishop's discretionary account ledgers." He refused a request for an interview.

She also wrote about $225,000 in unauthorized checks to third parties -- including her sons' private schools and her husband's church. She used her corporate credit card and other corporate accounts for 99 plane trips that she and her husband took to Richmond, running up about $325,000 in personal expenses. In this way she paid for fancy meals, hotel rooms, catering services, flowers and a $16,000 Tiffany necklace. And she wrote herself small checks that
eventually added up to $28,000.

To volunteers serving on two committees that were supposed to oversee the national church's finances, Cooke appeared, if anything, overly conscientious. They would arrive for their meetings and Cooke would provide each member with a six-inch stack of reports, ledgers and figures.

"She drowned us in paper," said Marjorie Christie, a member of the administration and finance committee. In oral reports, Cooke would drone on in impenetrable accounting jargon until the members were too confused or impatient to ask questions.

"Her style made you think, well, I just don't understand," Christie said.

Admits committee Chairman Vincent Currie Jr.: "She didn't have to manipulate the books. There wasn't anybody checking behind her."

The Final Chapter

The Cookes' Montclair house now has a yellow sign in front that says "Historic Home for Sale." It's on the market for $695,000, reduced from $725,000. The Virginia farm is for sale for $850,000.

The church owns the properties now because the Cookes cooperated in turning them over. Church lawyers suspect the Cookes may have assets that they haven't revealed and have hired the corporate sleuths from Kroll Associates to track them down. They are still searching for the Tiffany necklace.

The Cookes decline interviews. Ellen Cooke has spoken only once, through an open letter to the church's executive council, released to the public through her attorneys.

"I am one of a small percentage of the population who by reason of personality are simply unable to stop in the face of enormous pressures and stress," she said. The psychiatrist she began seeing in February "believes that my subsequent actions, blocked from memory during this time, were a cry for help which I fully expected to be discovered and questioned, and which escalated as I tried to escape from a situation which had become intolerable."

She says little more of her psychological state except to mention "the pain, abuse and powerlessness I have felt during the years I worked as a lay woman on a senior level at the church headquarters." This claim provoked outrage from the Episcopal Women's Caucus and many of her co-workers long frustrated by Cooke's inordinate power.

To most she appeared a model mother and professional. A few observed things that appear to them in retrospect like telltale signs: Cooke's frequent absences from work and her feeble excuses; her failing to appear at dinners and social events she said she would attend; her intense need to control.

Her father died of cancer on May 31 at age 81. Ellen and Nicholas Cooke arrived at his bedside hours before he died. In one of his last duties as a
pastor, Nicholas Cooke brought prayer books and held a bedside service for the dying man.

The couple are being permitted to live in the rectory at St. John's for part of the summer, but Nicholas Cooke is looking for work in a Richmond law firm or the civil service. Privately, to the senior warden of St. John's, Nicholas Cooke has insisted he didn't know about his wife's embezzlement.

From Episcopalians nationwide, there are calls for the presiding bishop to resign. Barbara Bunten, a former file clerk with no college degree whom Cooke appointed church controller, was fired June 5 and escorted from the building. The treasurer who succeeded Cooke, Donald Burchell, whom Cooke hired from First American Bank, has resigned because of stress. Browning has appointed a chief operating officer to handle day-to-day church administration.

Faced with the hard example of betrayal by a trusted insider, many dioceses and parishes are reviewing their own accounting procedures. In January, the church published a revised 185-page Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs detailing precise procedures for auditing records and building internal controls. There is a whole chapter on safe stewardship of clergy discretionary funds.

"Dear Friends," says the introductory letter in the manual. "The Church has entrusted us with funds placed in its hands for mission and ministry. This trust is deserving of our nurturing and careful attention to detail, and demanding of our accountability."

The letter is signed "Mrs. Nicholas T. Cooke III."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
When her 3-year-old son Graham came to her recently and asked, "Where is God?" Alexandra Roth took a deep breath.

Like many Americans, Roth has never found a home in any church or faith. A 38-year-old social worker who runs a home day-care program in Falls Church, she considers herself an atheist, but she wants her son to have a sense of reverence and gratitude "and the idea of God is one pathway to that," she says.

So she told Graham that God is everywhere, but that only piqued his curiosity. "Is God in my body?" he asked. "Is God mixed in with my lunch?"

"They're hard questions to answer," Roth said later, "especially if you don't have a catechism to refer to."

For nonbelievers and for those struggling to determine their faith, having children often becomes a painful moment of truth and discovery. It challenges them to define their beliefs about religion and God and a whole universe of existential questions they could feel comfortably ambivalent about before.

In an age of anxiety over a perceived lack of values, many look to religion to shore up crumbling moral bulwarks. Secular parents say they are also concerned about instilling values, but they improvise as they go, drawing on a myriad of sources — literary, spiritual and above all, perhaps, their own experiences -- to teach virtue to their children.

And while they often hear that this is a "secular nation," some nonreligious parents say they feel a strong social stigma for their lack of belief. "People think you're an atheist, or even a communist, and nobody wants to be known that way in a mostly Christian society," said Connie Greer, 26, a legal secretary in Springfield, and mother of one son.

But nonbelievers are far from alone. In their generation of baby boomers, two-thirds of those who grew up with a religious affiliation left it behind, usually in their late teens or early twenties. Of those, only 25 percent return, according to a 1988 study by religion scholar Wade Clark Roof at the University of California-Santa Barbara. The largest segment of baby boomers -- 42 percent -- are those Roof classifies as "dropouts."

Among Americans of all ages, about one in 11 said they have "no religion," according to the National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI) conducted by scholars at the City University of New York, which polled 113,000 Americans
in 1990. Even more have uncertain or unconventional beliefs and are unaffiliated with any organized religion. One-third of all Americans do not belong to a church or a synagogue, according to a Gallup Poll last December. Of those who do belong, 31 percent told Gallup they seldom attend, and 11 percent said they never do.

Interviews with more than two dozen families in the Washington region found those who are not religious grappling with colossal questions: Will lack of religion deprive my children of culture, tradition or a sense of security? How do I answer their questions about good and evil, life and death, when no religion has offered satisfactory answers for me? Can I provide them with a sense of community without belonging to a religious congregation?

Few of these secular families are totally without religion and, as Roof noted, many think more about spiritual matters than some loyal churchgoers. Like Alexandra Roth, many say they believe in God or some form of higher power and express a deep interest in or familiarity with religion.

The difference between secular people and others is that secular people do not accept the tenets of any one faith. They either believe that all religions have some validity, and therefore no single one can be divine truth; or that religions are basically arbitrary human constructs. Many pious people also live with doubts about their own faith's teachings. But for those who are not religious, the doubts are a chasm they cannot cross.

"If I could ever believe the dogma, I would be a very happy Catholic," said Roth, who is of mixed Christian and Jewish heritage. "I like the stained glass and the bells and the smells, and I love the stories. But it's those little niggling points — like the divinity of Christ — that get in the way. I just don't believe."

In the yard of Robert and Carol Schwartz's home in Northwest Washington is a dogwood tree planted on the spot where the ashes of their children's grandfather were buried eight years ago. When he died, Joanna was 5 and Sarah was 8, and the Schwartzes were suddenly forced to explain what had happened. They did not mention heaven.

"When someone dies," Joanna recalls her father told her, "they go into the ground and they fertilize the plants, and animals eat the plants, and people eat the plants and people eat the animals. That way people's spirits get transmitted," said Joanna, now 13 and an eighth-grader at Deal Junior High. "It makes sense to me."

Joanna's father was only passing on what his own mother had told him. Robert Schwartz, a 53-year-old architect, said he was brought up by parents "not at all proud" of their Jewish heritage and reluctant to appear too Jewish in their predominantly Catholic neighborhood. He married Carol, 52, a homemaker and part-time school administrator, whose parents had largely rejected Catholicism.

Psychologist of religion Bernard Spilka says religious faith helps children "make sense of the world," especially during crises like the death of someone close. Strong faith can also enhance their self-esteem and sense of control in life, says Spilka, a professor at the University of Denver. Children, like
adults, have a natural desire to know. to drive away ambiguity.

People can tolerate uncertainty, he says, "but it takes a pretty strong individual to say there isn't any kind of a master explanation that pulls it all together."

Robert and Carol Schwartz say that above all they want to raise their daughters to be tolerant and appreciative of many religions. At bedtime when they were small, their father read to Joanna and Sarah about Taoism, Confucianism and Zoroastrianism. Twice during the Jewish High Holidays he took them to services to help them understand their Jewish heritage.

But Robert Schwartz admits: "Judaism is no more emotional for me than other religions, so it's virtually impossible for me to make it an emotional thing for them. It's an intellectual thing. . . . All these religions are interesting and valid. You happen to be born into one of them."

The parents told their daughters they were free to choose any religion or none at all. Joanna says the result was that "everything runs together, all the religions, so I can't tell which one I want to be."

About five years ago, the family tried attending a Unitarian church, seeking a sense of community. "I was thinking it would be good for the [children] to belong to a Sunday school group, to give them some sort of outlet socially," Carol Schwartz recalled. But the class for Sarah's age group was full, and Joanna showed no interest in the Bible study class geared for her grade. The family didn't pursue it and has not returned since.

Yet when Carol Schwartz was diagnosed with cancer two years ago, the Schawrtzes discovered they already had the kind of supportive community that many people find only through religious affiliation. Friends and neighbors brought hot meals for the family every night for three months.

The daughters say their family had always been close, but their mother's illness bound them together even more tightly. If they were believers, they might have taken comfort that God was watching over their family, or that if their mother died, heaven awaited her. Instead they had the comfort of a father who was always there to cry with them.

"Stuff like that taught me values," Sarah said, "and that doesn't have anything to do with religion."

Carol Schwartz pulled through. Her experience in her support group for cancer survivors has left her acutely aware that other people "were really sustained by [belief in heaven] in a way I wasn't. But that belief just doesn't come from nowhere."

Her daughters have very different feelings about growing up without a faith. Joanna, now 13, says she hasn't missed anything because her life is full with saxophone lessons and soccer games. When she grows up she doubts that she will be religiously observant because "I want to be freer and do what I want."

But Sarah, now 16, says "I feel like I missed something." She envies her
friends who go on retreats with their Catholic church, who have "another part of life and people to support you" outside of school.

"When I get married," Sarah said, "if my husband is Jewish or if he's Christian, I'll convert to that religion. Because I do want my kids to have religion."

Children are "natural mystics" and very responsive to religious ritual -- even simple ones like lighting candles, says Linda Kavelin Popov, a psychiatric social worker and author of "The Virtues Project," a values education program used in schools and religious centers of many faiths.

"I think they have less of a foundation to stand on if they don't believe there is some power that's beyond them to help them," Popov said. "When they don't have something that is transcendent or spiritual, they replace it with what some religions call a 'false God' -- having power over people, or being first."

More important than faith is for parents to clarify their own values and beliefs and communicate them to their children, Popov said. "If the parent believes in anything strongly -- it could be civil rights -- you have the same impact on the child. I think that children crave idealism. So if the parents are idealistic or spiritual in a really living way, that has a great effect on a child's need for a sense of purpose."

Mixed messages from parents about religion can undermine belief. Connie Greer's parents were Jehovah's Witnesses, and so were supposed to shun smoking, drinking, and celebrating birthdays and many holidays. But Greer remembers the frantic moments before Bible study meetings when they sprayed the house with air freshener to mask the stench of cigarettes. When her parents dropped out of the faith, it left Greer, then 12, "a little jaded about religion." she says.

Today she believes religion is fine, but best not forced on people. In choosing a day-care center for her son Kenny, 2, she rejected one where children said the Lord's Prayer every day. She wants him to know that professing religion does not guarantee virtue. "I do see a lot of hypocritical people . . . who go to church every Sunday and have affairs with their secretaries," she says.

Like many of the secular parents interviewed for this report, Alexandra Roth wants most to cultivate in her son Graham an ability to think independently. Her perspective -- which many religious people would reject -- is that most religions demand absolute belief in an absolute truth. And she cannot accept that.

"The idea that you would be going around for example as a Christian and thinking all the Hindus will burn in hell, that a gazillion Muslims on their prayer rugs are accomplishing nothing -- that is disgusting to me," Roth said.

Graham came to her at lunchtime one day recently and asked her to compare God and Superman. "Is God invisible?" the 3-year-old asked. "Is Superman invisible?"

In the interfaith household that Roth grew up in, religion was never talked about. She wants her home to be different, even though she finds more for her
soul in Jung than in Jesus. And even though she doesn't know how to answer
Graham's questions about God, she finds his inquisitiveness a healthy start on
a journey they will have to make together.
As a child growing up in Milwaukee, Pam Parr spent Sunday mornings with her family in a big Catholic cathedral. She recalls feeling alienated by the Latin Mass, frightened and fascinated by the swinging incense burner.

Parr stopped going to church in her late teens, to her mother's chagrin. She didn't return until she became a mother herself and realized that "I was responsible" for her son Adam's life and his soul. She found a small, warm Catholic church to have him baptized in, and now that Adam is 12, Parr lures him and his younger brother and sister to Sunday services with promises of Slurpees afterward.

"Having a faith gives you comfort in knowing there is something else in control, and there are answers to my questions, and there is a reason," said Parr, 40, of Montgomery Village, who runs a consignment store.

Having children is the strongest single force pulling the baby boom generation back to worship. More than two in every three boomers raised in a religious tradition stopped going to church or synagogue during their teens or early twenties, according to a study by Wade Clark Roof, religion professor at the University of California-Santa Barbara. Of those, one in four returns, most because they now have children of their own.

"Parents take on some sense of responsibility for their children, and that includes questions of religious and moral training," Roof said. "That leads them to shop around, inquire, and explore, at least for the children, if not for themselves."

A 1988 study of Americans age 18 and older by the Princeton Religion Research Center found that 41 percent of Protestants, 35 percent of Catholics, and 45 percent of those classified as "other" stopped attending church or synagogue for two or more years. Of those who dropped out, 55 percent of Protestants returned to church, 33 percent of Catholics, and 31 percent of other faiths.

They may be looking for the values and comfort that faith can provide, or to pass on the traditions they knew as children. They may be seeking a sense of community. They may feel inadequate to answer the stunningly existential questions that children typically ask. They may even hope that a strong religious upbringing will "vaccinate" their children against attraction to a different faith or a fringe cult later in life.
Previous generations have done the same, Roof said. But this generation appears to return to church during child-rearing years only to drop out again as their children age. "I see a thin level of commitment," Roof said. "They'd like their children to have some exposure but they're not sure how serious they are about making lifelong attachments."

The Rev. James R. Adams is accustomed to seeing new parents arrive at his church asking about having their babies baptized. "Some come frankly because their parents are leaning on them," said Adams, rector at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill and author of the book, "So You Think You're Not Religious?" "Some come for reasons they cannot articulate, but I think the birth of a child puts them in touch with the mystery of life and death."

There are those who want their children baptized "just in case," Adams said. "Some people call it hell insurance." Some of those people he may never see again.

To previous generations, religious upbringing was not a matter of choice. If your parents were Methodist you were raised a Methodist, you married a Methodist in a Methodist church and you raised your children as Methodists. But many baby boomers -- those born between 1946 and 1962 -- treat religion like college elective courses: Their tastes are eclectic, they're not sure what they're looking for, they clarify their interests as they grow, and they don't always show up.

Interviews with parents in the Washington area indicate they left behind religion as teens or young adults because they were bored or disillusioned or found it irrelevant to their lives. Returning is an often indirect journey with surprising discoveries.

Amy Angel grew up in a Protestant, rather secular household, and by age 18 was "turned off" to religion because of "the idea that there is one way and no other way."

Angel is 35 now, a teacher of childbirth classes. She dabbled in New Age and alternative spirituality. She and her husband Jim did a lot of "church shopping," and she found herself drawn to the Quaker tradition.

But six months into her first pregnancy, Angel and her husband began attending Holy Trinity, a Catholic church in Georgetown. She finds the church broad enough to tolerate her irreverent disposition, and enjoys being part of a community of believers.

"We're at the most liberal edge of the church," Angel says. "If I ever became a Catholic, it would be the kind the pope wants to get rid of."

Some modern parents are willing to join a church or a synagogue even if they cannot accept the faith's beliefs in entirety. The Rev. Adams sees this as hopeful because for years "churches put out a signal that to be acceptable, people have to be believers . . . [But] you can have a religious affiliation with an emphasis on behavior as opposed to believing."

In contrast, Martha Fay, author of "Children and Religion," said she sees in
those parents a hint of hypocrisy. Some are so "in the grip of guilt, anxious about doing the right thing" that they send their children to Sunday school in a church where the parents can't stomach the pastor or the liturgy. "It's almost like an experiment, like giving the kid music lessons." Fay said.

Sylvia Viteri, 27, a bartender in Lorton, takes her 18-month old daughter Alexis with her to St. Mary's Church every week, kneels and lights a candle to pray for her safety. For years she was estranged from the Catholic church, but when she was six months pregnant with Alexis, "I became truly scared . . . that anything would happen to her. I prayed to God that she would be okay."

Viteri said that she hopes that her daughter will stay a Catholic, but not only because her mother wants her to. Viteri wants her daughter to know that "God is watching . . . so she can't just do whatever she wants."
At mealtime each day, the men studying for the priesthood at St. Joseph's Seminary here walk down a long hallway lined with 98 class photographs of the seminarians who have been ordained in the years before them.

In these group portraits it is possible to trace the fate of Roman Catholic priesthood: Photographs taken in the 1930s and 1940s show large, beaming groups of as many as 40 or 50 young men ordained into the priesthood each year. By 1986, the class had shrunk to six, and when this year's class lines up for its photograph, there are likely to be only 10 proud men in collars.

The Roman Catholic Church is confronting a severe shortage of diocesan priests as it moves into its third millennium, prompting growing numbers of Catholics to question the church's ban on the ordination of women and married men, and the tradition of mandatory priestly celibacy. Meanwhile, the church is weathering a radical transformation as laymen and laywomen take on responsibilities once shouldered solely by priests. The result, some scholars say, is the most dramatic change in the ministry since the Reformation.

"The demographics are really cataclysmic for the church," said Richard A. Schoenner, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin and the author of "Full Pews and Empty Altars." "The church cannot replenish its celibate male clergy at the rate required to serve a growing Catholic population."

When Pope John Paul II visits this seminary on his trip to the United States this week, he is expected to deliver a major speech about vocations to the priesthood. Ten percent of American parishes are without resident pastors. By 2005, there is expected to be only one pastor for every 2,200 parishioners, compared with one for every 1,100 in 1975, according to a study by Schoenner. Projections show that while the number of diocesan priests will drop by 40 percent between 1966 and 2005, the number of Catholics will rise by 65 percent.

Although the priest shortage confronts the church worldwide, the pope has held firm against ordaining women and married men. Instead, he has called for increasing priestly vocations through prayer and stronger recruiting efforts.

Yet while the pope has resisted radical calls for change, his church is already in the process of a deep transformation. In parishes where there is no
resident pastor -- at last count, 2,039 in the United States -- laymen and laywomen, along with nuns and deacons, are fulfilling many of the roles previously performed by priests. They are visiting the sick, counseling the troubled, giving sermons and overseeing parish finances.

More than 300 parishes around the country -- most of them in rural or inner-city areas -- are being wholly run by "pastoral coordinators." Most are nuns, but some are laymen or laywomen with spouses and families of their own. While they cannot say Mass, in many dioceses they are permitted to lead "word and communion services" that feature a scripture reading and homily.

The lay involvement "is a radical transformation of the structure of the church," said sociologist Schoenner, "in theology, in the worship service, in the emphasis of the liturgy. It's a radical change in who has power and authority in the church. Women, married people, non-ordained people -- they're running the parishes. That's radical."

Said Ruth Wallace, a sociologist at George Washington University, "They're not standing on a pedestal and looking down at the parishioners. They're on the same level as the parishioners."

In doing research for her book "They Call Her Pastor," Wallace found that the nuns and laywomen "empowered their parishioners," she said. "Those women tended not only to just form committees, but to give them power in the parish. . . . The typical priest calls all the shots and he's like a one-man band. But Catholic laity are no longer uneducated. They have a lot of resources and a lot of talents, and these women called out the talents."

The explosion of lay participation is so great that there are now more lay people enrolled in degree-granting Catholic lay ministry programs (3,500) than there are priest candidates enrolled in theological training (3,328). And laywomen in these programs outnumber men 2 to 1, according to Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

Priests are required, however, to perform the rites that are the spiritual core of Catholicism -- celebrating the Eucharist that transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, absolving sin, anointing the sick and dying. Many of the pastor-less parishes are served by circuit-riding priests -- some who are expected to visit as many as three parishes each Sunday.

While many Catholics say the church has been revitalized with the increasing participation of lay people, there is also a wave of uneasiness. Traditionally the parish priest was leader in every respect -- he administered the budget and the sacraments alike, and knew the members of his flock and their needs. He symbolized each parishioner's connection to the bishop, the pope and the entire Catholic Church.

The pastoral coordinators, said the Rev. Philip J. Murnion, director of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York, "are many of them very wonderful people, very caring and loving and attentive to people's needs. But they don't quite symbolize that this community is connected to the whole larger church, through the bishop, and to the mysterious sacred quality that comes with the sacraments."
"The hierarchy of control," said Schoenner, "is gradually being handed to the lay people. And that's congregationalism in the good Protestant tradition. . . . The Catholic Church is becoming a Protestant church."

Many of the bedrooms upstairs in the massive stone central building on the St. Joseph's Seminary campus are now empty for lack of students. This seminary that once had an enrollment of 300 students -- many the sons of New York's immigrant Catholics -- now has 70. There is nearly one faculty member for every two students.

Beyond some green lawns and manicured hedges, another seminary building has been turned over to a religious studies program offering master's degrees to lay people; it has an enrollment of 130.

The seminary's director of vocations, the Rev. Robert McKuen, who is in charge of recruiting candidates for the priesthood, said that "fear of commitment" is the biggest obstacle to men taking the vows. Today's ordination candidates are on average six years older than those of 30 years ago, and many have careers and independent lifestyles. Many are wary of making a permanent commitment to a life of prayer, service, discipline and celibacy, he said.

Catholic families once took pride in sending a son to the seminary, but McKuen said that his recruiting experience has taught him that those days are gone. Parents may not approve for many reasons, McKuen theorizes -- either because of contemporary notions that "success" means financial achievement or a career as a surgeon, or because of the taint left by the recent revelations of pedophilia and sexual abuse by priests.

"Literally I have dealt with men who have asked me not to contact them at home because they're afraid of their parents finding out," McKuen said.

Thomas Byrnes and John Higgins, young seminarians at St. Joseph's, followed the traditional progression toward the priesthood that has prevailed in this country for the last century. Both served as altar boys, were raised in observant Catholic families, and at an early age regarded the priests they knew as role models.

From the age of 5, Higgins revered his uncle, a Franciscan and a "holy man," he said, "with this incredible peace about him that was contagious and I wanted to imitate." Now 27, Higgins was ordained a deacon last weekend, and will become a priest next year. Among the members of his ordination class are a former police officer, a mechanical engineer and two accountants.

Byrnes, a lanky 25-year-old, pictured himself as a physics teacher before he decided to enter the priesthood. He felt called, he said, after volunteering in prisons and nursing homes, playing guitar at Masses, and visiting children in an AIDS hospice. Part of the attraction to the priesthood was his awareness of how badly his church needed him.

"There's a sense of being a soldier," Byrnes said in an interview at the seminary. "You're called. There's a duty that needs to be done. One priest told us, this is an age when we need more saints."

In their seminary classes they have discussed the theological and
philosophical rationale for priestly celibacy and have been taught to regard it as both a "sacrifice" and a "gift" from God. Though he is giving up marriage and family, Byrnes said that in "marrying" Jesus and the church, he is inheriting "a much larger family."

"It's a sacrifice," agreed Higgins, "for a normal healthy male to give up the good of having a family. But I'm willing to give up the good in this world for the good in the next world."

These seminarians say they are fully in favor of mandatory celibacy for priests, and oppose the ordination of women. Though many older priests today will privately admit support for married priests and women's ordination, polls show that the newer generation of seminarians is theologically more conservative and likely to agree with Pope John Paul II on these matters.

The surest solution to the crisis would be to lift the celibacy requirement, say Catholic scholars such as Dean Hoge, a sociologist at the Catholic University of America in Washington.

"If celibacy were optional you'd have roughly a fourfold increase in seminarians, and the priest shortage would be over," said Hoge, who conducted a major study of Catholic undergraduates on the topic. "How can you explain the fact that Protestant seminaries are full and the Catholic seminaries are empty?"

Even taking into account the large numbers of women enrolled in Protestant seminaries doesn't explain the discrepancy, Hoge said.

In the near future, bishops in this country will continue filling their altars in several cautious but controversial ways. They are importing priests from places such as Africa and the Philippines to serve as temporary assistant pastors. They are allowing married Episcopal priests disillusioned with their own church to lead Catholic parishes. In some dioceses, such as San Francisco, Baltimore and Boston, bishops are simply closing or consolidating parishes, often to the chagrin of parishioners heartsick to see their spiritual homes shuttered.

And, of course, more and more bishops are allowing lay people to step into leadership positions. Seventy-nine of the country's 174 dioceses have now appointed non-priests to head parishes, said Wallace, the George Washington University sociologist.

Some Catholic scholars are predicting that the more that parishioners witness married men and women effectively running their parishes, the more the Vatican will be forced to reevaluate its insistence on an all-male celibate clergy.

"This papacy is more or less the last hurrah for an outmoded, outdated form of Catholicism," said sociologist Schoenner. "The political processes are so powerful that it would take a very repressive regime to keep this from happening." He predicts that the current generation of churchgoers will see married clergy, and within a few generations the church will allow the ordination of women.
"The church has to ask itself," said the Rev. Thomas Sweetser, co-director of the Parish Evaluation Project in Des Plaines, Ill. "What's more important -- celibacy, or no Eucharist?"
Ellen Cooke left no doubt that she came from a monied family -- a background befitting the chief financial officer for the Episcopal Church's national headquarters in Manhattan.

Friends had heard her "Gone With the Wind" accounts of relatives hiding their jewelry in the draperies during the Civil War. Colleagues knew about her chauffeur, her antiques, her weekend flights to Virginia to her farm with the tennis court and deep-water dock. Churchgoers knew that when the New Jersey church her husband pastored lacked a coat rack or a new altar, the Cookes' largess could cover it.

So last month, people who thought they knew her were stunned to learn that the money Cooke had spent so freely was neither hers nor her family's. The hard-working woman whom colleagues thought of as "Mrs. Episcopal Church" had embezzled $2.2 million over five years while serving as the church's treasurer, at the same time she helped to sack nearly 100 staffers because of apparent "budget shortfalls." Prosecutors in the U.S. attorney's office in Newark are investigating, the Internal Revenue Service is on the case, and criminal charges are likely.

The scandal has also wrecked the career of Cooke's husband, until last month the pastor of St. John's Episcopal Church, a prominent McLean parish. The bishop of Virginia announced yesterday that Nicholas Cooke III has resigned from the priesthood.

Church and bank officials have slowly reconstructed exactly how Ellen Cooke duped them. She manipulated trust funds and trust. She exuded absolute confidence and control. She was feared and despised by co-workers who would have jumped at any opportunity to see her fired. But no one who knew Ellen Cooke knew what she had to hide.

Says Vincent Currie Jr., chairman of the church's administration and finance committee, "I'm on a long list of a hundred people who would have said, 'If you said you thought she was stealing, you'd be lying.'"

Just as no one suspected Cooke's financial dealings, few questioned the portrait she drew of herself. But the swindle appears to be Cooke's grandest deception in a lifetime built on illusion.

She had no family fortune. Ellen Fahey Gerrity was the oldest of six children.
in a Vienna, Va., household often wanting for money and affection.

She had no degree in economics from Georgetown University; she never went there. She flunked out of George Washington University after only two terms.

She handled hundreds of millions in investments for the church, but she had no background in high finance.

Finally, she had no aristocratic Episcopalian bloodline; her roots were working-class Catholic.

Mrs. Cooke

The 12-story headquarters of the Episcopal Church occupies prime real estate on Manhattan's East Side. Contradicting stereotypes of stuffy Episcopalians, it is an informal place where laypersons call priests by their first names and even the church's leading cleric -- Presiding Bishop Edmond L. Browning -- is referred to by many as "the PB" or just "Ed."

Ellen Cooke, however, insisted that she be addressed as "Mrs. Cooke" and signed her correspondence "Mrs. Nicholas T. Cooke III." Some co-workers assumed that Cooke, 51, was simply proud of her second husband, an affable priest marked early on as "bishop material."

She dressed primly in flowered Laura Ashley dresses and matching headbands, white stockings and a Dutch-boy bob. She ran the treasurer's office, say co-workers, like Marie Antoinette.

Initially this looked like progress. Before she arrived in 1987, department heads spent without regard for their annual allotments. Cooke made sure they stayed within their budgets. She demanded to see canceled checks or receipts even for expenditures of less than $3.

She won respect for narrowing the gap between the salaries and benefits of the mostly female lay employees and the predominantly male clergy who worked at headquarters. She computerized the accounting procedures.

Meanwhile, Cooke undermined the church's own version of separation of powers. She held not one potent position, but two: She was both executive officer for administration and finance appointed by the presiding bishop, and the treasurer of the church, elected by the General Convention of clergy and laity. Cooke persuaded the church's corporate legal counsel to combine two positions that, traditionally, had kept each other accountable. The church's laws were rewritten to accommodate her.

"It all seemed so reasonable at the time, in the interest of eliminating redundancy and overhead," said Barry Menuez, formerly the senior executive for planning and development and now a church consultant.

In a few short years, Cooke commanded sole control over nearly every function of church finance. She oversaw the investment of trust funds. She granted and withheld scholarships. She paid the heating bills.
"She probably exercised more control over the church center and beyond that into the national church than any other single person," says Pamela Chinnis, president of the church's elected House of Deputies.

"She controlled everything in this building, including the temperature we worked at," says Nan Cobbey, an editor at Episcopal Life magazine.

Program Director Diane Porter recalls being at a meeting of the National Council of Churches where a list of annual contributions to the council from each denomination was circulated. "For the Episcopal Church there was a big fat zero," said Porter. But she knew she had submitted the request for a wire transfer to Cooke six months earlier. Porter says she confronted Cooke and found the request in her briefcase.

Colleagues assumed she was simply overworked. Some hesitated to challenge her because they were dependent on her — after all, Cooke had successfully steered the Episcopal Church through years of downsizing and belt-tightening. The presiding bishop, known to champion laywomen, stood by Cooke when anyone complained, though even that relationship started to unravel at the end.

Still, everyone knew she served the church with total devotion. Many nights she was the last to leave. Sometimes her husband would come in from New Jersey for dinner with her and would wait "like a schoolboy," says Porter, occasionally until after 10.

Her spacious corner office faced Second Avenue. One door opened onto a hallway that led directly to the presiding bishop's office, giving her unparalleled access to the man and his accounts.

Cooke had attained a stature that her co-workers believed suited her origins: She talked of debutante balls, her father's prominence in publishing and her family's inclusion in the Social Register.

But to her family, Ellen Cooke's high perch in the Episcopal Church was a source of marvel.

Life at St. Luke's

John F. Gerrity disciplined his six children "with the techniques he learned from the Marine Corps," says his son Kevin, a journalist in Kansas City. His wife, Evelyn, suffered from grand mal epileptic seizures that sent her to the hospital on occasion. As the oldest of four boys and two girls, Ellen served as substitute mother.

"There was a tension in the air as if something were going to break or things were going to get out of control," Kevin Gerrity says. "We were not blessed with great coping skills. We reacted to pressure in sometimes thunderous ways."

John Gerrity had been a staff writer at The Washington Post for about a year when he and four other Post newsmen enlisted in the Marines in May 1942 as combat correspondents. He was wounded in action in Guam. At home, his leg riddled with shrapnel and his foot mangled, he sometimes tried to drown the pain
in drink. He returned to writing but didn't always have a staff job. For seven years he supported his large family by freelancing, recalls Kevin Gerrity, who says, "I grew up knowing that times were lean and we had to be cautious."

Yet John Gerrity gave his elder daughter a glimpse of high society, siring her to cocktail parties and dinners that her mother refused to attend out of fear her husband would get sauced, the son says. Ellen "learned the proper way to mingle. She was a fast study," he says.

Ellen graduated from Georgetown Visitation School, a Catholic girls school adjacent to Georgetown University. On her resume she claims a BS in economics from Georgetown, but she never enrolled there. She attended George Washington University for two semesters but was put on academic suspension when she earned one B, one D and four Fs. School records show she never re-enrolled.

Nevertheless, she managed to climb through the Episcopal Church bureaucracy, beginning with a part-time job in 1969 in the business office of Washington Natinal Cathedral. The same year, the 26-year-old progressed to business manager at the National Cathedral School, and in the early '70s was made assistant treasurer of the Diocese of Massachusetts. She had married the Rev. W. Christopher Koch, an Episcopal priest 16 years her senior, in 1971. After more than a decade, the marriage broke up; she was left with two sons of her own and one from her husband's previous marriage.

She was 41 and still living in the Boston area when she married Nicholas Trout Cooke III, 30, a seminarian from Richmond, in 1985. He had been a practicing attorney with a University of Virginia law degree, but told friends he felt called to the priesthood. When he was made assistant rector at Christ Church in Alexandria, Ellen Cooke took the job of assistant treasurer at the Diocese of Virginia.

Within six months, she was promoted to treasurer of the national church on the recommendations of the bishops of Boston and Virginia. (In both those dioceses, her successors have searched for any clues that she misused funds, and found none.) Nicholas Cooke was made rector of St. Luke's, a landmark church with Tiffany windows in a section of Montclair, N.J., where spring brings the power-tool buzz of gardeners manicuring the lawns of palatial Tudor homes.

After first living in the large rectory adjacent to the church, the Cookes paid $465,000 for the historic Crane Homestead, abode of Azariah Crane, son of Montclair's first settler. It was built in 1740 and is only three blocks from the church. It is actually a compound with a four-bedroom main house, a separate three-bedroom cottage in the rear and a two-car garage, all linked by a long lawn planted with tulips and towering trees. With this property and the Virginia farm, the Cookes owed $6,000 in monthly mortgage payments. Yet they spared no expense renovating the Montclair house with a wraparound porch, deluxe kitchen and the finest in wallpaper and tile, according to those who know of their expenditures.

At St. Luke's the Cookes rearranged things to their liking because they could pay for the changes. When the Rev. Cooke wanted to relocate the altar among the pews to signal that the priest is one among the worshipers, he quashed any resistance by paying to build a sliding altar. In honor of a former warden, the Cookes donated an ornamental metal screen that some parishioners resented
because it blocked their view of the Tiffany windows.

Yet many parishioners adored the Cookes, and regretted only that they never seemed to set down roots in New Jersey. They frequently spent time at their riverside farm in Ottaman, Va. For years they kept their Virginia license plates -- "RITE 1" and "RITE 2." They sent the children to private schools, though Montclair's integrated public schools are a point of pride for its residents.

To her siblings, among them a carpenter and a taxi driver, Ellen Cooke appeared the family high achiever. She seemed free of financial worries and emotional demons -- one brother wandered the streets for years until he was institutionalized, and two others have wrestled with depression. Ellen's sons were bright, well-adjusted and engaging. Her salary was $125,000, her husband's was $70,000, and Kevin Gerrity figured they could afford to live so well because "along the way she had made some wise investments."

Sudden Riches

No one was more shocked and delighted than the members of St. Luke's Episcopal Church to discover that they suddenly were blessed with the funds to hire two part-time assistant rectors. William Lashbrook, the church's senior warden -- the equivalent of chairman of the board -- heard the news while standing on the steps of the church one Sunday in March last year. Ellen Cooke ceremoniously handed him a check for $24,000 and a letter from church headquarters saying that St. Luke's had been awarded a grant from the national church for "ministry in changing communities." The letter and the check were signed "Mrs. Nicholas T. Cooke III."

"Sure, it was a little surprising, recalls Bruce Transky, treasurer of St. Luke's. The church had never applied for the grant. And the Rev. Cooke hadn't mentioned it to the church's board of directors.

"At the time he [Lashbrook] thought it was 100 percent legal, and so did I," says Transky.

They were unaware that in the previous five years while Nicholas Cooke served as rector, a windfall of $66,000 in checks from the national treasurer's office, all bearing Ellen Cooke's signature, was deposited into the Rector's Discretionary Fund controlled by her husband. Most church rectors have such funds to be used for people in need -- widows facing eviction, the unemployed who fall sick, the neighborhood homeless.

Now a committee of priests in the Diocese of Newark has been convened by the bishop there to investigate how Cooke used his discretionary fund. He freely wrote checks but did not fill out the stubs. When he left St. Luke's, $500 remained in the account.

Shell Game

When Presiding Bishop Browning fired Ellen Cooke, it was not for embezzlement. The two had clashed repeatedly over the budget in public meetings last year, and several months of mediation sessions for the staff with a trained
negotiator didn't reduce the friction. Browning allowed Cooke to resign in December 1994 after eight years of service, leaving the impression it was necessary because her husband had been transferred to St. John's Episcopal Church in McLean.

Before she left, Cooke received and cashed a check for $86,000. She told the human resources director at the church it was for back pay and vacation pay, and that she would provide documentation to authorize it. When a month later she still hadn't, the presiding bishop was informed.

Investigators from the accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand called in by the church discovered that Cooke had concocted an elaborate shell game.

Wealthy Episcopalians have left their church 955 trust funds and securities, all worth about $226 million. Only in retrospect did colleagues think it strange that Cooke knew the account numbers of many of these trusts by heart.

She regularly transferred the interest on some of the funds to the church's operating account at the First American Bank, now First Union, in Washington. The church had not always banked at First American. Cooke moved its accounts there in 1990, after she and other church officials expressed dissatisfaction with the service they received at the church's New York bank.

For Cooke, there was one other advantage: She and her husband maintained their personal accounts there.

From the church's operating account, Cooke would periodically write checks made out to First American Bank to be transferred to another account there. On the surface this too appeared entirely innocent, "since it was a normal and appropriate practice to transfer funds between the various church accounts," as the presiding bishop said in a statement last month.

But most of these checks were deposited into Cooke's personal account.

Other times the deposits had the account number of the presiding bishop's discretionary fund, a unique pocket in the elaborate garment of church assets. Discretionary funds are considered the assets of the presiding bishop and so went unaudited by the church's outside accountants. Cooke then wrote more checks from the discretionary fund and deposited these into her own account.

Through these conduits, Cooke diverted $1.5 million over five years. The presiding bishop himself was unaware Cooke was plundering his account because, he said in his statement, she "prevented others from having access to the presiding bishop's discretionary account ledgers." He refused a request for an interview.

She also wrote about $225,000 in unauthorized checks to third parties -- including her sons' private schools and her husband's church. She used her corporate credit card and other corporate accounts for 99 plane trips that she and her husband took to Richmond, running up about $325,000 in personal expenses. In this way she paid for fancy meals, hotel rooms, catering services, flowers and a $16,000 Tiffany necklace. And she wrote herself small checks that
eventually added up to $28,000.

To volunteers serving on two committees that were supposed to oversee the national church's finances, Cooke appeared, if anything, overly conscientious. They would arrive for their meetings and Cooke would provide each member with a six-inch stack of reports, ledgers and figures.

"She drowned us in paper," said Marjorie Christie, a member of the administration and finance committee. In oral reports, Cooke would drone on in impenetrable accounting jargon until the members were too confused or impatient to ask questions.

"Her style made you think, well, I just don't understand," Christie said.

Admits committee Chairman Vincent Currie Jr.: "She didn't have to manipulate the books. There wasn't anybody checking behind her."

The Final Chapter

The Cookes' Montclair house now has a yellow sign in front that says "Historic Home for Sale." It's on the market for $695,000, reduced from $725,000. The Virginia farm is for sale for $850,000.

The church owns the properties now because the Cookes cooperated in turning them over. Church lawyers suspect the Cookes may have assets that they haven't revealed and have hired the corporate sleuths from Kroll Associates to track them down. They are still searching for the Tiffany necklace.

The Cookes decline interviews. Ellen Cooke has spoken only once, through an open letter to the church's executive council, released to the public through her attorneys.

"I am one of a small percentage of the population who by reason of personality are simply unable to stop in the face of enormous pressures and stress," she said. The psychiatrist she began seeing in February "believes that my subsequent actions, blocked from memory during this time, were a cry for help which I fully expected to be discovered and questioned, and which escalated as I tried to escape from a situation which had become intolerable."

She says little more of her psychological state except to mention "the pain, abuse and powerlessness I have felt during the years I worked as a lay woman on a senior level at the church headquarters." This claim provoked outrage from the Episcopal Women's Caucus and many of her co-workers long frustrated by Cooke's inordinate power.

To most she appeared a model mother and professional. A few observed things that appear to them in retrospect like telltale signs: Cooke's frequent absences from work and her feeble excuses; her failing to appear at dinners and social events she said she would attend; her intense need to control.

Her father died of cancer on May 31 at age 81. Ellen and Nicholas Cooke arrived at his bedside hours before he died. In one of his last duties as a
pastor, Nicholas Cooke brought prayer books and held a bedside service for the dying man.

The couple are being permitted to live in the rectory at St. John's for part of the summer, but Nicholas Cooke is looking for work in a Richmond law firm or the civil service. Privately, to the senior warden of St. John's, Nicholas Cooke has insisted he didn't know about his wife's embezzlement.

From Episcopalian nationwide, there are calls for the presiding bishop to resign. Barbara Bunten, a former file clerk with no college degree whom Cooke appointed church controller, was fired June 5 and escorted from the building. The treasurer who succeeded Cooke, Donald Burchell, whom Cooke hired from First American Bank, has resigned because of stress. Browning has appointed a chief operating officer to handle day-to-day church administration.

Faced with the hard example of betrayal by a trusted insider, many dioceses and parishes are reviewing their own accounting procedures. In January, the church published a revised 185-page Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs detailing precise procedures for auditing records and building internal controls. There is a whole chapter on safe stewardship of clergy discretionary funds.

"Dear Friends," says the introductory letter in the manual. "The Church has entrusted us with funds placed in its hands for mission and ministry. This trust is deserving of our nurturing and careful attention to detail, and demanding of our accountability."

The letter is signed "Mrs. Nicholas T. Cooke III."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
27 January 1997

Religion Newswriters Association
Templeton Reporter of the Year Award

To the Judges:

Enterprise and versatility are hallmarks of the way this reporter approaches her work.

The following synopses of the stories contained in this entry are offered as evidence that this reporter deserves the Templeton Award for Religion Reporter of the year.

**WRITER'S CHOICE:** The torching and rebuilding of black churches was a major religion story of 1996, but this reporter added depth to the coverage by looking at how the millions of dollars in aid to rebuild the congregations was spent. She examined the massive, interfaith effort that brought people of faith together to help these traumatized congregations heal — and revealed the complexities inherent in these simple acts of charity.

**BREAKING NEWS:** A routine assignment to cover a meeting of religious leaders concerned about domestic violence contained a shocking revelation: the Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, publicly disclosed that she had been a victim of domestic violence. In a crisply written yet sympathetic style, this reporter delivered the story.

**FEATURE:** Much has been written about the mega-church phenomenon, but this is the only reporter to my knowledge to have written about black mega-churches. It was a solidly researched and clearly written examination of a significant religion trend.

**PROFILE:** Della Reese is a television angel, but few people know she is a real-life minister. This profile, datelined Los Angeles, elevated what could have been a show-business story into a look at one woman's distinctly California-style theology.

**ANALYSIS:** The African Methodist Episcopal Church engages in a practice that some church members consider highly controversial: sending its new bishops on a tour of duty in Africa... This close-up of the difficulties new bishops face is a revealing and critical
portrait of a denomination that is rarely glimpsed beyond the surface

With her knowledge of the American religious landscape and her sensitivity to issues and concerns in historically black denominations, this reporter has produced an exemplary body of work, worthy of the top honors in religion reporting. I commend these stories to your attention.

Sincerely,
NEW YORK _ There was a time when it all seemed so simple. Close to 100 mostly African-American churches have been the victim of arson or suspicious fires over the past two years. And people of faith _ all faiths _ rallied to help them rebuild.

The National Council of Churches (NCC) joined forces with Catholics, Jews and Muslims to raise money to rebuild burned churches. Similar funds were established by the Christian Coalition, the Southern Baptist Convention, the evangelical Promise Keepers men's movement and others. Donations poured in, totaling millions of dollars.

Now that the time has come to distribute the money, nothing seems simple at all.

So great are the complexities of rebuilding burned churches that some donor organizations _ which in the past have been distant from each other and, in some cases, downright adversarial _ are now exploring ways to work together.

The Christian Coalition and Promise Keepers, which are far more ideologically conservative than the more liberal NCC, have had informal discussions with the NCC's burned churches unit about determining the best ways to help rebuild houses of worship.

The Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, NCC general secretary, calls such the networking "rather miraculous" given the differences that exist among the donor groups.

Christian Coalition and Promise Keepers representatives say cooperation only makes sense.

"It's not a matter of reading about a church that was burned in the paper and sending them a check," said Promise Keepers spokesman Mark DeMoss. "It's turning out to be much more complicated than that."

The logistics of helping are unwieldy: Many congregations are still carrying on their ministries in makeshift arrangements while dealing with the intricacies of insurance claims, architectural plans and contractor delays. The affected pastors often also hold full-time jobs and are unable to devote enough time to rebuilding. And volunteers are ready to donate everything from human labor to Bibles and hymnals, but their energy and their offerings can't even be used until blueprints are drawn and building permits issued _ a process that could take six months.

Even more perplexing than the details of transforming brick and mortar into a new house of worship are questions far more basic: Who determines what churches qualify for aid? Who decides how much they receive? Should there be a cap on grants to any particular church?

A recent meeting of the grants committee of the NCC's Burned Churches Fund gave an inkling of how difficult the process can be.

In June, when the NCC focused national attention on the fact
that predominantly black churches were burning at an unusual rate, officials thought they would be helping a few dozen congregations. Now, they are considering reports from as many as 124, based on a 1990 list from the hate-crime watch group Center for Democratic Renewal. The majority of the churches were burned in 1995 and 1996.

At the meeting, representatives from Protestant, Unitarian and Jewish organizations wondered how best to handle a "growing universe" of mostly African-American churches in need of rebuilding assistance. With $8 million in cash and in-kind contributions, they realized that the donations they have received only can go so far.

Questions about limiting the grants in some way were countered with arguments about treating both large and small churches fairly. While the larger burned churches could benefit from a loan, some of the affected congregations have 25 members or less, and lack the financial resources to repay a bank loan, needing outright grants to rebuild.

"As the numbers of churches grow, it becomes more and more difficult to individualize," said Campbell, who chaired the meeting. "It's much more complicated than it was at the beginning."

The NCC, comprised of 33 Protestant and Orthodox denominations, is a partner in a joint task force with the Congress of National Black Churches, a consortium of eight denominations, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Working together, the groups hope to create "resource packages" that may include grants, guaranteed loans and volunteer labor for the congregations that have been fire victims.

The Rev. Albert Pennybacker, the NCC's associate general secretary for public policy, spoke with relief about cooperation with HUD, which will work with local banks in administering $10 million in private sector loan guarantees for the burned churches.

"It allows our money to go further," he said.

But there are some who question the validity of the effort to rebuild burned churches.

The conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy calls it the "great church-fire hoax" and has called for the ouster of two NCC officials who are managing the fund. The NCC has responded by accusing the institute of using "half-truths" and "distortions."

As the various groups with burned churches funds work toward the same goal, each has slightly different criteria for fund recipients. But most are aiding churches where investigators suspect arson.

Each group also has different accounting and allocation rules. Some make outright grants of cash; others make loans; and others work closely with congregations, keeping track of how the money is used.

"We had talked about raising money for ... smoke detectors or security systems," said Mike Russell, spokesman for the Christian Coalition, a conservative political organization. Eventually the coalition decided that pastors would know best how to use the money.

"We're not in the business of micro-managing that money," he
said.

Ben Connell, director of the South Carolina Baptist Convention Brotherhood Department, has taken another route. Instead of outright grants, the state convention buys what the churches need and reports its expenditures to Southern Baptist Convention officials.

Connell, who predicts some of the South Carolina churches he is assisting won't be built until next year, said he had to explain the lengthy process to a potential donor from California who wanted to know which church would receive her money and how it was going to be used.

"I said, 'Ma'am, I don't even know which church is going to need it,'" Connell said.

In addition to accounting for their expenditures, those administering rebuilding funds find themselves instructing ministers on the fine points of building construction.

"It's touching to talk (to) the pastor who didn't even know they had to have architectural plans," Connell said. "He's just sitting there taking notes up a storm."

Perhaps the most difficult task is establishing exactly which congregations are eligible for assistance.

"There are churches that we're still getting calls from who are not on anybody's list who say they were destroyed by arson and it happened in the last 24 months," said Juliette Davis, public relations director of the Congress of National Black Churches.

As organizations learn of burned churches, there are forms, telephone calls and site visits to assess how much help the congregations have already received and what they still need.

In the midst of grappling over policies, principles and process, come personal realities.

The Rev. Wilson Shannon, pastor of First Baptist Church of Centralia in Richmond, Va., attended the NCC meeting and heard for himself the "very detailed" process that led to a $50,000 grant to rebuild his church's historic structure.

His church's auxiliary building, used as a sanctuary from the early 1900s to 1962, was being restored when it burned in April.

"The Lord is truly providing," Shannon said, adding that he believes the provision came only through people working together.

"It goes to show that collectively we can eradicate this," he said. "Individually, we won't even scratch the surface."

END
(UNDATED) Here is a list of the major organizations that have raised money to rebuild burned churches and how the donations are being distributed:

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Cash received: $4.7 million
Amount allocated in grants: $2.3 million
Pledges not yet received: $1.4 million
In-kind contributions: $3.4 million

The National Council of Churches intends to spend 85 percent of its Burned Churches Fund on rebuilding. The remainder will be spent on administrative costs and on programs to address racism. Some donors, including Jewish and Catholic groups, have specified that their donations be used solely for rebuilding. Other donors want their money used solely for programs to fight racism.

Working with the Congress of National Black Churches and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the NCC intends to develop "resource packages" for burned churches that include grants, guaranteed loans and volunteer assistance. The NCC is addressing the needs of 124 churches, most of which burned in 1995 and 1996.

CHRISTIAN COALITION

Cash received: More than $750,000
Amount allocated in grants: About $350,000

The Christian Coalition began receiving money for its Save the Churches Fund after requesting donations in June from the pastors of almost 100,000 mostly white, evangelical churches nationwide. The coalition has appointed fund trustees to assess the needs of 72 burned churches and determine what congregations will receive the grants. The money is being given directly to pastors, who then decide how to spend it.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

Cash received: $649,965
Cash distributed: $649,965

Money for the denomination's Arson Fund was first collected at an offering of the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in June in New Orleans. Additional money continues to roll in, often from Southern Baptist churches that did not have representatives at the annual meeting.

Cash distributions are made each month, based on money
received the previous month, to regional Southern Baptist agencies
in states where fires have occurred. An official at each state
convention, in turn, is in charge of distributing the money to the
churches.

PROMISE KEEPERS

Cash received: More than $1 million
Cash distributed: More than $250,000

Money for Promise Keepers' Rebuild the Churches Fund was first
collected in June as a portion of an offering at a Promise Keepers
conference in Charlotte, N.C. Similar offerings were taken at some
subsequent conferences. Along with donations from individuals and
the organization's board of directors, the group reached its goal
of raising $1 million.

Promise Keepers has formed a loose-knit coalition of
denominations, relief agencies and churches working to help
churches in need of assistance. In addition, seven staff members
are working on Promise Keepers' response to the church burnings.
WASHINGTON — Religious leaders and advocates for victims of domestic violence met here Friday (Oct. 11) for an emotional interfaith gathering marked by personal disclosures about domestic violence and challenges to Scriptural admonitions for women to submit to their husbands.

The Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches, made a dramatic personal revelation: "I have lived with domestic violence," she told the group. Campbell, who is divorced, provided few details in her disclosure to the gathering, which included about 70 Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Mormon, Muslim and Jewish participants.

Campbell said she had hesitated for 20 years to reveal her story. Two weeks ago, while being treated for a back ailment, she said a nerve specialist noticed the scars of a broken arm.

"He said the only way that I know that people's arm can be broken in that way is if someone twists it," she recalled. "There is, of course, lasting evidence that I, like many, carry in my body, the scars of fear, the results of another's insecurity.''

Drawing from her own experience, Campbell called for a change in the religious community.

"'I urge the leadership of communities of faith to commit themselves anew to a respect for women, to an end of violence,' she said. "'Let us be advocates for justice. Let us move toward a nonviolent society where women and children are safe and men are praised for sensitivity, for gentleness, for tenderheartedness, a society where mothers are proud that they have taught their sons not only their daughters these skills.'"

Campbell was embraced by Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders who rose individually to comfort her as she left the gathering for another engagement.

"I think that the power of her words, her personal words, breaking the silence are just such a witness to all of us," said the Rev. Marie Fortune, leader of an interreligious ministry on sexual and domestic violence, after the meeting. "'Her courage is enormous. It means a great deal to women in the pew.'"

Fortune's Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle sponsored the event, along with the National Council of Churches and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. President Clinton was the honorary chair of the event.

Fortune, who has been working on issues of violence against women for 20 years, said many religious groups have been involved for a decade. She hopes the event which was mirrored by similar gatherings across the country would prompt more involvement by religious communities. In the last week, the Mormon Church and the Seventh-day Adventist Church addressed the issues of family violence and abusive men at their annual international meetings.

Campbell and other speakers called for greater cooperation on the domestic violence issue and warned that some interpretations of Scripture about submission can lead to assault. Many speakers
specifically said that domestic violence occurs among people in their faith groups—from Jews to Bahai's to Catholics.

"Religion has been used very widely historically... as a legitimization for the abuse that women suffer," said Riffat Hassan, a Muslim scholar who is chairperson of religious studies at the University of Louisville in Kentucky.

"I have in my own life as a Muslim woman suffered many kinds of violence," Hassan said, as she closed with a poem she had written about personal and general violence against women.

"I will never be a martyr. I will never be a victim. I will never be a loser," she read. "I will always be a survivor. I will always be a winner. I will always be triumphant."

Catherine Clark Kroeger, president emerita of the evangelical Christians for Biblical Equality, criticized situations where women in desperate need have been told by their church leaders to be more submissive to their husbands.

"Our first obligation to a battered woman is not bad advice but assistance in finding safety for herself and for her children," urged Kroeger, co-editor of "Women, Abuse and the Bible" (Baker Books).

From each faith perspective, there were different approaches to the same problem.

Snjezana Akpinar, chancellor of Dharma Realm Buddhist University in Berkeley, Calif., spoke of refraining from automatically swatting a fly or mosquito as well as more violent actions.

"We allow an empathy to guide our anger," she said. "We all agree that violence is and always will remain an act of despair... It is also... an act of a person who does not have the method or the tools to rise above anger."

The meeting was unusual not only for the variety of religious groups represented, but also for the historic opportunity to bring them together with advocates for victims of domestic violence.

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, in a keynote address to the gathering, urged greater activism within the religious community. Reno was instrumental in the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, which called for tougher penalties for domestic violence and provided new resources for law enforcement officials and victim advocates.

Reno said police, religious leaders, doctors and others need to work together. She provided the gathering with copies of a U.S. Department of Justice "community checklist," a pamphlet that advises houses of worship to become safe places for domestic violence victims and urges religious leaders to educate congregations about sexual assault from the pulpit.

"The answer is only going to be found when all of us are part of this effort and it is vitally important that the religious community be part of it," Reno said. "One's church, one's temple may be the best way for people to open a door to a new world for themselves."

She urged a different attitude in the future.

"We can't just sew up the wound anymore," she said. "We've got to sew up the spirit."
BRANDYWINE, Md. -- The Rev. C. Anthony Muse sprinkles apologies about the inconvenient seating arrangement throughout his welcome to congregants of his growing Gibbons United Methodist Church in this suburb of Washington, D.C.

Surveying the crowded sanctuary, he reminds everyone that they'll soon be in a bigger, $4.5 million building, the steel skeleton of which stands across the parking lot.

"Ain't no fire in here except the Holy Ghost fire," he jokes with the overflow crowd, many of whom are seated in folding chairs in the aisles. "If for any reason you need to vacate the premises, just take your chair with you."

Muse's predominantly African-American congregation has grown from 250 to almost 3,200 members in the 12 years of his pastorate. Once a country church in the middle of nowhere, it's an emerging black megachurch with three Sunday morning services attracting people from Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia.

Across Prince George's County, the nation's most affluent African-American community, stands another testament of the blend between black middle-class success and spiritual renewal.

At Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church in Fort Washington, parking attendants guide worshipers out of their BMWs and Mercury Sables, and white-gloved ushers direct them to seats in the packed sanctuary, which holds 3,000 before an overflow room is opened. In 1983, the church, foundering in Washington's Georgetown neighborhood, had 17 members. Eleven years later, the now-12,000-member church moved into its new $18 million octagonal building constructed in the shape of an African hut.

Throughout the nation, worshipers are gathering by the thousands in what have become the Christian epicenters of the black middle class.

Black counterparts of pioneer megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago and the Second Baptist Church of Houston, these are much more than big churches.

In a modern version of the smaller, traditional black church service, worshipers seldom sit still. Rather, they celebrate and participate. Congregants are often on their feet, clapping and singing along with gospel choirs. They shout "Amens" and "Hallelujahs" as the preacher turns a biblical story into a contemporary lesson on how God can help anyone overcome greed, racism and other social ills.

Fueled by the dreams and finances of upwardly mobile African-Americans, the megachurches offer opportunities for worship and a plethora of programs that satisfy the spiritual and social needs of the baby-boomer population.

With former business executives leading administrative staffs and dozens of ministries, these churches are places where members send their kids to school, attend workshops on financial planning,
get counseling to improve their marriages and reach out to people who haven't made it to the black middle class.

"Primarily, they've grown because of very hard-working pastors who bring to those congregations traditional African-American worship that addresses the current problems of baby-boomer African-American Christians and younger," said Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, a Baptist minister and associate professor at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. The people who join these large churches "usually are geographically mobile, so church is the way in which they reconnect with the black community."

In many instances, middle-class African-Americans who may have relocated and left their home church behind discover that material wealth does not replace their need for spiritual nourishment.

Muse, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, says people in his congregation "can't survive without the church." Life in the suburbs is not a panacea for them, he said.

"It was not helping us (African-Americans). It was not helping our children," Muse said. "They were getting in the same trouble that we thought growing up in a middle-class neighborhood would deliver them from .... Man does not live by bread alone."

Leslie Martin, a 27-year-old co-director of the children's choir at Ebenezer AME, agrees.

"Some people come here who are already financially wealthy, and they get spiritual strength," she said between Ebenezer's two Sunday services.

Federal immigration judge Michael McGoings joined Ebenezer five years ago, returning to regular church attendance for the sake of his young children.

McGoings, 52, was particularly attracted to the church's intellectual atmosphere -- the Revs. Grainger and Jo Ann Browning, pastor and assistant pastor, both have doctoral degrees -- and the variety of ministries it offers, including a law ministry, which allows him to socialize with others in the legal field.

He thinks the church has been successful because it combines an emphasis on the Scripture with pride in African-American success.

"There's not a Sunday when something about African-American history or African-American pride is not mentioned," he said. "It's always tied into the pastor's sermon."

But even as these churches cater to the black middle class, many black megachurch congregants try to help those who haven't made it out of poverty. Economic development projects and mentoring programs for young black males are typical outreach initiatives.

"They (megachurch members) reside some distance from .... the inner-city blight but are sponsoring programs to revitalize those communities," said Robert Franklin, program officer for the Ford Foundation in New York, an international philanthropic organization.

At Muse's church, dozens of homeless people are provided with food, shelter and job-interview assistance in a rotating program that involves other area churches.

At Ebenezer AME, volunteers with the Family Outreach and Resource Center of Ebenezer (F.O.R.C.E.) distribute food and
clothing, visit prisons and shelters, and offer substance-abuse counseling.

"That really is the good news," said Franklin, who helps the Ford Foundation determine the awarding of economic development grants to minority congregations. "The downside, however, is that, on a day-to-day basis, they (megachurch members) are not visible role models to kids who need them most, (who) never see people get dressed and going to work."

McGoings responds that the inner city is not the only place with crises.

"There are problems in the suburbs as well," he said. "You don't have to go downtown to find crime and drugs and kids with problems.... That's right out here in (Prince George's County), and I think the church is connected with that."

Ebenezer AME has sports teams and scouting troops that have contributed to the church's large youth membership and steered young people away from trouble, he said.

Calligrapher Fred Lee Johnson, a 38-year-old member of Ebenezer AME, said he tries to be a role model to African-American boys in his Largo, Md., neighborhood who have no father figure in their lives.

"Sometimes I take them fishing," he said. "When I go camping, I take them camping .... Other members that I fellowship with, they do the same."

Social outreach may be a more visible aspect of black megachurches than of some of their predominantly white counterparts.

"I think that the black church ... has a strong social-justice legacy that tugs harder at the black middle class and reminds them to engage Dr. (Martin Luther) King's unfinished agenda in a way that many white churches simply don't have," said Franklin.

A Memphis, Tenn., church demonstrated its commitment to meeting community needs when it moved to the downtown area and began a seven-days-a-week operation there.

Located in the same city as Elvis Presley's famous mansion, the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been dubbed "The Real Graceland" by author and veteran civil rights leader John M. Perkins. Its members and staff provide poor families with a 30-day supply of groceries, support people affected by the AIDS virus, and run an academy for students from pre-school through the eighth grade.

The Rev. Alvin O. Jackson, the church's pastor, said a "holistic approach to ministry" seems to be a key to the success of black megachurches.

Middle-class blacks in particular are looking for a place "where they feel that they're being spiritually fed as well as being challenged to be socially involved," said Jackson, whose mostly middle-class black congregation has grown from 350 to 8,000 during his 17 years as pastor. "The marriage of those two is very appealing."

And while Jackson's church, like some other megachurches, emphasizes its members' African-American heritage, it is also interested in reaching across racial barriers.

"We say, for instance, that we are unapologetically Christian
and unashamedly African-American," Jackson said. "But we also see a part of our mission to be a bridge between the black and white communities of the city."

In Memphis, which Jackson describes as "a very racially polarized city," church leaders have helped calm the community when tensions arose over white police officers' treatment of black youths, Perkins noted in his book, "Resurrecting Hope." The Mississippi Boulevard church leaders met with other pastors and encouraged the police to train their officers in cultural sensitivity.

Peter Paris, a social ethics professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, in Princeton, N.J., said well-known black preachers have drawn large congregations for more than a century, but nowadays the megachurch leaders -- most of whom are in their early 30s to early 40s -- are more likely to have master and doctor of divinity degrees and are either occasional lecturers, preachers or adjunct faculty at nearby seminaries.

Experts like Paris say these churches are growing as they attract new residents and people who haven't been regular churchgoers, rather than merely "stealing sheep" from smaller black congregations. In many cases, people from smaller churches will visit and return to their own congregations with new ideas.

Muse, of Gibbons United Methodist Church, said a couple of months ago deacons from a Baptist church attended all three of his services because they were thinking about moving to a similar schedule.

Muse recalls how his mentor, the Rev. John Cherry of the 19,000-member Full Gospel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Temple Hills, Md., gave him about $5,000 in seed money for his new building and made his chief administrator available as Muse's church developed.

"We're now giving money to smaller churches," said Muse, noting that his church has helped congregations as varied as Baptist, AME and Pentecostal. "I'm loaning my staff to other churches."

The Ford Foundation's Franklin said black megachurches provide "positive benefits for the entire black church culture" by inspiring the integration of proud African-American identity with Christian faith in small as well as large congregations.

"That's actually a kind of wonderful dynamic where a megachurch becomes a laboratory for testing community service projects as well as more innovative worship," he said.

END
LOS ANGELES — On television each Sunday night, she's Tess, the senior seraph on the CBS series "Touched By an Angel" who advises apprentice-angel Monica on how to best deliver God's guidance to needy and unsuspecting people.

But on Sunday mornings, the singer-actress known in real life as the Rev. Della Reese Lett preaches to her own congregation about the practical challenge of letting God into their lives.

How does Lett — who's been married to producer Franklin Thomas Lett for more than 17 years — manage the challenging dual roles of actress and preacher?

"God," she declared before a recent service. "They're both ministries."

To the rousing greeting of "Good morning, Reverend Della" from about 175 people, she enters the hall of the Masonic temple that serves as the sanctuary for her growing congregation, Understanding Principles for Better Living. The church, part of a religious movement known as "New Thought," draws its teachings from Christianity, positive thinking, metaphysics and other influences.

A bit of show-biz glitter is inevitable in a congregation that meets just south of Hollywood — not only because of its celebrity pastor, but because of the people in the pews.

On this Sunday, the service opened with silent meditation, then burst into song — the 1979 disco classic "Ain't No Stopping Us Now" sung by a five-member choir, three of whom tour regularly as back-up singers for Smokey Robinson. The 65-year-old Lett, with a frosting of gray hair atop her long black locks, rocked in her seat to the music.

When Lett mentioned that Linda Gray, the actress who played Sue Ellen Ewing (J.R.'s wife) on "Dallas," recently celebrated her birthday, the congregation broke into Stevie Wonder's soulful version of "Happy Birthday," accompanied by the church's four-piece band.

Then Lett began to preach about finding God even in life's most difficult moments.

"We all have concerns about the people we care about, but for some reason we find it hard to believe that there is a piece of God in everybody," she said.

Sometimes standing in front of the lectern, other times walking back and forth across the platform, Lett made her points wearing a striped gray pant suit with splashes of red, purple and black.

People sometimes need to simply mind their own business so God can deal with the person they're worried about, she told the congregation.

"You have to stay out of the way and let the Christ inside the person you're concerned about work at his own speed," she said. "You don't have to be worried or anxious about somebody else's soul. Jesus saves."

Lett preached for nearly an hour, quoting liberally from the Bible and from her own experience. She recalled a 1979 aneurysm
that changed her life and increased her faith in God.

"My brain exploding was one of the best things that happened to me," she declared. "That's why I'm doing this today. You get such an understanding because you experience it for yourself. It gives you courage and courage gives you strength and strength gives you greater belief in your belief in God."

Although angels are discussed more on Lett's show than at her church, some of the people attending the service acknowledged that one way or another, they had been touched by an angel themselves.

Synthia Hardy, who has been a member of the congregation for the past five years, is convinced that an angel led her to Lett's church. Hardy described meeting a woman during a temporary job who told her about the church. The unknown woman was present at the first service she attended, Hardy said, but was never seen again.

Howard Ibach, a congregant who described himself as one of Lett's "gay following," wore an angel pin on his lapel.

"The thing that Reverend Della in particular but the church in general offers is a real positive sense of a relationship between you and God," said Ibach, an advertising copywriter. "The whole thing about New Thought Christianity ... is erasing all negativity in your life by taking a positive look at your life."

In an interview before the service, Lett said she, too, has been influenced by angels. She said her progression from the slums of her hometown of Detroit to show business and the ministry came only "by the grace of God."

"I have along the way not known what to do when frantic, stressed and distressed, and somebody that I did not necessarily know came into my life, stayed 15 minutes, straightened out the situation and split," she said.

Lett's church espouses New Thought, a philosophy that dates to the 1800s and emphasizes the teachings of Jesus, practical principles of a liberal form of Christianity and an openness to metaphysics and other philosophical thought.


"She was the first person that I had heard speak aloud what I believed inside," recalled Lett, a former Baptist who began singing in church at age 6.

Colemon was ordained in the Unity Church, but withdrew her affiliation with the Association of Unity Churches in 1974 to form her own Universal Foundation for Better Living Inc. Lett's congregation is one of 15 churches and study groups that are part of Colemon's umbrella organization.

Lett was ordained in the 1980s and held classes in her home for several years before establishing her own congregation in 1989.

The Rev. Helen Carry, director of the Johnnie Colemon Institute in Chicago, taught Lett some of Colemon's principles and called her an "avid student."

Unity, Colemon's organizations and Lett's church all espouse the New Thought philosophy.

"I love God," explained Lett. "I love Jesus. I love the truth. I love peace, joy and happiness and my ministry gives me all
Carry, a regular watcher of "Touched By an Angel," likes the message Lett sends from the altar and via the airwaves.

"She's getting across to people that a church may not be able to reach, a message about God and about God loving everybody," Carry said of the TV show.

Lett is pleased to work on a show with a spiritual theme, which people tell her is inspiring. She predicts it will continue for seven more years.

"We've tried everything," she said. "We've tried technology. We've tried drugs. We've tried medications. We've tried greed. We've tried guns. We've tried everything and it didn't work. And finally we are all as a human race coming to the understanding that there has to be something deeper than that," she said.

"That's what I think people come to the show and the ministry for."

Lett served on the Johnnie Coleman Institute's board before her schedule got too busy with the television show. But she made time to travel to the Chicago institute for her required continuing education this summer.

"Della is Della," Carry said. "She doesn't view herself as a celebrity but as a child of God."

Likewise, members of Lett's congregation say they aren't there to rub elbows with a celebrity, but rather, to learn from a role model about getting closer to God.

Gray, of "Dallas" fame, said she started attending Lett's church after guest-starring on "Touched By an Angel" earlier this year.

"We have so few female role models in life that ... more than an actor or singer, she's a true role model for me," Gray said of Lett. "She speaks the truth. She comes from her heart."

"There are a lot of people who ostracize, criticize and say people who are in show business can't really know the Lord," said Patti Henley, one of the vocalists who sang at Sunday's service.

"She has been an example to me. She's not so way up there that I can't relate to her. I do believe she's anointed. ... When I'm in her presence, I feel his presence."
(WASHINGTON) On his last Sunday as pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop William P. DeVeaux baptized a baby, showed off his church's basement expansion and preached a poignant sermon of farewell.

"If God loves you and you understand that, it will be all right," he assured his congregation. "It's love that takes you through a transition. It's love that takes you through new bishops and new pastors."

DeVeaux, 55, delivered that advice, it seemed, not only to his congregants but also to himself. He was preaching about his own turning point from serving as pastor of an influential congregation in the nation's capital to being elected a bishop of his denomination.

And, like many other newly elected bishops in this historically black and distinctly American denomination, DeVeaux will serve at least four years in Africa.

The tradition of assigning new bishops to Africa is a matter of both pride and contention in the AME Church, which began in Philadelphia in 1787. Candidates lead vigorous, competitive campaigns for the prestigious posts, culminating in an election at the denomination's quadrennial General Conference. But some American members of the church want their U.S. leaders to stay closer to home, while some African members are calling for more of their own to be placed at the top.

"It's something that we continue to debate," said the Rev. Dennis C. Dickerson, historiographer of the denomination. "As of the last General Conference (which ended in July), the tradition of sending the newly elected bishops to Africa has held."

Dickerson, a history professor at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., says that though the majority of the church's 3.5 million members live in the United States, an estimated 500,000 reside in Africa.

The AME Church's presence in Africa is due to a combination of factors: missionary activity and a movement among American blacks in the late 19th century to return to Africa. Among the most prominent AME missionaries was Bishop Henry M. Turner, who established AME churches in Sierra Leone and Liberia. He was also instrumental in a historic merger between the AME Church and the Ethiopian Church in South Africa in 1896.

DeVeaux, who has spent 10 years at the helm of this Washington church known as the "cathedral of African Methodism," is bound for Maseru, Lesotho, in September, to serve as administrator of the church's 18th Episcopal District in southern Africa. He will move from leading a congregation that hosted President Clinton's inaugural prayer service to overseeing about 100 AME churches in Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique and Botswana.

Bishops of the denomination's five African districts appoint pastors, help candidates to the ministry get necessary training,
develop new congregations and oversee church institutions from schools to clinics to publishing houses in the countries within their jurisdictions. In many of the countries, which struggle with poverty and economic woes, the bishops strive to meet social needs, long a mission of the denomination.

"Social action has been a part of the AME Church since the beginning," said DeVeaux of the denomination that grew out of a protest against slavery and discrimination against black members in the Methodist Episcopal Church. "If you're not doing something social, you're not representing the Gospel."

But even as DeVeaux departs for Africa, some church members living there insist that more African clergy be appointed bishops.

"There's a silent, whispering cry to consider leadership from abroad also to be part of the inclusive leadership of the African Methodist Episcopal Church," said the Rev. Robert J. Eckert, the South African-born pastor of Coppin Memorial AME Church in Chicago.

Eckert, a Capetown native who received his post-secondary education in the United States, looks forward to the day when his denomination seeks more African-born bishops.

"When (American) bishops go to South Africa or to overseas work, people generally accept them because that's African Methodism," said Eckert. "The quest is that the tradition be changed or that the tradition be more inclusive of leadership from other places. When the church does that, then what is perceived as territorial limitations will have vanished."

There have only been two African-born bishops in the denomination. Francis H. Gow, born to a South African mother and an American father, was elected in 1956 and served African districts until his death in 1968. Harold B. Senatle, another native South African, was elected in 1984 and now serves the 15th Episcopal District, which includes the western part of South Africa, Namibia and Angola. Like Gow, Senatle has only served districts in Africa.

Some of the protests about the lack of African-born leadership have risen beyond the level of a whisper.

Earlier this year, the A.M.E. Church Review, a scholarly quarterly, published an article that cited protests at the January celebration of the 100th anniversary of African Methodism in South Africa. Outside a worship service attended by thousands, a dozen people stood with signs that read, "We Are Free But the Church in SA Is Still in Bondage" and "The Origin of Our Leaders Are Right Here at Home Not Abroad in America."

African political leaders who also are lifelong members of the AME Church spoke out at another session marking the centennial, urging more African leadership in the church, the article said.

"In Zimbabwe it is only the AME Church that continues to deny indigenous followers senior church leadership roles," said Mayor Abie Siwela of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. "Previously white-led denominations have opened doors to indigenous leadership. How can the church of Africa deny the people of Africa the opportunity to share in the running of the church at senior levels?"

Bishop Adam J. Richardson, 48, of Tallahassee, Fla., another new bishop who will oversee an African AME district, acknowledged
the calls for more African-born officials.

"There is a need for indigenous leadership but the resources are primarily here (in the United States) and we're going to have to deal with that as a denomination," said Richardson, who has been pastor of Tallahassee's Bethel AME Church for more than 17 years. "They need support from the outside. In some areas where I am (bishop), for example, there are pastors who make less than $25 a month and that's with our help."

Richardson already has had a taste of the enormous challenges he will face administrating a district that includes Liberia, a region plagued by a six-year civil war.

"I've been trying to make some contacts with some of the pastors and presiding elders in the area but it is really difficult," he said.

Because of the unrest in Liberia, Richardson expects to do some of his work from the United States and probably will set up his African headquarters in Ghana. His district also includes Sierra Leone, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast.

Despite the difficulties that confront American bishops in Africa, Judie Ponds, a longtime member of Metropolitan AME Church, can see a positive side to the tradition that takes Richardson and DeVeaux to Africa.

"I think it brings about a relationship that is yet to be seen of bridging the gap of the African-Americans in this country and the business and social interests of ... our brothers and sisters in Africa," she said.

But Ponds, a real estate development consultant, also wished the denomination could find a way to offer new bishops opportunities, yet keep them close to home.

"We just hate to see him go," she said after attending DeVeaux's last service with more than 600 people.

Bishop Vinton Anderson, the new bishop of the Second Episcopal District, which includes Washington, D.C., knows from personal experience that bishops' assignments to Africa are not always understood.

He recalled that his son, who was 8 years old when Anderson was assigned to the South Africa district in 1972 "asked his mother whether all of the bishops are sent to Africa to combat duty."

But despite the risks and challenges, Richardson and DeVeaux see many benefits to sending new bishops to Africa.

"I think that having junior bishops like myself, hungry for the work, a passion for trying to do mission, really wanting to be useful, is really to the advantage of the people that we will be serving because the energy level is higher, the interest is higher," Richardson said. "It's not like we are novices to ministry. We're just novices to the episcopacy."