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
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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 Schwartzes 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.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
February 22, 1995, Wednesday, Final Edition

SECTION: A Section; A01, NA

LENGTH: 1649 words

BYLINE: Laurie Goodstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

On a typical day this month, volunteers stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the small kitchen at the Washington City Church of the Brethren, ladling out a concoction they called "hot dog noodle soup" to 181 homeless and hungry people.

Five blocks away at the Capitol, legislators debating cuts to federal welfare programs were reasserting an idea often heard these days on the Hill: that churches, synagogues and faith-based charities would take up the burden if the federal government decides to cut back its role. They are "the great untapped resource in the welfare reform debate," as Rep. Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.) put it.

But the folks ladling soup and spreading peanut butter say policymakers on Capitol Hill are out of touch. Of the 350,000 churches in this country -- many with fewer than 100 members and scraping to pay bills -- about three-quarters are contributing money, food or time to alleviating poverty. They are, they say, hardly an "untapped resource."

"We're doing all we can now," said Andrea Stremmel, 18, a full-time volunteer at the Church of the Brethren soup kitchen. "We can't do much more."

Nearly all of the most solid and celebrated religious-based programs -- the soup kitchens, halfway houses and training programs for single mothers -- rely on government money to support their work. Catholic Charities USA, the nation's largest private social service network whose programs are often touted as models by lawmakers, received 65 percent of its 1993 budget of $1.8 billion from public funds, most of it in grants and contracts. Only 13 percent came from church and community contributions.

On a smaller scale, the noodles in the Brethren Church's soup and peanut butter in the sandwiches came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture -- which regularly supplies 10 percent to 60 percent of the food churches and charities give out, and which also faces cutbacks.

"Very few of these organizations except the real small Mom and Pops are able to do it just solely on private donations," said Max Finberg, program associate at Congressional Hunger Center, a nonprofit advocacy and education group. Even groups that start out adamant about refusing government support eventually learn government resources are more consistent than what they can gather from Sunday collection plates, donated goods and food obtained from restaurants and grocery stores, Finberg said.
Tens of millions of people receive federal welfare assistance, and Medicaid alone currently serves 36 million. Republican lawmakers are proposing to repeal many social welfare programs, including school breakfasts and lunches, food stamps, supplemental benefits for addicts and the disabled and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and replace them with block grants to the states. States could then choose where and how to spend the money.

And the "Personal Responsibility Act" in the Republican "Contract With America" proposes disqualifying pregnant mothers for benefits if they are under 18, have a child on welfare, do not establish the child's paternity or have been on welfare themselves more than two years.

Most religiously based activists and lobbyists concur that the welfare system needs an overhaul. To start with, they say teenage mothers or people addicted to drugs or alcohol should not receive welfare checks without supervision because the money is often misused.

But Fred Kammer, president of Catholic Charities, who has testified recently before congressional committees on welfare reform, said the lawmakers do not seem to understand the difference between what the government does to help poor families and what the religious community does. Churches and religious groups at best provide only a tattered patchwork of services -- some used clothing here, a bag of canned goods there, a bed during the coldest months of the year.

"Most of us are there at the crisis moment, when the family needs a rent deposit," Kammer said, "or because the plumbing is broken . . . and we piece together small amounts of money to help people, dragging $ 50 out of some little fund.

"What none of us do is to provide regular income to poor families. I speak here for everybody -- Catholic, Protestant, Salvation Army, Jews, evangelicals. None of us has that kind of money."

Federal, state and local governments contributed nearly two-thirds of the funding for Catholic Charities USA to operate its 1,400 programs, including foster care, group homes, residential treatment facilities, low-cost housing and day care. The organization receives government contracts and grants because of its record of efficiency and effectiveness in operating these programs.

After dropping lunch trays in a tub of soapy water at the Church of the Brethren the other day, many of the soup kitchen's clients headed down the hallway on their next order of business: collecting food stamps. They use the church's address because they do not have one themselves. They said the church's Monday through Friday lunches, though appreciated, are insufficient. They rely on the government's food stamps for breakfast, dinner and weekends, and for feeding family members at home.

"My check in yet, Mrs. Jackson?" asked one man in brown boots stuffed with newspaper. Dorothy Jackson, the nutrition program coordinator, fished through a file of checks. "Here it is, baby," she replied.
But Jackson could not help with his next request: a pair of gloves. She had none. It was one of the coldest days this winter, and as the afternoon passed Jackson turned down more requests for scarves, hats and long underwear. The annual windfall of 400 pairs of long underwear donated by a local law firm ran out the same day it arrived.

Ministering to the poor is a central tenet of many faiths. To Christians, caring for the needy is a requirement for spiritual redemption. Jews believe in tzedakah, often interpreted as "charity," but which translates as "justice." One of the five pillars of Islam is zakat, the practice of giving a portion of one's assets to the poor.

When budget cuts during the administration of Ronald Reagan sent poor and homeless people into the streets, religious organizations responded.

By redirecting resources and discovering new ones, congregations over the past decade have built an increasingly sophisticated network offering food, housing, tutoring and training. The para-church organization Bread for the World estimates 150,000 churches now run emergency food or feeding programs. By 1991, according to the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, almost as many congregations offered services to the poor as offered religious education.

But by the late 1980s, studies revealed charitable time and money were waning. Between 1989 and 1993, giving per household declined 24 percent and between 1991 and 1993 volunteerism was down 5 percent, according to the Independent Sector, a Washington-based coalition of about 800 charitable organizations.

In a recent letter to lawmakers, 116 charities said that even if the tax incentives being proposed to stimulate private giving were passed, the increase in donations "would do precious little" to offset the cuts to social programs.

If the $60 billion in cuts proposed in the Republican contract were to pass, each church in the country would have to spend $170,000 to make up the difference, calculated David Beckman, president of Bread for the World.

Most of those involved in church-based giving concede religious people and institutions can donate more, volunteer more and show more compassion.

"But if they're swamped by waves and waves of people who just don't have enough to eat month to month, it distorts what charities should be doing," Beckman said. What charities can do better than government is "help people assume personal responsibility by working closely with individuals."

That last point is one held dear by those who support the Contract With America. Ralph Reed, executive director of the conservative Christian Coalition, is a strong believer in private charity, and offers the example of his church, which distributes two tons of clothing to the needy each month.

The Christian Coalition plans to "challenge" each of the 100,000 churches it claims to be in its network. Reed said, to "find a family who will be in need after welfare reform, and meet the needs of those families."

Reed's idea has been repeated with enthusiasm on Capitol Hill. But it is
strongly questioned by one of the pioneers of such programs. The Rev. George
Clements, a Chicago priest, was the innovator of the "One Church, One Child"
scheme, through which 40,000 children in 39 states were adopted.

He now runs "One Church, One Addict", which is starting in three states. But
when it comes to churches meeting the needs of welfare families, "I don't think
it's realistic at all," he said.

A poor family exposed as needing "adoption" by a church could be subject to
ridicule, Clements said. Funds channeled through the church could be misused, he
argued, and it is not appropriate for every needy American to be forced into a
relationship with a church.

"If ever there were an argument for separation of church and state, this is it," Clements said.

From her office at the Church of the Brethren, where a window faces toward
the Capitol, church secretary Trina Parker recently readied solicitation letters
to the 40 regular donors, including five other church congregations.

Last year, the church managed to produce 38,812 meals on $46,382 in
donations, supplemented by USDA food and a slab of venison sent from a church in
Pennsylvania.

But the church was forced to shut down its twice-weekly medical clinic
recently for lack of funds, and people still come looking for the doctor.

"There's not a lot more we can do if they cut out welfare," Parker said. "We
can't take up the slack."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
March 14, 1995, Tuesday, Final Edition

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 1662 words

BYLINE: Laurie Goodstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

DATELINE: SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico

An illuminated map of the world as his backdrop, the Rev. Billy Graham preached in warm southern cadences while an interpreter at his side translated into staccato Spanish for the crowd here. Upstairs in the balcony, 47 translators in individual soundproof booths simultaneously rendered his call to repent into 47 other languages.

This Christian workers conference last week was the opener for the largest evangelistic event in the history of Christianity. If all goes as planned, when Graham steps to the stage in the stadium here Tuesday night, his organization says, his preaching will be sent by satellite, television and videotape to an audience of more than 1 billion people in 185 countries — about one-fifth of the planet's population.

Billy Graham's "Global Mission" is the pinnacle of his 50-year crusade to fulfill his promise as a youth "to do something great for God." At 76, his hands shaky and his step jagged from Parkinson's disease, Graham says he has left behind the partisan politics of his younger days and is sticking to "pure gospel." Where he once acted as unofficial adviser to Richard Nixon, Graham says now he wouldn't as much as recommend Bible passages for a president's speech.

Yet his reputation as "Chaplain to the White House" has opened doors to nations previously untouched by evangelical Christianity. This new crusade is the most dramatic demonstration of the transcontinental, transcultural reach Graham has attained.

The son of North Carolina dairy farmers is expected to attract coliseum-sized crowds this week in former communist-bloc nations that once brooked no Bibles, and in countries where Christianity is a small sect overshadowed by Islam, Hinduism or Confucianism. The message will be the same for Rwandan refugees, Japanese earthquake survivors and Bosnian war victims: God has a place for you in heaven if you confess your sins and put your faith in Jesus Christ.

Graham is not, he readily confesses, a natural-born preacher. Among his first awkward attempts, he once recalled, he opened a service at a city jail with, "I'm glad to see so many of you out this afternoon." As a theologian he has been said to lack profundity, and his best-selling books are "not that deep," he conceded in an interview last week.
Yet while other big-name evangelists have fallen to scandal or obsolescence, Graham has kept his name as clean as his message. He has been ranked among Gallup's "10 most admired men in the world" 37 times in the past 39 years -- more than any other person.

"He has maintained a life of remarkable integrity," said his biographer, William Martin, a sociologist at Rice University in Houston. "I've looked awfully closely, and a lot of other people have, and it looks to me like it's for real. Billy Graham wants to be, and he succeeds in being, an extraordinarily good man. I think he's a genuinely humble man with a great deal of ambition."

At 6-foot-3, with a profile made for marble, Graham looks an aging Western film actor. He is a disarming blend of grandiosity and humility, a combination on display at a news conference here as he described the place of his $25 million crusade in the time line of Christianity.

Jesus started with 12 people, he said. At the first Pentecost, 3,000 converted. Nearly 2,000 years later, Graham expects his preaching to be beamed by 30 satellites to 2,921 auditoriums, coliseums, churches, plazas, hospitals and refugee camps around the globe.

"It's never been done before," Graham said. "Oh, you say, 'We saw the Olympic games.' But never before have this many stadiums and auditoriums been used for people to . . . listen and respond to the message of the gospel."

Yet Graham's humility is genuine, friends say. He said during the news conference that "in some ways I feel I have been a failure," and later explained that he meant he has not reached enough people. He told the Christian workers conference that when they heard his daughter, Anne Graham Lotz, preach to them later, they would hear "the best preacher in my family."

Graham truly believes that he and his fame are an "instrument" of God, says boyhood friend T.W. Wilson. Even in this crusade, he attributes the tremendous mobilization of people and resources to divine will. The satellites in every time zone, the 160 digital editing machines, the 13 generators with enough power to keep it all going if the island has a blackout, are all "God's tools," Graham says. So is the preaching that he eventually honed into a riveting rapid-fire delivery that earned him the nickname "God's Machine Gun."

Graham says so many respond to him because "God gave me somehow a love for people" so intense that "there's something supernatural about it." An unabashed name-dropper, Graham relates how King Hussein of Jordan once told him the reason the American evangelist was welcomed in both Jordan and Israel was because "we can tell that you love us."

But love alone is not enough to have built his empire. The conference here suggested some other factors. Graham is a Baptist, but the Christian workers included Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians and a smattering of Catholics. Wherever he preaches, his local organizations reach out to the leadership of many denominations. When new converts step forward at his crusades, he turns them over to the local churches.

"He's tried to avoid getting involved in church politics," said Robert
Williams, director of Global Mission. "The church around the world trusts him. They know we're not going to come out and damn this one, favor that one."

In secular politics too, Graham has moved toward nonalignment. He once had a reputation for golfing with Republicans and backing the war in Vietnam. "He made a conscious effort to befrend people in power so he could gain access to bigger crowds," said Stephen Winzenburg, a communications professor at Grand View College in Des Moines, who has studied Graham and other evangelists.

Graham was summoned to the White House the night his friend George Bush gave the okay to launch the first squadron of fighter bombers in the Persian Gulf War. Now, Graham says, he steers clear of partisan politics and the conservative evangelical groups that are more politically potent than ever before. "You won't see me identified with any of the so-called religious right," Graham said. "I am not with them. I'm just neutral."

Graham uses less air time than most other television evangelists to ask for money, said Winzenburg. In his most recent study in 1992, Winzenburg found that Graham used 2 percent of his air time for fund-raising, compared with 17 percent for the Rev. Jerry Falwell, and 13 percent for the Rev. Robert Schuller.

"He is almost embarrassed to ask the audience for money. It's a very quiet, soft-spoken request," Winzenburg said. "If he used some of the techniques other televangelists do, he could double his income." Graham doesn't do healings -- "I have not been given the gift of healing," he told a caller to the Larry King show.

The Graham dominion includes a training center in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina, the "Hour of Decision" radio program heard weekly on 700 stations worldwide, television specials that regularly appear during prime time, Decision magazine with a circulation of nearly 2 million, and a film production and distribution company. Funding comes from contributions to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) and sales of magazines, films and Graham's 17 books.

Early on, Graham decided to accept a salary equivalent to that of a pastor of a large urban church. Today he receives $101,250, plus a $33,750 housing allowance. A board of directors -- neither Graham nor his family on it -- raises and spends the money through the BGEA in Minneapolis, far from Graham's home in Montreat, N.C.

In 1948 Graham called together his mission colleagues and asked them to list the moral pitfalls that had brought down other itinerant evangelists. Their resulting "Modesto Manifesto" set rules they have stuck by ever since: Avoiding being alone with women not their wives; turning over money collected to the revival's local sponsors; depending on the crowd estimates of local officials to avoid the appearance of inflating their numbers.

Ambition corrupts too, and Graham is not above ambition, his biographer says. "The real secret of his success," Martin said, is an inner circle that has been keeping him accountable for 50 years. "People like [televangelists Jimmy] Swaggart and Jim Bakker didn't have anybody to tell them 'no.' You have men
whose whole success is built on their ability to persuade. And it's easy for them to persuade themselves as well as others."

Graham's people tell him "no." Ten years ago, he wanted to mount a worldwide satellite mission. Williams and others told him they weren't ready. In the intervening years, they held regional crusades for Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe that helped prepare them for the undertaking this week.

At every site, Christian pastors and lay leaders -- 1.5 million in all -- have been trained in how to nurture contact with new converts who step forward at the broadcast sites. And they expect a healthy harvest: Surveys show that when Graham appears by satellite -- his face filling the screen, the auditorium darkened, the impact intimate -- 14 percent answer his call to commit to Christ.

Graham and members of his circle are often asked who will be "the next Billy Graham," and much speculation has centered on his son, Franklin. Many say that Graham may have no single successor, but instead may leave behind the global army of pastors, deacons and church volunteers who have heard his message in places as far-flung as Finland, Nepal and Australia.

For his part, Graham says he is not ready to speculate about succession. As with everything, he turns to Scripture: "I do not find any place in the Bible where anybody retires."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
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March 27, 1995, Monday, Final Edition

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 1384 words

BYLINE: Laurie Goodstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

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 prepared 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,
elimininating 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."
As Friday prayers were about to begin yesterday, Ali Hussein arrived breathless at the door of the mosque in Norman, Okla., and blurted out the latest news to his fellow Muslims: Police had caught a suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing, and he was neither Muslim nor Middle Eastern.

There were no sighs of relief from the group, only knowing nods. Many Muslims living in this college town outside Oklahoma City had just endured three days of harassment and hostility, as everyone from congressmen to radio talk-show callers speculated that the bombing of the federal building that has left 78 dead was the work of "Islamic fundamentalists."

Mosques from coast to coast received threatening phone calls. Within five hours of the blast, someone shot pellets through the windows of the Islamic Society in Stillwater, north of Oklahoma City. Some foreign-born Muslims in Norman stayed home from their jobs or from school, too mortified to face their American colleagues.

Suddenly, yesterday, the shadow of blame lifted. But the sting of resentment will take longer to fade.

"Islam is always the victim," said Hussein, 33, a University of Oklahoma doctoral student in economics from Saudi Arabia. "Whatever happens anywhere in the world they just put it on Islam, and they don't wait until they know the facts."

Some Muslims praying yesterday at the Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church also said they were angry that the finger of suspicion so quickly pointed in their direction.

"When Waco happened, no one said this is Christian fanatics," said Mohammed Alami, a reporter for an Arab television network. "I'm a father myself. This was devastating to me."

Ever since Muslim extremists claimed credit for the World Trade Center bombing, Muslims in this country say they have been tainted by association with terrorists who claim to share their religion, but who do not share their beliefs.

When Janine Ali saw the carnage on television Wednesday, she said she prayed for the dead and for herself. "I was saying, Please, please, don't let it be a Muslim Arab," said Ali, adding that some of the women at Dar Al-Hijrah have been afraid to appear in public since the bombing. "Horns would blow and people would give you dirty looks and make dirty remarks," said Ali. Muslim women were especially vulnerable, she said, because of the traditional robes and scarves some wear.

There are an estimated 4 million to 6 million Muslims living in this country. They live on the coasts and in the heartland, supporting mosques and cultural centers from Chattanooga, Tenn., to Salt Lake City to Chester, Pa. Many are immigrants or the children of immigrants, but many also are white and black Americans who have turned to Islam more recently.

There are five mosques and an estimated 5,000 observant Muslims living in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area, which includes Norman.

Muslim students on the University of Oklahoma campus yesterday said most of the time, Oklahomans make them feel welcome. Othman Khaled, 33, an air traffic controller who arrived here with his family from Egypt nine months ago, said he was surprised to discover that the Americans he met "care about us, they are very sensitive."

In the days following the Oklahoma City bombing, some Americans reached out to their Islamic neighbors. The Rev. Mark D. Heaney, associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City, knocked on the door of Al-Falah Masjid across town and arranged with the spiritual leader there, whom he had never met, for Christian clergy to join the Muslims in Friday prayers.

And Muslim leaders were not only quick to condemn Wednesday's attack, they also helped in relief efforts. Yesterday at Dar Al-Hijrah, leaders were collecting money, food and other supplies to send to Oklahoma. A blood drive also was underway.
"There are many people who need our help. We are part of them, they are part of us," said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, one of the groups organizing the relief effort.

Investigators focused on Muslims because the car bombing resembled others perpetrated by people claiming to be Muslims, and because Oklahoma City had been the site of a conference of Islamic radicals in 1992. Within hours of the bombing, former Oklahoma representative Dave McCurdy (D) told CNN that the most likely suspects were Islamic radicals. The FBI arrived to question campus officials.

Abdulwali H. Aldamash, 33, said he learned of the bombing while teaching a chemical engineering class, and one of the regular jokers in class said to him, "You did it." Aldamash told him, "If I find that person who did it, I will take him out myself."

While about 150 worshipers knelt in the carpeted prayer room in Norman, Imam Abdel Jalil Mezgouri said that he appreciated President Clinton's caution against blaming any ethnic group or religion for the crime. Nevertheless, he said, "We were treated unfairly. From the first moment, without any facts, any basis, we the Muslims were blamed."

In Falls Church, Samir Abed-Rabo said the bombing "broke my heart." The Syrian-born computer consultant, who has three children, said, "We left our countries and came to this country looking for a better situation. And we find the same thing here. . . . I'm scared for the future. Any father would be scared for his kids after seeing that."

Goodstein reported from Norman, Okla., Tousignant from Falls Church.

**END OF STORY REACHED**

Note to judges: Story written and conceived by Goodstein.
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 publicly 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 two rulings further refining the delicate relationship between church and state, the Supreme Court yesterday enhanced the ability of religious groups to promote their messages in the public arena.

In a 5 to 4 vote, the court said that the University of Virginia violated the free speech rights of a student group by refusing to provide funds for its Christian magazine while subsidizing other student publications.

The decision marked the first time that the court approved government funding for a religious activity.

In another case, which was closely watched by the many communities that have wrangled over creches and other religious displays, the justices by a 7 to 2 vote said the state of Ohio was wrong to bar the Ku Klux Klan from putting up a large wooden cross in front of the state capitol.

Conservative Christians hailed both rulings as major victories for religious freedom in an era they say is one of unprecedented government hostility to religion.

"We have crossed a critical threshold in the fight for religious liberty," said Jay Sekulow, chief litigator for the American Center for Law and Justice, founded by religious broadcaster Pat Robertson. "The message is clear: Religious speech or speakers must be treated exactly the same way as any other group. The content of that speech does not disqualify them from funding."

But the Virginia ruling in particular dismayed backers of strong separation between church and state. They said that the court had betrayed core democratic principles that have helped this nation transcend religious divisions.

"This is a sad day for religious liberty. For the first time in our nation's history, the Supreme Court has sanctioned funding of religion with public funds," said J. Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. "Our founders understood that, for religion to be meaningful it must be voluntary, freed from government assistance and control."

Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy cautioned that the court was not opening the door to more direct public funding of religious activities, and said courts must guard against such "abuse." He stressed that states should treat student groups neutrally by offering support to religious and nonreligious groups on equal terms.
"We have held that the guarantee of neutrality is respected, not offended," he wrote, "when the government, following neutral criteria and evenhanded policies, extends benefits to recipients whose ideologies and viewpoints, including religious ones, are broad and diverse."

Kennedy was joined by Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Dissenting, Justice David H. Souter said the court was turning away from fundamental guarantees of the separation of church and state.

"The court today, for the first time, approves direct funding of core religious activities by an arm of the state." He was joined by Justices John Paul Stevens, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Steven G. Breyer.

The church-state cases yesterday involved two aspects of the First Amendment that the court has tried to balance for decades: one guaranteeing free speech and the other ensuring that government "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." But the decisions were closely tied to the peculiar facts of each case and did not attempt to set broader standards for how governments should treat religious activities.

Conservatives, who have been lobbying for a "religious equality" amendment to the Constitution that would ease the separation between church and state, said yesterday's Supreme Court decisions only reinforced the need for it. Opponents of such an amendment said these rulings make it clear that the court is not at all hostile to religion.

In the University of Virginia case, former student Ronald W. Rosenberger had sought $5,800 from a student activities fund to publish "Wide Awake: A Christian Perspective at the University of Virginia." He argued that among the 118 student organizations receiving funds were Jewish, Muslim and other Christian groups, some that also published magazines.

The university argued that those groups could be funded because their activities and magazines were primarily cultural and not religious. But because many of the articles in "Wide Awake" were explicitly religious, the university could not allow student activity funds to subsidize publication.

He sued, but lower federal courts upheld the university policy, as did the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals which said providing the subsidy would have breached the First Amendment mandate against government establishment of religion.

Reversing that yesterday in the Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of University of Virginia decision, the Supreme Court said, "Vital First Amendment speech principles are at stake here. The first danger to liberty lies in granting the state the power to examine publications to determine whether or not they are based on some ultimate idea and if so for the state to classify them."

Kennedy said the court recognizes "dangers where the government makes direct money payments" to religious institutions. But in the University of Virginia
case, he said, the university could have paid the funds to a magazine printer, in effect a neutral, secular third party. The majority also emphasized that Wide Awake magazine was asking for funding from student fees, not taxpayer dollars.

In his dissent, Souter noted that the Wide Awake magazine refers extensively to Jesus Christ or God, and he said the court's ruling could open the door to greater state entanglement with religion.

Advocates on both side of issue debated yesterday how much impact the ruling will have on controversial proposals to provide government funding for other religious activities such as tuition vouchers for religious schools.

"The grant of a voucher . . . is simply religious equality, and the Supreme Court in its decision today clearly supports an equality position," Sekulow of the American Center for Law and Justice said.

But August Steinhilber, general counsel for the National School Boards Association, which opposes school vouchers, said that "fortunately for us, the majority opinion spends a long time explaining that this is not tax money, that this is student money. . . . If there should be an attempt to move toward aiding of church-related schools, we have more than enough room to file suit, and a reasonable chance of success."

At the University of Virginia, Hovey Dabney, rector of the Board of Visitors, said the decision could be "far-reaching . . . because so many other colleges and universities fund [groups] exactly the way we do."

The Ohio case, Capitol Square Review v. Pinette, began when Klansmen tried to erect a 10-foot cross on a public square adjoining the state Capitol in December 1993. State officials objected although they permitted a Christmas tree and menorah to be displayed there.

The state had said the Christmas tree and menorah were allowed because they had a cultural significance beyond religion, while the cross conveyed a purely sectarian message advancing Christianity.

The Klan sued, alleging that its rights of free speech and free exercise of religion were denied, and lower courts agreed. The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said a private group's unattended display of a religious symbol in a public forum does not violate the Establishment Clause. The court said "the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution cannot depend upon the fanciful perceptions of some hypothetical dolt," who may not realize the cross was a message from private citizens, not the government.

The court's ruling may make it easier for private groups to sponsor religious displays on public property, lessening some of the conflicts that have divided many communities over whether to exhibit creches and menorahs in public parks or town halls.

Seven justices affirmed the appeals ruling, but they differed in their reasoning.
Justice Scalia, joined by Rehnquist, Kennedy and Thomas, said that the state cannot ban all private religious speech from an area used as a public forum. Justices Souter, O'Connor and Breyer said the state need only make clear that it is not endorsing religion.

Writing separately, Thomas agreed that the cross should be allowed but he asserted that the Klan may have been engaging in "a political act, not a Christian one."

Dissenting, Ginsburg said, "If the aim of the Establishment Clause is genuinely to uncouple government from church, a state may not permit, and a court may not order, a display of this character." Stevens also dissented.

Staff writer David Karp in Fairfax contributed to this report.
Copyright 1995 The Washington Post
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August 21, 1995, Monday, Final Edition

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 1250 words

BYLINE: Laurie Goodstein, Washington Post Staff Writer

DATELINE: RANDALLSTOWN, Md.

BODY:
When two brothers opened a small Christian retail shop called Peter & John Trustworthy here 31 years ago, they stocked it primarily with King James Bibles, Sunday school supplies and communion wafers.

This summer they moved to a bigger location in a shopping mall and invested in the deluxe makeover recommended by a nationally known Christian marketing consultant. Now there's a cappuccino bar, Christian "elevator" music and a toy section that displays GI Joe-size "Bible Action Figures" such as John the Baptist. Three cash registers ring up sales of Jesus T-shirts and blankets stitched with proverbs, and the whole store carries the faint, meadowy aroma of Scripture Fresh Scents air freshener ($ 2.45 a packet).

"Christian stores today are trying to keep up with the world of marketing," said Gilbert Miller, manager of Trustworthy, pointing out six overhead screens playing Christian music videos. "If you're used to shopping in a mall, at Macy's or another department store, you're used to a high-class atmosphere. Well, this is a high-class model of a Christian store."

Fueled by Americans' concern that Hollywood and shopping mall culture are undermining their children's values, a parallel marketplace of Christian virtuousness is flourishing across the country. Shops such as Trustworthy that once stocked their shelves entirely with sacred objects and religious articles have moved those items to the rear to make way for a dizzying selection of Christian gifts, software, household goods and inspirational books.

Among their most popular items are millions of righteous children's videos unavailable in mainstream outlets, and a wide selection of Christian rock, rap and reggae seldom seen in secular music stores. A shopper will rarely find, for example, a "McGee and Me" video at a Blockbuster video store, yet more than 2.3 million of these modern morality tales for pre-teenagers have been sold through Christian retail stores and catalogues.

"We're seeing baby boomers coming into the stores and looking for books that will help them to raise their children" because they don't think they can rely on Hollywood or the schools to teach positive morals, said Bill Anderson, president and CEO of the Christian Booksellers Association, which drew 2,555 store representatives to its convention in Denver last month.
America's religious pioneers have embraced capitalism and borrowed commercial techniques to promote their faith since the 1800s, when itinerant missionaries sold tracts door to door. But this decade has seen an explosion. The Christian retailing industry has tripled its annual sales since 1990, bringing in almost $3 billion in 1994, according to the Christian Booksellers Association. Ten years ago only a handful of Christian stores did $1 million or more in business annually. Today there are more than 100.

Religious retailers are adopting trends sweeping the secular market. For the one-stop shopper, they're building 25,000-square-foot "megastores," carrying everything from greeting cards to school supplies. Some Christian stores stay open until 11 p.m., and at least one keeps its doors open 24 hours a day between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Chains such as the Family Bookstores Co. swallow mom-and-pop Christian stores and build their customer bases with "frequent buyer" clubs.

Some secular businesses are rushing to snag a piece of the market. Chains such as Kmart and Barnes & Noble have expanded their selections of Christian books and merchandise. At least six publishing houses have created religious imprints in recent years.

"If you walked through the American Booksellers Association [June convention], you would have heard everywhere that religion is hot, as if it sort of broke like a wave from nowhere on top of big mainstream publishers," said Thomas Cahill, director of religious publishing for Doubleday.

In fact, said Cahill, "I'm not sure religion is a new trend. It's a deep, pervasive, abiding need of many people, and publishers have simply rediscovered it."

Although the Bible is the enduring bestseller in Christian retailing, publishers are pushing new versions for every conceivable audience. There are Bibles for teenagers, parents and recovering addicts, Bibles in genuine leather and Naugahyde, Bibles designed to be read one passage a day, Peter & John Trustworthy sells more than 4,000 different styles of Bibles.

But at this year's CBA convention, the Bibles were overshadowed by the elaborate displays of Christian consumer goods now being manufactured to meet the demand.

There were mouse pads and pogs, plastic angels and a line of date books called "The Master's Planner." There were bottles of "Heavenly Spring Water" and jars of "Taste of Heaven" jelly beans -- the label reads, in part, "Red is for the blood he gave, Green is for the grass he made . . . ."

The Christian retailers and their secular competitors are vying for a desirable clientele: primarily evangelical Christians with growing families and disposable income. A Gallup survey taken last May for USA Today and CNN found that 39 percent of the 1,000 people polled described themselves as evangelical or born-again Christians, and almost half of those had annual incomes of more than $30,000.

It's a far cry from the days when owners of "religious goods" stores
attempted to diversify their merchandise with "plastic napkin holders and doggie jackets that said 'God Loves You.'" said Bob Streight, who has been in the Christian retailing business for more than 20 years.

Streight is the Illinois makeover whiz who has renovated 90 Christian stores nationwide -- including Peter & John Trustworthy -- following a formula he designed to bring in upscale shoppers. A former J.C. Penney Co. store designer who sports chunky gold rings and a gold chain around his stained-glass pattern tie, Streight epitomizes the contemporary Christian retailers who see themselves as missionaries in the marketplace.

"Others have ministries to children in the streets of Ethiopia, to people in Watts, to the homeless in Times Square," Streight said in an interview. "I have a ministry to yuppies, specifically to yuppie females."

Exit polls commissioned by Streight showed that more than 88 percent of those who shop at Christian stores are women between the ages of 24 and 49. Streight looks for ways to attract those shoppers to Christian stores and keep them there.

But the burgeoning Christian men's movement, exemplified by the "Promise Keepers" revival rallies filling stadiums this summer, has created another new market for Christian goods. The hottest items in the exhibit hall at last month's CBA conference were books and T-shirts designed to reinforce the faith of evangelical males.

CBA president Anderson said each product should "edify and glorify Jesus Christ." But some in the industry ask themselves whether they aren't compromising their mission by catering to Americans' most materialistic instincts.

Retailer Streight said that some evenings as he watches television with his wife and sees footage of starving children in Africa or victims of the war in Bosnia, he has "twinges of doubt" about whether his ministry to yuppies is a worthy calling.

But then he tells himself that there are "in this very materialistic society a lot of people on spiritual quest. There are people with tremendous needs that only Christian retailing is going to meet." He says his prayers and sleeps soundly.
At mealt ime 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 Byrne 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 heartbroken 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?"

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH