John Chadwick

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Evangelicals pushing America toward the right

It was Independence Day, but the Rev. Walter Healy had Election Day on his mind.

Healy, the pastor of a church in Toms River, confronted his congregation with a troubling vision of America.

The nation's Christian heritage, he said, had been undermined by secularists bent on removing God from the culture.

"For four decades, I've been watching the total erosion of the foundations of truth in this nation," Healy told members of the Church of Grace and Peace.

And, after a passionate sermon in which he mocked the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, Healy concluded there was just one solution to the nation's problems.

"For the voice of God to begin to be heard again in the land, you have to vote," he said.

Healy didn't stop there. His church registered more than 100 new voters for the presidential election during the next several months, he said in a recent interview. And he joined other pastors in forming a non-profit group to bring conservative causes to the forefront of the election and New Jersey politics.

Few would contend that Healy, whose Pentecostal church has about 1,000 members, was a key political player in New Jersey, let alone nationally.

But he is one small part of an increasingly influential movement of evangelical Christians mobilizing churchgoers into a political force. It's a force that has been in the making for 25 years, but seemed to break through in the 2004 election, when it rallied pastors and the faithful to connect their political decisions with their religious convictions.

"For years, the church has been a sleeping giant," said Peter Brandt of Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian ministry and one of the central players in the effort to get evangelicals to vote. "But we saw the results of the church waking up in the last election."

Now, with a president they view as one of their own, the movement's leaders are hoping to shape the nation's agenda as never before.

In the short term, they are agitating for a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a bond between a man and woman. In the long run, they hope to recast society in a more conservative mold through installation of a cooperative judiciary, one that will not only overturn Roe v. Wade - the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion - but will also relegate other hot-button social issues to state legislatures.
"The most important goal is to end the process by which unelected and unaccountable individuals are creating laws out of the blue," Brandt said. "What we see is that when the radical left cannot get its way, it turns to the judiciary and finds someone who will change laws that can't be changed in any other way."

Even in New Jersey, which is reliably centrist or liberal on most issues, religious conservatives are gaining strength, in part by forming an alliance with African-Americans opposed to gay marriage and supportive of school vouchers.

"There's been fertilizing going on for years, and you're just starting to see the fruit now," said John Tomicki, a veteran conservative activist and executive director of the Trenton-based League of American Families. "Even on the Democratic side, there are more and more legislators requesting meetings with me."

Whether the movement can maintain its momentum remains to be seen. Polling data for the last election suggest evangelicals didn't single-handedly clinch Bush's reelection.

"Bush had a pretty broad coalition," said John C. Green, a professor at the University of Akron and an expert on the role of religion in politics. "Evangelicals were an essential part of the base, but he also improved among Jews and Hispanics, and it was all just big enough to get 51 percent."

Even so, the campaign showed evangelicals to be highly organized, politically savvy and able to communicate seamlessly with millions of other Christians in the evocative language of Scripture.

A well-tuned machine

The effort to marshal the vast body of churchgoers into an electoral bloc was a striking one. It was both top-down and bottom-up: Powerful, national organizations, such as Focus on the Family, employed multimedia campaigns to urge Christians to vote their values, while independent pastors, such as Healy, made sure that message echoed among the pews with rousing sermons, voter registration drives and distribution of voter guides.

At times, the effort transformed the Bible from a compendium of faith and wisdom to a political manifesto. It didn't make direct endorsements but led unerringly to the Republican column.

The national "I Vote Values" campaign, for example, explicitly urged Christians to look beyond issues such as the economy, health care and education. Instead, its Web site told Christians to focus on three "non-negotiable" issues: stopping abortion, preventing embryonic stem-cell research and banning gay marriage.

Those perusing the Web site could click on a variety of links that disdained any compromise. "Tolerance is the virtue of those who believe in nothing," one proclaimed.

The site generated 8 million hits last year, organizers said.

Mass e-mailings by other Christian organizations went further, warning of an America descending into chaos and depravity. One mailing spoke darkly of public schools where children were learning how to stage a "simulated jihad." Another one about gay marriage said that losing the "culture war" would be tantamount to surrendering to the "terrorists within."
Some groups examined typically Democratic issues, such as environmental protection and government-supported welfare, through a biblical lens and came up with interpretations that pointed sharply right.

"It is the responsibility of believers [not government institutions] to help the poor and widows and orphans," read one mailing, titled "What Does God Say About the Issues?" It quoted Jewish and Christian scripture to support its arguments.

The Republican Party also got into the act, sending mailings to Arkansas and West Virginia voters that said "Liberals," if elected, would ban the Bible.

An estimated 3.5 million new evangelical voters went to the polls, and Bush won an estimated 80 percent of the overall evangelical vote, exit polls showed.

Even political opponents profess admiration for the disciplined ground game conducted by groups such as Focus on the Family.

"There was just this constant bombardment of e-mails on gay marriage," said Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "And the message strongly stated that the future of the nation hinged on that issue."

Some evangelicals are reveling in what they see as an epochal victory. The legacy of the 1960s, with its anti-war protests and sexual revolution, had finally been vanquished, said Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention and the architect of the "I Vote Values" campaign.

"Those who think George Bush is just some sort of natural disaster don't really understand what has transpired," said Land, who leads the convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. "The next president is going to look a lot like George Bush, because what happened in 2004 was the culmination of long-term historical forces."

Indeed, this change did not come overnight.

Long, quiet history

Evangelical Christianity in America goes back to the Great Awakening of the 1700s, when religious revivals swept through the Colonies, inspiring the theologian Jonathan Edwards to write that his New England town "seemed to be full of the presence of God."

Today, white evangelicals number about 55 million, or 25 percent of the voting-age population, according to telephone polls cited by Green.

But their influence had never been as large as their numbers. Typically, only about half vote in presidential elections. In 2004, that rose to an estimated 57 to 60 percent, reflecting an overall increase in voter turnout.

Still, many evangelicals believe societal change comes solely through conversion to Christ, not partisan politics.
"For years, evangelicals have had the notion that we're just passing through this world and [politics] doesn't matter," said the Rev. Lloyd Pulley, senior pastor at Calvary Chapel Old Bridge, a megachurch in Middlesex County.

Those who have been involved in public affairs don't necessarily fit the stereotype of the Christian-right activist focused solely on sexual morality or prayer in school.

The National Association of Evangelicals, for example, recently issued a 12-page document, calling on Christians to become involved in a range of issues - from human rights to the environment to fighting AIDS - and to understand the complicated facts behind the issues.

"If we're going to be people of the book, we have to be people of the whole book," said Richard Cizik, the association's vice president for governmental affairs. "The whole Gospel has as much to say about religious freedom, about poverty, about the underclass and the environment as it does about protecting family definitions and the sanctity of human life."

Even so, a highly partisan Christian movement, embracing family values and the Republican Party, began to take hold in the 1980s and has steadily picked up steam.

"Evangelicals have become three things since 1980: more organized politically, more Republican and more active participants in politics," said Green, the University of Akron professor. "The last election was really the culmination of a very long pattern."

Making gains in N.J.

Even in generally liberal New Jersey, pastors speak of a slow awakening. They say it's fueled not just by controversial social issues, such as abortion, but a feeling that Bible-believing Christians are being marginalized in an America that has forgotten its roots.

"It's gotten to the point where you can have Wiccans in the classroom but not Christians," the Rev. Frank Dupree, of Living Water Church in North Arlington, said of those who practice a form of pagan nature worship. "When we speak out for traditional values, we're labeled as homophobes, we're ridiculed, and we lose our voice."

A pastor in Elizabeth goes further.

"The whole secular Western viewpoint is waging a subtle war against us," said the Rev. Gary Hartley of Christ Fellowship.

Hartley, Dupree and Healy belong to a loose network of New Jersey pastors that is building a collective conservative voice. Although their influence is limited in New Jersey politics, they can be a force in Republican primaries, and helped Bret Schundler defeat Bob Franks in the 2001 gubernatorial race.

They also see a promising trend. Nationwide and around the state, their churches have generally been growing, while the liberal mainline Protestant tradition has been in decline.

Calvary Chapel Old Bridge, for example, began with a handful of worshipers 20 years ago and now draws almost 4,000 to a converted warehouse every Sunday. And the pastor isn't shy about invoking the culture wars.
Pulley delivered a sermon in January that traced the roots of the nation's problems back to 1962, when the Supreme Court struck down mandatory school prayer.

"I am very concerned about this nation ... that has gone back on its foundation," Pulley said in the sermon that could be heard as far north as the Catskills in New York on a radio station the church runs. "Who knows how much longer we can survive?"

E-mails fuel message

The picture of a nation on the brink of disaster was a familiar one in the last election. It was hammered home in a constant volley of e-mails.

One reported that California seventh-graders were learning Islam and staging a "simulated jihad" in class.

Another warned about a hate crimes bill that might make it a crime to criticize homosexuality.

A third, sent by the noted conservative Gary Bauer, likened the battle against gay marriage to the war on terrorism.

"If we lose the culture war here at home, our fundamental institutions will crumble and be destroyed just as surely as if they were violently attacked by any weapon in the terrorist's arsenal," Bauer wrote.

All three e-mails were among dozens sent before the election to about 100 members of Calvary Chapel Old Bridge who asked to receive such updates.

Those e-mails told only part of the story. For example, a California judge found the "simulated jihad" was harmless role-playing and dismissed a lawsuit filed against the school district by a Christian couple.

Tony Paskitti, a Calvary Chapel member who runs the congregation's Community Action and Awareness ministry, said the e-mails aren't intended to present the whole story, but rather to focus on the Christian perspective.

"A lot of times, we are shielded from things that are going on," said Paskitti, who surfs the Internet for material he thinks is relevant to Christians and sends it to the list's members. "We get the mainstream media, which isn't balanced."

Many evangelicals agree.

They are reaching millions with their own media, appealing directly to believers with concerns that are largely moral and spiritual, and with a tone that is frequently urgent.

Focus on the Family, for example, sends daily news bulletins to about 114,000 e-mail subscribers. The bylined reports cut a wide swath, covering political battles in Washington, but also zooming in to report on controversies in the states.

One recent article sought to rally readers against a Colorado bill aimed at preventing workplace discrimination against homosexuals.
"Men dressed as women could be teaching at your child's public school," the article warned.

But Focus doesn't limit itself to politics. It also provides a remarkable range of spiritual and emotional assistance, from child-rearing tips to marriage advice to a crisis hot line.

"They provide a balm for what ails a lot of people," said Boston, of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. "I'm not aware of any equivalent on the moderate or liberal side of religion."

Exactly how influential such efforts were in getting evangelicals to vote last year may never be known.

But there's no question the 2004 campaign ushered in the era of the "values voter," providing evangelicals with a powerful voice in public affairs and prompting painful introspection among Democrats.

A Wayne pastor said he saw evidence of newly invigorated evangelicals three days before the November election. After mentioning to his congregation at Calvary Temple that Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y. - a liberal icon - was speaking that day at a church in Newark, the Rev. Tom Keinath told the congregation that religious conservatives must also speak their consciences. He went on to outline the church's stand on the issues.

"They responded with an ovation," Keinath said. "They were relieved I wasn't going to acquiesce."

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True believers

What is an evangelical? The term traditionally meant one who spread the Gospel, from the Greek word for "bringing good news." Today, evangelical refers to a specific category of Protestant Christians that includes denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God, as well as a number of independent, non-denominational churches.

What do evangelicals believe? Evangelicals tend to be theological conservatives. They believe in the Bible as the infallible word of God, though not necessarily in the literal truth of every passage. Evangelicals stress the necessity of being "born again," or going through a conversion experience in which the believer develops a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Evangelicals believe that one must accept Jesus Christ as the savior to be saved and get into heaven. They emphasize faith over human works. Evangelicals are known for enthusiastically and energetically spreading their faith.

Who are some well-known evangelicals? Billy Graham is perhaps the most famous evangelical preacher in modern times and is universally admired in the evangelical world. President George W. Bush was a member of a United Methodist church prior to his election in 2000 - a denomination that is considered a "mainline" church rather than evangelical. Nevertheless, the president's personal story of how Jesus changed his life, his willingness to openly discuss his faith and his support for religion-based social service agencies resonates deeply with evangelicals.
Are all evangelicals members of the Christian right? No. Polling data from previous elections show evangelicals have been diverse in their voting habits, giving considerable support to Southern Democratic candidates, such as Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Today, organizations such as Sojourners and Evangelicals for Social Action are Christians who have distanced themselves from the Christian right by adopting a broad agenda of social issues including alleviating poverty and racism.

Why do so many evangelicals support the Republican Party? Unlike Catholics, who are divided on many social issues, there's broad agreement among evangelicals on issues such as abortion and homosexuality. In the 2004 election, the Republican Party made a concerted effort to focus attention on those issues, thus attracting much of their support.

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Evangelism's rise

The membership growth of evangelical denominations compared with that of mainline Protestant churches:

1990 2000 Increase/decrease

Evangelical

Assemblies of God 2.16 million 2.56 million 18.5 percent
Foursquare Gospel Church 255,092 347,367 36.1 percent
Southern Baptist Convention 18.94 million 19.88 million 4.9 percent

Mainline Protestant

Episcopal Church 2.44 million 2.31 million -5.3 percent
Presbyterian Church USA 3.55 million 3.14 million -11.5 percent
United Methodist Church 11.09 million 10.35 million -6.6 percent

Source: Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States 2000, Glenmary Research Center of Nashville, Tenn.
Minister who acted like a father now at center of a storm

No one ever thought of the Rev. Norman J. Kansfield as a rebel.

The gentle Midwestern native quietly worked for decades as a librarian and professor at several Christian colleges before becoming president of the prestigious New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1993.

Gray-haired and 65, he's known to North Jersey pastors simply as "Norm" and admired for his erudition and friendly manner.

He seems the very model of Dutch Protestant probity.

But on the day of his daughter's wedding, Kansfield crossed a line.

His daughter, Ann, tied the knot with another woman at a church in Northampton, Mass.

Kansfield officiated.

Clad in his church vestments, he read with emotion from the Book of Isaiah about a God who extends his kingdom of love beyond Israel to cover foreigners and eunuchs.

But Kansfield hadn't sought permission from the Reformed Church in America to perform a gay marriage. The denomination to which he has devoted his life voted last year to define marriage solely as a union between a man and a woman.

"We realized in making the wedding plans that there might be some dustup," Kansfield said last week.

He was being optimistic. The June 2004 wedding provoked a furious backlash that has devastated his family, damaged his career and divided the denomination.

In January, the seminary refused to renew Kansfield's contract, effectively ending his tenure as president. Last month, delegates for the denomination's annual convention, or synod, put him on trial, voted to strip him of his title of professor of theology and suspended him indefinitely from the ministry.

Kansfield's actions and the uncompromising response from the denomination's general synod have exposed deep fissures in the Reformed Church, a mainline denomination of 280,000 that has seemed relatively quiet compared with the very public battles over gay rights that have rocked the Episcopal, Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

"For gay people in the church, it's a little bit like in the military - don't ask, don't tell," said the Rev. Daniel Ogden of the Reformed Church of Oradell. "As a denomination, we see the centrality of the family as the central focus of our ministry. The homosexual community is seen as on the margins."
But after Ann Kansfield's wedding, sharp lines are being drawn within the denomination.

In some quarters, the opposition to gay marriage runs so strong that even pastors who know and like Kansfield applaud his punishment.

"I know Norm quite well, and I think his father's love for his daughter overtook him," said the Rev. Fred VanderMeer of Third Reformed Church of Hackensack. "There are times when you just have to say no. I believe marriage is only between a man and a woman. There's no halfway. You either accept it or you reject it."

A Clifton pastor who voted to sanction Kansfield said there was no ambivalence in his church.

"I'd say in my local church, there was no diversity of opinion whatsoever," said the Rev. Edward Surrern of Hope Reformed Church. "They were universally supportive of [the discipline] and universally concerned about his actions."

But others said the punishment was extreme.

"I think it made it difficult for good people to stay in church," said the Rev. Allan Janssen of the Community Church of Glen Rock. "I think there was a concerted effort to punish, and I find that unfortunate and not worthy of the church."

And some admire Kansfield for bringing a difficult issue to the forefront of a reluctant denomination. His actions produced results: Besides voting to punish Kansfield, the delegates approved a call for a denomination-wide dialogue on homosexuality and approved hiring a full-time facilitator to assist with the dialogue.

"Here it is 2005, and we haven't really had a dialogue on how inclusive the Christian community should be," said the Rev. Steve Giordano, a longtime Bergenfield pastor who moved last year to Long Island. "If you look at the example of Christ, he never excluded anyone. It was a dramatic and almost sacrificial effort by Norm that brought the message to the front burner."

Last week, Kansfield and his wife, Mary, were packing their belongings, preparing to leave the elegant 139-year-old president's house in New Brunswick.

Shocked by the punishment meted out by the denomination and stung by criticism that Kansfield had forsaken the Bible, the couple is moving to a rural home in Pennsylvania, where Kansfield plans to fish and contemplate his next move. He said he may seek a new trial next year.

"The hurtful part for me was receiving these very angry responses that said, 'Haven't you ever read your Bible?'." Kansfield said in his soon-to-be vacated private study, where the walls are lined with bookshelves that stretch to the ceiling.

A tall, stocky man who speaks with the exacting precision of a professor and the mild manner of a chaplain, Kansfield said he thinks about leaving the denomination. Yet he can't bring himself to sever the connection that has defined his life.

"I've never lived apart from the Reformed Church," he said. "Sixty-five years is a long time to give up on something because one general synod takes a negative view of something I've done."
The Reformed Church in America is one of the oldest mainline denominations in the country, dating back to the 1600s and the arrival of Dutch Calvinists. The denomination has long had a strong presence in New Jersey, with about 30,000 adherents and 130 churches.

Kansfield and his wife grew up in predominantly Dutch communities in the Midwest, gravitating at an early age to their families' Reformed congregations. They met at Hope College, a school affiliated with the denomination in Holland, Mich.

Neither of them see the lesbian wedding as a break with the Christian values they learned while growing up in church-run institutions.

"We don't understand the unwillingness of parents to stand by their children," Mary Kansfield said. "This is a deviation from what we were taught."

Indeed, Norman Kansfield said his decision to perform the wedding was an act of parental love, not a theological statement.

"It was a wedding gift I could give my daughter," he said. "And I have a stack of letters from pastors who say, 'I can understand why you had to do it.'-"
A priest who's been there eases the pain for alcoholics

The priest began the Mass with an unusual introduction.

"My name is Jim, and I'm an alcoholic."

Jim is the Rev. James McKenna, who made his declaration on a recent Saturday afternoon from the altar of a Roman Catholic parish in Ramsey.

His admission wasn't news to the several hundred casually dressed people in the pews. Most were also alcoholics. They, or people like them, have been following McKenna to monthly Masses around Bergen County for two decades.

That's because in his hands, the traditional Catholic Mass becomes a healing, meditative respite for alcoholics battling their demons.

"Lord in heaven, your son Jesus accepted suffering," McKenna said at the recent service. "May all of us who suffer pain, illness or disease know that we are joined to Christ in suffering."

He prayed aloud for several local men who've wound up in jail because of their drinking problems. He preached a homily about the virtue of patience during recovery. And he invited audience members to receive Communion by reminding them that Jesus came to heal the sick.

When it was over, McKenna and dozens of churchgoers went to the parish hall for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

"I don't know anybody who does what Father Jim does," said Joanne O'Neill, a Hackensack resident who isn't an alcoholic but has a relative who is. "This is an oasis for people."

McKenna, sober for 23 years, draws as many as 800 people to the Saturday afternoon "recovery Masses." About 400 showed up for July's Mass - the first one he celebrated at St. Paul's Church after a decade at a Closter parish 15 miles away.

The diverse crowd reflected both McKenna's broad appeal and the indiscriminate reach of alcoholism: Catholics, both practicing and lapsed; many Protestants, and some Jews filled the pews.

They were just as varied in their professions: construction workers, retired police officers, business executives.

Ken Restel, a construction worker from Hackensack, said attending the Masses has helped him return to his faith after a long battle with the bottle. His understanding of God, he said, has evolved from the punishing God of his Catholic school youth to a compassionate, merciful God who restores broken lives.
"Going to church wasn't something that I initially thought would go hand in hand with recovery," he said. "But Father Jim knows where we've been, and he knows the pain we go through. He is not just an ordinary person who doesn't understand."

For some, the Mass is their sole spiritual outlet - besides 12-step meetings.

Others already attend a house of worship. But they also long to be part of a community of believers struggling to turn their lives around.

"My regular church is nice, but it's quite formal," said a woman from Leonia whose husband is an alcoholic. "Father Jim gives us that human feeling. We can be stupid. We can make mistakes. And he always relates to us. That's the wonderful feeling."

McKenna, a Cliffside Park native, took his first drink at age 30, egged on by fellow priests and Catholic brothers at a 1965 party for the faculty at Marist High School in Bayonne.

Within a few years, he was drinking alone in bars. And by the late 1970s, he was ready to quit the priesthood.

"It was a quick descent," he said.

The Newark Archdiocese sent him to a church-run psychiatric center near Boston, where doctors told him that he was depressed. But then he met a psychologist, Vincent Billotti, who offered a different diagnosis.

"He told me, 'Jim, you're not psychotic, you're an alcoholic,'" McKenna said. "It was a life-changing moment - the beginning of my realization that I was depressed because I was drinking."

After a stay at an alcohol rehabilitation clinic, McKenna came back to North Jersey and turned his life around, creating a new ministry from the ashes of his past.

He knew from the start exactly what he wanted to accomplish: spread the word that alcoholism was a disease, not a moral failing, and provide a distinctly Catholic framework to complement the 12-step recovery program that stresses the need for a higher power.

"I thought I could provide the spiritual care for the type of deprivation that alcoholics go through," McKenna said. "When you're unable to stop drinking, there's a feeling that you're beyond redemption and there's no hope. You feel completely bereft of salvation. There's not even the slightest inkling of light on the horizon."

Now 70, McKenna is trim, bald and wears glasses. He looks like a monk; in fact, he once spent a year in a monastery. But he is also genial and talkative, with a penchant for self-deprecating humor.

He was influenced early on by the writings of Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk and popular 20th century theologian. McKenna still buys Merton's books and gives them away.

"He saw God in the reality of the human condition," McKenna said. "That's what I liked about Merton."
At each Mass, McKenna blends his life experience and spirituality into a seamless approach. He started the July service with a stark warning about isolation.

"Alcohol likes us when we're alone, because it kill us when we're alone," he said.

But he also told bittersweet stories, like the one about his inebriated uncle staring through the window of a Catholic school and being scolded by a stern nun. McKenna, who was in the class, was embarrassed. But he realized later there was another boy who felt even worse - the uncle's son.

"I thought later, 'My God, what must he be feeling?'" McKenna said.

The Mass had some familiar touches for those who attend 12-step meetings. At McKenna's behest, audience members rose and told how many years they have been sober, triggering robust applause.

O'Neill, the woman from Hackensack, said the Masses deepened her sense of solidarity with people she saw at 12-step meetings.

"I was Catholic, I was attending meetings and the two things came together," she said. "It took what we shared in the rooms and connected it to my faith, and it was Father Jim who made it possible."

The Masses end with everyone joining hands for a prayer.

Charles Lynch, a retired police officer, said it was in that moment that he once experienced an epiphany. Lynch, of Rockland County, said he felt a powerful sensation that entered one clasped hand, passed through his body and out the other hand.

"There I was, looking up at the stained-glass window of Jesus and the blessed mother, and I had this sudden chill," Lynch said. "It's not the kind of thing I could talk about outside of this group. I told one of the other guys, and he said, 'Charlie, that's your high power.' "

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Spotlight

Name: The Rev. James McKenna

Hometown: Ramsey

Occupation: Catholic priest who performs a special healing Mass for alcoholics

Age: 70

Background: Has worked in parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Newark

Quote: "When you're unable to stop drinking, there's a feeling that you're beyond redemption."

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Interest in Dalai Lama shows Buddhism's reach

32,000 to attend his Rutgers speech

When the Dalai Lama delivered his first lecture to an American audience, the year was 1979, and the place was in northwestern New Jersey, at an obscure Buddhist teaching center.

"We had maybe several hundred people," said Diana Cutler, who has lived at the center for decades. "He wasn't famous then."

That has changed.

On Sunday, the 75-year-old leader of Tibetan Buddhism and global human rights champion will address more than 32,000 people at Rutgers University's football stadium - one of Rutgers' largest crowds for a guest speaker.

The appearance, during which he will speak on "Peace, War and Reconciliation," has electrified the university, inspiring a series of events throughout the semester, including films with Tibetan themes, lectures on global conflict and exhibits of Asian art.

But the sheer number planning to attend also has served notice of a change going on outside the campus: Buddhism has entered the mainstream of the American religious landscape, spreading from remote monasteries and university lecture halls to suburbs like Ridgewood and Wyckoff.

"People don't find it so weird anymore when you say you're a Buddhist," said Amy Hertz, the vice president of Morgan Road Books, which last week published the latest Dalai Lama-penned book, "The Universe in a Single Atom."

Hertz said a previous book co-written by the Dalai Lama, "The Art of Happiness," was so popular that it sold a million U.S. copies in hardcover and turned up in scenes on "Friends" and "Sex and the City."

"When you see Buddhism popping up on TV, you know it's booming," Hertz said.

Yet a more telling change may be happening off-screen.

In North Jersey, American converts to Buddhism have been organizing their own distinctive communities, meeting in homes, churches and small halls. Although these sanghas, or practice communities, are barely a blip on the radar screen compared with the growth of Muslims or evangelical Christians, they're drawing a steady supply of people seeking an alternative to institutional religion.

"There isn't a leader telling you what you should feel or believe, and that's very appealing to many people," said Bernard Spitz, who founded a Zen Buddhist group in Ridgewood.

Spitz's group, which meets in the local Unitarian church, is small and informal and focuses mostly on weekly meditation classes that begin with the sound of a bell.
A Buddhist center in Wyckoff is taking the idea a step further, renting space in a medical building and offering everything from spiritual drumming to classes in natural healing to a youth group for Buddhist kids.

"In the 1960s and 1970s, everyone wanted to be a great monk or nun," said Paul Khan, the spiritual director of the High Mountain Crystal Lake Zen Community. "But today our people have careers, families and responsibilities in the community. We want to meet them on the ground."

The number of American Buddhists has been estimated at 2 million, with Asian immigrants outnumbering converts by a 3-1 ratio.

The religion dates back 2,500 years, to India, where a wealthy young man left his home to seek an explanation for human suffering. He became the Buddha, or enlightened one.

Buddhists believe that life is filled with suffering, but that humans can alleviate suffering by controlling their desires, overcoming ignorance and leading moral lives. Buddhists meditate to achieve a state of nirvana, or a cessation of suffering.

"It's really about learning how to let go of our attachment to the self," said Joan Hoeberichts, who runs Heart Circle Sangha, a second Buddhist group in Ridgewood. "When you meditate, your connection to others becomes more transparent, and suffering is reduced."

Buddhism began making inroads into America through the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s.

And one key destination for aspiring Buddhists was the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center, the remote Warren County site where the Dalai Lama spoke in 1979. The center attracted several generations of young seekers eager to learn the religion firsthand from Tibetan monks.

"I came here at 22 and never left," said Joshua Cutler, who runs the center with Diana, his wife. "I had it in the back of my mind that I really wanted to pursue the teachings. I had no intention to do anything else."

But the Cutlers' current students have different priorities. They're typically adults trying to manage family and careers. They come every Sunday, seeking teachings that they can incorporate into their daily lives.

"My typical Sunday consists of church in the morning, and the Buddhist center in the afternoon," said Betty Levy, a practicing Catholic and a resident of Whitehouse Station near the Pennsylvania border.

Unlike an earlier generation of aspiring Buddhists, Levy didn't discover the center while on a spiritual trek. Instead, she met Diana Cutler while both women were waiting for their cars to be repaired at a local auto dealership.

And after three years of classes, Levy said Buddhism is making her a better Christian.

"In the Gospels, Christ is teaching how to live," Levy said. "And Buddhism helps give me the tools to live like we should - to put others first, to control anger and to be compassionate."
The Cutlers, now in their late 50s, still embrace a quiet, austere lifestyle that they learned from their mentor, a Tibetan monk named Geshe Ngawang Wangyal.

But they also said the new wave of students is an encouraging sign that Buddhism is gaining mainstream acceptance.

"It's gotten to the point where people stop me in the supermarket and ask me about the Dalai Lama," Diana Cutler said. "They want to know how he's doing and when he's coming back."

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(SIDEBAR)

Fast facts

* The Dalai Lama will speak Sunday to more than 32,000 people at Rutgers Stadium.

* The Dalai Lama is the leader of Tibetan Buddhism and a global human rights advocate.

* Buddhism has more than 300 million followers worldwide and 2 million in the United States.

* Converts say the religion helps relieve inner suffering.

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In his sister's name

Brother continues quest for justice for murdered nuns

Ita Ford was a Brooklyn-born nun working in violent, impoverished El Salvador.

Her older brother, Bill Ford, was living a very different life in 1980, practicing law on Wall Street and raising a family in Montclair.

"I wasn't really thinking about Central America at all," he said.

That changed in an instant.

Ford was at home, enjoying his newborn sixth child, in early December when a telephone call from the Maryknoll Sisters, his sister's order, changed his life. Ita Ford was among four American Catholic churchwomen missing in El Salvador.

Within minutes, he was on the phone with the U.S. ambassador in San Salvador.

"He told me there was about a 10 or 15 percent chance the women were alive," Ford said.

The grim appraisal was on target. The bodies were found the next day on the side of a dirt road. They had been raped and shot.

Ita Ford, 40, was buried in El Salvador, in accordance with the Maryknoll tradition of burying missionaries in the countries where they die.

Back in New Jersey, Bill Ford huddled with his family.

"We retreated into a cocoon," he said. "It was a very confusing time."

But it was also an awakening. Ford began to understand that his sister's death was not a random act of violence. And he would soon launch his own search for answers - a journey that would put him on a collision course with his own government.

It's a journey that continues, 25 years later.

"It really shook me," said Ford, who will travel to El Salvador this week for the 25th anniversary of the killings. "Not only that American nuns would be killed, but that they would be killed by the people the Reagan administration was trying to sell as our best friends."

The murders came amid a civil war sparked by years of economic exploitation and government repression. The U.S.-backed Salvadoran military, which was protecting wealthy landowning families and fighting a leftist guerrilla movement, regarded church workers like Ita Ford as subversives, because they sided with the poor. As a result, suspicion immediately fell upon the nation's security forces and its notorious paramilitary death squads.
That year, 1980, already had been remarkably violent. Archbishop Oscar Romero - whose impassioned calls for justice had drawn Ita Ford to El Salvador - was shot and killed in March at the altar of a San Salvador chapel while celebrating Mass.

And just as the Salvadoran people rallied around their martyred archbishop, many American church activists would come to identify with the four churchwomen and their brand of liberation theology - which emphasized the need for the Catholic Church to stand by the poor.

"This became a very personal event," said Sister Eleanor Goekler, who serves in Paterson with the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God and will attend a memorial service in El Salvador. "These women were acting out their convictions as Catholics living the Gospel, and we felt personally connected to them."

Eventually and under intense U.S. pressure, five low-ranking members of El Salvador's National Guard were convicted of killing the women and sentenced to 30 years in prison. The United States considers the case closed and is now focused on the Muslim world, rather than Central America, and on stopping terrorism, not communism.

Yet little has changed for Bill Ford. He still seeks justice and the identities of the Salvadoran military commanders he suspects of ordering the murders. And he is still prodding the U.S. government to release all the classified documents from that era.

"We may not learn all the answers in my lifetime," said Ford, whose plainspoken manner belies his boardroom years. "One of my kids may have to pick it up."

But his quest has left him with more than just anger and grief.

There's also awe for his sister's choice of a path radically different from his own.

"Where did she get her vocation?" he asks, sitting in his Montclair home at a table covered with photos of Ita and a recently published book of her letters. "The short answer is I don't know."

A violent land

Bill Ford knew his sister was working in a strife-torn nation, but didn't realize the extent of the danger.

"We naively thought that because Ita was an American, nobody would touch her," he said.

In fact, Ita Ford worked in one of the most violent regions in El Salvador - the province of Chalatenango - a farming area and the scene of heavy fighting between rebels and government forces.

The military and security forces, in their efforts to root out rebels, attacked any village suspected of harboring insurgents.

"The army would basically go in and kill all the men," said the Rev. Paul Schindler, a priest who worked with Ford in El Salvador and is now a pastor in Ohio. "You'd get women and children left behind, and their houses had been burned down."
Ita Ford helped the displaced peasants find food and shelter, comb the area for missing loved ones and move to refugee camps in San Salvador. She had already worked in violent Chile during the early 1970s, but was appalled by the Salvadoran bloodshed. Nevertheless, she refused to abandon her mission.

"She was a pixie with quite a head on her shoulders," said Maryknoll Sister Madeline Dorsey, who also worked in El Salvador. "She was certain she was where God wanted her to be."

Indeed, Ford recited Romero's words to a gathering of Maryknoll nuns in Nicaragua late that November.

"Those who are committed to the poor must risk the same fate as the poor," she said. "And in El Salvador, we know what the fate of the poor signifies: to disappear, to be tortured, to be captive and to be found dead."

On Dec. 2, Ford flew back to El Salvador, where she and Sister Maura Clarke were picked up by two colleagues, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan, a lay missionary. The four women were traveling in a van when they were stopped at a military roadblock just past the international airport's entrance.

Eventually, five guardsmen, most of them dressed in civilian clothes, piled into the van and took the women on a 15-mile trip into a hilly, remote area.

They pulled off the road near the town of Santiago Nonualco in La Paz province and ordered everyone out. They shot the women, point-blank, with their rifles, leaving the bodies near the side of the dirt road, according to testimony in their trial.

The bodies were found the next day by peasants, who, thinking they were unidentified victims of the civil war, buried them in a cow pasture, stacked upon each other in a single grave.

Workers used ropes to pull the bodies from the ground the following day before a crowd that included Salvadoran authorities, U.S. Embassy officials and the women's fellow church workers. Bloody bandannas and the underwear of three of the women were found in the grave.

"It was ugly," Dorsey said. "Your faith comes in, you say, 'They are in heaven, and these are just their bodies.'"

She and others covered the bodies with grass and leaves to keep insects away. Then she went to Ita's body and wiped earth from her face.

"She had a very tranquil look," she said. "It was like she knew she was going home to God."

Schindler drove the bodies to San Salvador in the back of a pickup truck.

"I look at the [news] footage now, and I can tell I was in shock," he said.

But the murders only made the American church workers more certain of their mission.

"After the deaths, the [Salvadoran] people could see we were authentic," Schindler said. "They knew that we understood what it was like to be one of them."
Fighting Washington

While church workers began venerating Ita Ford as a martyr, her brother struggled to explain her death to his children.

"You can talk theoretically about evil in the world," Ford said. "But it's really tough to talk about it when the victim is your own sister."

Ford turned his grief and anger toward Washington, pressing the government to conduct a criminal investigation and release its findings to the public.

Resistance was swift and strong.

"The first request for information we sent to the CIA was returned with a request that we prove Ita Ford was dead," he said.

The U.S. government was fighting one of the last battles of the Cold War, and the Reagan administration insisted that El Salvador was at risk of a communist takeover that could spread through the hemisphere. Administration officials insisted the killings were the result of a few renegades and not the work of top Salvadoran military officials.

Nevertheless, the murders sparked a decade-long protest movement against U.S. involvement in Central America. Critics said the United States was supporting a brutal oligarchy that murdered indiscriminately.

Bill Ford was relentless, appearing before Congress, speaking publicly against U.S. foreign policy and enlisting the help of human rights advocates. Through it all, he and his allies have kept the case alive.

In 1993, a United Nations-sponsored commission found that the Salvadoran military had stonewalled any attempt to investigate the killings. In 1998, some of the convicted guardsmen said they had acted on orders from above. And U.S. documents released a short time later revealed the Salvadoran defense minister had told the State Department in 1985 that he suspected a military commander's involvement in the murders.

R. Scott Greathead, a Manhattan-based lawyer and human rights advocate, said the commander, Col. Oscar Edgardo Casanova Vejar, now runs a trucking company in El Salvador. Greathead interviewed Casanova in 1998 and said the man denied having anything do with the murders, insisting that he was never even questioned.

"The fact is there has never been a full investigation, either by the Salvadorans or U.S. authorities, that examines whether there were higher orders," said Greathead, who worked on the case for the women's families as a member of the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, which changed its name to Human Rights First last year. "But I expect we will continue to discover documents that will bring us closer to the truth."

The U.S. envoy to El Salvador from 1983 to 1985 said he tried vigorously to bring those responsible to justice.
"We got the guys who pulled the trigger, and I spent a hell of a lot of my time trying to get the people behind it," said Thomas R. Pickering, now a senior vice president with the Boeing Co. "But we didn't do it. They have their own culture, and it's a protective culture."

Today, Bill Ford is back where he started: filing requests for information with the government and waiting for answers.

But he has found some solace. Countless people have told him that his sister and the other women had changed their lives.

He also has seen his sister's spirit alive in El Salvador, where women have introduced him to babies named Ita in her honor.

And he has noticed her presence in his children, most of whom have embraced careers and activism that reflect Ita's passion for justice. His oldest, Miriam, runs a New York City medical clinic for the uninsured.

And, over time, Ford has come to see his own life in the light of his sister's legacy.

"When we were kids, I was the tolerant big brother, and she was the little sister," said Ford, who was dressed for Wall Street in red suspenders and shirt and tie. "I was the one who was going to do well, and she was going to do good.

"But time has shown me that I was the pygmy, and she was the giant."

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