

Millennial task force

From the Editors in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

The purported last year of the old millennium started with a vivid reminder that eschatological hopes and fears will be flourishing in the months of 1999. In Jerusalem on January 3, Israeli police arrested a group of U.S. Christians who were planning either to kill themselves or to have themselves killed in an effort to hasten the Second Coming of Christ.

The Concerned Christians, who originated in Denver, operate on the lunatic fringe of the millennialist movement (see story, page 50). Their leader, Monte Kim Miller, has said he expects to die and be resurrected in Jerusalem. Perhaps, like Marshall Applewhite of the Heaven's Gate cult, he sees himself as one of the "witnesses" or "prophets" whose death and resurrection in Jerusalem are part of the unfolding of the end times described in chapter 11 of the Book of Revelation.

Israeli police have already established a special task force to forestall violent incidents arising from groups like the Concerned Christians. A counter-apocalyptic investigative unit, a task force on millennium-related crimes--it sounds like a job for Dana Scully and Fox Mulder of television's X-Files. But clearly the influx of apocalyptic-minded Christians to Jerusalem is a deadly serious matter for Israeli authorities.

If ever there were a teaching moment for the church, this is it. Christians who look for the fulfillment of the apocalyptic texts in all their various details need to be reminded of those often-ignored words of Jesus regarding his return: "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). They need to be reminded too, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America said last fall in a pastoral letter written with an eye on the year 2000, that "there is no biblical basis for equating a year with Jesus' return, the coming of the kingdom of God, or the end of the world."

But it is also a teaching moment for those Christians who, though they may not pore over the the Book of Revelation or speculate about the timing of Jesus' return, do puzzle about the ultimate meaning and purpose of our all-too-human history. They

might be reminded that, however bizarre the beliefs and activities of people like Monte Miller, Christians share the conviction that history is not only headed somewhere, but headed toward a consummation in Christ, a time when all things will be united in Christ (Eph. 1:10). The creed proclaims that "Christ will come again," and the prayer regularly uttered by the lips of Christians is "Come, Lord Jesus." The good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is a word about the final outcome of all existence. Though we should be quite happy to leave the details of Christ's final triumph shrouded in mystery, the expectation of that event, and confidence in that triumph, cannot be abandoned lest the faith itself be abandoned.