Charismatic and mainline: Domestication of a movement

by John Dart in the March 7, 2006 issue

On Passion Sunday in 1960, the Episcopal pastor of a growing parish in suburban Los Angeles revealed his covert spiritual experiences of recent months. Unknown to most parishioners, he and 70 other members had been “speaking in tongues”—making utterances that most mainline churches equated with overheated Pentecostalism and Holy Roller tent revivals.

Dennis Bennett got through the 7:30 service without causing a commotion at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, which had 2,500 people on its rolls. At the end of the second service, however, an assistant priest pulled off his vestments, put them on the altar and stalked out, saying, “I can no longer work with this man!”

Tumult reigned in the patio. One man stood on a chair, shouting, “Throw out the damn tongue-speakers!” according to Bennett.

The parish treasurer at the time, M. Scott Pruyn, in a letter to this writer years later, said that he and the senior warden confronted Bennett in the sacristy and told him he had broken a “solemn promise” that he would not preach on tongues-speaking “without first discussing the matter in executive session with the officers and vestry.” Bennett promptly agreed to resign.

Episcopal Bishop Francis Bloy of Los Angeles quickly forbade group meetings “under any semblance of parish auspices to be held where speaking in tongues is encouraged or actually engaged in.” Indeed, most tongues-speaking members stopped going to St. Mark’s.

The crisis at St. Mark’s escaped public notice until Jean Stone, a laywoman active in St. Mark’s tongues-speaking group, contacted *Newsweek* and *Time*. Both magazines carried stories about St. Mark’s that summer. Stone kept up her nationwide publicity campaign with letters, pamphlets and a quarterly magazine. Bennett accepted a post as rector of a struggling urban parish in Seattle that quickly flourished, lifting up

Bennett and his wife, Rita, as leaders in a burgeoning neo-Pentecostal movement.

Thus, a mere 16 miles away from the site of modern Pentecostalism's American beginnings in 1906 at Azusa Street in downtown Los Angeles, an Episcopal church in the Van Nuys section of the city sparked a latter-day Pentecostal revival.

Believers eventually took the name *charismatics* (from the Greek word for "gift") partly to distinguish this movement of better-educated, higher-income Christians from that of Pentecostals such as those belonging to the Assemblies of God, the Foursquare Gospel and the Church of God in Christ. Yet no less than the "classic" Pentecostals, the new charismatics saw themselves as reclaiming spiritual blessings of the type cited in the book of Acts, which recounts in chapter two how the apostles spoke in strange languages on Pentecost, and in 1 Corinthians 12, which refers to "gifts of the Holy Spirit" such as tongues, prophecy, interpretation and healing.

Over the next dozen years, the charismatic movement stirred controversy in virtually all mainline and traditional Protestant denominations. It rose to an exhilarating peak in the late 1970s, then scattered into other movements. Mainline charismatics today are arguably inconsequential—except for the strain that is an integral part of the dissident Anglican movement battling U.S. Episcopal leaders over homosexuality and other concerns.

Studies of Pentecostal influence within world Christianity for the past hundred years are hardly complete, scholars say, without tracing the second stage that began in 1960 with the mainline Protestants and in 1967 with the Catholic charismatic renewal. The Catholic renewal gathered momentum initially at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, then at the universities of Notre Dame and Michigan. U.S. Catholic dioceses, after some hesitancy, decided to permit Catholic renewal worship and activities as long as they stayed within institutional oversight.

Many traditional Protestant churches in the late 1960s and early 1970s criticized charismatic beliefs as divisive and questioned whether the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament were identical to those practiced by contemporary Christians. When mainline churches proved inhospitable, "spirit-filled" believers often formed support networks within their traditions or drifted to independent charismatic and Pentecostal megachurches. Southern Baptist, Missouri-Synod Lutheran and Nazarene churches, among others, discouraged such practices to the point of disfellowshiping clergy and churches.

Yet because charismatics and Pentecostals generally shared with evangelical Protestants a conservative political-moral outlook, many in these Protestant groups toned down their hostility and made peace in various ways.

Leading charismatic pastors tended to deemphasize tongues-speaking as the required sign of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Billy Graham crusades and Bill Bright’s Campus Crusade eventually welcomed charismatics as co-workers for Christ. Pentecostal televangelists Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker and Paul Crouch often led the charge for evangelical and charismatic Christians against secular humanism, sectarian cults, homosexuality and liberal theology.

The high point for organized charismatic activities, according to most accounts, was in 1977 when 50,000 believers from dozens of denominations displayed their ecumenical enthusiasm at a gathering in Kansas City, Missouri. A follow-up conference ten years later in New Orleans urged charismatics and Pentecostals to work together on world evangelization. A leading expert, Vinson Synan of Regent University, estimated that in 1977 there were 50 million Pentecostals and charismatics worldwide. The number surpassed 200 million in 1987.

Today, many scholars and participants agree that the charismatic movement as a distinct phenomenon has fizzled out, and survives in niches of broader movements.

“At first, people wanted to celebrate. Some got goose bumps and fell onto the floor—but that got boring,” said J. Lee Grady, editor of the Florida-based 250,000-circulation *Charisma* magazine, a flagship journal for both charismatic and Pentecostal believers. “The spirit came to empower us to plant churches and feed the poor.”

The terms *charismatic* and *Pentecostal* have become virtually interchangeable, and both labels tend to be avoided by mainstream Christians who have incorporated various “Spirit-filled” beliefs or styles into personal and congregational life. Worshipers raising hands while praying and church services using repetitious “praise” music—once signs of Pentecostal-charismatic piety—are no longer predictable indicators of charismatic identity. A crossbreeding was at work in the 1980s and 1990s. Former Fuller Seminary professor C. Peter Wagner, for example, spoke of a “third wave” of evangelicals who believe “signs and wonders” will accompany the proclamation of the gospel. John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard churches, was an early proponent of this strain of the charismatic movement.

Remnant charismatic groups in mainline Protestant circles persist, sometimes identifying with socially conservative renewal groups that oppose progressive leaders in mainline denominations, attacking their liberal social stances. But there are exceptions.

• The charismatic Aldersgate Renewal Ministries is part of the United Methodist Church's structure. Executive director Gary Moore of Goodlettsville, Tennessee, said that about 1,500 to 2,000 people attend the ARM annual meeting and 3,000 are on its support list.

"Being within our denomination opens some doors and acceptance it would not otherwise have, and it also gives us a line of accountability that maintains equilibrium," Moore said. "We've not gotten involved in internal politics," he added. "Groups like Good News are flagbearers for political [change]; we chose to focus on bringing personal and church renewal."

• Presbyterians may have been the first to form a national charismatic network associated with a mainline denomination. The group cites as forerunners Dennis Bennett at St. Mark's Church—despite his Episcopal affiliation—and pastor Louis Evans Jr., who introduced charismatic ministries in 1963 at Bel Air Presbyterian Church outside Los Angeles. In May 1966, Presbyterian pastors formed a "charismatic communion" at Lake Murray, Oklahoma.

In 1984, with the addition of Reformed church members, the group adopted the name Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International (PRMI). According to its apolitical Web site, Zeb "Brad" Long, a former missionary to Taiwan, became its executive director in 1990, and the group hopes to establish a permanent center in Black Mountain, North Carolina. While grounded in Presbyterian-Reformed theology and biblical interpretation, PRMI says it identifies with the "third wave" movement in its understanding of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, Tom Swieringa, a charismatic working among Christian Reformed members, said that PRMI teaches "that we are saved by grace alone and do not need anything else for salvation." Gifts of the Holy Spirit are welcomed "for the shaping of our character to reflect Jesus" and for having an impact in mission, he said.

In at least three other mainline traditions, the charismatic and social-moral conservative wings are often indistinguishable.

• In the United Church of Christ, the charismatic Focus Renewal group has become smaller and less active, said David Runnion-Bareford, who edits its newsletter. He is also executive director of the conservative Biblical Witness Fellowship. “Once distinctly noncharismatic, the Fellowship evolved in such a way that many of its key people would consider themselves charismatic,” said Runnion-Bareford, who lives in Candia, New Hampshire.

“Most of the UCC-related and non-UCC settings I move in that are evangelically inclined include people who pray in tongues and people who don’t [but who] mingle without discomfort,” he said. The transition of charismatic practices into wider circles “has contributed significantly to the realignment of the church at large,” the minister added.

• A schismatic shift has occurred in the charismatic group within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Paul Anderson, a spokesman for Lutheran Renewal, said many of the 2,000 or more people who attended Holy Spirit conferences years earlier “have jumped ship and found new homes” outside the ELCA.

Anderson belongs to the 8,000-member, two-campus North Heights Lutheran Church in St. Paul, a self-described “spirit-filled” congregation which left the ELCA a few years ago. In a July 2004 posting on Lutheran Renewal’s Web site, Anderson suggested that it would not be appropriate for conservative fellow members to stay loyal to the denomination. “The ELCA has been experiencing a theological and moral landslide since its inception,” he wrote.

North Heights is the flagship church for the Alliance of Renewal Churches, which is composed mostly of Lutheran churches with a charismatic background. “There is still plenty of interest in the Holy Spirit,” Anderson said, “but we don’t use the word *charismatic* much anymore. That movement peaked in the 1980s.” The ARC calls itself “Spirit-empowered,” which he said was more user-friendly for open-minded evangelicals.

• The Episcopal Charismatic Fellowship, founded in Dallas in 1973, has undergone two name changes and several location changes. ACTS 29 Ministries, as it is now called, has relocated to Atlanta. The group has struggled like other specialized charismatic fellowships to keep the movement relevant to mainline churches.

Instead, the Anglican-Episcopal charismatic influence shows significant strength as part of the theological mix in two other movements.

First, the popular Alpha courses that introduce Christianity, originating in London's Holy Trinity Brampton Church in the 1970s and '80s, have helped put "gifts of the Spirit" beliefs into a broader framework, say Protestant charismatic groups. "The Alpha course is used extensively in diverse Protestant settings in the U.S., including dozens of UCC congregations around the country," said Runnion-Bareford of Focus Renewal.

Second, the primary traditionalist groups fighting the U.S. Episcopal Church over the election of an openly gay bishop and use of same-sex blessings have embraced charismatic worship and a charismatic worldview. They share that perspective with often-charismatic African Anglican bishops who also seek to isolate the U.S. church leadership from the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Asked to characterize the American groups, sometimes called "orthodox Episcopalians," Leslie Fairfield, professor of church history at Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, said in an interview: "In general, they are Anglo-Catholic in liturgy, evangelical in theology and charismatic in piety." His seminary is considered the seminary of choice for the movement, just as the large Truro Episcopal Church in Fairfax, Virginia, is the flagship congregation.

"Take somebody like David C. Anderson," said Fairfield, referring to the president and CEO of the conservative American Anglican Council. Fairfield said that Anderson, a retired pastor, prefers "Anglo-Catholic haberdashery, candles and stained glass; in theology he is thoroughly evangelical; and he is open to people who pray in tongues and, with appropriate accountability, who have prophecy with wisdom from the Holy Spirit." Anderson's last parish was the large St. James Episcopal Church in Newport Beach, California, which, along with two other solidly charismatic parishes, is battling the Los Angeles Diocese in court to keep its church properties.

Closely related to the American Anglican Council is the Anglican Communion Network (ACN), moderated by Episcopal bishop Robert Duncan of Pittsburgh, a charismatic who is prominent among more than a dozen conservative bishops and dioceses. They formed the ACN early last year as a "confessing" association of Episcopal dioceses and congregations that, its Web site says, expects "the appearance among us of the fruits and gifts of the Spirit."

Another leading figure was the late Diane Knippers, longtime head of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, known for its sustained criticism of liberal Protestants.

Once a Methodist who worked for the *Good News* magazine, Knippers later become an Episcopalian at Truro Church, where she served on the vestry.

Calling himself a “spiritual mutt,” *Charisma* editor Grady said that he now attends Orlando’s New Covenant Church, which broke from the Episcopal Church to align itself with the Anglican Mission in America and the Anglican bishop of Rwanda. Raised a Southern Baptist, Grady became a charismatic in college, attended an independent charismatic church, then was ordained by the Pentecostal Holiness Church before being drawn to the conservative Episcopal parish.

The rise, fall and diffusion of the charismatic movement that erupted over 35 years ago in mainline Protestantism may have been driven in part by changes in American culture. “It’s not so coincidental that the movement arose in the ’60s and ’70s,” said Frank D. Macchia, who teaches systematic theology at Vanguard University of Southern California in Costa Mesa.

“There was a spiritual quest in the general culture,” said Macchia, editor of *Pneuma*, the journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies. “There was the search for community, whether in parachurch groups or forms of communal life; a quest for ecstasy or an alternate form of consciousness along with a disillusionment about Western rationalism; and, thirdly, a search for new forms of healing.”

As church membership loyalties frayed in the 1980s, “postdenominational influences” probably contributed to the downsizing of mainline charismatic groups, Macchia said. In addition, the distinctive Pentecostal practices perhaps lost their shock value as Americans also encountered New Age ideas, religious gurus and increasing religious diversity.

For signs of the domestication of the charismatic movement, one need look no further than St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Van Nuys. Still in the same building on Sherman Way, the church now has 350 members and about 170 attending services. For Pentecostal students at nearby King’s Seminary, founded by pastor Jack Hayford of Church on the Way, St. Mark’s is part of a tour of historic Pentecostal sites. In the early 1990s, St. Mark’s rector was Gary Hand, who says he volunteered the fact that he is charismatic when he interviewed for the post. At one point, Hand led classes on “gifts of the Holy Spirit” and a charismatic praise service one Sunday night each month. About 10 percent of members were charismatic, not counting a charismatic Ugandan congregation that met there, he said. “People would hardly ever hear me

speaking in tongues because I do it quietly in prayer language," Hand said in an interview.

The current rector, Norman Hull, said that he is not a charismatic at all, but that "we have people who have an incredible healing ministry with the laying on of hands." They were never part of the Bennett era, he said, and they eschew the charismatic label. The Ugandan congregation still worships at the church, which now also houses an independent Filipino congregation.

"We have all sorts of people who say they are helped by the Holy Spirit, who has brought them joy, healing and comfort," Hull said, "but they would never call themselves charismatics."