

HALLELUJAH!

[BABY BOOMERS HAVE REDISCOVERED ORGANIZED RELIGION. BUT THIS ISN'T THE CHURCH GRANDMA WENT TO.]

BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

Growing up in New England in the 1950s, Marilyn Reese* attended Sunday school at her family's Episcopal church every week, dressed in her Mary Jane's, anklet socks, and white gloves. The family said grace before meals; Marilyn and her brother said prayers before going to sleep. She continued going to church in college, but it was the sixties, and as she began to rebel against her family and the status quo, the church became just another casualty. She married, had children, and remained unaffiliated for nearly 20 years. Alcoholics Anonymous brought her back.

"AA is a mind, body, and spirit recovery," says Marilyn, a Syracuse University staff member. "When you get to the spiritual part, a lot of people get into New Age stuff, chanting mantras and that kind of thing." Marilyn experimented by trying a Unitarian church attended by some University colleagues.

"I went for six months on a fairly regular basis. But I left feeling I had been to a banquet but had nothing to eat. We would sing hymns where references to God and Jesus had been removed. There was an emptiness there."

So she returned to her spiritual

roots and attended an Episcopal church. "I literally felt I was coming home," Marilyn says. "There was a tremendous feeling of rightness about being there."

That was four years ago and she's been going ever since. "It provided an anchor, a place to connect to a spirituality that evidently exists very deep inside me," she says.

Although Marilyn's lapse and return to organized religion feels to her like a personal journey, she is really part of a larger trend. According to sociologist Wade Clark Roof, author of *A Generation of Seekers*, roughly two-thirds of baby boomers dropped out of institutional religion at one time or another. In recent years, more than one-third of those dropouts have returned. Baby boomers—born between 1946 and 1964—make up half the country's adult population.

While some may be prompted by personal crisis, many return to church as they start their own families or as their children reach the age to begin religious education.

"People want their children to have some kind of moral guidance," says Amanda Porterfield, former SU professor of religion. "Often they go through some kind of spiritual odyssey and come to a place in themselves where they want to ally with a reli-

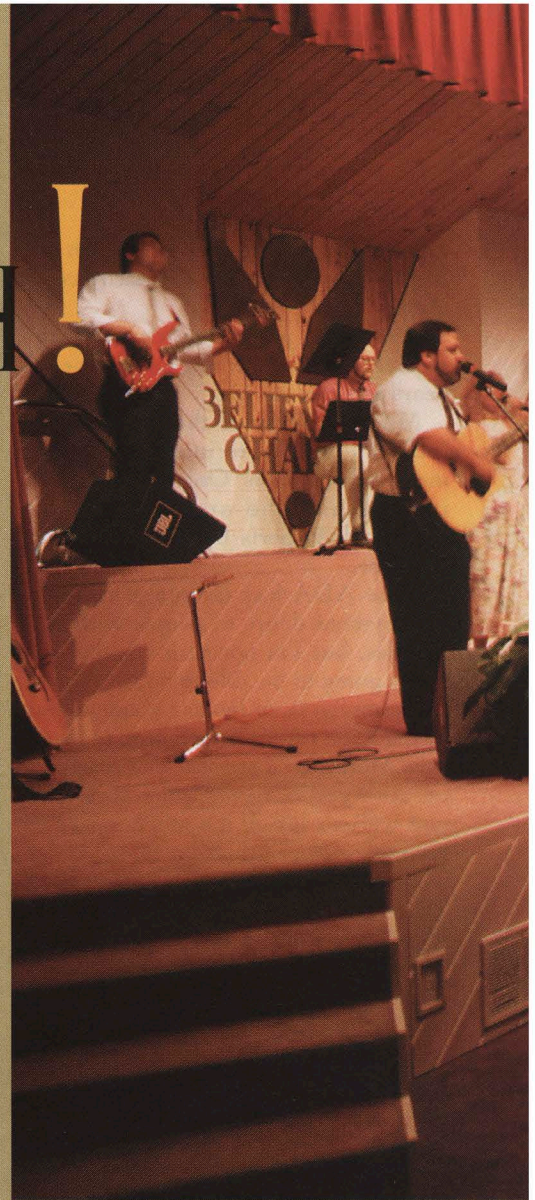
gious community. It becomes increasingly important to have that for their children."

Others say they are seeking to fill a spiritual void in their lives. Or perhaps it's just another example of the free-thinking experimentation that defines baby boomers.

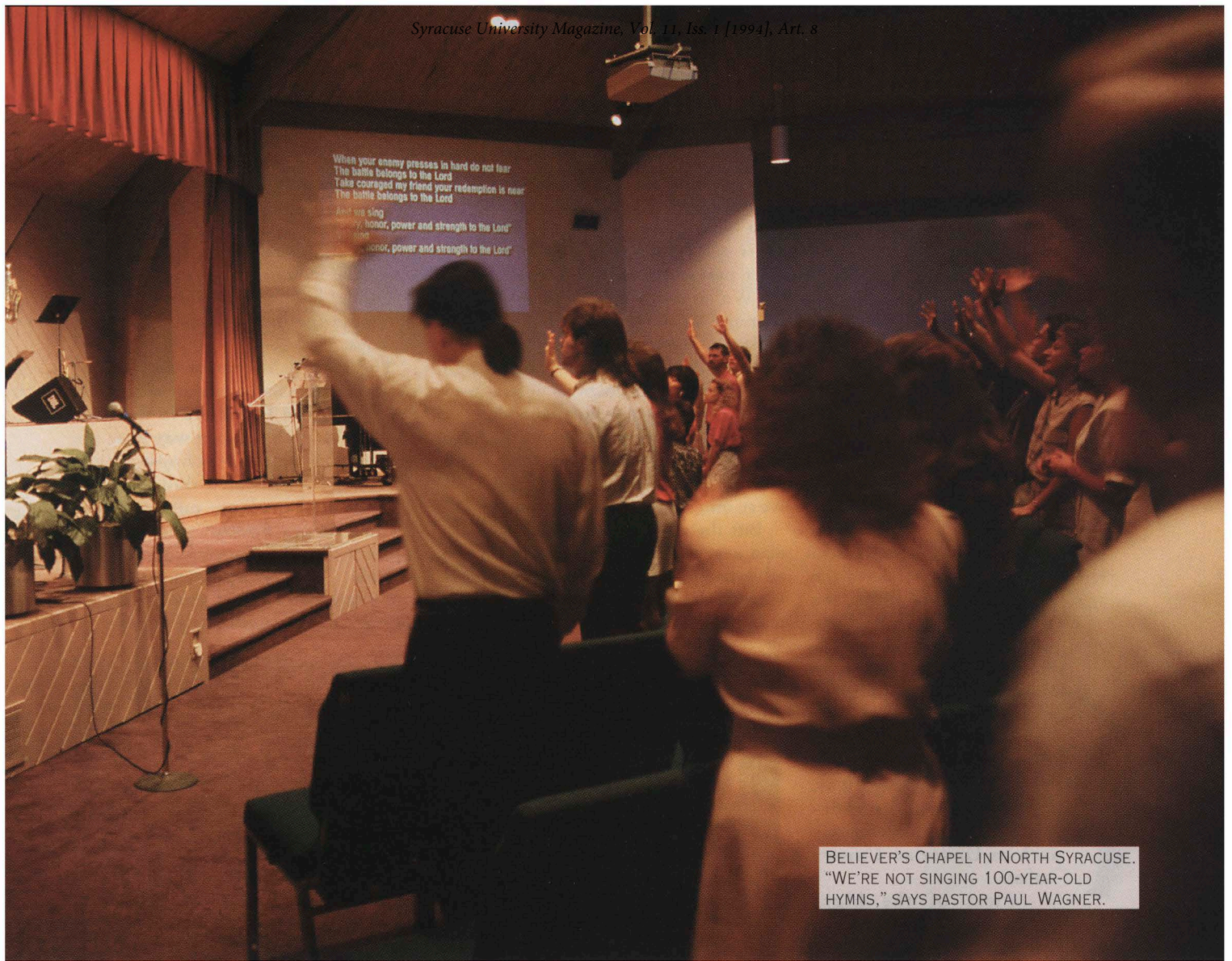
The baby-boom generation engaged in a lot of searching behavior throughout the sixties and seventies," says Richard L. Phillips, dean of Hendricks Chapel and a United Methodist minister. "In the late eighties and the nineties, we see that begin to take on more traditional forms."

Phillips believes people hunger for meaning and direction in their lives. "They're looking for answers. What's worthwhile? Who am I? These are deeply religious questions."

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*name changed by request



BELIEVER'S CHAPEL IN NORTH SYRACUSE.
"WE'RE NOT SINGING 100-YEAR-OLD
HYMNS," SAYS PASTOR PAUL WAGNER.

The last religious revival in America took place in the fifties, when church attendance was at its peak, fueled largely by the suburban middle-class.

"It was a new world, post-World War II. There was kind of a back-to-the-family movement," says Porterfield. "What's going on now is sort of a repetition of history."

But the bulk of baby boomers—children of the fifties—came of age in the sixties. And they took nothing handed down from their parents for granted.

"We rejected everything in the sixties and turned the world upside down," says Jack Kreischer, a 1965 School of Management graduate, managing director of a Philadelphia

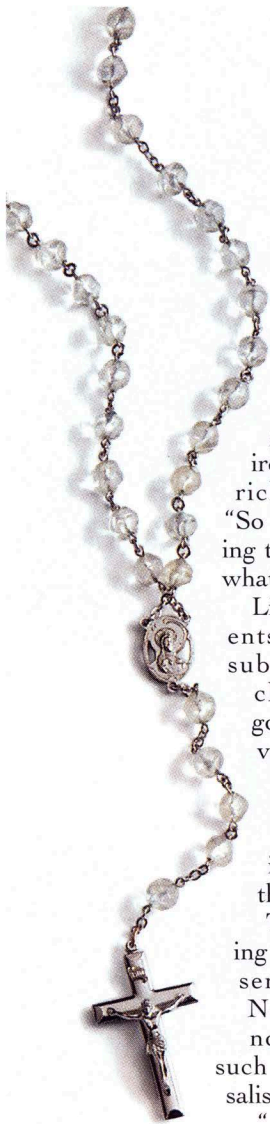
accounting firm, and owner of three Christian bookstores. "That led to the excesses of the seventies and eighties. Many people bought into the materialistic life hook, line, and sinker, and it didn't deliver. Now they're left saying, 'Is that all there was?' A lot of those people are turning to religion to find spiritual strength."

Kreischer first became interested in religion as a student at SU, where, like many, he was drawn to Hendricks Chapel by Dean Charles Noble. But when he graduated, his interests focused elsewhere. "I slept late on Sunday mornings and didn't care about church," he says. "It just wasn't relevant to me at that point. I was too busy worrying about how to start my new career."

He was drawn back to the church after he and his wife, Lynn, a member of the Class of 1966, began having children. "It didn't take very long until it became painfully apparent there was a void in our lives," he says. They joined a Presbyterian church and have been increasingly involved ever since.

"When people are younger they like the idea of not having any restraints," says Kreischer. "I also think they're befuddled because of all the changes in their lives. But as you get older you become more focused and centered. You don't spend as much time experimenting with things that lead to dead ends."

What may be surprising to some is that it's not the mainstream denominations that are benefiting most from the



new spirituality among boomers. "Baby boomers, many of whom were part of the anti-Vietnam movement, view institutional religion as oppressive and, ironically, not spiritually rich," says Porterfield. "So what people are turning to now isn't necessarily what they grew up with."

Like their post-war parents, who moved to the suburbs and created churches and synagogues that reflected the values of the fifties, the baby boomers have changed the landscape of religious institutions to meet their own needs.

Today's fastest-growing churches include conservative evangelical, New Age, and non-denominational religions such as Unitarian Universalist.

"Most of the high-growth churches don't have denominations," says LeRoy Gainey, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Vacaville, California, and professor of theology at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. "They have names like Community Church or Fellowship Church. They're more generic in their focus. The boomers are more interested in relationships than they are religion, but they get those relationships through religion."

"The old notion of Catholic and Protestant is out the window as far as I'm concerned," says Paul Wagner, pastor of Believer's Chapel in North Syracuse. "A lot of churches that are catching on to contemporary worship are putting away the trappings of religion and beginning to speak with great relevance about principles established in scripture."

Wagner's church started 11 years ago, growing out of a Bible-study group at the State University of New York College at Oswego. The group moved to a vacant church, and reached full capacity within 4 months.

Weekly attendance averages 1,500. Wagner estimates as many as 70 percent of members had either lapsed in their relationship to any church or were previously unchurched.

"We're not singing 100-year-old hymns," says Wagner, who earned a master's degree in anthropology from SU in 1974. "We're not talking about a church that looks down its nose at people with problems, who are coming out of tough experiences, who still have dysfunctional behavior in their lives. I'm not trying to slam anybody, but we're into something contemporary."

But the mainline denominations are also reaching out. Some have started advertising. An ad from the Episcopal Church shows a picture of the 10 commandments with the heading, "For fast

relief, take two tablets." New York City's Lincoln Square Synagogue recruits with an ad that reads, "How about having red wine for Kiddush instead of white wine for cocktails?"

Others have altered their offerings or structure to keep pace with the nineties.

The United Methodist Church, for example, launched a multimedia bible-study program for adults in the mid-eighties. "It's a long, long way from the old idea of Sunday school, where everybody listens to a dull lecture," says John Lovelace, editor of the *United Methodist Reporter*, who earned a master's degree in journalism from SU in 1964. "This incorporates video and audio tapes and lots of small group interchanges. It's exceedingly popular."



FOR THE MOST PART, IT'S NOT THE MAINLINE DENOMINATIONS BENEFITING FROM THE RESURGENCE IN SPIRITUALITY AMONG BOOMERS.

SU's RELIGIOUS BUFFET

It took David Aitkin three months to find his way to the Alibrandi Catholic Center when he arrived on campus as a freshman. A Roman Catholic from Long Island, he was more concerned with settling in and getting coursework done than attending worship services. But SU's religious community quickly became an integral part of his college experience.

Aitkin became a founding member of an interfaith student council formed at Hendricks Chapel during Celebrate Difference week. "Coming from a family that only went to Catholic mass, and having gone to a Catholic school most of my life, I never experienced different religions," says Aitkin. "It's really important to learn about different people and what they believe in, and have dialogue."

Aitkin, who graduated in May with a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism, may be a more active participant than the average student at SU, but his interest is typical.

"The interest-flow is high," says Richard L. Phillips, dean of Hendricks Chapel. "Students get very excited about experimenting. 'Let's go to synagogue one week and to a Muslim service next week.' Religion courses are popular. Students like attending bull sessions and special programs, like we had last semester on cults. They're curious."

"College years are when you sort out your value systems," says Father Jim Lang, chaplain and director of the Alibrandi Catholic Center. "They're when you make the distinctions between what you learned from your parents and what's going to be your own. When you get here and test the limits of the value system your parents taught you, that system either works or it doesn't work. Some people find religion during those years and others reject it."

Aitkin believes religious education completes the circle of other things learned at college. "College opens your mind about a lot of things, or at least it ought to. Religion is part of that picture." —RGL

Gainey's Baptist church has marketed itself as a multicultural, multi-ethnic congregation. "A congregation tends to reflect its leadership, so our staffing reflects what we're trying to achieve," says Gainey, who earned his doctorate in adult education from SU in 1992. "I'm African American. Another pastor is Asian, another is Anglo, and one is East Indian. Our membership includes about 25 different ethnic groups."

Judaism has its own challenges, with more than 50 percent of Jews marrying outside their faith in the last 20 years. Traditionally, children of mixed marriages are not considered Jewish unless the mother is a Jew. Reform Judaism has responded by allowing that children born to a Jewish father are considered Jewish if the child is raised Jewish. The issue at many Reform temples has moved past allowing non-Jews as members to whether they should hold officer status.

"Reform Judaism is moving to make the tradition more attractive and to keep Jews Jewish," says Alan Berger, SU associate professor of religion and director of the Jewish studies program. "The question is, are they making it more attractive or diluting it out of existence?"

By tradition, a church is designed to celebrate the glory of God. But today many churches and temples go beyond traditional services and bible study, offering 12-step programs or ministry to special con-

stituents, such as singles or gays.

Worshipping God as an all-knowing, all-powerful deity isn't universally important among this new generation of churchgoers. "I guess you'd call me an atheist," says Kevin Boyd*, who earned his MBA from SU in 1989. "I don't believe in a supreme being."

Yet Boyd and his young family joined a Unitarian Universalist church in Syracuse eight years ago, and he calls the association "a very important part of my life."

"Surprisingly, there's an organized religion based on Judeo-Christian tradition that combines the ritual and the fellowship without some of the things I just can't deal with," he says.

Boyd was not raised in a religious household. But his wife had grown up a Methodist, and when their oldest child reached the age to begin Sunday school, she pressed to join a church.

But Boyd says he's not the type to sit and listen to views he doesn't believe or that contradict his political beliefs. The Unitarian church his wife found meets his criteria. Boyd even served on its board of trustees.

"The whole service is similar to conventional Christian services, only different, more relevant," says Boyd. "The hymnbook is gender-inclusive and includes contemporary music. The readings don't always have to do with religion, but with observations about life, about living a moral life."

Boyd says church membership has given him and his wife an extended family and a feeling of community.

"The services give me an opportunity to think and reassess my own beliefs and the problems people face," he says. "It's a very spiritual experience to dive into yourself and think about why you are here and what you are doing for others."

Therein may lie the key difference between the boomers' search for religion and that of their parents and grandparents. The aim is less salvation than support. Spirituality serves as their guide through the trials of life.

"In turbulent times, people need something to hang on to," says Phillips.

Kreischer believes troubled times are prompting Americans to return to a stronger sense of values, which include religion.

"For a period of time over the past 20 years, it wasn't fashionable to have values, it wasn't fashionable to talk about your faith," he says. "But people are fed up with a society that doesn't seem to know any bounds. People are looking for anchors, going back to the basics."

Wagner agrees. "There is a basic sense of need in America that politicians don't know how to fix, that wars all over the world haven't fixed, that cocaine hasn't fixed, and that the movie industry hasn't fixed. People are searching for something that's meaningful," says Wagner. "I believe they are flooding into places of worship just to check it out, and many are sticking with what they've found." ■