

# CHURCHIFICATION

by Jim McNelly

I suppose that the attempt to churchify the fellowship of believers in The URANTIA Book was inevitable. How could it have been otherwise? All the elements of a good cult foundation were in place - mysterious origin, a potentially autocratic central organization, secrecy and a sacred book. Build upon these: worship, prayer, authoritative leaders and an "approved" belief-gospel, and you have a church.

Coming from an institutional church that boasted a panoply of saints, creeds, priests and sacramental guilt, I had hoped that the assemblies of readers of The URANTIA Book would be refreshingly different from common churches. The URANTIA Papers foresaw a new type of religion, one not centered in buildings, fundraising, beliefs and taboos. The new religion I was experiencing was more personal, liberating, focused on the home and family.

In the other readers I encountered, I was encouraged by a prevailing spirit that seemed to share ideals of reform and progress. Many others had come to the book after becoming disillusioned with the barrenness of institutional religion. Safeguards appeared to be in place to discourage the churchification tendency.

These early readers shared a healthy avoidance of acquiring permanent buildings or properties that resembled churches. The mysterious origin of the book was downplayed. Advertising was not an official practice. The organization, while somewhat centralized, had healthy democratic roots. Societies were autonomous and leaders were elected. Group prayers were usually silent; worship optional and spontaneous. These early readers fostered study groups, emphasizing religion at home.

I was proud to belong to URANTIA Brotherhood. No one at the top appeared to be getting rich or setting themselves up on a fanatical ego trip. There was no conspiracy to shove the book down people's throats. Readers did not browbeat the masses into accepting a Bible replacement. It did not feel like a cult. Members could think what they pleased, believe what they chose, and follow their denominational preferences. No

official interpretations or dignity compromising rituals emanated from on high.

During this last year my bubble popped. So gradual was the change, it was hardly noticeable, but we were on our way to becoming a church. General Council resolutions virtually mandated prayer at all "official" gatherings. "Spread the teachings, not the book" became the creed. Saints Christy and Sadler had ostensibly chosen their successors. Charismatic cult personalities required no democracy to elect them. Subtle and not so subtle efforts to recruit factional followings became apparent.

Evangelizing the "selected teachings" became more important than making the book available. Study groups were too ordinary, mundane. They had no glamour compared to the conferences which showcased movement superstars. Self-proclaimed leaders with cryptic messages were ready to terrorize readers into bizarre subcults.

Planning formats aimed at brainwashing new converts into the "evangelize-the-selected-teachings" church were innocently formulated. Mission and belief statements were agonizingly adopted. Heretics were disfellowshipped as both resolutions and policies evolved into loyalty oaths.

It may be too sudden a step for humanity to transfer his religious life to the inner world which exists between man and his creator. After all, we have become conditioned to an externalized religion identified with buildings and beliefs. For too many years, popes, priests, gurus and other leaders or intermediaries have interpreted religion for people. There is a sense of security for many people in following leaders with certification, degrees and accreditation who will tell them what to believe and do.

Perhaps I have expected too much of people as if merely reading a book would change 2000 years of tradition in a single lifetime. Despite all the warnings about the dangers of fixating religion and identifying it with a particular socio-political culture, we are merrily presenting to the world "The New Improved Christian Church". The international association of book readers is in danger of being perceived of as an American, neo-Christian, evangelical cult of "selected teaching" preachers that seeks to become a clone of mainline Christianity.

If the democracy decides to accept its

new church status, then so be it. But such a decision will delay for many years the age when humanity will be able to muster the courage to practice a living faith and cast aside the cocoon of organized churches. Revelation will not reform evolutionary religion overnight. The church structure will continue to serve as a cultural safety net until the best of the old church format is quietly carried forth into the new living faith, and men are better conditioned to take religion into their own hands, hearts and homes.

Perhaps some social outlet along the lines of the temples of philosophy utilized on the neighboring planet might be adopted for use on this world. Another option would be to provide enough singing, group prayer and worship to satisfy the need for a sense of a spiritual community but not so much so as to alienate those without a church predilection. I am reminded of the quote on page 1930 where Jesus tells us, "As faith-enlightened and spirit-liberated sons of the kingdom of heaven, you face a double responsibility of duty to man and duty to God while you voluntarily assume a third and sacred obligation: service to the brotherhood of believers."\*

I interpret this quote to suggest that the official organization act like a professional society which exists to serve the needs of its members - publishing papers, holding conferences, keeping mailing lists and serving as an informal clearinghouse to assist home based study groups and foster occasional social renewals or retreats for

larger groups. The activities related to serving God (worship) or serving man (social uplift) should be generally conducted outside the forum of URANTIA Brotherhood.

There is currently a positive effort to internationalize the brotherhood of readers through book translations and other multi-lingual services. Many readers already understand that there is nothing sacred about Chicago or the United States of America simply because the book happened to arrive there. No pressing need exists to become an American styled church simply because it is the first option which comes to mind. Other possibilities for creative group functioning will arise in the fullness of time.

Individuals must search their own motivation and sort their way through the various possibilities. Look more closely at the implications of the course you choose or acquiesce towards. Take responsibility for your actions. Exercise the opportunity to participate and vote. If you belong to a URANTIA Society, determine how your potential Triennial Delegate Assembly Representative feels about administrative and religious issues. The General Councilors they elect can have an effect on the future of organized religious activity of many years to come.

If people participate, there is no reason why URANTIA Brotherhood can't serve the needs and desires of a broad range of interests for ourselves and others. This is an exciting age to live in. The opportunity for individuals to shape the course of the future is a rare one. Let us be proud of what we create for future generations. ●