

20th Century's fastest-growing spiritual movement marks its 40th anniversary Charismatic Movement Transcends Sects

by Julia Duin, Reporter

Forty years ago on April 3, 1960, the Rev. Dennis Bennett stepped up to his pulpit in his wealthy Van Nuys, California Episcopal parish and announced he had recently learned how to speak in tongues.

His 2,600-member congregation was fairly accepting until the end of the second service, when one of his assistant priests tore off his vestments and strode out of the church exclaiming, "I can no longer work with this man."

Mr. Bennett's subsequent resignation from his church, his appearances on TV, in *Newsweek* and *Time* and his transfer to a dying Seattle parish has become a part of the lore of the 20th century's fastest-growing religious movement: the "charismatic renewal," after the Greek word *charis*, meaning "gift."

It pertains to the unusual "gifts of the Holy Spirit" such as the prophetic utterances, divine healing and speaking in tongues associated with the movement.

Today, Pentecostal or charismatic Christians—the two terms are nearly synonymous—number 523 million adherents worldwide, according to the Richmond-based Global Evangelization Movement Research.

An ecumenical charismatic conference slated for June 22-25 in St. Louis is expected to draw about 15,000 Christians from all denominations.

Harvard University theologian Harvey Cox has called it Christianity's "primal religion," growing at a rate of 20 million members a year.

Its music, worship styles and language, and emphasis on spiritual experiences have seeped into the larger culture. Uplifted hands during worship services are commonplace in many gatherings that have nothing to do with Pentecostalism.

"You can't tell any more what kind of church you're in," said the Rev. Vinson Synan, dean of Regent University's divinity school and author of several books on Pentecostal/charismatic history. Referring to forests of waving arms during the singing of hymns, he said, "These Prom-

ise Keeper meetings looked like Pentecostal rallies."

Although the Pentecostal movement in Christianity began at the dawn of the 20th century, it did not seep into mainline denominations until the 1960s, spurred by Mr. Bennett's well-publicized involvement. Mr. Synan has recorded how, starting at that point, the renewal exploded among mainline denominations.

Books such as the Rev. David Wilkerson's "The Cross and the Switchblade," which told how Pentecostal practices helped New York drug addicts shed their habit, were instrumental in influencing the Roman Catholic Church, America's largest religious denomination.

The Catholic Church had its first charismatic prayer meeting in February 1967. Thirty-three years later, "In the Catholic Church, most of their lay leaders are charismatic or have come through the movement," My Synan observed. "The archbishop of Canterbury is charismatic. He is a symbol of how the charismatics have risen in the hierarchies of the churches, except the liberal ones.

"The head of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, Jerry Rankin, is a known charismatic. Most of the [Southern Baptist] missionaries are charismatic or they couldn't make it on the mission field."

During the 1960s and 1970s, the movement's progress through American churches was like an arrow heading straight up. Thanks to spiritual meccas such as Southern California's Calvary Chapel, which introduced charismatic practices to a whole generation of baby boomer musicians, the movement soon had its own lyrics and songs.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bennett's new parish - St. Luke's Episcopal Church in the Ballard area of Seattle - thrived. It drew huge crowds for its Friday night services centered on the "baptism in the Holy Spirit," the seminal experience of the charismatic movement wherein people are prayed for to receive spiritual power and most commonly, to begin praying in an un-

known language; that is, speaking in tongues.

By the early 1970s, evangelical Christian theologians such as the Rev. John Stott had issued literature opposing the movement. One denomination, the Nazarene Church, passed legislation forbidding its ministers to pray in tongues.

Frank Schaeffer, son of the well-known Presbyterian theologian Francis Schaeffer, termed the charismatic movement as being in a "disastrous position" - even though he conceded he was influenced by it.

"Any evangelical Protestant always had friends in the charismatic movement or was reading the literature and being challenged to be part of it," he said.

But the movement grew so fast in the 1970s that Anglican Bishop Michael Marshall predicted in 1976 that within 10 years, the Episcopal Church, at least, would be "charismatic or dead."

In 1977, 45,000 charismatic Christians from all denominations packed Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, MO., in a massive show of strength. Half of them were Catholic, no doubt buoyed by Pope Paul VI's endorsement of the movement two years earlier.

The conference also drew generous media coverage as journalists recognized the charismatic movement as having supplanted the National Council of Churches to become the ecumenical movement of the century.

But numbers began falling off soon after that as charismatic leaders began feuding with each other and massive amounts of denominational Christians left their churches to join newer, independent charismatic fellowships.

Thus, this "wave of 20th century Pentecost was reduced to glowing embers by 1980," writes University of Akron sociologist Margaret Poloma.

At this point, she says, independent evangelists such as the Rev. John Wimber of the Anaheim, Calif.-based Vineyard Christian Fellowship moved in with a new message of "signs and wonders." In the 1990s, charismatic-style revivals broke out in



The Rev. Dennis Bennett

isolated churches, the most famous spots being the Toronto Airport Vineyard in 1994 and the Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Fla., in 1995.

Today, says Walter Matthews, director of the Catholic Chariscenter in Locust Grove, Va., immigrant groups such as Haitians, Filipinos and Hispanics, are the most involved in the renewal.

"Those groups tend to be marginalized," he said, "so there's this spiritual hunger." Among middle-class Catholics, young people, he added, are relatively indifferent to the renewal and "much more into computers and the Internet."

As for Mr. Bennett, his death of a heart attack in November 1991 revealed a trans-denominational appeal so great that the local St. James Catholic Cathedral offered its large sanctuary for the funeral.

However, the rites were held at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, attended by 1,000 people, including two Episcopal bishops.

"It was the most charismatic service you can imagine," Mrs. Bennett said. "It was a party. People were lifting their hands, there were tongues, interpretation and prophecy.

"Dennis always said that if the church didn't change and get empowered, it would be absorbed by the world. Those with different theological opinions on the baptism in the Spirit still don't believe it's for today. There's always a battle when God does something fresh."