

VINEYARD LEADER DIES

John Wimber, purveyor of a self-styled brand of "power evangelism," died last Nov. 17 from a brain hemorrhage caused by an accidental fall. He was 63.

The former jazz musician-turned-pastor became a Christian in 1962 and was affiliated with Chuck Smith and the Calvary Chapel fellowships. In 1983, he joined a group of independent congregations known as the "Vineyards." Four years later, the Association of Vineyard Churches was officially formed. Under his leadership, he helped to build the affiliation into a 150,000-member international group. Wimber's teachings emphasized the spiritual gifts of tongues and healing and cited such signs and wonders as God's validation of his ministry.

Robert Schuller, pastor of the Crystal Cathedral, told the *Los Angeles Times* that he felt "power when Wimber visited him" after an accident in 1991 that left him in a coma. "I'm convinced that God's healing power entered my body through the personal touch of John Wimber," Schuller told the newspaper after learning of Wimber's death.

Wimber's critics had long criticized his "power evangelism" was devoid of the cross, which according to 1 Corinthians 1:18 is the "power" of God. The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Todd Hunter, National Coordinator of Vineyard Churches, as saying Wimber used to say, "Look at me, I'm just a fat man trying to get to heaven."

Although Wimber believed that the perpetuation of the gifts of tongues and healing could eliminate "Satan, sin and sickness," he suffered a number of ailments in his last years. Just a few weeks before his death, he underwent open heart surgery. Three years earlier, he suffered a mild stroke. In 1993, doctors discovered a malignant tumor in his nasal pharynx. The cancer and subsequent treatment reportedly caused Wimber to lose more than 100 pounds.

—MKG

CARTER SAYS MORMONS ARE CHRISTIAN

Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter has denounced leaders of his denomination for declaring that professing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are non-Christians.

Carter told reporters, "Too many leaders now, I think, in the Southern Baptist Convention and in other conventions, are trying to act as Pharisees did, who were condemned by Christ, in trying to define who can and who cannot be considered an acceptable person in the eyes of God. In other words, they're making judgments on behalf of God. I think that's wrong."

The former U.S. president also told the Mormon-owned *Deseret News* that his church's leaders were "narrow in their definition of what is a proper Christian or certainly even a proper Baptist." He said Baptists "are inerrantists (meaning) there cannot possibly be any error in even a translation of a Bible down through the centuries."

The newspaper stated that Carter has misgivings about "Christians trying to convert other Christians." The North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptists, under the direction of Interfaith Witness director Phil Roberts, has made a concerted effort to equip its members to witness to Mormons. The Southern Baptists will hold their annual convention this summer in Salt Lake City.

Carter's comments raised the ire of Southern Baptist leaders. Roberts told the Baptist Press that, "Mr. Carter must be a better politician and diplomat than a theologian. His comments show he is totally uninformed and naive about the nature and beliefs of the Mormon church." Southern Baptist Convention president Tom Elliff said Carter "would do well to take a serious look at the Mormon faith before embracing it as part of the Christian community."

Carter's reservations about interfaith witnessing were not exclusive to the Mormon religion. "If you mean should we Protestants devote our time to converting Catholics to be Protestants, that's something with which I generally disagree."

—MKG

NEWSPAPER CHALLENGES REVIVAL'S CLAIMS

Following four months of investigative work, the *Pensacola News Journal* revealed an excess of questionable issues and practices by the leadership of the Brownsville Assembly of God church. Last November, the Florida newspaper reported its findings in a five-day series of "special reports" in nearly three dozen articles.

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Beginning in June 1995, the leadership of the Pensacola church has claimed an unplanned, last-days revival and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Since that time, more than 2 million people have attended the revival services and it is claimed that more than 120,000 people have made decisions for Christ. The newspaper contends, however, that the revival is not the result of an extemporaneous move of God, but was carefully planned and orchestrated by the church's leadership.

The *News Journal* further showed that claims by the church's staff were fabricated and falsified to enhance the revival's reputation, an allegation leveled by apologetic ministries such as PFO. Also documented were embellishments by the church's evangelist, Stephen Hill, as to his own personal conversion to the Christian faith as detailed in his biographical volume, *Stone Cold Heart*.

The newspaper traced the by-products of the enormous money trail generated by the revival through its donations and sale of books, audio and video tapes, and other revival materials. Each of the key leaders of the revival has independent ministries established apart from the church that acquire hundreds of thousands of dollars from resource and literature sales.

The paper also showed the considerable effect the pecuniary windfall has had for the church's pastor, John Kilpatrick. Despite Kilpatrick's claim that, "I have always strived to set an example by not living above the means of my people," it was documented that the pastor is currently building a \$340,000 luxury home across the Alabama state line and his ministry recently purchased a \$310,000 motor coach in which to chauffeur him around. Also, Hill's ministry has spent nearly \$900,000 on property and buildings, including a home for the evangelist in Alabama.

Other fiscal discrepancies also plagued the church as its claimed expenditures on missions failed to add up. Hill told the newspaper that his ministry had given over \$600,000 to foreign and domestic mission work. The paper showed his ministry's IRS return reported only \$102,212 outgoing donations for mission work. Only 2.2% of the church's \$6.6 million budget is devoted to assist missions, the paper said. Brownsville's Associate Pastor Carey Robertson told the *News Journal*, "If you wonder where the money is going, then don't give it. ... once it becomes a gift, it is ours to use. It is nobody's business how we use it."

The paper also describes how its city's Social Services have been overburdened primarily because of the influx of needy people coming into the area unrealistically thinking the church would miraculously change their circumstances and because of the church's lack of response to social concerns.

The church's leadership responded by taking a near two-page advertisement in the paper the Sunday follow-

ing the series of articles. The church's Web site also posted the response. The ad charged that newspaper reporters had fabricated stories and twisted facts, not the church and that statements, such as the one attributed to Robertson, were lifted from its context.

Yet, despite the church's attempt to state the "facts" and deny the newspaper's charges, its efforts were, at best, evasive. *World* magazine "tried to obtain from the church more information that would refute the press accusations, but without success." The Christian magazine was told that "Church officials have declared there will be no further statements to the press beyond what appears on the Web site." The weekly periodical spotlighted the newspaper's accusations in its Dec. 20, 1997, issue.

—MKG

NEW AGE LEADER DISCLOSES AILMENT

Elizabeth Clare Prophet, New Age guru and former president of the Church Universal and Triumphant, recently revealed that she is suffering from a neurological disorder and epilepsy. The 58-year-old Prophet told followers of her condition at a church conference in Texas. The church, headquartered in Corwin Springs, Mont., also released a statement concerning her ailments.

According to the Associated Press, church spokesman Chris Kelly expressed "confidence in her ability to continue to lead the church." Prophet's physician, Dr. Ilo Leppik, indicated that her ailment "is characterized by memory loss that inhibits her ability to accurately recall past and recent events and interferes with new learning."

The Church Universal and Triumphant was founded in 1958 by Mark L. Prophet. In 1961, he was joined by Elizabeth, whom he later married. She assumed command and leadership of the sect following his death in 1973. The church's teachings reflect an amalgamation of Christian, Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. It claims 230 congregations in 30 countries.

—MKG

CHURCH OF SATAN FOUNDER DIES

The man who founded the Church of Satan and played the devil in the 1968 occult movie classic, "Rosemary's Baby," is dead. Anton Szandor LaVey died Oct. 29 of pulmonary edema following years of heart problems. He was 67. The onetime lion trainer and professional organist began his church in 1966, gaining national attention when he performed a satanic wedding and baptized his first daughter in the church. His appetite for