

# Power to the Laity

**T**here is a powerful movement surging through American Christianity that may best be described as a **New Reformation**. And though it will produce no schisms and see no theses nailed to church doors, this movement may ultimately transform both the structure and the operations of most U.S. churches.

In essence, the New Reformation is a rising independence among millions of laymen, mostly Protestant, who no longer feel any real need in their lives for directions from an ordained clergy. Like the Protestant sectarians who followed Luther literally in creating a "priesthood of all believers," the most radical of these lay Christians have established their own prayer groups, "house churches" and other religious communities where members worship and minister to each other without benefit of clergy.

**'Prophets':** A decade ago, the New Reformation was only a fringe phenomenon. But in the past few years, the lay Christian movement has taken root and now is burgeoning within established church circles. Increasingly, laymen are turning for fellowship to retreats at lay-run renewal centers. They are seeking intellectual stimulation in courses in lay theology and savoring with almost cultic reverence the words of lay "prophets" ranging from Russian Orthodox author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to pop evangelist Ruth Carter Stapleton. "There's a tremendous quest for being Christian in the world, not in the church," says Texas millionaire Howard E. Butt Jr., a grocery executive who directs lay leadership conferences at retreat centers in the Southwest. "Laymen are asking themselves, 'Do I have a calling as authentic and clear as a clergyman's call?' Many are answering, 'Yes!'"

Last week, using funds from his family foundation, Butt brought together 800 leaders from business, labor, government, education and the arts for an unprecedented Congress of the Laity in Los Angeles. With former President and Mrs. Gerald Ford acting as official—and somewhat bewildered—hosts, Butt's guests were encouraged to exchange their views on how dedicated Christian laymen can transform secular society through their individual decisions and power. The conference marked the first time that leading evangelicals had shared their deepest religious convictions with laymen from Catholic and mainline Protestant traditions. "I don't think there has been a more important religious

meeting since Vatican Council II," said Catholic philosopher Michael Novak.

But though the congress was undoubtedly a watershed in the emerging lay Christian movement, its focus was too diffuse to permit extended analysis of the movement itself. This was partly because many of the delegates were elite church members—often highly clerical in outlook—who have yet to develop a special lay perspective on their own lives as Christians. "To locate the real centers of lay religion," advised histori-



Lester Sloan—New

Fords at lay congress: Without benefit of cler

an Martin Marty, one of the few clerics at the congress, "you have to look for groups that minister to each other without direction from clergy."

Chief among such groups are the charismatic Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, who claim an estimated 3 million members nationwide. Although many charismatics are active in Pentecostal and mainline churches, most tend to look to their own lay prayer groups or charismatic communities for their primary spiritual support and expression. Some, like the 400,000-member Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, assemble in hotel meeting rooms for prayer and spiritual healing. Others, like the ecumenical Word of God community in Ann Arbor, Mich., which claims 1,600 members, live more like a sect and hold services, according to commu-



**Network:** As a counter to this individualistic trend, groups of radical, well-educated evangelicals are reviving an old Anabaptist tradition by forming small house churches, often involving several families living in the same neighborhood. The members pool their incomes, share chores and try to live total Christian lives by ministering to each other and to the poor. Although there is no way to determine how many such communities exist, dozens of them have created an informal network of communication through *Sojourners* magazine, a monthly which is itself produced by a communal fellowship in Washington, D.C. As in all house churches, the leaders of the *Sojourners* fellowship are not ordained clergy. "A lot of people are realizing that distinctions between the ordained and the nonordained Christian are not that important any more," says Wes Michaelson, managing editor of *Sojourners* magazine. "The only way we can really be a Christian church is to live that is tested and affirmed by the whole community—not one that is imposed on us by the outside."

Inevitably, the lay movement has prompted established churches to re-evaluate lay-clergy relations and question the purpose of laymen's leagues and women's auxiliaries that function chiefly as service clubs for ordained ministers. At the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., for example, every prospective member must train for at least a year to find out what ministry he or she can best perform within the congregation, and no minister—clerical or lay—is considered superior to any other. And at the interdenominational New York Theological Seminary, one of the most popular programs prepares "executive" men and women to take up the nonordained ministry as either a parallel or a second career.

In the Roman Catholic Church, where the priesthood has been regarded traditionally as a higher calling from God, clerical-lay relations are undergoing painful reassessment. The Maryknoll Fathers, the oldest Catholic missionary society founded in the U.S., is training lay "missioners" to develop lay leadership in Third World parishes. Eventually, Maryknoll hopes some of these local leaders will become priests. Meanwhile, in an effort to offset the loss—and aging—of priests, and also to hush demands for a married priesthood, Catholic bishops have revived the ancient clerical order of the diaconate and conferred it on nearly 6,000 laymen.