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Massapequa's Assembly of God Church, with cross topped by crown of glory and framed by crutches of the healed, stresses the ecstasy of worship

Charismatics Alive and Well on L.I.

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MASSAPEQUA — A few years ago, Long Island's traditionally conservative churches were confronted by a spiritual renaissance that forced many clergymen to re-evaluate their own roles.

Charismatics, or Pentacostals, as the new "reborn" Christians were called in a society that is inclined to label everything, were meeting in homes, singing the praises of the Lord, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), prophesizing, praying for healings, discernment and wisdom.

Roman Catholics and Protestants, young and old, and even some younger members of the Jewish faith

called on others to repent and accept the salvation offered to them. They knelt in crowded services to be baptized in and filled with the Holy Spirit. Hallelujahs replaced quiet acknowledgment and "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art" became the most popular hymns.

A Broad Renewal

It was not Long Island alone, but the whole country that seemed to be caught up in the spiritual renewal. It was the time of the "Jesus People" and of bumper stickers proclaiming "Smile, God Loves You," "Jesus Is Lord" and "Honk If You Love Jesus."

Most of all, it held a promise for greater things to

come. Some even suggested that the long-awaited Second Coming of Christ was "at hand."

So what happened? The Jesus People are no longer flooding college campuses, newspapers display fewer pictures of people singing with eyes closed and arms upheld.

"I think we are on the threshold of a great revival," said the Rev. Charles Baker, Charismatic pastor of the nondenominational Brentwood Christian Fellowship in Suffolk County.

"If things have quieted down, there is no evidence of it here," said the Rev. Gene Profeta, pastor of the Assembly of God church of Massapequa, which has several services a week and is so overfilled that it has to "bar the doors," after its capacity has been reached, to conform with local fire laws.

But there is concern, too, that some elements of the Charismatic movement are heading in misguided direc-

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Charismatics Are Alive and Well on the Island

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tions, either through wrong motivations or a lack of understanding.

A priest in Suffolk County who was instrumental in helping a number of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, to form Charismatic groups, said: "The whole issue is so intricate and delicate that I wouldn't want to comment on it without careful thought. It demands a series, not one article."

Much of the trouble stems from the fact that sometimes the new found freedom of spirit becomes too free, with the organizational church cast in the role of the enemy. For others, too much stress is placed on speaking in tongues, exorcisms or healings and the basic truths tend to fall by the wayside.

This, of course, is not a new problem, as even a casual reader of the Apostle Paul's letters could detect, but it is one with which Charismatic leaders are forced to grapple.

The Rev. Jack Hickman, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in North Massapequa, which, with the Christ Lutheran Church in East Meadow, is active in a Jewish mission, among other services, said that despite the fact that his church worked in the "power of the Holy Spirit," he did not consider St. John's to be part of the Charismatic movement.

"From the very beginning," Mr. Hickman said, "we have had to impose disciplines to avoid the many dangers of



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The Rev. Gene Profeta with part of his congregation during a revival session

Charismatic thinking.

Charismatic people, he said, tend to drift from "blessing to blessing" and, in the end, lose sight of what they are supposed to be doing.

Different Approaches

But, as Mr. Profeta pointed out, different people like different approaches. The walls of his church are lined with the crutches of people who had come for healings. The music is loud, almost deafening. People clap their hands, some literally jump with joy, and, like St. John's, which has a more conservative approach, the church attracts

large numbers of young people.

Mr. Profeta said that about 70 percent of his congregation was Catholic, a ratio that more or less holds true in many of the Charismatic fellowships, partially because of the heavy Catholic population on the Island.

The Roman Catholic diocese and a number of the Protestant mainline (major denomination) churches generally support Charismatic groups, but, for the most part, they insist that they operate within the organizational body.

Some organizational Chris-

tians view Charismatics as antichurch; others think that they are getting carried away with religious fervor and have become too clubbish; still other feel simply that the Charismatics have misplaced their mental tools.

The antichurch charge is one that deeply concerns many Charismatic leaders.

"I think that the whole point of the Charismatic movement is to restore the church," said the Rev. Ernie Hyle, a former Baptist minister who is now pastor of the nondenominational Community Christian Fellowship in Riverhead. "This is God's doing, not man's."

Mr. Baker of Brentwood

said that he thought that most of the Charismatics were not antichurch and that they were going back into the churches with the intent of sharing their new found relationship with Christ.

"The key seems to be home meetings," Mr. Baker said, "and whenever one starts with five or six people, it rapidly grows to 40 or 50."

The mainline churches attribute this growth within the Charismatic movement to a need for spiritual renewal in the church; the Charismatics attribute it to the work of the Holy Spirit.

But whatever the reason for growth, the Charismatic movement is increasing in size. There is no way to calculate how many have become Charismatics, but they number in the tens of thousands.

"We don't advertise," Mr. Profeta said, "but the people keep coming in. It must be by word of mouth."

Mr. Baker said that one change he had noted was that the former barriers of denomination and race were breaking down, Nuns, Protestant ministers, Asians and blacks were increasingly sharing their experiences, he said. The reaction of the mainline churches was most favorable he added.

However, another Charismatic leader said that the mainline churches were "inclined to rationalize, attributing half-empty pews and flagging coffers to 'the times.'" He asserted: "Rather than relying on God, they rely on man."

Mr. Baker said that as a former mainline church pastor, he was reluctant to criticize the organizational church. "I stand convicted of that charge myself," he said, "but if you want a gut reaction, I have to say, amen."