

CHURCHES for CHANGE

RELIGIOUS ACTIVISM IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

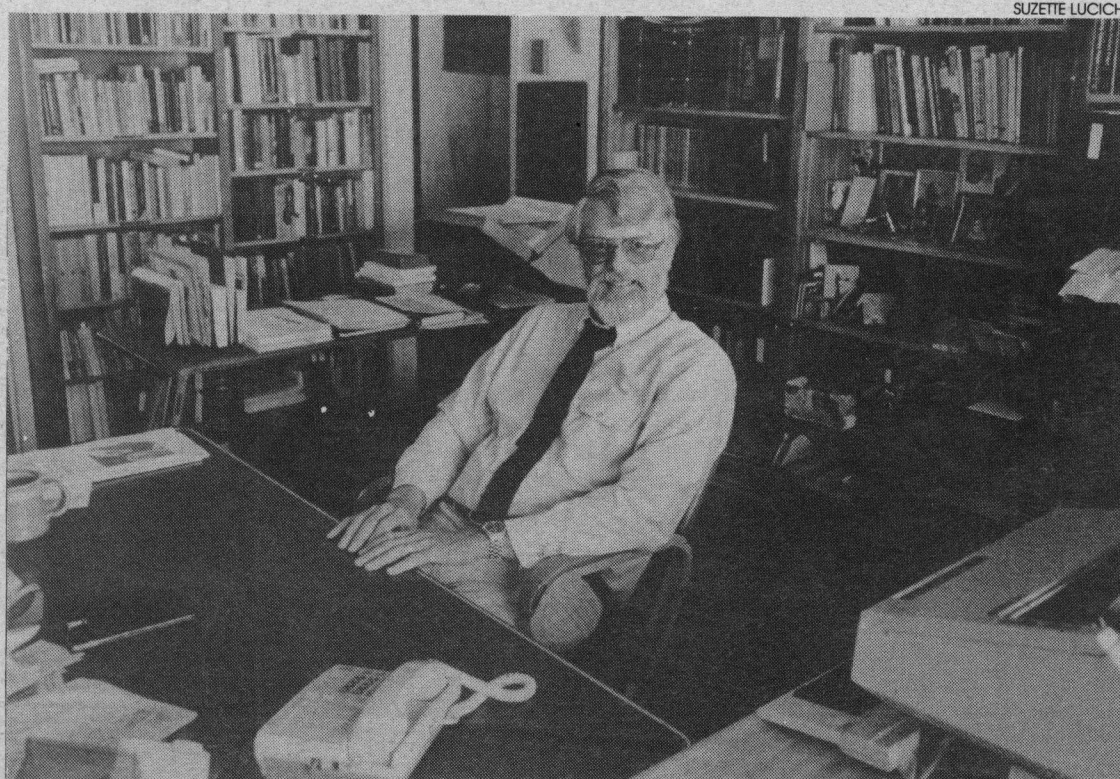
By Vicki Bolam

It should not be surprising that churches, as the traditional keepers of ethical and religious values, are taking the lead in addressing a wide range of social issues. But churches are also institutions that have traditionally tended to support the status quo, and these days, as peace and social justice activities challenge political structures, formerly "apolitical" churches are finding themselves taking some surprisingly controversial positions.

Local congregations of every denomination—Christians, Jews and others—are getting more and more involved in a wide range of problems. They don't talk much about it, and action rather than publicity tends to be the emphasis. Some of the issues are local, like support for local shelter projects, the prevention of family violence, and helping striking Watsonville cannery workers. Local churches are also following their national leaderships in taking clear positions on a wide range of national and international issues—such as U.S. intervention in Latin America and the nuclear arms race—and encouraging members of their congregations to take action.

While most local churches have some sort of peace and social justice committee to coordinate work in these areas, there is a reluctance to consider this type of activity "political." According to Matt Broadbent, Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church in Santa Cruz, "A lot of people in this church would be bothered by the term 'political action.' There is a very strong sense of the division between church and state, and that the division is appropriate." He adds that during political campaigns, "I wouldn't dare support a political candidate to this congregation. We wouldn't be in a position of lobbying for specific political action."

However, Broadbent's church is one of the original churches involved in sheltering the local homeless. First Congregational, Calvary Lutheran (another leader in this movement) and eight other Santa Cruz churches provide shelter on a rotating basis to between 25 and 50 homeless people each night. They have also followed their national church leadership in coming out strongly against the nuclear arms race. Local parishioners are involved in the Habitat for Humanity (the low-income housing program supported by former President Jimmy Carter); the church also helps sponsor an ecumenical, "faith-based" counseling center and will host a peace delegation from the Soviet Union in May.



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Broadbent sees these activities as a natural and necessary outgrowth of religious conviction. "The most radical thing you can do in a church is hold Bible studies. You can't study the Bible without realizing that what Jesus was requiring was a change in the consciousness and a change in society. There are those who perceive of religion in terms of personal conversion and personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They don't see it as having social connotations. . . . I believe it's the Church's responsibility to raise issues of justice, righteousness and moral values."

Donovan Roberts, pastor of the First United Church in Watsonville, another so-called "mainline" denomination, also leads an active church. "We seem to have some consensus around the United Methodist Church commitment to 'peace with justice.' On how to achieve those ends there are differences. But there aren't any hawks in the church." Nationally, the United Methodist Church has been one of the most outspoken in its position in

support of peace. Its bishops have issued a statement expressing total opposition to nuclear weapons for any purpose—a step beyond even the strong peace position taken by the Catholic bishops.

Roberts' church has also been active in work to aid low-income people and the homeless. Several years ago, with other south county churches, they built the 200-unit Green Valley Apartments; more recently, a group of churches pooled their resources to create the Pajaro Valley Emergency Shelter for Women and Children. The Methodist Church was made available for strike meetings during the recent cannery strike, and also plays host to



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United Farm Workers when that group needs a large facility.

As an individual, Roberts is on the steering committee of the local Pledge of Resistance organization, which promises various kinds of civil disobedience in response to increased U.S. intervention in Central America. He stresses that his involvement is personal. "Certain things I do as a United Methodist pastor and certain things I do as an individual. I like to keep that fairly clear. People in the congregation understand the split. They say, 'This is Donovan doing what the inner light of his faith leads him to do.' There is no 'right' way, no one 'right-thinking' theology. We're a pluralistic church, ethnically, attitudinally and in other ways, and I like that."

That "inner light" is something most religious activists agree underlies their actions. "My faith needs to have an immediate and direct application to the whole of life," says Roberts. One way he and members of other local churches apply their faith is through the local Satellite Shelter Project. Peter Buehler, pastor of the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Santa Cruz, says some members of his congregation were uneasy at first about using their building in this way. "What we learned," he said, "is that there are a variety of people who are homeless; older people, women, people who are working but still can't afford housing. Some of us spend the night there and consider ourselves hosts. Now I recognize people from week to week, I see them downtown. It's no longer 'Oh, there's a homeless person.' It's 'There is Norman.'"

Buehler gives credit to the increased local emphasis on housing the homeless to Peter Carota, who started the successful Santa Cruz St. Francis Soup Kitchen and Shelter: "We're all kind of following his lead." Buehler sees the local shelter efforts as a definite form of peacemaking. "It's peacemaking in this community." He also sees such activities as an expression of his faith. "We must always be thinking about what we're doing. We're not just jumping on some bandwagon; we're doing this because Jesus calls us to minister to the poor, the sick, the oppressed. It comes out of a sense of celebration, really, not out of guilt. Christians, in a very deep way, realize that we have been given our lives, and out of that springs a desire to share that; we're called to do it."

Area Catholic churches are also taking the lead in the peace and social justice movement. At Resurrection Catholic Church in Aptos, one emphasis is on helping

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people in Latin America. They have a close relationship with a Chilean school—they send the school regular financial support, and also hold a yearly fundraiser to raise additional money. Says Stuart Carlson, co-chair of the parish Justice and Peace Committee, "We also work to expose people to the social injustice in Chile."

Addressing issues closer to home, the church held fundraisers for the families of those involved in the Watsonville strike. Carlson and co-chair Bill Brokaw say the parish tries

to work on projects both in the local and world communities. "A big part of what the committee does is information and outreach to people who wouldn't otherwise hear about these issues, and to do it in a Christian context."

Carlson and Brokaw say that they have a few parishioners who were not sure about the appropriateness of such action. Their answer is in the Bible. Carlson cites the book of Matthew, in which Jesus divides the people to his right and his left hands on the day of judgment. He quotes, "For I was hungry, and you gave me

food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me . . . truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Practical material aid for one's neighbor," he adds, "is the criteria for a just life. The person who is poor and in need is Jesus himself."

These progressive Catholics also have a lot to say about the role of the Church (with a capital C) in the world. While they don't always applaud the decisions coming out of Rome, they see the Church gradually changing. They point to the recent U.S. bishops' letter strongly opposing the arms race, and to the strong stand on Latin American political issues taken by the pope during his recent tour of that region.

They also point out that the changes are being generated by the larger Catholic community. "The Church is more than the pope," says Brokaw, "it's a huge community. The majority of people in the Church are in the Americas and Africa, not in Rome. The Church is the people in it."

Many churches have long histories of social action, but two deserving special recognition for paving the path of religious social action are the Society of Friends (the Quakers) and the Unitarians. According to Ellie Foster, a member of the local Friends Meeting, the church's pacifist stance was evident as early as the 17th century, when church members were not welcome in the British army because of their refusal to kill.

The Quakers have long been active in the anti-nuclear movement. Earle Reynolds, now a member of the Santa Cruz Friends Meeting, was sent by the U.S. government to study the effects of the World War II atomic blasts on survivors in Hiroshima. He was so sickened by the experience that he staged a widely publicized protest by sailing his small boat into an area of the Pacific being used for nuclear tests. The Friends have held several of their meetings at Vandenberg Air Force Base as a silent witness to the nuclear testing being conducted there, and many church members refuse to pay taxes, in protest of weapons spending. Foster says, "I've had my salary attached. Some people have had their cars

taken, their bank accounts taken."

The Friends is also the only Santa Cruz County church that has officially declared itself a sanctuary for Central American refugees. While they don't have a building to act as a physical sanctuary, members of the church have sponsored several Central American families in their homes.

Sanctuary is a difficult issue for many area churches, one that can be divisive. The Sanctuary Movement is active here, in the form of Central Coast Sanctuary, and the movement has strong support in local churches, but there are also many parishioners who are reluctant to break the law by aiding refugees. Although there are no official Sanc-

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tuary churches in the area, local Sanctuary supporters say that many churches and church members in the Monterey Bay area are quietly sheltering Central American refugees but not making the activities public in an effort to protect their charges and avoid unwanted government action.

Another longtime peace church that is active in this area is the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. According to Harriet Blue, their non-credal denomination attracts people who have become disappointed with other organized religions. They have an active 20-member Social Action Committee which is working to help the homeless, to end U.S. intervention in Central America and to stop the arms race.

Blue herself was a long time coming to organized religion. She says she had a strongly ethical but not strongly religious upbringing, which led her to understand that ethical conviction can exist outside the religious context. "Religion is usually defined as a belief in a higher power, but it can also be seen as a belief in the relationships of people to one another, and in making the world a better place to live. I believe we are our 'brother's keeper,'" says Blue. "If something can happen to you, it can happen to me. What's good for you is good for me. I'm not interested in getting my soul into heaven—I'm not sure I'm going there—but I know I'm here now."

For Blue there is tremendous excitement in working within a

church. "Working with other people makes it more effective. It gives you a sense of empowerment. An interesting thing happens when we do something we think is worthwhile; we may even have disagreements, but when you get something accomplished you feel fulfilled, you feel human. Following the individualist path isn't nearly as fulfilling."

Another congregation that has made great contributions to the local peace and social justice movement is Temple Beth El. According to Diane Grunes, chair of the Temple Social Action Committee, Jews have a special commitment to such efforts. "Traditionally, being a minority, Jews have felt it's their place to help take care of other people, just as we would want people to help us. There's always been some form of social action—now more than ever. Nearly daily we find a new area where people need help."

The Temple is active in the local anti-nuclear movement, the local Satellite Shelter Project, and is supportive of the Central Coast Sanctuary Movement, donating some of its social action funds to that effort. Another major project is a support campaign for Soviet Jewry, with a concentration on letter writing to "refuseniks."

Also high on the Temple's social action priority list is its Holocaust Education Project. All Santa Cruz County high schools now present a one-week intensive curriculum on the Holocaust, including a talk by a Holocaust survivor. Grunes feels that most Jews are culturally instilled



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with a great concern for humanity. "Just being a minority, and having the problem of persecution ourselves, we tend to feel for people who need support, need shelter."

While most area churches have some form of congregational activity, there is also a growing movement toward joint church action for peacemaking. The Satellite Shelter Project is one example, as is the recent Lenten series. The annual series is sponsored by Peacemakers, a Christian ecumenical group, and more than two dozen area churches. Starting off the series was outspoken United Methodist Bishop Leontine Kelly, a vocal critic of the nuclear arms race and its effects on the poor, both in this country and elsewhere. The talk was hosted by the Resurrection Catholic Church, and was followed by six other speakers on the theme "Peacemaking: The Risk and the Promise."

Another ecumenical group is the Pajaro Valley Religious Committee for Peacemaking, which sponsors annual vigils in Downtown Watsonville during Advent and Lent, and also a yearly remembrance of Hiroshima Day, a joint worship service with the largely Japanese-American Watsonville Buddhist Temple. Still another group of churches, Valley Churches United, is active in the San Lorenzo Valley, and has just opened a food bank and resource center for valley residents.

Shelly D'Amour works for the Resource Center for Nonviolence as

a liaison with local churches, and also coordinates Peacemakers. She sees this as an era of tremendous change for religion. "The society and culture have forced the churches to deal with certain issues; issues like nuclear arms, Sanctuary . . . they're coming face to face with the U.S. government, with the law, and having to decide where their final loyalty lies."

D'Amour adds that this conception of religion is difficult for some people. "Older people were usually not raised in this kind of church, but the pastors have had these issues raised in seminary and are very interested in them. You never used to talk about politics in church; it makes some people uncomfortable. But it's also attracting a lot of people who want to address such problems in their lives. The struggle is about whether the churches will meet the challenge and grow. It's not just peace and social justice issues, it's things like parenting, families, sexuality, homosexuality, the role of women in the Church."

D'Amour sees the "faith life" as intrinsically tied to social reality. "There is no separation between the two in the New Testament. The church in this country reflects the compartmentalization of our culture into work life, social life and religious life. Clearly, and this is already more recognized in areas of the Third World, there is no distinction between faith and political action in the Gospel. One's deepest values about life have to be acted out in a meaningful way in society." ●