

The Man Who Created Christ Circle

(Last Of Four Parts)
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At the center of the controversy swirling around Christ Circle stands one man, alternately described as saint, charlatan, messiah and messenger. Who is Arthur J. Hempel, and why has his self-admitted creation, the Christ Circle commune, befallen such troubled times?

Answers to such questions are not easy to come by. Even a simple request for Hempel's age meets with the response, "I would rather not answer that." Both his origins and background before coming to this area in the late 1960s remain shrouded in mystery, a tantalizing question mark upon which Hempel refuses to elaborate.

Little is known of Hempel's personal life except for one bizarre and inexplicable occurrence. In 1969, a published obituary listed Muriel Hempel as having died in Palo Alto after a short illness. She was 35, and left as her sole survivor her husband, Arthur J. Hempel.

The County Recorder for Santa Clara County has confirmed, however, that there was no death certificate ever registered for

Muriel Hempel, either in Palo Alto or elsewhere in the state.

Hempel, when queried on the matter in a recent exclusive trans-Atlantic telephone interview with The Sentinel, responded, "My wife is not deceased. She is my former wife, and she is still alive and living and remarried. She has children by her second husband, and I would rather not reveal her name."

As to the obituary, Hempel admits "there was some confusion raised about that some time ago," but states, "I don't know where it came from." When asked to elaborate on the "confusion," Hempel stated "I would rather not."

Hempel's stint as a Santa Cruz County senior psychiatric social worker from Oct. 14, 1970, through Jan. 16, 1971, was abruptly ended when he was terminated in a contretemps that reportedly embarrassed county mental health officials.

The incident concerned a proposal by Hempel for an alcoholic and drug addiction rehabilitation center to be located on Pine Flat Road in Bonny Doon. Apparently, Hempel's announcement of such a program was the first many of his superiors had heard of it, along with a surprised Bonny Doon School Board.

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In an eerie foreshadowing of the philosophy behind Christ Circle, Hempel proposed a "family" program that would use reality therapy and confrontation and supportive techniques, "in which the patient's nose is rubbed in his weaknesses, and he is instructed in means of turning them into strengths."

Setting himself up as director of the facility, Hempel apparently began recruitment of 15 staff members from around the country. When asked at the time about approval of the project, Hempel said his staff had worked closely with county supervisors in its formation.

On Jan. 16, 1971, however, Hempel was fired by Dr. Louis Ruschin, General Hospital Medical administrator, in a letter that declared Hempel assumed authority "not delegated to you, plus in my opinion, the ill-considered use of these self-assumed authorities." Commitments Hempel made to prospective staff members for the project were termed "inexcusable" by Ruschin.

Hempel claims he was fired because county officials "decided to soft pedal what they wanted to do in Bonny Doon. I lost my job over that. I couldn't compromise what I

was being asked to do. I wouldn't lie to the people in Bonny Doon."

Simultaneous with these events, a group of people had begun to meet at Hempel's house in Rio Del Mar to discuss philosophy and sociology. This group followed Hempel to West Valley Junior College in Saratoga when he took a position there as a full-time instructor from Sept. 1, 1970 to June 30, 1972.

Hempel taught in the social sciences department at West Valley, until his termination in mid-1972. According to one administrator well-acquainted with Hempel at that time, he was "an unusual person to say the least. He was the only instructor I know to have been suddenly terminated from a full-time position. I would say he left the school under a cloud."

It was following his termination from West Valley that Hempel began to lay the groundwork for what would eventually be Christ Circle. A group of 26 adults, mostly from the Bay Area, began to meet more frequently at Hempel's San Jose residence, at which time the group's philosophy began to take shape.

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