

Jesus On A Platter

Maranatha's Kentucky Fried Religion

By MURIEL DRAAISMA

Bob Weiner steps boldly onto the stage. His gold ring flashing in the light, he smiles his heavenly smile. Some 50 well-dressed students gathered at the front of the stage begin to raise their arms toward the founder.

Build an army for God, they sing, clapping and stamping. For opening prayer, students are herded by Maranatha elders into even rows in the middle of this large, theatre-like room at UBC. They hold hands. Weiner urges them to have faith in themselves and in Jesus.

"I want you to look into my eyes and I'll tell you something that'll get you excited," he says. "Everyone in this room is special—you have a destiny. God has a plan for every person and every university student. Amen."

"Righteousness, peace and God—that's what we're going to bring to university campuses. We need the spirit of might to turn this country around."

The message is simple and direct: students should devote themselves 100 per cent to Jesus. They should be Christians first, students second. God must be the final authority in their lives.

Weiner and the growing group of UBC Maranathas have even greater expectations. They want to convert international students studying here in the hope they will spread the Maranatha word when they return to their homelands.

"God's called you internationals to preach in your nation, amen. If God's called you to preach, don't worry about your parents paying for your four-year degree. How dare you not come to Jesus if you're called to be a member of His body!"

Bob Weiner, director of 60 Maranatha campus ministries in the U.S., three in Canada and scores of others across the globe,

Their activities even came to the attention of the Council On Mind Abuse, an organization opposed to cults, who reported calls from parents seeking advice on coping with their offspring's detachment after joining Maranatha.

At UBC, a campus chaplain says he received several complaints from upset students, parents and counsellors after Maranatha's recruitment drives in September and March. Rev. George Hermanson says he is disturbed by the Maranathas' targeting of international and first year students.

The Maranathas tried to obtain the names and addresses of UBC's 900 foreign students from International House's list last summer, as well as a computer listing of first year students from the university's registrar. The requests were refused, both denials citing UBC's policy "to deny requests for access to student information to clubs which have a sectarian or political affiliation."

It is Maranatha's loud and aggressive style, the carnival preaching, which distinguishes them from other fundamentalists, says Hermanson.

Hermanson, who administers to the Anglican and United communities on campus, says a few parents reported disturbing changes in their sons' and daughters' behaviour after they joined the sect.

"Maranathas were telling students how they ought to run their lives. Their leadership was discouraging questions, claiming authority to do this from the scriptures. They told students what they should study, how long they should study, and whom they should marry."

But Hermanson warns that their methods are no excuse for persecuting the group. "We want an educational process about Maranatha; we don't want a witch hunt."

Former student administrator Alan Pinkey found himself facing that dilemma while in office: personally having "moral objections" to Maranatha practices, while fearing an abuse of his power.

"It's a bull I never grabbed by the horns," he admitted recently. "They're a problem I left unchecked."

Not all campus groups feel the Maranathas are disruptive. Rod Alm, staff advisor for the Campus Crusade for Christ, says the Maranathas have added an exciting dimension to UBC's Christian scene.

There is no question the Maranathas are committed. Weiner and his self-proclaimed radical band believe in what they preach.

As he asks the students at the gathering last week to bow their heads and close their eyes, he begins to talk softly about letting Jesus enter their hearts and rule their lives.

The true believers let their bodies sway to the sound of his voice.

"Come to Jesus. He's wrapping his arms

around you. Amen. Jesus, I love you. Lord, come into my heart. Thank you for taking thousands of pounds of sin from my heart. Amen."

One big warm handshake follows another. Some are prolonged. The leaders stare intently into the students' eyes, prodding them with questions about their school work, family and ambitions. All wish success, and one or two grab a hand for a friendly squeeze before leaving.

Earlier, Weiner had said, "This campus is the Lord's. This campus will never be the same."

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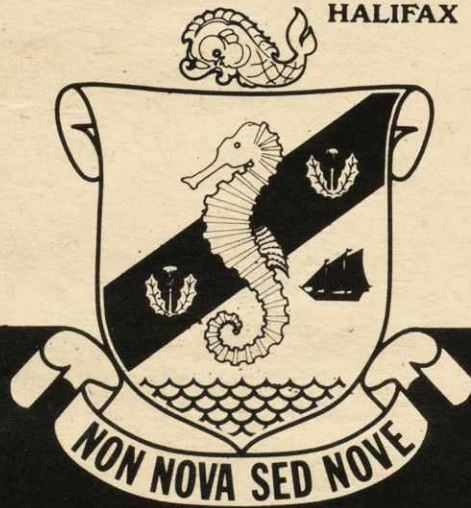
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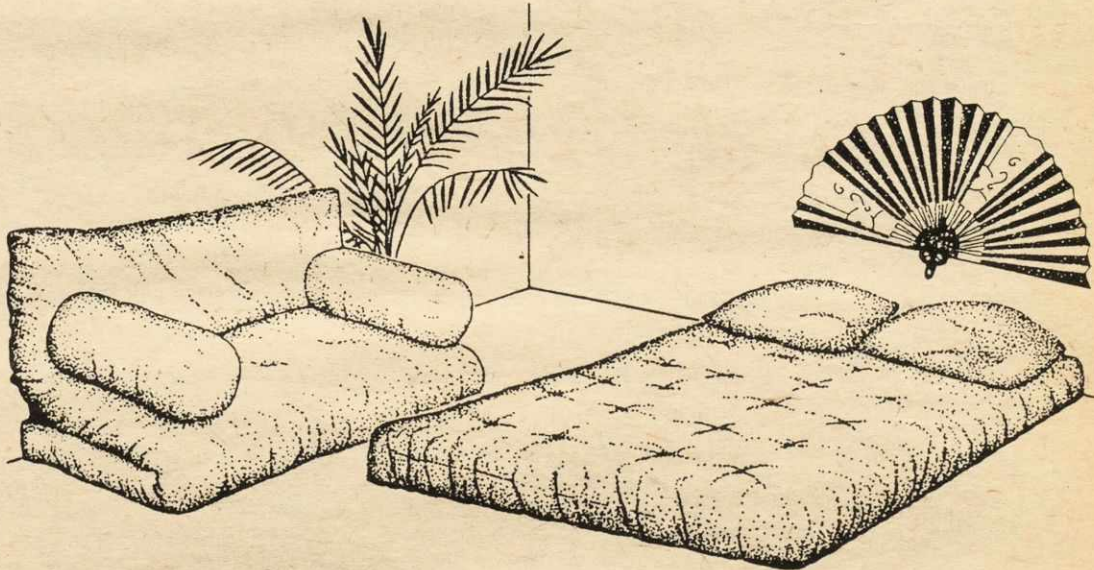
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