

CAROL STAHL

In 1965 I had just finished my education at San Jose State, and had finished my training as an elementary school teacher. I had heard of Jim from my dad who had told me about a young minister who had come from Indianapolis, who had led a group of people that my dad said were similar to ours---working for the betterment of mankind. The group I was with at the time was called Christ Church of the Golden Rule. I had been in that church from the time I was five years old. People in the church lived communally. So I have had experience with cooperative living all my life.

As I say, I was in the Golden Rule since I was very young. And, as I recall, my parents had been members of an organization called Mankind United prior to that, practically from the time of my birth. My dad used to go out in the streets and pass out pamphlets protesting World War II. They were quite active and it was a very unpopular stand to take. I recall them talking about the horrible things that Hitler was doing to the Jewish people. However, as they began to be attacked, and people started saying they were subversives, I guess Arthur Bell (the leader of Mankind United) felt that the only way to survive would be to form a church organization, that would be the only way to function. I guess there were several thousand people in the beginning who got together "projects". These were ranches, farms, where they raised produce and livestock for the people; they had hotels, motels, laundries, that were run by volunteer help. All the services of the people were voluntary-- no one worked an "outside job", for wages. Everything was collective. They were accused of being "Communists" and they began to crawl into a religious shell. Some of the leaders of the movement were attacked, sued, and the church was thrown into receivership and bankruptcy, and all the monies that were collected were given to the Bank's receivers, I guess you'd call them. They lost almost all of their property-- at one time they owned property all up and down the State of California, and some in Oregon. Large pieces of property. One ranch was almost 4,000 acres; they had another one in California that was almost 3,000 acres. After going into bankruptcy they crawled more and more into the religious shell, and became less and less involved with political issues and social problems. Now during the forties, several young men took conscientious objector status and went to Federal prison for this, and lost their citizenship. There were four that went to prison. My brother-in-law took a CO stand and he went to the local jail.

We wound up in California on one of the ranches, and I was there from 1963 to 1968 when I joined Peoples Temple. All my life I had grown up hearing that some day there would be other groups that we would merge with and work with, that were working toward the same goals that we were of helping mankind-- feeding the hungry, clothing the naked etc. However, I did not see that we were really doing this--yes, we were existing, we were eating, we had clothes on our backs, we did not individually have to worry about the bills being paid, but we were not branching out in any way. When I met Jim Jones in 1965, he and a few people came to visit one of our meetings at Ridgewood Ranch, where we shared a few ideas. The Golden Rule had a large property, about 16,000 acres that would have been very well put to use. Could have housed them, had facilities, room for a care home, orphanage etc. We had a school established already. Much could have been done there. It was my understanding that Jim had tried to worship with various churches in the Ukiah-Redwood Valley area and he had been turned down by all of them because of the fact that they were an integrated church. The people at Ridgewood-Golden Rule had told them that they could use the facilities there to hold their church services and meetings. And they did so for an extended period of time, about three years. In that time I grew to know and respect Jim more and more. Every spare moment that I had I would be with the people. I had a lot of responsibilities with the Golden Rule, I was a member of the Board of Elders, I worked in the restaurant that we had-- an income property, and also in the motel. I didn't have a lot of spare time; I had an invalid mother that I had to care for as well. But every spare moment that I had I spent with Jim Jones and other members of Peoples Temple. I saw that Jim was a man who genuinely cared for people and was trying actively to do something about relieving the misery of the poor.

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The members of the church went around the community, visiting people who were sick, comforting them when there was a tragedy in the family, taking things to people if they were burned out in their home, seeing that if there was a death in the family, people had food taken to them. There weren't very many members of Peoples Temple at that time, maybe a hundred or so.

The background of the Golden Rule church was based on Christian Science faith, so I was familiar with Christian Science practitioners and faith healing. However, I was not too much aware of it personally, although my mother had seemingly overcome a lot of physical problems, she seemed like she was on the verge of dying many times, and with the help of meditations of practitioners, she seemed to come through a lot of things. I don't know, I don't understand that part of it. All during that time I had never actually seen Jim Jones heal anybody. I was more interested in the practical applications of Christ's teachings as I had been taught-- feeding the hungry etc. Though I had been reared with that belief, I had not actually become all that involved with that part of it, and this really intrigued me. Jim came to the Golden Rule very humbly, very open. They at first had their own separate services, although they invited the people from the Golden Rule to come and worship with them if they chose. However, it had been the policy of the Golden Rule never to visit other churches or become involved in their religious worship. Yet, some people did go periodically. I was one of those people.

On several occasions after they'd been there a while, members of the Board of Peoples Temple met with our Board and talked about the possibility of working together and of actually merging. Jim was very open to this, he even said that if they were threatened by his leadership, because he was very much respected and revered by his own people, he would step down. I could see why people thought so highly of him. But I could see that many of the leadership there who were up in years were very much threatened by this-- by his youth, his obvious grasp of matters. I think that many of them had grown very complacent-- I myself had grown complacent-- too satisfied, too settled in the groove. I was comfortable, I didn't have any physical needs or wants. I know in the Golden Rule we didn't confront one another-- it was kind of a peace at any price philosophy. Some of us were very uptight, particularly about one member of the Board whom we felt to be grossly unethical. We attempted to approach the Senior Elder about it but she took the position that we were attacking the office of the Senior Elder. But finally they agreed to talk to my dad about his complaints and they listened but of course nothing was done. I saw this happening a lot and I was beginning to get very uptight about the whole thing.

As I said they were very threatened by Jim. I had become engaged to one of the members of Peoples Temple, and we wanted to get married. On several different occasions my fiancée had gone with my dad and my step-mother to the Senior Elder and try to work out a way where we could get married and yet neither of us have to give up membership in our own church. And at this time we still had hopes that there would be a merging of the two groups, and it was even felt by some of us that our marriage would help bring this about. We were turned down, and one evening Jim and several other members came to one of the Wednesday night meetings that we held at the Golden Rule, and asked why we couldn't get married and still hold our separate memberships? One person got up and was very dogmatic. Either Richmond would have to give up his membership in Peoples Temple or I would have to give up my membership in the Golden Rule, and if I didn't like it I could just leave. At that point Jim and the other members of the Temple got up and walked out, and said they would move their organ and other things out that evening-- and they came back that night and did just that. I walked out with them.

We went down to Redwood Valley and had a meeting about what to do now that they had no place to hold their services. I decided at that time that I was going to move my things out that evening, myself. And so several of them went back with me. My dad did not understand why

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I was doing this, he thought I should think it over. But I'd decided it was time I did some thinking for myself.

Jim picked up quite a few members in his adult-education night classes. Many of them are with us to this day. In fact, some of the members were able to get their high school diplomas through those classes.

The church services were very open to the community. People were invited, and they would come--maybe one time, and you'd never see them again. People would make disparaging remarks about the Blacks in the congregation and I know they made comments like "The people smell." you know, really racist stuff. Needless to say the community was not very well known for its tolerance of minorities, as evidenced by the treatment the Indian population had received over the years. In fact, it was not very long before Jim came that they were allowed in the theatres and restaurants finally. Indians had simply not been allowed to enter those places.

Jim began to talk about integration at length, and what it meant-- the willingness to take a stand and endure the harassment. And another thing he did that I think turned off more people than anything else, was that he began to break down the fundamentalist religion. He pointed out that this type of religion was the backbone of all the racism, poverty and inequality that existed. It kept people content with their misery-- you know, "religion is the opiate of the people." He made people feel responsible for the injustice around them, and responsible for doing something to change it-- and people just did not want to accept that responsibility. Later on, he began to preach socialism and Marxism openly, and what it really meant-- that it was not the bugaboo that propaganda had led us to believe. People definitely didn't want to listen to that either. So in the beginning the church was open to any one who wanted to come and offered to help. There was no push for money-- no offerings. People were just encouraged to give whatever they felt they could out of their own conscience.

This was unique to me because in any other church that I had ever been to or seen there was a push for offerings and the money went to support the preacher. Jim was concerned about seeing that every member had all of the things that they needed, all of the things that many of them could not have before, because they were poor. Medical care, dental care, eye examinations, even if a family could not afford it. All of these things cost money, and as there became more and more members, naturally it required more money to continue, to see that these things were taken care of. Some members when they came were on welfare. Well, a lot of them got off of welfare, and the church took up the burden of taking care of these expenses. That was one of the things the church was known for in the Redwood Valley-Ukiah area; it got people off of welfare. I know I got my job because I was a member of Peoples Temple. Peoples Temple members were known for their conscientiousness, for putting in a good day's work, being kindly and polite on the job etc. The members had a very good reputation. Jim stressed strongly that as an interracial organization we had a responsibility to represent that well in the community.

As the church became more influential in the community, we began to have harassing phone calls. I know, I was called up in the night and called "nigger-lover"; heavy breathing; I was told that Jim would be killed and other members of the church would be killed. There were shots fired at the church. They killed some of our animals, poisoned them. Strangled one cat. It became more and more evident that the feeling was more and more against Black people and Jim Jones in the community. He caused people to think. You cannot be around Jim Jones and not think-- and you either become hostile because he pricks your conscience or you begin to analyze and change your own way of doing things. You just don't remain complacent.