News



Amy Coney Barrett (CNS/Courtesy of University of Notre Dame/Julian Velasco)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Editor's note: NCR is re-publishing this profile of the People of Praise group, originally written in 2018, when Amy Coney Barrett's name was on a list of potential U.S. Supreme Court nominees. With the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Barrett's name is once again on President Donald Trump's list of prospective nominees.

It has taken Coral Anika Theill 30 years to heal from the physical and emotional abuse she says she suffered while a member of People of Praise, one of several "covenanted communities" that grew out of the Catholic charismatic revival in the 1970s.

And now she's worried because a woman deeply involved in the group is on a short list of nominees to the highest court in the land. Judge Amy Coney Barrett is reportedly a member — and likely a "covenanted" member — of People of Praise, which means she has entered into a marital-like promise of commitment to other members. The group's leader said "a pretty high fraction" of the 1,700 adult members are covenanted.

Theill describes her five years in the group's branch in Corvallis, Oregon, as a period of suffering under conservative ideology, strict gender-role divisions that emphasized women's submission, and secrecy toward outsiders. When she asked too many questions, she was shunned and eventually left the group.

"It still traumatizes me to this day," said Theill, who changed her name after leaving her husband, who initially remained in the group.

While her experience in the 1970s and '80s may have been extreme and atypical — and Theill admits there may be regional differences among the now 22 geographical branches of the organization — others who have left People of Praise also describe a rigid, controlling atmosphere. Some even use the word "cult."

But representatives for People of Praise say its members are merely inspired by the first Christian communities to live communally (sometimes, though not necessarily, in the same households), "until the day when Jesus will be all in all," according to its website.

"The main thing is just living life with other Christians and seeing the Lord at work in their faces and their lives," said Craig Lent, People of Praise's overall coordinator, or highest leader, who has been a member for 40 years. He grew up Baptist but converted to Catholicism after getting involved in the charismatic renewal movement.

"It's a great blessing to me," said Lent, who is a professor of engineering and of physics at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana.

The group is coming under scrutiny now, as Barrett — who has taught at Notre Dame's law school since 2002 — is said to be among President Donald Trump's top choices for the Supreme Court seat vacated by the retirement of Justice Anthony Kennedy. Trump has said he will announce his nominee July 9.

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Barrett's membership in People of Praise — which she did not disclose on her questionnaire for the Senate Judiciary Committee — was not discussed during her confirmation hearings for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago last September.

But a New York Times article after her confirmation raised questions about People of Praise and those concerns have been repeated by opponents of Barrett's potential nomination in the past week.

Of particular concern is the group's practice of being accountable to a more spiritually mature personal adviser, called a "head" for men and previously called a "handmaiden" (now "women's leader") for single women. Married women — such as Barrett — are "headed" by their husbands. They may also receive spiritual advice from the head of their women's small group, which meets weekly.

People of Praise leaders defend the practice as pastoral care or spiritual direction by fellow laypeople. "It's just somebody you can talk to in confidence," said Lent, explaining that when he was a young father, his "head" gave him advice about

matters as varied as raising kids and septic systems. He said he has not found the process to feel controlling.

Insiders and ex-insiders

Current members are reluctant to talk to the media, but those who have left People of Praise often cite the strict control over everyday life in the group and their experiences of being shunned when they question leaders' decisions or leave.

A blog created by an anonymous ex-member in 2008 includes critical comments by adult children of People of Praise members who no longer belong to the movement. While admitting that members can be "some of the nicest and most morally good people I've known," these ex-members describe an authoritarian atmosphere in which all of one's life decisions — career, marriage, where to live and more — are controlled by the leaders or "heads."

Recruitment through evangelization is stressed and leaving the group is strongly discouraged. Those who disagree with leaders have been told they are influenced by Satan and those who leave are "quitters," say ex-members on that blog as well as in a Facebook group called "Covenant Community: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly."

Because of the "covenanted" relationship, which involves reciting the five-sentence promise with other covenanted members, the group is tightly knit. People of Praise leaders refused to provide a copy of the covenant, but Lent said it simply says members agree to "support each other materially, spiritually and financially."

> 'The covenant just means we're together for the long run. These guys who are in my wedding will probably come to my funeral.'
>
> —Craig Lent
>
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Members contribute at least 5 percent of their gross income to the community, Lent said. Their commitment also may mean not taking a promotion or other job in a city that does not have a People of Praise branch, although the group does understand if covenanted members feel God is calling them to something different, he said.

"The covenant just means we're together for the long run," said Lent. "These guys who are in my wedding will probably come to my funeral."

Others who have left tell a different story. "If your family leave[s] while you are a child or you leave POP on your own when grown up, you will most likely lose many and possibly all connection and relationships you've had within POP. There is a very clear line between insider and ex-insider," a commenter at the blog wrote.

Adrian Reimers was one of the original 29 members of People of Praise, when it was founded in 1971 by Kevin Ranaghan and Paul DeCelles. DeCelles was a professor of physics at Notre Dame, while Ranaghan was a Notre Dame graduate and professor of theology at St. Mary's College in Indiana. Both founders went on to become ordained permanent deacons in the Catholic Church and are still living.

Reimers and his wife, Marie, eventually left People of Praise, which he describes in a book manuscript called *Not Reliable Guides: An Analysis of Some Covenant Community Structures*.

While Reimers' criticisms of the group were primarily theological and ecclesiological — in that he sees the group as a parallel church structure not sufficiently obedient to the Catholic Church — his description of the group's first three decades mirror other ex-members' critiques about the subjugation of women and authoritarianism, especially in the "headship" model of pastoral care.

That model was adopted from the "shepherding" discipleship movement created by the evangelical Protestant neo-Pentecostal movement, Reimers and others say. The shepherding movement has been accused of being authoritarian because of its emphasis on submission to a personal pastor or "shepherd," as they termed it, according to an author of a history of the movement.

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Reimers critiques the lack of confidentiality in this model, as it has been practiced at People of Praise, as well as the confusion of pastoral care with governance of the covenanted communities, since "heads" are also leaders in the community.

"These two aspects of People of Praise headship are a matter of grave concern and must surely give us pause. Taken together they imply that the People of Praise

member's life is not his own, his or her self is not his or her own," he wrote in *Not Reliable Guides*.

"As in [other covenanted communities], the distinction between the secular and the religious is broken down, so that all one's decisions and dealings become the concern of one's head, and in turn potentially become known to the leadership," wrote Reimers.

Reimers has also critiqued the People of Praise in an article called "Charismatic Covenant Community: A Failed Promise" that ran in Cultic Studies Journal in 1986. He declined to be interviewed for this article, noting that he "no longer wants to address my experiences in the People of Praise."

The group's history is intertwined with other "covenanted communities" that grew out of the charismatic renewal movement after Vatican II, although People of Praise has no formal relationship with other communities. It is not a member of the Vatican-approved Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities and Fellowships, because it is an ecumenical group, Lent said.

Beyond prayer meetings

The Catholic charismatic movement began at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, when a small group experienced "baptism in the Spirit" in the late 1960s. The movement spread quickly and blossomed at the University of Notre Dame.

Charismatic Catholics emphasize individual experiences of the Holy Spirit, which may include prophecy, speaking in tongues and healing — similar to those in Pentecostal movements.

What started as prayer groups eventually grew into some established communities in the late 1960s and early '70s, such as the Word of God (part of which split and joined the "Sword of the Spirit") in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and People of Praise in South Bend. Both groups also claim the Cursillo movement as part of their roots. Cursillo is a lay movement founded in Spain in the 1940s, which uses retreats and small groups to build spiritual leaders.



People pray during the International Conference on Charismatic Renewal at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, in 1974. (CNS/John Muthig)

NCR has previously reported on abuses at other similar covenanted communities, including the Mother of God community in Washington, D.C., and a Sword of the Spirit community in Steubenville, Ohio. In those and other cases, bishops have stepped in to address what they saw as excess authoritarianism. However, not all charismatic Catholics belong to covenanted communities.

People of Praise has grown to more than 2,500 members, including adults and children, who live in 22 branches in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean. Fairly early on, the group became ecumenical and it accepts Protestant members, although about 90 percent of members today are Catholic. It is governed by a board of governors, who are elected by an assembly comprising other lower-level leaders.

Reimers describes how early in the group's history, People of Praise and other covenanted communities moved beyond prayer meetings to emphasize "rooting out sin and growing in holiness" in response to an evil world. This led to the headship model and resulted in an emphasis on obedience to the group's authority.

Although the group's "guiding principles" have not changed, People of Praise today has continued to be "always growing up in the Lord," said Lent.

That has included expansion of missionary outreach work to the poor in Indianapolis and Evansville, Indiana, as well as Shreveport, Louisiana, where members "spread the gospel and build community the old-fashioned way, face to face and one by one," according to a People of Praise "Fact Sheet."

Outsiders also may have contact with People of Praise members through their three Trinity Schools in South Bend, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Falls Church, Virginia. The hallmarks of the award-winning junior high/high schools are single-gender classrooms, critical thinking and a seminar format. Most of the students and faculty are not community members, Lent said.

The 2018 parent handbook for students at Trinity's South Bend school describes its "culture of Christian life," which includes morning prayer and an emphasis on chastity and modesty.

"We believe that men and women are created by God equal in dignity, and that that the distinction between male and female reflects God's intention in creation," said the handbook.

"We understand that the only proper place for human sexual activity is marriage, where marriage is a legal and committed relationship between one man and one woman," the handbook reads, listing as problematic "fornication, pornography, adultery, homosexual acts, and advocating or modeling any of these behaviors."

People of Praise also has increased its outreach to youth and young adults in recent years and operates communications and web development businesses in South Bend.

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A group of lay, single, male People of Praise members live celibate lives in the Brotherhood of the People of Praise, and three have gone on to ordination as Catholic priests, including Auxiliary Bishop Peter Smith of the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon.

The Brotherhood gained official status as a private association of the faithful in the Catholic Church through the assistance of the late Cardinal Francis George of

Chicago, although four other bishops declined to help with that status.

Catholics in People of Praise attend Mass at their own parishes, followed by a weekly Sunday afternoon meeting with the group. Critics have raised questions about the group's relationship to parishes. Lent, who is a member of St. Pius X Parish in Granger, Indiana, said People of Praise members are active in their parishes.

He admits that the group is difficult to label. On the People of Praise's website, the "Who We Are" page is subtitled "Hard to understand and that's OK."

But those concerned about the power of a Supreme Court justice — especially one who, at 46, could have a long, influential impact on the court — are not OK with ambiguity about her involvement with People of Praise.

Barrett's lack of comment about her involvement in the group — so far, anyway — is typical of the group's belief that male elders speak for the community, said John Flaherty, a former member of the Sword of the Spirit covenanted community who believes it was abusive and has documented its history.

Other former members of covenanted communities — including some on the ex-members' Facebook group — also would like Barrett to address her involvement in the group, which they see as different than having to defend her Catholicism, as she was asked to in last year’s hearings.

"Where she goes to church is a matter of public record, and the teachings of the Catholic Church are a matter of public record," Ann Tonsor Zeddies, who was a member of the Word of God group, wrote on a thread about Barrett. "But the teachings of People of Praise are not, and that's why people are suspicious — and not unjustly, in my opinion."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]