

Exodus to New Jersey

"The city," sermonized evangelist John Allen Chalk, "is a place of frustration, despair and cynicism" where neurotic sinners dwell. "Isn't it wonderful that the Lord brought them all together like that for us!"

For most of the faithful who gathered to hear Chalk talk at the Golf Course Road Church of Christ in Midland, Texas, "the city" is a generic term for every metropolitan center in the Northeast. But for some of the more committed believers among the Southern-based sect, the urban Northeast—or at least its more comfortable suburbs—will soon be home. While most Protestant churches are relying on teams of clerical missionaries to spread the Gospel, the 2.5 million-member Church of Christ will send 111 Southern families this summer to colonize Somerset County, N.J.—and, it is hoped, to win the inhabitants to Christ.

Promised Land: By last week, an advance party for "Exodus/New Jersey," as church leaders call their project, had unpacked their bags and Bibles in newly rented apartments in suburban Finderne. "This is the most exciting venture the world has known since the first century," claimed one ecstatic elder from Midland. And others compared it favorably with Moses' exodus to the Promised Land. But Somerset County, though booming, is no land of milk and honey, and the evangelists picked it, as preacher Dwain Evans says, "with all the care that industry uses in locating a new plant."

From a list of 30 cities drawn up two years ago, church officials personally surveyed the suburbs surrounding Chicago, Buffalo and New York City. They concluded that Somerset County, some 30 miles west of New York, offered the

best location for a community of Christian colonizers in need of jobs, housing, schools—and converts. Last fall, project leaders distributed a brochure urging enlistments and detailing, Chamber of Commerce-style, the population and employment trends of the target area.

The bulk of the pilgrims are white-collar workers and most of them have secured jobs in advance. But the 1,900-mile trek northeastward nevertheless involves a measure of courage. For example, pilgrim Cato Jones, 27, has resigned as a bank vice president in order to move East.

The pilgrims' penchant for dressing baptismal candidates in flowing white robes and totally immersing them in water before the assembled congregation may startle the more reticent citizens of Somerset County. So for the moment, says layman William Adkins, the pilgrims are concentrating on bringing neighbors and fellow workers "back to the Bible and away from other books written by men."

Eventually, church leaders hope to surround New York City. Last year their project "Exodus/Bayshore" established a beachhead on Long Island, at the city's eastern perimeter, and next fall, a Church of Christ group from Tuscaloosa, Ala., plans to colonize Stamford, Conn., to the north. "If every member of the Church of Christ led one sinner to Jesus every year," calculates evangelist M.F. (Mid) McKnight, "in eighteen years the whole world would be Christian."

Newsweek

