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Protestants: Exodus for Christ

The 2,500,000 members of the Churches of Christ, who live mostly in the South and Southwest, have embarked on a new kind of aggressive evangelism. In order to carry the Gospel to one corner of the U.S. where they have few adherents, the churches are sending entire communities of believers to the urban Northeast instead of relying on individual missionaries to do the task.

The first exodus took place in 1963, when Dwain Evans, a Churches of Christ preacher, led a trek of 85 families, most of them from Texas, to West Islip, Long Island. So successful was this experiment—the West Islip congregation now has its own \$300,000 church and has won 100 converts—that other ministers set up similar communities in Somerville, N.J., and Stamford, Conn. This year, the Churches of Christ plan to organize new congregations in Rochester, N.Y., Burlington, Mass., and Toronto, Canada. By 1968, they hope to ship a readymade congregation to Sao Paulo in Brazil.

Life Adjustment. Every move is carefully planned. Ministers in charge of the operation inquire for volunteers through existing congregations in the South. Those who indicate a willingness to go are screened to make sure they will be able to adjust to the new community. At the same time, church representatives canvass likely Northern communities to check on the availability of jobs and housing and the outlook for proselyting. Stamford, for example, was chosen because it had a good labor market for professional and white-collar workers.

After the decision was made, James Pounders of Tuscaloosa, Ala., the exodus organizer, flew to Stamford with 56 members of his new congregation for job interviews. According to one employment agency, some firms seemed worried that the Churches of Christ members "would try to convert everybody in the shop." Nonetheless, by the time the move took place last August, three-fourths of the missionaries had jobs waiting for them.

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Inspirational Message. In all, 53 families, most of them from Tennessee, Texas and Alabama, have now settled in Stamford. While saving up to build their own house of worship, members of the Stamford Church of Christ gather for Sunday services at a public school. They have also been working hard to spread their fundamentalist interpretation of the Gospel. They have placed ads in the local paper announcing their services. A "dial-a-devotion" telephone number (322-9559), sponsored by the church, provides callers with a daily inspirational message on tape. Congregation members have rung 4,000 local doorbells, distributing literature and inviting people to their Bible-study classes.

A few families have found it hard to adapt to the faster pace and higher rents in Stamford; some of their neighbors have been amused and confused by their slow Southern drawls. On the grounds that Stamford seems to have quite enough churches as it is, clergymen of other faiths question the need for the mission, but laymen are more open-minded. So far, there have been only two formal conversions, but Pounders happily reports that several others are "on the verge." What attracts converts is the activist zeal of the transplanted missionaries. Says High School Teacher Janet Saine, who joined the Church of Christ in Somerville, N.J.: "I was looking for a church and this one seemed to be the only one that was doing anything. There is a corporate life here; it's not just a Sunday church."

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