

About Piecemakers

Accent

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A PAUSE TO REFLECT: Glimpsed in a living-room mirror, Marie Kolasinski sits with two other members of the Piecemakers commune and her dog, Freckles, while listening to singing after the early-morning meeting the group holds daily in one of several suburban homes in which member live.



Costa Mesa's controversial religious commune offers glimpse at the way its members live.

PIECEMAKERS

TIME IN PRAYER:

Piecemakers Mark Wagner, Doug Follette, Marie Kolasinski and Greg Walloch pray for the safe travel of Wagner and Follette, who were about to leave for Colorado.



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Tissue-thin Bible pages flutter and crackle like fire. The seekers turn to Matthew and read aloud in the thin morning light:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world; no, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers. ... a man’s worst enemy will be the members of his own family. ...

“Whoever does not take up his cross and follow in my steps is not worthy of Me. Whoever tries to gain his own life will lose it; who ever loses his life for My sake will gain it.”

Tears glisten in the hazel eyes of Marie Kolasinski, the 76-year-old spiritual powerhouse of the controversial group Piecemakers, now at loggerheads

with Costa Mesa in particular and government in general.

She explains: “He’s saying you will leave your natural family for my sake, and I will return to you a community - I will return it all,” she says, choking on her own emotion.

Thirty-five seekers listen intently. All eyes are on her.

“You are my children,” she says. “We are related with a deeper bond than natural families - the bond of Christ. We have found the most precious thing that God can give us: a community. A secret buried deep in God’s hand, and only a few will find it, because to find it you must forsake the world, forsake everything.

“He has given us the most precious thing: living

together and sharing all things.”



If you are not born of God, your source of life is the devil. ... All who are in the world have the devil as their Father. We do not like to hear truths such as this.

Marie Kolasinski

Kolasinski says she met Jesus Christ when she was asleep. It was a traumatic conversion.

“Nobody was around — but I could feel Christ just literally take my heart. I could feel him massaging my heart. And he said, ‘I’ll take your heart of stone and I’ll give you a heart of flesh.’ It happened three different nights.”

That was 30 years ago, but the memory still makes Kolasinski weep. “He so took my heart and changed it,” she said.

With great gusto, the Costa Mesa housewife plunged into the born-again Christian movement sweeping California during the Summer of Love. She witnessed to whomever would listen. Invited hippies to her tidy tract home where streets are named after birds. Read the Bible aloud as they swam in her built-in pool. But it didn’t satisfy her spiritual hunger. Jesus Christ wasn’t the end of the journey, she decided; he was simply the beginning of the journey. Jesus Christ wanted her to disciple herself to him and to tread a more torturous path: to live as he did, to purify herself as he did, and ultimately, to meet God the Father as he did.

So he called her out of the world. Out of the “false church,” out of hell, out of the grave, where everyone is dead. And he dragged her through the fire.

“We have to suffer the way he suffered. We have to be crucified the way he was crucified. And then we’re resurrected the way he was resurrected,” she said. “That’s what real Christianity is. I hadn’t seen it. You don’t hear it in the churches, because most people don’t want to go that way. Because it’s very painful. There is suffering. Because you have to give up your old life.”



Kolasinski is a tiny woman with a penchant for peasant skirts and funky jewelry. Her snow-white hair is cropped at the ears and she stares square in your eyes when she talks. And she talks a lot.

She talks quickly, with the excitement of a child, the earnestness of a grandmother, the conviction of a prophet. She talks rough, like a sailor, a sinner, a savior. Kolasinski is the sun; the Piecemakers, planets in orbit. Originally from Wisconsin, Kolasinski moved to California in 1959. Husband Ray, a Catholic, never came around to her way of seeing God, but they stayed together nonetheless. He was a diabetic who lost both feet. She fluffed his pillows and sat with him the night he died.

PIECEMAKERS



BREAKFAST AND THE BIBLE: The Piecemakers converge early at one of their homes each day to do business, eat breakfast together and pray.



MEETING THE WORLD: Marie Kolasinski takes a break from reading her Bible during lunch with Anne Sorenson at the Piecemakers store, left, to talk with Hannah Johnson, 8, a girl associated with the group whose mother is not yet a member. Above, two members of the Piecemakers prepare to ride their bikes to the Costa Mesa store.

Ray wasn’t the mushy type, but that night, he said, “I love you.” “I love you, too, Ray,” she said. “You’ve been a good husband.” Soon she saw his face drop and turn ashen. “I saw his spirit come right out his mouth,” she said.

“All of our children met Christ. But my husband never did. It’s hard. It’s hard walking.”



People came — with broken hearts and broken marriages and broken psyches, seeking wholeness, perfect love, a better way.

Kolasinski opened up her Swan Drive home to them. So did her neighbor Anne Sorenson.

Today, three dozen core members live communally in a handful of tract homes, sharing meals, sharing chores, sharing the struggle inherent in leaving the world of the dead and entering God’s kingdom. Together they work at the Piecemakers Country Store on Adams Avenue. Or on carpentry jobs in the nearby wood shop. Or at the other store and small community in Colorado.

On the Piecemakers Web site (www.piecemakers.com), the group offers answers to commonly asked questions about them.

Q. Do you live together?

A. Yes. We share several houses close to work. We do share meals, money, cars, and as much as possible, have all things in common. (See Acts 2 in the Bible).

Q. What are your beliefs?

A. "Beliefs", in this day and age, is simple mental agreement with an idea and no action. We, on the other hand, found that God the Father required action to the truth of his son Jesus Christ. We gave our will to Him, allowing our lives to be crucified with Him, in a daily journey. We have found that good old fashioned work is a wonderful antidote for the many ills of mankind.

Q. Are you a dangerous religious cult stockpiling weapons?

A. No. A cult is a weak description sometimes used by the media to stir up trouble. It doesn't describe us. We are a community of believers in the world, but not of it, forsaking all to find the prize of the high calling of Jesus Christ. We don't have any weapons. We are part of the community and our kids attend public school.

Q. Are you all mind controlled robots?

A. No. Walking with God the Father is the "narrow way". Anyone on this path has his or her own decisions to make about whether to keep on the journey. It's far too serious and life-changing for any one person to be able to transform the people.

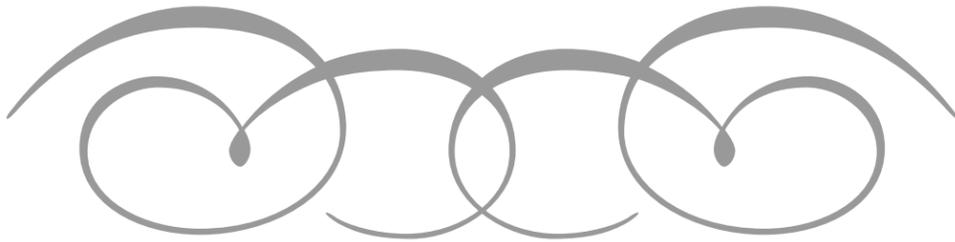
Q. Are you against family and marriage?

A. Our experience is that family and marriage, at best, is a shadow

of what Jesus has for us. At worst, it is a self-serving and manipulative institution made because of fallen man, not God. We don't accept the shadow as being reality and don't have any fantasies or romance about marriage or our natural family.

Q. Why do you mix God and business?

A. The only reason we have the business is because of God. He is the owner and founder. We fellowshiped together before there was a business called Piecemakers. It surely wouldn't hurt to have God in more businesses.



Thousands of people take their classes in quilting, sewing, needlework and doll-making every year, and customers from all over the globe order Piecemakers crafts and quilting patterns over the Internet. The Piecemakers do more than \$3 million worth of business annually, which pays for their food, their homes, their other earthly needs.

Detractors call the Piecemakers a cult — but Kolasinski says they are a community, struggling together to die out of their old lives and kill their wills so they might embrace and embody the will of God.

This community is, in fact, the body of Christ, she said. "We're a different creation," Kolasinski said. "He hand-picked us as a first fruit in the Resurrection. God has set us up purposefully as a shining light in a dark world. We are representatives of the one true God on the Earth — and anybody who hates us hates God. It's that simple."



In Costa Mesa, the laws of God and man are colliding.

Piecemakers will represent themselves in court Thursday, when they — specifically Anne Sorenson, whose name is on the business license — are arraigned for mounting the musical "Big River" in their parking lot without a city permit, which would have cost \$100. They plan to mount a parade for the occasion and sing "When the Saints Come Marching In."

"It would have been easier for us to give them the \$100," Kolasinski said. "But God said, 'Don't give it to them.'"

It's not the first showdown. Piecemakers are famous for clashing with local governments over everything from candy counters to ficus trees.

Kolasinski's expletive-laden letters damning intrusive government regulation sparked an FBI investigation in 1995, when she referred to the Oklahoma City bombing in a missive to the county Health Department.

"The principle is, laws are important to promote public safety and general welfare, and everyone needs to follow them," said Steven Rosenblit, the attorney handling the case for Costa Mesa. "If you want to change the laws,

there are ways to do that within the system. But someone is not exempt because they claim religious reasons."

Piecemakers disagree. The end of the age is nigh, Kolasinski said — governments have turned against God, and God has chosen Costa Mesa for a showdown.

"It's a world system that's passing away," she says. "It's going to be a very traumatic time. In the Bible it talks about earthquakes. And you know what? It's shaking right now. Can't you feel it? Everything's shaking. I think everybody feels it."



The day begins at 5 a.m. When the sky is still thick and black with night, they slip silently through sleeping suburban streets, past towering palm trees and well-kept tract homes, gathering at Anne Sorensen's house for the 6 a.m. meeting.

Inside, it's as cozy as Grandma's house. Frilly white curtains frame the windows. There are 35 people packed into the living room — sitting on the hearth, spilling up the stairs — sipping hot tea and eating warm muffins as Kolasinski leads them through the day's business.

"The Promise Keepers are a false movement of God," Kolasinski says of the Christian men's recent march on Washington. "They're trying to keep the natural family together, but that's the seed. God wants the fruit. When God came into my family, we flew to all corners of the Earth. He sets at variance one against the other. Otherwise we don't grow."

The tiny dog, a Peekapoo, yaps. He flops on his back and gets a belly rub from the nearest friendly foot.

"Wake up, America," Kolasinski says. "Hallelujah. God is here."

Time for business: A teacher at a nearby school wants to buy 32 pumpkins (she can have them at cost, 15 cents a pound). Another woman wants to buy 1,000 tapestry needles (she'll get 25 percent off).

And then, Kolasinski's eyes sweep her groggy flock. Are there any struggles of the spirit to report?

In the quiet that follows, Nevenka begins to weep. "I have something to share," the

Croatian native confesses. Last night, her daughter placed her shoes on the dinner table, and something in Nevenka snapped. Fury rose. She vainly struggled to beat it back. "Now I can see that it was my old controlling nature coming back." She sniffles.

"The shoe wasn't the issue at all," Kolasinski says.

Nevenka nods with anguish. "I couldn't see it last night," she says, crying into a tissue. "I know that God is right and his judgments are right, but I have to admit it was hard for me to see the whole picture. It was very, very difficult to conform to the image of Christ."

Kolasinski shakes her head. "This nation has gotten so spit- and-polish clean we don't have any immunity left," she says. "It's hard for children to live in a house where things are too clean. We all have an unclean thing inside us — that's what we have to clean. Not worry about shoes on the table."

Nevenka nods, cries harder into her tissue. "That's good, Nevenka," Kolasinski says gently. "You are a good disciple. You have so much light inside you that guides you already."

Michelle's turn. "Some stuff happened last night," she says softly. "I blew up at Deborah."

Now Kolasinski nods. "Something comes out of you that wants to run," she says.

And Michelle did run. Stormed out of the house, wrestled with her will, turned around. "I was so scared to come back — but it blew me away," Michelle says. "I was welcomed back in. I was expecting the total opposite."

Kolasinski smiles. "Growth never happens without disruption," she says. "Welcome back, Michelle. Don't you love her? Can't you identify with that?"

Yes, yes, thank you, Father, the seekers say. Sniffles, nose-blowing, a moment of silence. The moon hangs huge over the rooftops when they troop across the street to Kolasinski's house to sing a few songs of praise and celebration, accompanied by piano. Four ducks sweep into the backyard pool for a swim as the four-part harmony swells. Then, breakfast. Together.



Some hop on bicycles and ride to the store to start the day's work. Others walk. Kolasinski usually drives one of the cars; there are about three vehicles per household, belonging to no one and everyone.

The pumpkin patch in the parking lot glows gold and orange. Posted at the front door is a "Supreme Authority Permit" in case a government code inspector wanders by:

"God ... hereby grants to the bearer of this document His permit to do as he seems fit, just and proper in accordance with the spiritual direction of His inviolable eternal Will. No man or institution of man shall usurp, ignore, interfere with or otherwise attempt to nullify this decree. This permit is issued to the bearer for all eternity..."

In the lobby, an explosion of nostalgia. Hanging from the high ceiling are exquisitely detailed, handmade quilts celebrating home, hearth, nature's bounty. Shelves are lined with bread and candy and fresh-baked goodies. Silk flowers, fabrics and dolls. Christmas decorations, ribbons and jewelry. Warm as cinnamon.

Norma Brenner is back in the kitchen, preparing lunch. Today's soup: homemade tomato. She ties on an apron, gets to work. "I was searching for the Lord in the 1970s," she sighs among the pots and pans. "I was married. We moved from Virginia, bought a house on Swan Drive. Marie and Anne came over one

day, asked me if I knew the Lord. I said no. I was searching; there had to be more. ...

"They started telling me about Jesus. We sat around the table, and I'm telling you, the spirit of God was at that table. I thought my life was going in such a different direction. I thought, maybe if I went and saw a psychiatrist. ...

"They prayed for me. And the spirit of God came into my life right then and there. I knew. I knew. There was no doubt about it." Brenner's eyes mist.

"That's when I started my walk. In 1972. We started meeting every day. You start drinking it in and you can't stop. It's like you've been dying of thirst for so long."

Nobody understood what was happening. Nobody planned to make a community. But slowly, the fellowship grew — and tested its members. "It was hard," Brenner says about the lessons learned. "I've been on my face — 'I can't take it, Lord! I can't!' I've called Him every name in the book. For me, the kitchen was my domain, my kingdom. Now you started to give and take, move over and let somebody else come in.

"When community first started in our house, Katie took over the grocery shopping. I used to love to grocery shop.

I was standing in the Safeway and," she cries, remembering, "I thought, 'I guess I won't ever be shopping anymore.'"

In time, Brenner found herself prowling the Price Club, filling carts for the tremendous meals prepared at the store. She smiles. "I know God was laughing at me in the Safeway," she says. "He was saying, 'Honey! You are going to shop!' You see, when you give something up, He gives it back, much bigger."

The chop-chop of vegetables, the sniffing of spices.

"It was like a dying to yourself," she says. "Something starts changing inside and you want more of what God has for your life, and less of everything else. It's a giving-up inside. When Marie says about giving up your husband, giving up your children ... freedom is when you have nothing left to lose. That's the truth."

Brenner's ultimate goal — like that of all Piecemakers — is to come to know God the Father the way Kolasinski does.

"I know her spirit knows. I want that. It's not an exalted place — it's a lowly place. He brings you down." She stirs a fragrant concoction. A spoon to the lips, a taste, a nod of approval.

An average afternoon: Walter the bird perches handsomely on Katie Needham's shoulder as she serves customers on the shop's floor.

Deborah Scherfee squints at the screen of a sophisticated computer in an office above the art center and sewing room, producing graphics for quilt patterns and calendars. A few blocks away, at the warehouse cited by the city for fire-code violations, John Ready builds cabinets that will be part of someone's hand-crafted kitchen.

But routine breaks and people quickly converge in the store's upstairs office when a call comes from Bill Brumbaugh, short-wave radio talk-show host. "I want to get the word out that we have a Christian sister here who is under assault," Brumbaugh tells Kolasinski, his tinny voice crackling over the speakerphone. "I'd like to interview you on my show."

Soon Brumbaugh is reading his treatise on President Clinton's health problems live on the air — theorizing that Clinton didn't really hurt his knee in a fall but actually had surgery on his penis to remove the "identifying markers" Paula Jones referred to in her lawsuit.

Gasps and giggles rise from the dozen Piecemakers jammed into the office.

"You're becoming a bit of a media icon locally," Brumbaugh says. "Tell us your story."

Kolasinski presses the phone to her ear, tells about the permit problems, how policemen and firemen "raided" their warehouse. "They were like ants, all over the place," she says. "I think they were looking for guns or something."

Brumbaugh rages over the "ungodly Babylonian system," abortion, drugs, homosexuality.

After the show, Brumbaugh calls back. Kolasinski needs to set him straight about a few things.

"Bill, the pastor sitting in a church is as wicked as a whore," she says. "I can't point my finger at a homosexual — I only have to look at my own heart. He is going to take the finger-pointing Christians and say, 'What are you doing with your own wicked heart?' Bill, there are so many issues you can get into. He wants you to keep your eye on Christ and to hell with everything else. I know they killed the people at Waco. I know Janet Reno's a whore. But keep your eye on the Lord instead of issues, and you'll be fine."



She hangs up, feels bad. "I hope I wasn't too harsh on him," she says. No, no, heads shake. "If you didn't tell him," says John Ready, "you'd be hurting him."

Kolasinski heads home around 5 p.m. so dinner is on the table by 6: pasta salad garnished with artichokes and sun-dried tomatoes. Steaming fresh peas. Fresh fruit smoothies. "We eat very healthy," she says.

Two red candlesticks warm the center of a homey table, and an orange cat named Sniffles lounges atop an open Dutch door. There are usually four or five other women who live in the house with Kolasinski; they take their seats, admiring the feast, but say no prayers before digging in. "You ask for everything when you're a babe," says Judy Haeger, smiling. "When you're an adult, you just bow your head and thank Him."

Talk turns to the seekers' trials. Deborah's problem is she's too smart. Amy's problem is she talks too much. "Some pout. Some fight back. There is warfare to bring people into God," Kolasinski said.

Brenda Stanfield puts down her fork. Kansas was home when she first ran into Piecemakers back in the 1970s.

After seven rocky years of marriage, "I was down to the pits," she says. "God uses whatever to bring us to the end of ourselves. I tried to commit suicide."

A Piecemaker rushed to her side and brought Stanfield back to Costa Mesa. "I knew I had arrived home," Stanfield says. "You can take your shoes off and be who you are, and know you're accepted. Everybody has the same kind

of story — we're all trying to find our way back home, to that place of perfect peace with Him."

Kolasinski alone has found it. "Meeting God was scary and painful; meeting Christ wasn't," she says. "God is a consuming fire. He burns everything inside of you — everything inside that isn't God. It was the most excruciating pain I've ever experienced. When you experience pain, it means something's wrong; once God made everything inside of me right, there was no more pain.

"It was like an acorn growing into an oak tree. They call it perfection. The kingdom of God is here because we are coming into maturity — He is unveiling us before the world. It's making the people go crazy, because they don't know how to contend with it. They want to put the light out. They want to get rid of us."

Consider those who leave and turn on them. "In Piecemakers, He's forming a body exactly like he'd form this body here," Kolasinski says, pointing to her tiny frame. "He'd start making, like, one end of a little finger, and all of a sudden they decide to leave because they didn't want to pay the price. So they felt good leaving, but that left us without a finger. They have to answer to Christ for that."

There's that married couple who stayed for nearly 20 years, then charged that Piecemakers was a mind-controlling cult, in which Kolasinski decides everything from whom a person lives with, to who gets a vasectomy, to who can buy new clothes.

Marion and Harold Simonds filed a lawsuit saying that, at Kolasinski's urging, they signed over part ownership of their home to Piecemakers; the Simonds reclaimed the house shortly afterward. Several former members have filed lawsuits over the years, ranging from child custody disputes to compensation claims for original quilt patterns.

"It's like spitting on Christ," Kolasinski says. "Blaspheming the Holy Spirit. They turn around and accuse us of things, when the fact is they just didn't want to walk the walk. ...

"Mind-controlling? You bet it's mind-controlling!" she says. "If they haven't had a mind-controlling experience walking with Christ, they haven't met him."

Freckles, the cocker spaniel, paws insistently at Kolasinski's leg. Kolasinski reaches for a bowl filled with kibble and tosses the nuggets, one by one, into the air. Freckles leaps gracefully, and airborne, catches them.

"Blessed are those that are persecuted," she says, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

After dinner, the women put Freckles on a leash and stroll through the darkened neighborhood under a brilliant harvest moon, wondering about the purity of a certain reporter's heart. Then, sleep. Soon it will be 5 a.m. Another day. Another chance to walk toward perfection. Together.



TIME TO SING: After a pre-dawn breakfast, Piecemakers members walk across the street from their meeting place to another home equipped with a piano to accompany their singing.