



## The Mail Order Ministry

I had read somewhere, in the summer of 1968 -- perhaps in an issue of Paul Krasser's magazine *The Realist*, of which I'm sure I was only the subscriber at my high school -- that there was an outfit in California, a cult you might say, that would ordain anyone to the ministry, and that thousands of draft age men were using these preprinted divinity degrees to maintain deferred status from the U.S. Selective Service. Having a vague plan in mind for freeing myself from the world of squares and transporting myself to a better, higher plane, I jotted down the address:

Universal Life Church  
c/o Rev. Kirby J. Hensley  
1769 Poland Road  
Modesto CA 95358

And after a few months, I came upon the address and wrote to it. I was wise enough even at age 17 to think, You don't get something for nothing. But in this case I did get something. I never sent the Universal Life Church so much as a dollar or a return stamped envelope. But a

week later I got a letter with a divinity degree in it, stating that I was entitled to all the rights and privileges accorded a man of the cloth.

I was enrolled at Wooster by that time, in my sophomore year. I gleefully showed the document around to friends and requested that from that point on I was to be referred to as the Very Reverend Finley. I saw the degree as not only a useful tool in confounding my draft board, but also the antidote to my Presbyterian college's chapel requirements. How could they demand that I attend chapel services if I was already a minister in another faith?

I went down to the Wayne County offices in downtown Wooster and applied for a license to perform marriages. Later, I was to cross into West Virginia and Pennsylvania and get paperwork for the same privileges in those states, too, and when I arrived in California I sent off for the same forms, but never received any.

Just to have something to talk about, I made up a marriage ceremony. It was a simple thing. I simply waved my hand ritualistically over the heads of the happy couple, swigged wine from a jug, and proclaimed "Go, and sin no more!"

I bought a black Roman collar dickey from a religious supply store, and wore it under a wool suit while I went for long, deliberate walks around town. The idea was to get into a ministerial frame of mind. I wanted to approximate the gravity of a real minister, so I

practiced thinking about the things I thought ministers thought about -- the fires of hell, the problems of wayward youth, the themes for next Sunday's homily. Now that I am older I realize ministers spend more time thinking about building funds and career tracks than about hell. What did I know.

The joke was good enough that about 40 classmates were eventually ordained. I was pleased to see other people thought it was a cool idea -- but I secretly bridled at them stripping the exclusivity of the idea away from me. Also, obviously, when everyone was a minister, that being a minister meant less. The whole point of the ministerial joke is the solitariness of the spiritual leader tending to his flock, the intermediary to God. When everyone was a minister it was more like a Frisbee party.

But there was nothing I could do about that. After all, I got the idea from a magazine. And Kirby J. Hensley wasn't interested in my exclusivity. The more I found out about him, the more of a troublemaker he seemed to be. He was an old-time Pentecostal preacher in North Carolina, but something flipped him out. I hoped it was the war, or the way his church handled civil rights, or some struggle over doctrine.

It appears, however, that he was just dissatisfied with the doctrinaire attitudes of Pentecostalism. So his idea was to create a new kind of church in which people could invent their own beliefs. In classic American style, He divorced his first

wife and decided to find a new improved religion. He inspected many religions, judging what each had to offer spiritually. After 5 years of studying, Hensley concluded that “the proper religion may differ for each man, and everyone is entitled to choose his or her own religion. No one should be criticized or condemned for wanting to practice the belief of his or her choice.”

So Kirby Hensley started this bogus church with the primary goal of screwing the system up. To anyone at all, he was willing to confer the privileges which religion had zealously guarded over the years – freedom from investigation, freedom from taxation, freedom to say the most outlandish things, freedom to worship in unusual ways and to ingest weird things as part of the ceremony, even the freedom of sanctuary from worldly authority.

Over the years, many movements would make their way to Modesto to take advantage of these glittering freedoms – draft resisters, tax protesters, goofball cults, and grifters. Dogs, cartoon characters, death-row inmates and dead people are said to be among the ordained elect.

My fate was to use this tarnished vessel to launch a strike against my school, my society, my family and the U.S. Government by creating an unprosecutable religious enclave on the palm-lined streets of Hollywood, California.

My goal was sanctuary.