

# What Motivated Terry Ratzmann's Shooting Spree in the Living Church of God?

Peter Ditzel

On March 12, 2005, 44-year-old Terry Ratzmann walked into the services of the Living Church of God. They were being held in the Sheraton Hotel near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Ratzmann stood near the back of the room where he was spotted by 12-year-old Robert Geiger. The boy later described Ratzmann, whom he had known most of his life, as looking enraged, and "his eyes were real dark." Robert also saw Ratzmann's gun.

Ratzmann opened fire with a 9mm handgun. He fired 22 shots, immediately killing four people. One bullet was intended for Robert, but the bullet whizzed past his face. Ratzmann ended the shooting spree by killing himself. Three more people died in hospital. Police have still not figured out Ratzmann's motive. At first, they focused on the possibility that Ratzmann was about to lose his job. This now turns out not to be the case. He was near the end of a temporary assignment through an employment firm, and would likely have received a new assignment.

Police and media at first assumed the Living Church of God to be an evangelical church. But both have now finally realized that the Living Church of God is no ordinary church. They now believe that Ratzmann's motives were directly connected with the church.

The Living Church of God is one of the most extreme of the many offshoots of the Worldwide Church of God, a church founded in the 1930s by the late Herbert W. Armstrong (<http://www.livingcog.com/237offshoots.htm> lists 237 groups that can trace their origins to the Worldwide Church of God). The former advertising man based his church on unique blends of what most Christians would agree are unorthodox beliefs. Among these beliefs, which are also held by the Living Church of God, are strict observance of Saturday as the Sabbath, the teaching that only the followers of Armstrong's beliefs are true Christians, a denial of the Trinity, believing that the Holy Spirit is merely an impersonal force, the belief that man's destiny is to become God as God is God, Anglo-Israelism (the belief that the white, English-speaking people are the lost tribes of Israel), and the belief that Jesus Christ's sacrifice justifies us only from past sins and that keeping the law of Moses (including the Ten

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Commandments and dietary laws) merits toward salvation. Armstrong also placed a heavy emphasis on prophecy, trying to create a sense of urgency in his readers and listeners by saying we are in the very last days.

Roderick C. Meredith heads the Living Church of God. Meredith was one of the first four students of Ambassador College, which Herbert Armstrong started in 1947. He was ordained in 1952 and quickly rose to become one of the Worldwide Church of God's top evangelists.

Herbert W. Armstrong died in 1986. His successor, Joseph W. Tkach, began making changes in the church's beliefs that many who remained faithful to Herbert Armstrong's teachings disagreed with. In 1992, Meredith, who did not like the changes made by Tkach, left the Worldwide Church of God and founded the Global Church of God. By the end of the 1990s, he had left Global during a power struggle and formed the Living Church of God.

In the January-February 2005 *Tomorrow's World* magazine, Meredith wrote an article named "Are You Prepared?" in which he claimed, "Events prophesied in your Bible are now beginning to occur with increasing frequency. In this Work of the living God, we are able to warn you about what is going to happen soon. We are not talking about decades in the future. We are talking about Bible prophecies that will intensify within the next five to 15 years of your life!" He then goes on to warn members to be prepared for a sudden emergency, such as the breakdown of the banking system, by paying off their credit-card debts and putting aside enough cash for at least sixty days' living expenses. Toward the end of the article, he adds, "If you truly believe in the living God and in His inspired word, you will do your part to support His Work [undoubtedly meaning supporting the Living Church of God —ed.] even in trying times. Then the Creator will certainly 'be there' when you desperately need Him" (online version of article found at <http://www.tomorrowworld.org/cgi-bin/tw/tw-mag.cgi?category=Magazine34&item=1104274596>).

Meredith ties God's being there when you need Him to supporting Meredith's church. Some people would shy away from Meredith's writing as manipulative. But others are attracted to it, believing it to be the "inside scoop" on Bible prophecy that will keep them safe in perilous times. This has allowed Meredith to get away with making nearly identical predictions for almost 50 years. In the August 1957 *Plain Truth* magazine, Roderick Meredith wrote, "After 1965, we are destined to run into increasing trouble with the Gentile nations.

America and Britain will begin to suffer from trade embargoes imposed by the brown and oriental races.... We will begin to experience the pangs of starvation and the scarcity of goods!"

In following years he wrote, "You might as well wake up and FACE FACTS! The world you live in won't be here 15 years from now!" (*The Plain Truth*, December 1963); "Frankly, literally dozens of prophesied events indicate that this final revival of the Roman Empire in Europe—and its bestial persecution of multitudes of Bible-believing Christians—will take place within the next seven to ten years of your life!" (*The Plain Truth*, Feb. 1965, p. 48); and "Bible prophecy indicates that the final attack on the U.S. and Britain by this coming 'Beast' power could easily be launched perhaps as early as the spring of 1972—or earlier." (*The Plain Truth*, May 1965, p. 45).

Besides his penchant for whipping up fervency over impending doom, Meredith has another reputation. In 1980, Armstrong wrote to Meredith saying, "You do not attract—as I said before, you REPEL people. You are a harsh taskmaster over those under you. THAT IS YOUR RECORD!" (posted at <http://www.servantsnews.com/docs/merlet02.htm>).

In the book, *Armstrongism: Religion or Rip-off*, Marion McNair writes of Meredith's Worldwide Church of God days, "Under the guidance of Meredith a social caste was developed in conjunction with a strong-handed ministerial visiting program, looked upon as a 'spy system' by members who denigrated it by comparing it with Hitler's Gestapo." Meredith used to be the head of the Church Administration Department in the Worldwide Church of God, which means that he was the ministers' supervisor. "Through the years," writes McNair, "this progressively heightened sin detection system became a crucible of interrogation. During more than ten years of this process thousands of members were molded in the Meredith image but many, many more were not sufficiently refined by the heat of the crucible and came up as rejects. Thousands were expelled for raising insignificant questions of doctrine or for failure to agree with one of Armstrong's suppositions."

Is the Living Church of God responsible for Terry Ratzmann's murderous rampage? It is highly unlikely that any earthly court will ever find the church or its leaders guilty. Meredith is quite truthful in saying that the Living Church of God does not advocate violence. Ratzmann was obviously unstable, and unstable people commit rash, and sometimes violent, acts. But whether the Living Church of God and its predecessors (Ratzmann was once a member of the Worldwide

Church of God) contributed to or even caused Ratzmann's instability is another question. Meanwhile, Living Church of God officials are blaming Satan.

For a while, police were looking for a motive in a sermon Ratzmann heard a couple of weeks before the shooting. But they are not likely to find the answer in one sermon. The answer will likely be found in all of the sermons, all of the articles, all of the trying to qualify for one's own salvation, all of the first tithing and second tithing and third tithing and tithe-of-the-second-tithing and asking for even more offerings if we want God to be there when we need Him, all of the doom and gloom predictions, and all of the oppression found in the Living Church of God. As Nancy Ammerman, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University, said in a March 19, 2005, Associated Press article about Ratzmann's possible motives, "The strictness [of the church] can heighten the possibility for disruptive behavior."

Clearly, Terry Ratzmann had simply had enough. But instead of walking out like many thousands of other members of Armstrong-following churches and finding freedom, Ratzmann, twisted as he was, tried to strike back. Sadly, for those who were once members of an Armstrong-following church (this writer included), Ratzmann's actions are shocking, but not surprising. We extend our heartfelt sympathy to the survivors. But we are sad not just for those who died, but for those who are still "living" in that dying Church of God.

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