

DEFINING AND PRESERVING THE PEOPLES TEMPLE IN COLLECTIVE MEMORY

An interview with Mr. Fielding M. McGehee III and Dr. Rebecca Moore



The tragic demise of the Peoples Temple at Jonestown is a significant but enigmatic event in American religious history. Members of the Peoples Temple regarded the community as a noble experiment in racial equality and social justice, even if it ultimately ended in failure. Several decades after the community's demise, Jonestown and Jim Jones have come to symbolize religious evil, danger, and madness, at least in popular culture. Scholars continue to debate the group's history and meaning. Fielding McGehee and Rebecca Moore have established the largest and most comprehensive archive of materials on the history of Peoples Temple. In this interview we explore with them the creation of the *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* archive and its contribution to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the Peoples Temple. The archive is online at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/>.

Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: When was *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* established and what was your motivation and purpose in doing so?

Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore: The website was founded in 1998 as a project of Dr. Moore at the University of North Dakota. It was designed to provide an alternative to news media coverage that coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the deaths in Jonestown. When Dr. Moore relocated to San Diego State University in 1999, the site moved with her, where it has been ever since at: <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>

WRSP: Your selection of the name, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, seems to indicate a recognition of the contested nature of the Peoples Temple's history and meaning. Would you comment on how you decided on the archive name and what it indicates about the archive?

Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore: As noted above, news media coverage of Peoples Temple and Jonestown seemed to rely on a few selected persons, particularly ex-members, so it presented the apostate view of the group and the event. As the title suggests, the site was initially designed to present an alternative perspective. As it has developed, however, the website provides a variety of alternatives and does not represent a single voice or viewpoint. In fact, we feel an obligation to present a variety of viewpoints—or alternatives—even though we do not agree with many of the articles and opinions published on the site.

WRSP: What types of materials are available in the archive and how have you gone about gathering them?

Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore: There are a number of different types of materials. The first are personal reflections and articles written by survivors of Peoples Temple. These include apostates, people who lived in Jonestown, people who escaped the deaths, and people who just happened to survive by not being in Jonestown on November 18, 1978. We have solicited these materials primarily through the annual publication of *The Jonestown Report*, asking survivors to comment on various issues of controversy, e.g., whether the deaths were murder or suicide. The second type are articles written by scholars that have analyzed a range of topics: the psychology of Jim Jones; the sociology of the community; the recovery process of survivors, and so on. Most of these articles we have directly solicited, although a few have come in directly from academics. The third type of material is rather unusual: these are reports of artistic representations of Jonestown provided by the artists themselves. They include descriptions of poems, paintings, dramas, films, and other creative works. Most of these items come in directly from their creators, although once we learn about them, we pursue the artists and ask them to contribute to *The Jonestown Report*. The fourth and final type of archival material is what is traditionally considered an archive: documents from Peoples Temple. This material has been obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, and has been scanned, re-typed, or otherwise posted directly onto the website. The vast majority of these documents come from the FBI, although additional items come from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the State Department; the Central Intelligence Agency; and other sources. This section of the site will continue to grow in coming years as more documents are identified and analyzed, and will provide the foundation for continuing original research, both on our own site and by other scholars.

Already contributors to the site—primarily in the person of former Temple member Don Beck—have pored through hundreds of documents to compile records of use for future researchers, including the dates that individuals arrived in Guyana from the United States, the

jobs that various people had within the Jonestown community, the rosters of people who lived together in different dorms, cottages and group houses in Jonestown, even the daily menus for food served at each meal. These compilations give a fuller understanding of the strength of the community and the challenges it was still trying to overcome.

But perhaps the most important contribution that the website has made has been the research that went into the compilation of the only complete list of the people who died in Jonestown, a process that took thirty years. This research also allowed us to provide the names that appear at the Jonestown memorial at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, California, the site where more than 400 unidentified or unclaimed bodies from Jonestown were buried in May 1979. In addition, the site has become an online memorial for the Jonestown dead, as relatives and friends can leave remembrances and expressions of love in a single place of respect and honor.

The final section of note on the site is the collection of tapes recorded by members of Peoples Temple of their own church services, Jim Jones' sermons, telephone calls, community meetings in Jonestown, and the events of the final week, including the so-called "Death Tape." Of the 750 tapes that have been identified as containing conversations, almost half have been transcribed and placed in context with a summary that includes date of the recording, the identifiable people who speak or are named, and—for Jim Jones' sermons—the Bible verses quoted. This is another one of the sections that will continue to grow in coming years.

One related aspect of this project that has almost been completed, however, is the digitization of all 750 tapes in our possession, including those we have not yet reviewed. Certainly the digitization of audiotapes has made a wealth of material instantly accessible to a global audience.

WRSP: Not all of the government files related to Peoples Temple and Jonestown have been released. Do you expect any major new information that would reorient our understanding of Peoples Temple when those materials become publicly available?

Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore: New regulations concerning privacy and archiving at the federal level were promulgated under the Clinton Administration, promising greater access to documents. We had expected a great release of classified documents after twenty-five years elapsed, but this did not happen. We are currently in the thirteenth year of a FOIA lawsuit (McGehee et al. v. Department of Justice) that has slowly pried items from the FBI. This has resulted in the release of a set of CDs with thousands of pages on them; at the same time, the FBI has not released photographs in the appropriate format (photocopies of photos rather than jpg files), and has refused to release other items although privacy considerations are moot. This case may be nearing litigation, since the FBI has consistently refused to provide items that we feel are both reasonable and required under FOIA.

WRSP: Based on the vast array of documents and records you have now collected in Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, what are the most important insights about Peoples Temple that have emerged from these materials?

Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore: Clearly the wealth of materials indicates the complexity of the organization, defying simplistic assertions about the nature of this particular group and all new religions. They show the development and changes that occurred over time, again challenging the idea that new religions are static and supporting the notion that, like all religions, new groups change. The materials definitely show that the group functioned well without Jim Jones' leadership, but also reveal his micro-management of almost every operation. Nevertheless, the vast numbers of Temple members engaged in a variety of services—legal advocacy, social welfare assistance, political activism—demonstrate a well-organized and high functioning group.

WRSP: Mr. McGehee and Dr. Moore, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Fielding M. McGehee III is the chief historical researcher for the Internet's most scholarly and diverse resource on Peoples Temple, at <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>. He edits the site's annual journal, *The Jonestown Report*, which follows ongoing scholarly research and artistic interpretations of Peoples Temple; offers a forum for Jonestown survivors, relatives and Temple apostates; and publishes original articles by students and writers. He is the primary transcriber and contextual analyst in an ongoing project to put 750 audiotapes from Jonestown on the public record. He has also participated in many book-length projects on Jonestown and Peoples Temple, including *Stories from Jonestown* by Leigh Fondakowski (2013). In 2011, he joined with two Jonestown survivors to create, underwrite, and dedicate a permanent memorial to the 918 people who died that day; the memorial is located at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, Cemetery. As with all of these efforts in conjunction with other survivors and relatives, he and his wife Rebecca Moore have sought to humanize the people of Jonestown, to document the history of the movement and the government's response to it, and to articulate the lessons that the tragedy can teach the U.S. A journalist and researcher by training, Mr. McGehee has also worked for a number of public interest groups, including the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, the Military Audit Project, Citizen Alert, and SkyGuard.

Rebecca Moore is Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at San Diego State University. She has a Ph.D. in religious studies from Marquette University (1996), where her specialty was Jewish and Christian dialogue. She has written and published on medieval Christian theologians and their debt to Jewish biblical commentary. She is author of *Voices of Christianity: A Global Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 2005), and co-author of *A Portable God: The Origin of Judaism and Christianity*, with Risa Levitt Kohn (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). She directs San Diego State University's Metropolitan Area Pluralism Study

(MAPS), which locates, charts and digitally publishes a visual and descriptive guide to the religious diversity that exists in the San Diego-Tijuana border region (<http://geoinfo.sdsu.edu/MAPS/>). Dr. Moore also specializes in American religions, focusing on new religious movements. Her most recent book is *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (Praeger, 2009). She co-manages the website *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple* (<http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>). Her interest in Peoples Temple is both professional as a scholar, and personal, as someone who lost family members in Jonestown.

WRSP Interviewer: Dr. Catherine Wessinger

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Peoples Temple profile

www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/PeoplesTemple.htm

Peoples Temple archive

<http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/ARCHIVES/PeoplesTemple.htm>