On a warm spring evening in 1931, 1,000 New Yorkers filled a ballroom at the city’s plush Plaza Hotel to hear about a rapidly growing Christian movement. After prayers by an Episcopal bishop and the pastor of one of the city’s leading Presbyterian churches, the gathering heard Samuel Shoemaker—now rector of New York’s Calvary Episcopal Church—praise Frank Buchman and his “First Century Christian Fellowship.” Twelve people testified to their personal religious experiences in the fellowship, the New York Times reported, “with emphasis on their intimate difficulties before they ‘surrendered themselves to Christ.’”¹

Four years after sailing for England, Buchman and his colleagues had established their movement at the heart of the American establishment. They had spent the late 1920s working in the United States and overseas, attracting ever-increasing crowds and favorable publicity. At the movement’s house parties Americans, Britons, South Africans, and others found an important community and a more vital relationship with God.

Moral Re-Armament regularly recreated itself to adapt to changed circumstances. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, movement leaders expanded the focus beyond college students, reaching out to adults and families. While professing to be anti-institutional, they developed institutions to sustain their work. After more than a decade of anonymity, they embraced publicity. They reshaped their methods, pursuing personal work while organizing large evangelical campaigns for cities and countries. Buchman and his colleagues maintained their fundamental concepts and methods, but by 1932 their movement had a new public face.

D. Sack, Moral Re-Armament
© Daniel Sack 2009
By the early 1930s, Buchman’s most dedicated followers, converted as students, had become young adults. Many took outside work and attended group meetings in their free time, while a few dedicated their lives to the movement, working full-time to spread Buchman’s message around the world. The group coalesced into cells, local clusters where believers could strengthen their faith and talk about the intimate matters of their lives.

Members saw the group as a surrogate family. After the death of Buchman’s mother, for example, Purdy offered “our love and fellowship and eternal brotherhood[,] There is always a place for you in our little house, Frank. It may be a haven for short or long. And what we have is eternally sharable as deeply as our fellowship.” Members saw the group as a surrogate family. After the death of Buchman’s mother, for example, Purdy offered “our love and fellowship and eternal brotherhood[,] There is always a place for you in our little house, Frank. It may be a haven for short or long. And what we have is eternally sharable as deeply as our fellowship.”2 This family was particularly important for those whose families of origin did not understand or support their involvement with Buchman’s work.

Correspondence within the group reflected the intimacy of their relationships, as members regularly reported on their activities, plans, and physical and spiritual health. In a typical letter from late 1927, Day reported to Buchman that “Phil has gone on to Montreal. Will return in a few days. God is using him. I do not yet see clearly how to help him most. He needs care and discipline and his physical weakness makes it hard often to discipline him.” He also noted “Han and Virginia are always a joy. Their baby should be along any day now. They are marvelous about it. Ray is at Sam’s resting.”3 No detail was too small to share.

Some of the reports were less positive. There was a lengthy correspondence about one member’s spiritual status, and whether she should go to Europe with another member. “There has been too much gabbing, interfering, etc., in the matter by people more or less out of real touch with the situation,” one man observed, and then proceeded to gab: “Harry Jacobsen for instance rather upset the applecart by going to Gene first, and telling her what he thought, and then by sharing it all around.” Meanwhile, he reported, “Han rather jumped on Eleanor Forde for lack of fire, and a feeling of insincerity he felt in her Monday afternoon.”4 The letter continues like that for four pages. While almost unintelligible out of context, the intensity of this spiritual gossip suggests the movement’s intimacy. It also shows how their commitment to absolute honesty sometimes made for confrontational friendships.

Movement members shared God’s guidance for each other and the movement. Each morning, individually or in groups, members listened