One May night in 1921, Frank Buchman was bicycling through Cambridge, England, after visiting with a group of students. Suddenly a thought came to him: “You will be used to remake the world.” He was so astonished, he remembered later, that he almost fell off his bicycle. He didn’t tell anyone this story for quite some time, but it shaped his ministry for the rest of his life.¹

Buchman’s goal must have seemed close at hand during the 1939 rally at the Hollywood Bowl. Searchlights lit the sky and flags filled the stage. Actors, athletes, and politicians testified to how Moral Re-Armament had changed their lives and told how it could change the world. MRA had become a mass movement, with billboards and milk bottle caps all across America telling citizens the same basic message: listen to God and lead an absolutely moral life.

Thirty-one years later the world was very different indeed. After a world war, America was now caught up in a cold war, civil strife, and a sexual revolution. MRA, however, had not remade the world; the world had left MRA behind. Up With People continued its youth explosion while the earnest world-changers met at Caux. People around the world still listened for God’s guidance and followed the four absolutes, but MRA was no longer a mass movement.

In the almost 50 years between Buchman’s Cambridge experience and the closure of MRA’s American offices, his movement was reinvented several times. He changed his target audience from college students to adults. He and his devotees broadened their efforts to change the world as well as individuals. MRA’s message was still evangelical—bringing about changed lives through religious experience—but they
called it ideological instead of Christian. In the 1960s it repackaged its message to reach the rising baby boom generation.

MRA reinvented itself in response to changes inside the movement and in its environment. Buchman’s early converts, many of them clergymen such as Sherwood Day and Samuel Shoemaker, saw their work as an extension or reformation of the church’s ministry. Their ministry changed as they aged, paralleling their maturation from college student to young adult to middle age. Later leaders such as Peter Howard were more interested in world affairs than in ministry. Other reinventions responded to new circumstances, as cultures changed and wars raged. Buchman, Shoemaker, Howard, and the rest reshaped their gospel for new audiences and new media, offering the same basic message for new contexts.

In the late 1960s, however, reinvention failed. American culture was changing so much and so quickly that MRA could not keep up. Buchman had died, and the founding generation was retiring. Younger members embraced Up With People, which fled the constraints of MRA’s history and practices. Older MRA members, meanwhile, scorned the youth initiative and clung to the movement’s evangelical Christian tradition. Without strong leadership, no one reinvention could satisfy all of MRA’s constituencies. The mass movement fragmented.

But Moral Re-Armament was not dead. People continued to follow Buchman’s practices, including sharing, guidance, and the four absolutes. There were still operations in other countries, with conferences at Caux and plays in London. In 2001 MRA changed its name to Initiatives of Change, reflecting its commitment to transforming society through personal change. Its literature calls for spiritual renewal from an interfaith perspective, no longer rooted in Christian evangelicalism but still using the tools of guidance and absolute moral values. Headquartered in Geneva, with representatives in 60 countries including the United States, Initiatives of Change sponsors conferences on multiculturalism and peacemaking at Caux and in Asia and Africa, and still gives Buchman pride of place in its history.

MRA has other descendents, including Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step recovery groups, the best-known legacies of Buchman’s movement. While they avoid explicitly Christian language, these groups still follow the practices of confession, sharing, and making amends that they learned from Buchman and Shoemaker in the 1930s. They have grown quickly in recent decades, and for many people have become a spiritual community more important than the church.