

Tumultuous times fuel end-times preparations

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By Amy Green

(RNS) For years, Ken Uptegrove believed another Great Depression was at hand.

A computer professional in Springdale, Ark., Uptegrove started a garden and researched ways to live more simply. He studied the lives of early Christians and launched a ministry and Web site (<http://www.arkhaven.org>) where he and his wife now share their beliefs with some 100 visitors a day.

Ideally, one day they'll move to a remote area with other self-sufficient Christians where they can raise their own food and be ready should things get any worse.

They do not call themselves survivalists per se, but inherent in their way of life is the Christian ideal of neighborliness, he says. Surviving is not about saving yourself alone, but about coming through disaster with enough strength to help your neighbors, too.

"We are not militia. We are not an armed camp. We simply describe ourselves as first-century Christians," said Uptegrove, 74. "It is always just simply living the Christian community lifestyle and being ready for (Jesus') return as if it will happen tomorrow, but at the same time being ready to live our life and being ready for a full life."

In the wake of 9/11, war, Hurricane Katrina, the worst recession in a generation and countless other woes, preparation and survivalism are no longer fringe activities. In fact, for some Christians, current events yield signs of the end times and Jesus' Second Coming.

Government leaders warn of rising unemployment and worldwide pandemics. Movies such as "2012" stoke fears about looming armageddon, while TV shows such as "Man vs. Wild" make survivalism seem almost hip. Sustainability and self-sufficiency seem downright mainstream, led by first lady Michelle Obama's White House vegetable garden. Mormon beliefs in stockpiling food and supplies no longer seem quaint, but maybe something worth looking into.

"We as Americans have this sense of personal responsibility and efficiency," said Richard Mitchell, Jr., a professor emeritus at Oregon State University and author of "Dancing at Armageddon: Survivalism and Chaos in Modern Times."

"Individually we can solve those problems, and that we don't live in an easy world or one that is consistent but one that requires focused reaction and cooperation and sort of individual grit."

Across the Web, message boards, blogs and businesses promoting survivalism are flourishing. Living Fresh, an online store that sells emergency supplies, has seen business jump as much as 700 percent, owner Joe Branin estimated. Among his best-selling items are pouches that can store water up to five years and sturdy blankets that also can be used as tents. He sells perhaps 1,000 blankets a month.

Today, survivalists are "your basic person, like a ... person that just read about it or started hearing about it and thought, 'You know what? This is a good idea,'" Branin said.

The popular myth has been that survivalists are Rambo types, Mitchell said. Instead, survivalists often are urbanites or suburbanites who distrust the government or believe the government is flawed. For the less hard-core, the concept perhaps renders a measure of control they feel they have lost to disasters or 9/11, Branin said.

"This is one way people feel like they're taking control of their own situations again," he said. "We've had so much drama. It's like getting your oil changed in your car. You've done something that feels good. It's the same way with somebody going down and getting a survival kit and having extra food or water. It gives them that level of a little bit of security."

Of course, doomsday fads come and go. In the 1830s, New York farmer William Miller saw the return of Jesus in 1843, which led to the "Great Disappointment" but also the birth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Similar end-times predictions led to the founding of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some say the hype is fueled by the government and the media: just ask anyone who worried about Y2K a decade ago, or the 2003 government directive to stock up on duct tape to seal homes from a chemical or biological attack.

Yet being prepared isn't all bad, Mitchell said. If survivalists are gardening because they feel the U.S. should be less dependent on foreign

countries for food or even energy, maybe they're on to something. And if survivalists distrust government and economic systems they don't completely understand, perhaps the recession has proven they have a point.

New technology is helping measure progress toward completing Jesus' [Great Commission](#) command to make disciples of all nations, said the Rev. Allan Beeber, who runs the online Global Media Outreach missionary effort for Orlando-based Campus Crusade for Christ.

Many Christians believe the Great Commission must be fulfilled before Jesus can return, and at the rate the ministry is growing, Beeber believes it's possible the job might be completed by 2020, maybe sooner.

Then again, he's not making any specific plans.

"It may happen in our lifetime. I just don't wake up everyday thinking today's going to be the day. I just don't do that. I've been through too much," he said. "I do believe the scriptures will be fulfilled someday, but I think the timing will surprise every one of us."

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