

Modern-day Pagans trying to revive Wiccan May Day festivities

By Matthew McGrath • TOMS RIVER BUREAU • May 4, 2009

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JACKSON — May Day, or Beltane, an ancient Celtic festival of fertility revived by Wiccans and neopagans alike, sprang to life again on Saturday.

Members of the Sanctuary of Universal Life, a Wiccan church — danced around the holiday's chief symbol, the maypole, weaving bright ribbons into a braid around it. The ritual symbolized the marriage between Wicca's chief deities, an unnamed male and female god.

"Contemporary Paganism is a recreation of very, very old, mostly European, customs that predate Christianity," said Nikki Bado-Fralick, director of religious studies at Iowa State University, during a telephone interview Friday. "Beltane is a celebration of spring. It's a wonderful time to celebrate renewed energy or renewed vitality."

The atmosphere Saturday was relaxed. Between rituals, people hiked through the woods, played Frisbee and sat on blankets in an open field off North County Line Road.

Based in Manalapan, Sacred Wind Sanctuary is an eclectic pagan and Wiccan church founded by two friends from Manalapan who reconnected following the death of a high school friend.

Matthew S. Bartky, 24, came to Wicca from Judaism, and Stephen R. Sprague, 26, who was raised in an agnostic Episcopalian household, follows Asatru, the ancient Scandinavian and Germanic pagan traditions.

Both men found irreconcilable differences with the Judeo-Christian traditions and the present. Bartky could not reconcile the Hebrew calendar, which says the world is 5,769 years old, with fossil records. Sprague could not understand an all-loving, all-forgiving God who allows evil in the world.

"I identified with the Norse gods," Sprague said. "They are more human, and they are not inherently good nor evil."

Wicca and neopaganism are a religious movement that is gaining more followers each year, said Wendy Griffin, who co-chairs the Contemporary Pagan Group for the American Academy of Religion, in an interview Friday.

"I don't think people (just leave mainstream religions), they have already left or they are seekers," Griffin said. "It's a religion of personal responsibility and empowerment."

Bartky and Sprague know that their beliefs make them targets for criticism. They hope that what is tolerated will start to change.

"If people just stop looking at the differences and look at the similarities, they would see we are very similar," Bartky said. "We stand for tolerance, love, respect and honor."



Members of the Sacred Wind Sanctuary of Universal Life dance around the maypole during the annual Beltane (celebration of spring) on Saturday. (STAFF PHOTO: MATTHEW McGRATH)