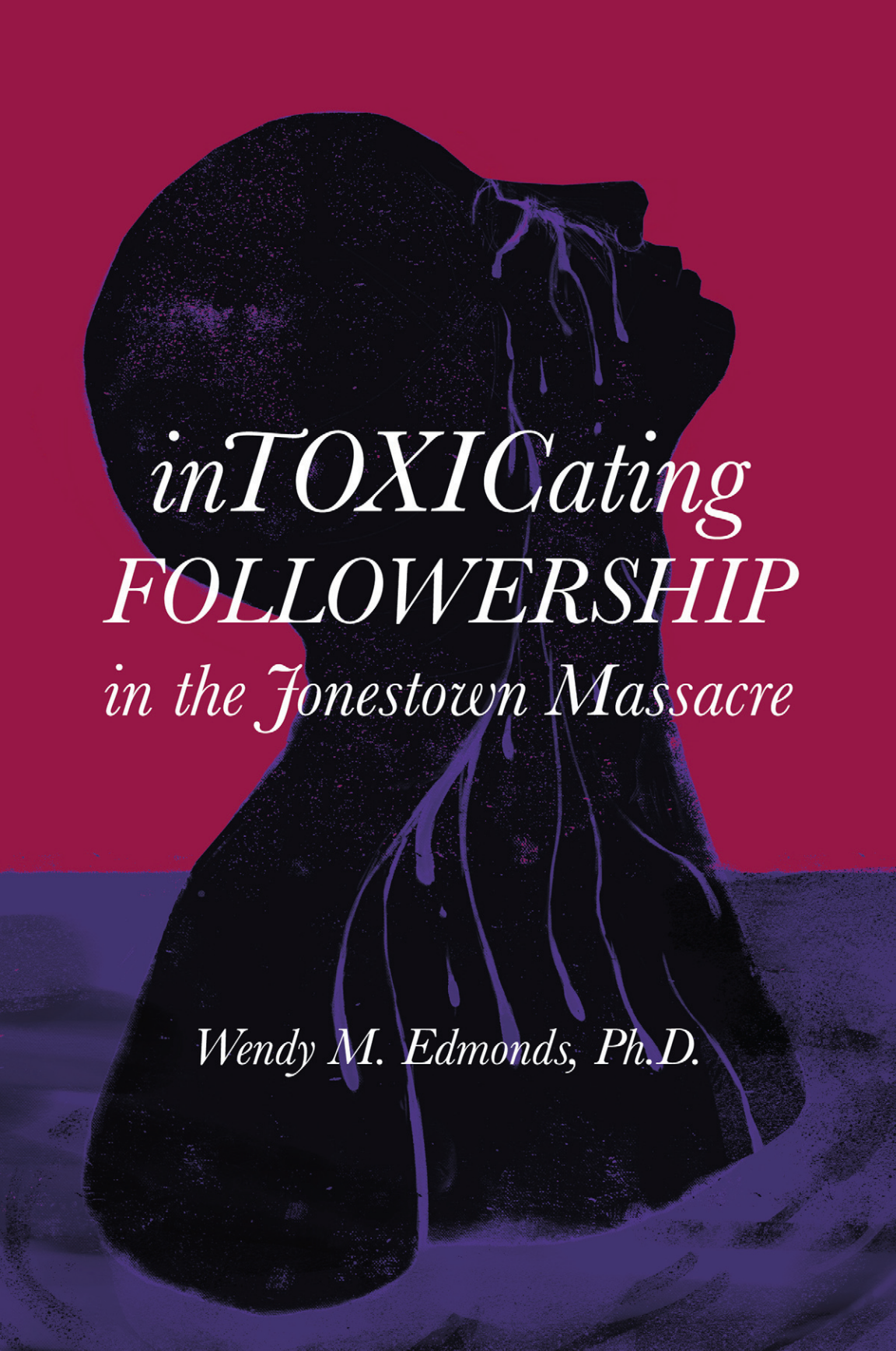
inTOXICating
FOLLOWERSHIP
in the Jonestown Massacre
Wendy M. Edmonds, Ph.D.

*in*TOXIC*ating* FOLLOWERSHIP

Wendy Edmonds has made an important and crucial contribution to our understanding of the complex dynamics of toxic followership and how it played out in the Jonestown catastrophe in 1978! Given our own cultist movements in these Trump-influenced times, let us learn from Edmonds's analysis and wisdom!

–Cornel West, Harvard University

Dr. Edmonds presents a work that is exceptional and relevant, especially during our current world situation. She has pinpointed the various aspects of toxic followership which highlights not just one stereotypical view of those who have joined toxic organizations, but several. This will help people recognize what Toxic Followership looks like.

–Leslie Wagner-Wilson, Jonestown Survivor

*in*TOXIC*ating* FOLLOWERSHIP: in the Jonestown Massacre

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to those consumed by your emotions in the role as followers. May this inspire you to no longer subject yourselves to ruthless leaders. It is not uncommon to make an assessment of your encounters. Your experiences will cause you to leverage your own power to escape the domination of predators.

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About the Author

Dr. Wendy M. Edmonds, is an Assistant Professor at Bowie State University and Chair of the Followership Learning Community at the International Leadership Association – the largest followership research and practitioner group in the world. Recognized internationally as a scholar-practitioner in followership, an emerging field of study in organizational leadership, Dr. Edmonds is the first researcher to conduct focus group studies with survivors of the 1978 Jonestown Massacre that occurred in Guyana.

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Foreword

In November 1978, when news of a mass suicide of Peoples Temple cult members in Guyana reached Los Angeles, I had already been immersed in another cult for 10 years and would not extricate myself from it for an additional five years.

Of course, we did not consider ourselves to be part of a cult. Probably the members of Peoples Temple didn't either. Rather we were members of a group building a new and much better world. Or so we thought.

That is one of the problems of cult dynamics. There is always a narrative that elevates the experience and makes any of the sacrifices its members make seem rational, even noble. Equally problematic is the loss of the capacity to view the cult leader with any degree of objectivity and certainly not with the slightest hint of criticism.

The reaction to the news of the Jonestown suicides in my group was, "Well, they were obviously a cult. *We would never do that!*" Or would we? Thankfully, many cults fall short of such a drastic response to the ever threatening "outside" world. But, in retrospect, the conditions and actions we tolerated in our cult held the same grim potential. And, in the broader sense of political cults such as Maoism, Nazism, or Stalinism, the crimes committed and the deaths resulting were many times that of Peoples Temple, as have been the deaths resulting from fanatical religious groups of every denomination.

So, what is going on here?

When I extricated myself from the grip of my cult, I reintegrated into mainstream society. With intentionality, I located myself in Washington, DC, as I instinctively felt that a way to improve the world was through government. Having dropped out of the University of California at Berkeley, I needed to backfill my credentials and entered a degree program in Applied Behavioral Science. There is a lot of emphasis in such a program on group dynamics. I began to reflect on these dynamics as they related to those found in the nonprofits and congressional offices in which I found myself operating, as well as applying them to the more extreme conditions of the cult I had left.

One day I was reading an analysis by M. Scott Peck of the Mỹ Lai massacre in Vietnam. How did hundreds of ordinary Americans participate in this obscenity? Peck observed that when people view themselves in the follower role, they often displace their own accountability for their actions onto the leader. Bingo! That was the missing piece! I wrote in the margin, "It sounds like a book on a new way of following is needed." That was the moment that led me on the journey to writing my first book on followership.

Like a magnet surrounded by iron filings, I began attracting others who were working with equal fascination and even urgency on aspects of followership. Early among these was Wendy Edmonds. Her doctoral work on Jonestown captivated me. To this day, I am not sure if she knew about my prior cult involvement, as I felt vulnerable about sharing it for many years.

To deeply understand a subject, or even a relationship, one of the ways to get under the superficialities is when it is stress tested. Peoples Temple and Jonestown took leader–follower dynamics to their extreme. The racial and class dynamics involved in this tragedy make it an even more complex case history. Wendy Edmonds has dedicated herself to understanding the lessons of this type of extremity so that we may better recognize, understand, and mitigate its toxic potential.

Make no mistake. The attraction of cults in many forms, tangible and virtual, is all around us. Some of these cults are stridently visible and others are cleverly masked. By taking what she has learned through rigorous academic research and converting the story and its lessons into a widely accessible analysis, Wendy Edmonds has done us a great service.

Ira Chaleff.
April 2020.

Preface

I toiled in the past several years over how to turn my original research into a book and what to share and how much to share. I continued to wrestle with the emotions that gripped my soul from hearing the survivors' stories of such a horrific life event, people who wanted no more from me except to be their voice in letting others know what it means to be a follower of any kind. They wanted me to reveal toxic followership. Frank, who often spoke about his experience in a poetic fashion, said, "It was the nature of Jim Jones's leadership that defined the nature of my followership; that gave me a larger meaning in my life than I had before or have had since." Hearing him speak those words had the same effect on me as the sound of roaring thunder: it sounded the alarms in my head. Andrea put it like this: "You looked forward to that meeting and everybody gettin' down to the music like they do in Africa, dancing to the beat of the rhythmic drums, even having the bon fires. The music was good." But it was Rob's comment that was the clincher: "It was intoxicating." Clearly, their experience as followers of Jim Jones could be explained as invigorating and exciting, sometimes even diminishing the physical and mental controls of an individual. With that, I give you

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Acknowledgment

For all of the late nights, campsite conversations, and long rides traveling on the road you spent listening to me, this is for you. The man of my life who kept me grounded, prayed for me, prayed with me, and believed in me – my husband Warren, thank you.
Thanks to my children who gave me peace during this time.
In memory of my Mommy, and to Daddy, my "Black Gold" who speaks words of wisdom to me daily. Oh, how I cherish you. Thank you.
For my favorite and only brother who has always encouraged me and continues to "build my library," and my sisters who light up a late night with a text that makes me giggle, thank you.
In all of your unique ways, you have helped me.

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Introduction

On November 18, 1978, one of the greatest massacres of United States citizens occurred in the South American country of Guyana at Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, otherwise known as Jonestown. There, 909 men, women, and children died after drinking grape-flavored Flavor Aid laced with cyanide.[1] At an airstrip in Port Kaituma, five people were assassinated, including Congressman Leo Ryan (California), who was leading a fact-finding group to investigate Jonestown. And in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, another four members of Peoples Temple were killed. In all, 918 individuals lost their lives on the orders of Jim Jones, leader of Peoples Temple.

How could this happen? Why did so many people seemingly commit suicide voluntarily and others kill members of their own community and families? More importantly, could this happen again?

Despite Jonestown, cults continue to exist. Destructive leaders continue to sway supporters to follow their wishes, both expressed and implied. And followers continue to sacrifice themselves, often literally, in the name of the causes these leaders espouse. We have only to listen to the news, scan the Internet, or glance at newsfeeds to see examples of destructive leadership and toxic followership on a regular basis: systemic racism, suicide bombings, gang violence, corporate malfeasance, political and religious extremism. These individuals are not limited to religious and political groups; they exist in all levels of our society.

Much has been written on the leadership of Jim Jones and his ability to control his followers. Less has been focused on the followers themselves. Yet the leader-follower dynamic is hardly one-sided. As the saying goes, "It takes two to tango." No matter how charismatic the leader, followers must engage and submit to empower leaders with the all-encompassing control evidenced by Jim Jones. This kind of toxic followership allows destructive leadership to continue.

To put this term into context, toxic followership begins with the pioneering spirit of a trusted individual who, through creative manipulation, transforms the mindset whereby people can so easily become an extension of a toxic leader's moral decay. Are you a toxic follower? In *inTOXICating FOLLOWERSHIP*, we examine the hows and whys of Jonestown through the eyes of survivors of this tragedy, many of whom were children at the time. From them, we see the traits they now recognize that led to their parents' and their involvement with Peoples

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Temple and how this event has affected them. Coupled with what we've learned about the leadership-followership dynamic, we have a better understanding of what may cause each of us to succumb to toxic followership. Today's society dictates the importance of minimizing the chance of becoming toxic followers.

Note

1. The residents actually drank Flavor Aid during the mass suicide. Because of a picture taken earlier in the history of Jonestown showing Kool Aid, the common belief is that the residents drank Kool Aid, hence the popular quotation, "Don't drink the Kool Aid," used in encouraging individuals not to buy into anything that counters common beliefs or practices.

Chapter 1

Jim Jones and Peoples Temple

Jim Jones, leader of Peoples Temple, had gained the respect and admiration of many before the allegations in the 1970s of misconduct and misappropriation of church funds. The negative press generated by these accusations eventually led to Jones's decision to move Peoples Temple to Guyana. There he had already begun an agricultural project a few years earlier with plans of turning it into the utopia he always promised his followers. Although many of them chose to remain in the United States, several hundred members of Peoples Temple moved with Jones to over 3,000 acres under the church's control in northwestern Guyana. Far removed from Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, and accessible only by the most rudimentary of roads, Jones effected total control over the project and all the Peoples Temple members who had come with him. That control ultimately led to their deaths as they followed Jones's orders on November 18, 1978, to commit the "revolutionary act" of mass suicide.

With armed guards surrounding the compound, the adults first administered the cyanide-laced drink to the children, using syringes to feed the liquid down the throats of the babies and younger children. They then drank the flavored poison concoction themselves. When Guyanese authorities entered the compound the next day, they found 909 people dead. They also found Jim Jones, sitting on his throne, dead from a presumably self-inflicted bullet wound. With the deaths of four members of a congressional party, one Temple defector, and a mother and her three children in the Peoples Temple building in Georgetown, the final death toll was 918 men, women, and children.

How Jones managed to get these individuals to follow such orders has been the subject of speculation for the last 40 years. Part of the answer lies in the circumstances that shaped his personality as a child. Born on May 31, 1931, in Crete, Indiana, James Warren Jones grew up in an impoverished, objectively dysfunctional family. He was the son of a disabled war veteran, James Thurman Jones, who had little to do with him, and Lynette Putnam, who was out of the home working most of the time. Raised primarily by babysitters, Jones had little adult supervision during his formative years. Neither parent attended church or any of Jones's school functions. His mother, however, did allow a neighbor to take Jones to church with her on Sundays. In tape recordings discovered in Jonestown, Jones revealed he was so angry by the time he was in third grade that he "was ready to kill."[1]

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A voracious reader, Jones, graduated from high school with honors in 1948. In 1949, he married Marceline Baldwin, a nurse, who died with him in Jonestown. Moving to Bloomington, he attended Indiana University for a time. There he was influenced by a speech given by Eleanor Roosevelt concerning the conditions of African Americans in the United States. After he and his wife moved to Indianapolis in 1951, Jones continued his education at Butler University, attending at night until finally earning a degree in secondary education in 1961.

After moving to Indianapolis, Jones became active with the Communist Party and increasingly frustrated with the persecution of American communists typified in the McCarthy hearings. He sought to counter this by becoming a minister. Jones had been interested in religion from an early age and became intrigued by the ebullient services and faith healing of black churches. Surprisingly, a Methodist minister mentored him, securing him a position as a student pastor at Somerset Southside Methodist church.

His ministry led him to start a church known as Community Unity in 1954. Two years later, he opened a church called Wings of Deliverance.[2] He did so with the purpose of creating a community for those who were less fortunate than others. This included the unemployed, underemployed, ill, and homeless. The church affiliated with the Disciples of Christ in 1960, and Jones later became an ordained minister within that denomination.

In 1965, Jones renamed the church Peoples Temple Christian Church Full Gospel, which he believed was more representative of his vision for the members. A proponent of racial equality, Jones, welcomed people of all races into the church, something unheard of at that time. His sermons often focused on social justice and his increasing fears of a nuclear holocaust.

He and his wife also created one of the first "rainbow" families in Indiana, adopting several children of difference races and nationalities. They were the first family in the state to adopt a black child. Jones also referred to the congregation of Peoples Temple as his "rainbow family."

In 1960, he became the first director of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission. Jones took full advantage of this position to espouse his beliefs, despite warnings from the mayor to keep a low profile. Instead, he actively sought opportunities to proclaim his message through the media. He met with leaders from the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When he spoke at one of their meetings, his message of militant action was well received by those attending. He worked to integrate churches, businesses of all kinds, hospitals, and civil agencies, including the Indianapolis Police Department. Through his efforts, Jones gained both the respect and admiration of many and the intense criticism of others, some of which resulted in vandalism to Peoples Temple. The diverse nature of these interactions heightened his suspicious nature.

Jones's paranoia concerning the government continued to increase, developing into a fear of a nuclear holocaust, which also became a subject in his sermons. His anxiety, along with his socialist beliefs, led him to travel to Brazil to seek an alternative location for Peoples Temple, somewhere that would be safe from the impending destruction of nuclear war. On his way, he stopped in Guyana, using

the time to test his message on the racial minorities there and to gage the economic viability of this location. The lack of available resources caused him to continue to Brazil, where he worked with those living in the slums of Rio de Janeiro and studying various native religions. Understanding he might receive a poor reception as a foreigner if he espoused the teachings of Marx, Castro, and communism, Jones began referring to his ideas as an "apostolic communal lifestyle." He returned to the United States in 1963 upon receiving word from his associate pastors in Indianapolis that, without his return and guidance, Peoples Temple might as well cease to exist.

Upon his return, Jones began referring to his idea of apostolic socialism in his sermons at the Temple. He told his congregation they would experience a cataclysmic nuclear event in 1967 and, to be safe, had to move the Temple to California. Thus, began the move to the Redwood Valley; the establishment of Peoples Temple in Uriah, California; and Jones's referring to himself as The Prophet.

As Peoples Temple grew, Jones established locations in San Francisco (1970) and Los Angeles (1972). He moved the Temple headquarters to San Francisco where he began to court the local and state politicians. He curried their favor and increased his influence as he donated to charitable projects, ran various social and medical programs, and delivered votes during elections. He also surfaced on the national scene, earning the praise of presidential candidate Walter Mondale and First Lady Rosalyn Carter.

Jones continued to espouse his socialist ideas through his sermons but increasingly began denouncing the Christian faith. He criticized the Bible as a tool of oppression and ultimately set himself up as God. He claimed he was the reincarnation of Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi, and Lenin, among others. According to his wife, Marceline, Jones was both agnostic and atheist, his primary goal being to use religion and the church to spread Marxism throughout the United States.

However, despite Jones's courting of the media and the good relationships he established with them, the move to San Francisco stirred the interest of some journalists, who began investigating Peoples Temple and Jim Jones. As media attention became more negative, Jones sent a team to Guyana to establish Peoples Temple Agricultural Project. The goal was to launch a utopian society out of the prying eyes of the media, a place the Temple could grow without governmental interference. It was to be a "model community… to be emulated the world over."[3]

In 1977, New West magazine chose to publish an expose on Jim Jones and Peoples Temple, whose membership now exceeded 20,000. In the article, authors Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy wrote of the allegations of former Temple members concerning Jones's abuse and control.[4] They cited being forced to sell or turn over possession of their homes and property and to give custody of their children to the church. The article talked about the physical abuse, beatings, administered to those who disobeyed Jones; staged faith healings and illegal methods used to cure illnesses; Jones's sexual misconduct and drug addiction; and the misappropriation of Temple funds for Jones's personal use.

With the impending publication of the expose and the increased negative publicity and scrutiny it would engender, Jones urged his followers to go with him to Jonestown, where he promised to build a "socialist utopia."[5] Although some

chose to remain in the United States, over 1,000 people agreed to move to Guyana. Once there, no one was allowed to leave Jonestown. Jones collected their passports and medications; censored all communications with people outside of Jonestown; expected members to inform on other members, including their families; and posted armed guards around the compound.

Life at Jonestown was far from utopian. Plagued by mosquitoes and tropical diseases, members labored long hours in the 3,000 plus-acre compound located in an isolated area in northwest Guyana. There Jones began promoting his belief in the Translation through which he and all Temple members would die together and be reunited in "an afterlife of bliss."[6] To ensure compliance, Jones had members practice White Night drills periodically. During these drills, members would come to the pavilion, the main meeting area in the compound. Once there, they would pretend to drink a poison-laced drink and fall to the ground.

Meanwhile, even though Jones left the United States, investigations into the various allegations were ongoing. Central to these investigations, which resulted in a congressional party traveling to Jonestown, was Jones's sexual misconduct. Supposedly encouraged by Tim Stoen, whose wife Grace wished to leave the congregation, Jones engaged in sexual relations with her and fathered a child, John, although the birth certificate names Stoen as the father. Jones sent the boy to Jonestown to keep him out of his mother's reach as she sought custody during divorce proceedings from her husband. When Stoen also left the Temple in 1977, he joined a group of concerned relatives who had family members living in Jonestown and petitioned the State Department and members of Congress to address their grievances against Jones and Peoples Temple.

Intrigued by the allegations of Stoen and the other family members, Congressman Leo Ryan began investigating, apprising the Guyanese prime minister of the situation. The Concerned Relatives group also began legal proceedings to initiate the return of John Stoen and released packets of material to the press and politicians outlining the human rights violations and abuses of Jones and Peoples Temple. Included in the packets were documents, letters, and affidavits from members who had escaped Jonestown. These actions culminated in Congressman Ryan's decision to take a fact-finding trip to Jonestown to see conditions for himself. Accompanying him were two staff members, nine journalists (including an NBC News television crew), and 18 family members of Jonestown residents.[7]

Jones and Temple officials denied Ryan's request to come to the compound and examine conditions there; but when Ryan announced he would charter a plane and go there regardless, Jones relented. On November 17, the delegation traveled from Georgetown, Guyana, to an airstrip east of the compound at Port Kaituma. From there, Ryan, several family members, and some of the reporters were driven to the compound. While Jones feted them with dinner and entertainment, however, residents approached various delegates throughout the evening and night, seeking their help in leaving the compound.

On November 18, Ryan and his delegation prepared to return to Port Kaituma, taking 15 of the residents with them. Another resident attacked Ryan with a knife in an attempt to keep the group from leaving but was unsuccessful. Jones

did not try to prevent the 15 residents, who included one loyalist posing as a defector, from leaving with Ryan. He did, however, send his security team, the Red Brigade, after the delegation with the intent of killing them.

At the airstrip, some of the delegation and the defectors boarded one of the planes. This group included the loyalist, Larry Layton. As the plane readied for take-off, Layton pulled out a gun and began shooting the people in the plane. Almost simultaneously, Red Brigade members arrived on a tractor trailer, jumped down, and began firing on Congressman Ryan and the others waiting to board the second plane. In just a few moments, the Red Brigade left, leaving five dead and several severely wounded. Among the dead were Congressman Ryan; Don Harris and Bob Brown from the NBC News team; Greg Robinson from the San Francisco Examiner; and Patricia Parks, one of the Jonestown defectors.

As the drama played out at Port Kaituma, Jones sent a message to the Temple's headquarters in Georgetown, instructing the people to take their lives in the revolutionary act of suicide. When police arrived later, they found four people dead of knife wounds: a mother and her three daughters. Police indicated one of the victims killed the other three before taking her own life.

Jones also began the Translation ritual in the compound, only this time the drinks were real. A 45-minute audio recording of the process discovered by the FBI as they investigated the massacre revealed how this tragedy unfolded. In this "death tape," Jones told his followers how much he loved them but that a few disloyal members had made it impossible to live at Jonestown. He also relayed that some of those defectors had stolen children from others to take with them. He appealed to the residents concerning the welfare of their children, that they would not want their children to continue to live in the current situation. He quoted "the greatest prophet" regarding laying down one's life rather than having it taken by someone else. He talked about the violence in the world, arguing that although unable to live in peace, they could die in peace.

Jones then explained what was supposed to be happening at the airstrip. The death of those individuals would trigger a military response, which would put them and their children in jeopardy. As he had in countless sermons over the years, Jones invoked the images of his own paranoia concerning government interference: Ryan's delegation would be only the first of many to come, and the outside world would not leave them alone. He then compared their situation to those of the ancient Greeks who, rather than seeing their children and elderly suffer at the hands of invaders, administered deadly potions, robbing the invaders of any sense of victory. By killing themselves, he argued, they were not committing suicide but a revolutionary act because they could not go back to the way things were.

During his explanations, Jones also responded to a question from one of the residents, Christine Miller, about the status of the negotiations with Russia. Jones had been in touch with Russian officials, trying to arrange an exodus for Jonestown as he feared increased interference on the part of the Guyanese government. In responding to Christine's question, Jones blamed the actions of the Red Brigade for eliminating that option: Russia would not have anything to do with Jonestown because of the actions of those few men in killing members of

the congressional delegation. However, Miller continued to ask questions about getting a plane to evacuate and sending a message to the Russians for help. Jones rebutted each of these, coming back to the message of suicide as the only way out.

At one point, Miller even questioned the need for 1,200 people to give up their lives because of the fewer than 20 who had defected. She further questioned the need for the babies to die, saying they deserved the chance to live. Jones continued to rebut her suggestions and questions, often agreeing with her initial statements before urging the opposite. For example, Jones argued that even though the babies deserved to live, they deserved to live in peace. That was something they would not have after what had transpired. Jones also reminded her that without him, life had no meaning for any of them. And, seemingly throughout, with music and singing, most of the other residents were fully supportive of Jones's decision to enact the Translation, giving the poison-laced drink first to their babies and children and then to themselves. Jones urged them to do this as families, lying down with each other as they left this world for the blissful place he had promised them.

When the Red Brigade returned from Port Kaituma, the residents seemingly knew they had no choice but to drink the poison in an act of revolutionary suicide. According to some of the residents who managed to escape the Translation, a mother and her baby were the first to take the poisoned drink. Some residents were reluctant to do so as they began seeing their fellow members dying. However, the presence of the armed guards left them believing they could either take the drink or a bullet. Either way, there was no way out. During this time, Jones urged the residents to "get on with it."[8] He chastised parents who were telling their children they were going to die and to stop telling the children that, to stop their crying. He tried to soothe the children, telling them it wouldn't hurt, and urged the adults to stop being so emotional, to "lay down your life with dignity; don't lay down with tears and agony."[9]

Of the 909 individuals found in the compound, two died from bullet wounds rather than the poison. One of them was Jim Jones. Guyanese officials found him lying next to his deck chair, a pillow under his head. The Guyanese chief medical director ruled Jones's death consistent with suicide. Coupled with the five killed at Port Kaituma and the four killed in Georgetown, the final death toll for the November 18, 1978, massacre was 918 men, women, and children.

Not all the residents of Jonestown died, however. About 87 people escaped the Translation in various ways, including Jones's sons Stephen and Jim Jr., who were in Georgetown for a basketball game. At the time of the Jonestown events, the two sons had gone to the US Embassy for help but were turned away by the Guyanese guards outside the embassy who had heard about the shootings at Port Kaituma. The boys returned to the Temple headquarters in Georgetown where they found the bodies of the mother and her three children who had followed Jones's orders to commit suicide. Others had been sent from the Temple by Jones or were away on Temple business. Some managed to escape into the jungle as the Translation was occurring, evading the armed guards. They managed either to get to help or to survive in the jungle until rescued. A few of the survivors were those