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Allegations of cult tactics don't halt church's rise

By Richard Kindlberger
Globe Staff

Six months after she was "deprogrammed," Wellesley College senior Karen Gray says she feels lucky she escaped the Boston Church of Christ with her emotions intact.

John Gath, a Billerica firefighter, tells of a radically different experience. His marriage was in trouble when he and his wife joined the church three years ago, Gath said. Since then the church has "changed our lives. We really love it."

The Boston Church of Christ evokes a wide range of feelings in the people who know it. The converted say it is the first church they have found that has made Jesus Christ central to their lives, but some

former members and other critics denounce it as a cult that uses mind-control to win and keep converts.

The church is said to be the fastest-growing religious group in this area. In 10 years, it has grown from a few dozen members meeting in Lexington to 3,600 worshippers gathering at Boston Garden for Sunday services.

Steven Haasan, who spent 2½ years with Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church before becoming a student of cults and an "exit counselor," said the church is "probably the group I've worked the most with in the past couple of years."

The church has endured intense criticism in recent years, but it continues to CHURCH, Page 30



KAREN GRAY . . . underwent deprogramming

Globe staff photo/Jane Knot

ing the newspaper into the house.

The Saturday night service at the Maranatha House in Boston runs along similar lines, but there's a more formal flavor—kneeling, bowed heads, whispered prayer.

"It's growing so fast that I can't keep track anymore," says Marc Massengale, a Maranatha minister who played football at Ole Miss and came to Boston to start a ministry at Boston University. His recruiting efforts reach not only college students but also high school students, often through sports. Tomorrow, for instance, he and another minister will go to a Boston high school to show a film called *Football Fever*, which features Christian athletes testifying.

Maranatha members can become Maranatha ministers without studying theology. Instead, they are encouraged to graduate from college and must be suffused with the Spirit. That, Massengale explains, makes the heart open like a rose, and brings understanding. On biblical and worldly matters, Maranatha members believe God speaks directly to them.

Deandra Tillman is a student at Kansas State University and a former member of Maranatha Ministries at that Midwestern campus. She found that during her involvement with Maranatha, she handed over all her decision-making powers to the group's leaders, whom Maranatha members believe to be in contact with God.

Her parents were justifiably concerned. Tillman remembers going home and remaining aloof to her parents' expressions of worry for her. "My parents could be crying and yelling, and I'd feel nothing. I'd think they didn't know what God was doing, that they didn't understand."

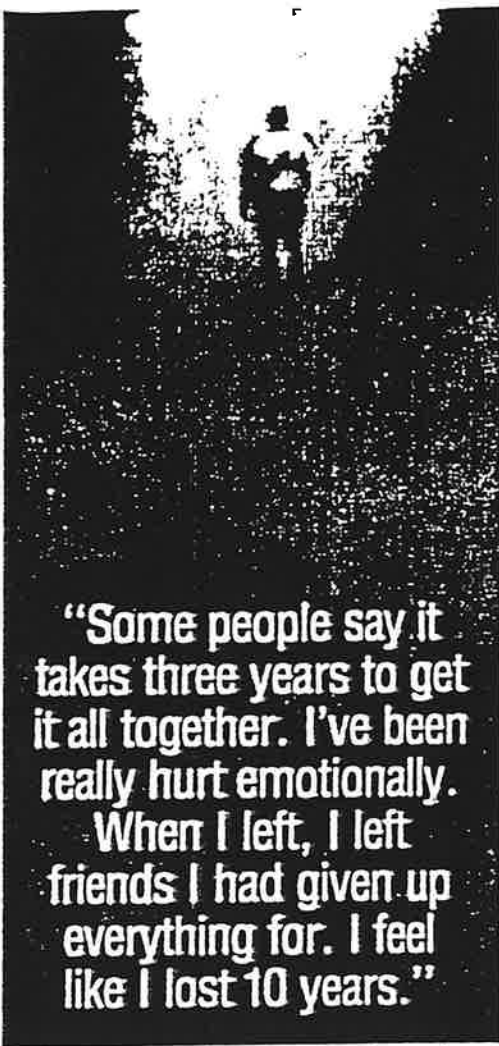
Her father insisted on taking her to a deprogrammer, who compelled her to face some of the inconsistencies in her religious beliefs. The turning point came when Tillman realized that Maranatha was not doing any of the good works the church said it stood for, such as helping the poor, the weak, and the sick. "All the helping was turned inward," she says. "When you're in a cult, you don't realize it. The people are completely sincere in what they're doing and what they're telling you, but that's because they've been deceived, too."

Once a person becomes involved, it is hard to leave a zealous religious group, just as it is hard to leave any close, intense community. Some, like Kathy Riverton, never get in so far that they forget their personal goals. Some, like Deandra Tillman, are "rescued" by parents through deprogramming or noncoercive counseling. Others, like Elizabeth Fraser, finally revolt against a particular outrage. And some members have to attain leadership status in a group before they can decide to leave. Once they become controllers, they often begin to think for themselves again and can perceive the flaws in their churches' belief systems.

Bob Tedford fits this last description. After three semesters of membership, he left Maranatha Ministries while he was a senior at Kansas State.

"I was excommunicated," he says. "They call it 'church discipline.'" That means that other members were instructed not to talk to Tedford "unless they were strong," and he was made unwelcome at the Maranatha House and at Maranatha functions.

One of the reasons for his expulsion was that he attempted to



"Some people say it takes three years to get it all together. I've been really hurt emotionally. When I left, I left friends I had given up everything for. I feel like I lost 10 years."

move the meetings of the Bible-study group he was co-leading from Tuesday evenings to Wednesday evenings because of a conflict with his engineering study group. The members of the Bible-study group were willing to meet on Wednesdays, but the Maranatha elders told him that God wanted the meetings held on Tuesdays. Tedford went to his engineering-study group instead.

Another reason was that he failed to submit to the elders beforehand a plan of his activities during a weekend school project. "I didn't even think of submitting it," Tedford says. "The field trip was something I had to do."

Being cut off from his former friends "was very confusing for me. Some people looked on me as a traitor, others wouldn't speak to me." Tedford went to a Methodist minister for advice. After that, he started receiving "spiritual threats" by phone, in the mail—even on his door. They consisted of Bible quotations suggesting that he might be under the Lord's curse.

Indeed, it seemed as though he was cursed. His grandmother had a stroke. "I felt that maybe God was punishing me. I couldn't even pray over her in tongues. I felt so guilty all I could do was hold her hand and weep. Only after several months did I realize that this was an unfortunate coincidence. I understood then that I had been under mind control."

Tedford had been troubled by various church practices for some time. After trying to confront church elders about his "church discipline," he was told that the real reason for their action was his alleged attendance at a meeting of the Citizens' Freedom Foundation, a group comprised mostly of parents whose children had joined cults and new religious movements.

Tedford decided to leave the church. Before he did so, he wanted to make a statement to his friends at the Maranatha House by reading a Bible quotation that warns of false prophets.

One night, he entered the Maranatha House accompanied by a reporter from the campus newspaper. One member moved to phone the police, while others left the room. Tedford left as well.

"Goodbye, Bob," said the church members, milling about outside the house. "You should have gone through the right channels, Bob. That was not called for, Bob."

The people who leave these churches go through a difficult transition that may take years. Fraser and other ex-members of Community Chapel supported one another by attending meetings together and by staying in touch. Others join groups organized by health-care professionals. Coming out of an intense religious community to which you have pledged total commitment means that you have to rebuild your world and take on the difficult task of starting again where you left off when you joined. Some ex-members become wary of any further deep commitments and stick to safe paths for a long time. For others, the experience eventually matures into a deeper understanding of human relationships, the difference between freedom and propaganda, and the nature of spiritual growth. ■

Rasa Gustaitis is an editor at Pacific News Service. Her article "Gays and Straights" appeared in the fall '82 Nutshell.