

Crossroads: Parents, pastors

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say it's a dangerous cult

[Editor's note: The following story is the culmination of a three-month investigation by Outlook into the history and practices of the Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville.]

By RANDY NOLES

On the surface, it seems harmless--almost hopeful.

There is a church in Gainesville that is somehow able to motivate people--especially young people--to spread the Word of God with zeal. Too much zeal, some say.

And it's working so well that the Church is branching out, with some 30 campus ministries and new churches springing up all over the country, including one at the University of Central Florida.

It's called the Crossroads Church of Christ. And only when you look beneath the surface do the problems become apparent. Only when you look a little closer do you see the broken homes, mental anguish, and even suicides attributed to the high-powered tactics of the church many clergymen are terming "the most dangerous type of cult."

Dangerous because, unlike the Moonies or Hare Krishnas, Crossroads does nothing outwardly to distinguish itself from the multitude of other denominations we have to choose from. They don't shave their heads or wear outlandish costumes. The God they worship isn't some unfamiliar Eastern diety. It's the same God shared by the Catholics, Jews, Baptists, Presbyterians, and the traditional churches of Christ.

If only the church had been a little more "noticable," say many parents of young people now involved in Crossroads, then they might have been able to see what was happening to their children before it was too late. Before Crossroads turned their kids into "zombies" and caused them to reject, and even to hate their parents.

"The danger of Crossroads is that up front, they have a smooth, slick presentation like some of the best fundamental churches," says Rev. Lloyd Larsen of the University United Church of Christ.

Larsen was one of the first area clergymen to notice the presence of Crossroads at the UCF campus. He's also concerned over the fact that the proposed Crossroads branch

from his own University Blvd. church.

And Larsen's comments were typical of clergymen from all denominations who are aware of the Crossroads Church of Christ. Among them:

--"I could not begin to tell you of the damage done to students I have counselled because of this church..." --Rev. Otto M. Spangler, University of Florida Baptist Campus Ministry.

--"Once a person is involved (in Crossroads) the threat of rejection, eternal punishment, and the habit of mental, emotional, and social conformity make it extremely hard to break away."--Rev. Earl C. Page, Holy Trinity Episcopal Church (Gainesville).

Clergymen charge brainwashing

Since Outlook began investigating Crossroads it has learned that:

--Many clergymen in Gainesville feel the Crossroads Church preys on young people with emotional problems, and demands heavy emotional and financial sacrifices from members.

--Pastors and former members liken the church to a cult because of alleged usage of mind control and brainwashing techniques through "soul alks," in which members are urged to reveal their inner-most feelings and thoughts, only to have the secrets become community property of the church, and used to create an emotional dependence to church leaders.

--Crossroads Church teaches, according to former members, that salvation comes only through the Crossroads Church. Consequently, they attempt to lead people out of existing churches by infiltrating their congregations.

--Pastors familiar with Crossroads and former members alledge that Crossroads teaches young people "to hate their parents," and disavow their families in order to devote more time to the church.

--University of Florida dorm residents complain that Crossroads recruiting methods are "obnoxious and persistent," and former members who try to leave the Church say they are harassed and threatened with damnation.

--Several psychologists and counselors in Gainesville say participation in Crossroads can cause severe emotional problems. At least

suicide has been attributed to the high-pressure tactics Crossroads uses to retain members.

--Ministers from traditional Churches of Christ are quick to disassociate themselves from the Crossroads Church of Christ. Crossroads is not associated with any branch of the Church of Christ.

One of our outstanding young men, **ADRIAN CARR**, has been employed as minister for the newly formed **UNIVERSITY BOULEVARD CHURCH OF CHRIST** in Orlando, Florida. Forty members attended the recent organizational meeting of the congregation which will minister to the campus of the **University of Central Florida** (formerly Florida Tech) and to an area of Orlando not now being served by a congregation.

A cut from Crossroads literature states that Adrian Carr "ministers to the campus of the University of Central Florida.

--Members are pressured to contribute large sums of money to the Church, former members allege Church literature obtained by Outlook does, in fact, urge members to borrow from banks, break certificates of deposit, and tap into pension, savings, and retirement accounts to purchase church bonds for a \$1,500 expansion program. The former member said she'd seen people contribute half their paychecks at Sunday services in Gainesville.

Church growing rapidly

The Crossroads Church of Christ was originally called the 14th Street Church of Christ in Gainesville, and was founded in 1950. UCF is only one of 30 campus ministries currently financed by Crossroads.

In addition, a copy of the Crossroads budget shows that the 1,000-person Church supports a \$900,000-plus budget, including \$15,000 allocated for the University Boulevard Church of Christ. Crossroads also sponsors Evangelism Seminars, such as a recently-held seminar in Orlando which attracted over 3,000 people.

However, with the rapid growth has come a large degree of infamy for the Gainesville Church. One local pastor of a traditional Church of Christ said that Crossroads gains footholds on other college campuses by registering for recognition under a different name, and leading campus officials to believe that the organization is a branch of the Church of Christ to lend it more "respectability."

UCF branch formed

Indeed, that seems to have been the pattern in the local effort to establish a Crossroads branch.

Carr and 12 UCF students applied for recognition as an official student organization in January under the name Christian Student Association, listing the parent Church as the "University Blvd. Church of Christ."

Student Organizations director Jimmie Ferrell, saying Carr "seemed like a very nice young man," gave his approval, as did the student senate and the vice president for student affairs. It was all quite routine.

However, one campus organization that Carr avoided being a part of was the United Campus Ministry. The UCM, under the leadership of Sister Barbara Scully, acts as a clearing house for all religious organizations operating on campus.

All except one, that is.

Avoid Campus Ministry

Not only did Carr not join the UCM, he never even dropped in to say hello. He simply set himself about the task of recruiting members and building a church, using University facilities to make his job that much easier.

Outlook's investigation has shown that Crossroads also has a history of being uncooperative with the established campus ministries in Gainesville at the University of Florida.

Outlook's subsequent stories, which were also later picked up on by Channel 6 news, caused a public outcry and "numerous phone calls" to the university. It was also somewhat embarrassing to UCF officials that an organization can become sanctioned with such ease and with so little investigation. UCF vice President for Student Affairs Rex Brown has failed to return four phone calls to his office to discuss the Crossroads sanction.

In the meantime, attendance at the CSA services grew to about 40.

But at the same time, parents and clergymen who had direct experience with Crossroads but had "suffered in silence" until the publicity brought them together, began to organize "in order to get our children back," as one parent put it.

It seems, however, that agents of the Crossroads Church of Christ had actually been laying groundwork for the local church long before they first received a sanction from the University.

The core of members that made up the UCF branch all came from one small Church of Christ on Howell Branch Rd., the South Seminole Church of Christ.

Local beginnings traced

According to a former member of Crossroads, the group's involvement with that Church is all part of a typical pattern that Crossroads uses to establish a new branch: find a college town, infiltrate a local "traditional" Church of Christ, and, when enough members are pilfered away, break off and form a new church under the auspices of Crossroads.

One source said the group from Gainesville actually attended as many as seven or eight Churches of Christ in metro Orlando before settling on the South Seminole Church as a base of operations.

That was the unfortunate conclusion of T. Pierce Brown, who had been leading South Seminole only a few months before he realized something funny was going on within a certain "clique" of his congregation.

At first, he was "quite pleased and inspired" by the sight of this group of some 30 young people who were so filled with zeal for their

faith that they even held their own prayer meetings, sometimes as often as five nights during the week. Brown now estimates that at least a half-dozen of that group were former members of the Gainesville Crossroads Church.

Soon, however, he got the feeling "that it wasn't as good a thing as it appeared on the surface." There were several signs that something was amiss--signs that Brown was quick to pick up on:

--The group always sat together on the same side of the church. Although they spoke and fellowshiped with enthusiasm among one another, they rarely mixed with other members of the congregation.

--Whenever the collection plate came around, the group didn't contribute. This struck Brown as odd since they all attended so regularly.

It was then that Brown addressed from the pulpit some of the problems he found vexing about the "inspiring" young people that seemed strangely apart from the South Seminole Church of Christ. He gave sermons on self-righteousness, and about giving. Although he didn't mention names, the Crossroaders knew who he was talking about.

Brown also suggested "mixing and mingling", which he says produced "startled looks" on the faces of the clique.

"I explained that Christian love isn't something to be turned on and off like a faucet, and exhausted only within your own group," Brown said.

He said he even attended one of their weeknight prayer meetings, and felt like a stranger in the church he ministered. He got the feeling that their activities "were directed by some outside force."

but perhaps the clincher came when Brown published an essay in the "Gospel Advocate", a nationally-circulated Christian newsletter, which talked about mind control, and warned against religions with a hierarchy that holds such power over its followers. Again, he did not mention names. But the clique apparently again saw itself in his writings.

"They all just took off and didn't say beans," Brown said.

UCF meetings start

That group made up the core of the UCF Crossroads Church. Crossroads in Gainesville then dispatched Adrian Carr to minister to the new congregation, and land was bought on University Blvd. for the "University Boulevard Church of Christ."

Although Brown believes his preaching may have hastened the departure of the group, he believes also that the split had been planned since long before his arrival. The speed with which they were able to form the new church, and the speed of the financial and pastoral support from Crossroads in Gainesville makes it obvious that the groundwork had already been laid.

And Brown says in his article in the Gospel Advocate has prompted letters to him from all over the country. Mainly, they're from ministers of churches in or near college towns who have had or are having similar infiltrations in their own congregations from a group they believe to be directed by Crossroads.

Parents, pastors organize

Locally, Larsen and Rev. Richard Bowman of the Church of the Holy Spirit (Episcopal) in Apopka began organizing local parents who had experiences to share about the Crossroads Church of Christ, either in Gainesville or the new UCF branch.

Rev. Bowman said he first became aware of Crossroads when one of his parishioners became involved while attending college in Gainesville.

Because the young woman's mother was distressed, Rev. Bowman said he agreed to talk to the student.

"When I began talking to her, I knew in just a few minutes what we were up against," Rev. Bowman said. "She could not carry on a conversation expect within the rigid framework of structured speech: constantly repeating memorized Bible verses."

"They teach that you must hate your parents and follow us," Rev. Bowman continued. "They teach that your parents are hypocrits, and then they become a surrogate parent that is far more demanding and pressuring than even the most authoritative parent would be."

Rev. Bowman said the organization he was

suicide

putting together "will be a place parents can share experiences....because it's the family that is hurt the worst (by Crossroads involvement)."

That first "sharing of experiences" came in an emotional, three hour meeting held at the University United Church and hosted by Rev. Larsen and Rev. Bowman.

Attending that meeting were about 20 parents who had children involved in Crossroads, and a quiet young man named Bill Hadley, who is a student at Santa Fe Community College and a former member of Crossroads Church in Gainesville.

Also attending were several current members of the UCF Crossroads branch, one of whom was secretly tape-recording the meeting until his cassette recorder was spotted by a parent sitting near the young man.

Hadley told the group of the pressure he and his girlfriend received when he attempted to leave the group-pressure that Hadley says led to his girlfriend's suicide.

"I left when I wanted to get married to my girlfriend, and the church elders told me to dump her," Hadley said. "I said 'that's it-- that was going too far.'"

He continued, saying that after the couple left the church, they were continually harassed in person, called on the telephone and put under constant pressure.

"They told me she was going to hell anyway," Hadley said, "so I shouldn't care."

In "soul talks," new initiates are encouraged to "reveal everything" to their prayer partners. Then, Hadley said the information-particularly personal problems and past misdeeds are passed along to the church hierarchy, and a detailed file is compiled on every member.

He said members do not have access to the files, but that church ministers do, and the information is used to create a further emotional dependence.

Hadley likened the mind control aspect of Crossroads to Moonies and Hare Krishnas, saying that the church makes it clear to members who they are to date, who they are to marry, and even how many children they can have by using guilt and fear to manipulate members.

Several sets of parents with college-age children talked about the changes they'd seen in their youngsters after Crossroads affiliation.

One mother termed her daughter "zombie-like" when discussing religion, and unable to carry on a conversation about Crossroads unless it was simply the repeating of memorized Bible verses, often out of context.

Hadley said the church discouraged parental contact because parents "are of the world" and interfere with the Lord's work.

Several other parents spoke of the intolerance Crossroaders are taught to feel for all other denominations, and one father said his son told him he would "go to hell" because he didn't accept Crossroads' doctrine.

One man who first identified himself as a former Crossroads member, but later admitted he was helping organize the UCF branch said Crossroads children "don't want to hate you (parents)". But, he added, "if you want to have dialogue with your children and if you want to keep them," parents "had better be acquainted with the scripture" and should accept their children's involvement and the Crossroads doctrine.

Rev. Bowman responded, saying Crossroads members' repetition and memorization of out-of-context Bible verses to justify their doctrine "is a misuse of the Word of God. You're saying 'if you want to keep your children, you have to join them.' I say no."

"They've made my life miserable"

Before and since that meeting, Outlook has spoken to numerous parents of Crossroads members. Most wished to remain anonymous because they feared reprisals against their children if it was discovered that they were publicly criticizing the Crossroads Church.

"They've made my life miserable," said one parent, who found that most of the money he had sent his daughter for tuition at U of F had actually gone to Crossroads.

All parents interviewed mentioned the changes they had seen occurring in their children's personalities. One mother said her daughter was "zombie-like" on her rare visits home, and could discuss religion only by quoting memorized Bible verses.

"She told me I was going to Hell unless I joined Crossroads," the mother said.

Kip McKean, Charleston, Illinois	1,800.00
Marvin Bryant, Alabama	600.00
University Blvd. Church of Christ, Orlando, FL	15,000.00
Paul Dietro, Birmingham, Alabama	500.00
Boston, Massachusetts	*
Salt Lake City, Utah	*
Campus Advance	71,200.00
Youth Ministry	34,732.00
Tape Ministry	-----
Crossroad	-----

A copy of the Crossroads budget [left] shows \$15,000 slated for the Orlando Church. [Below] Gainesville Crossroads literature mentions Adrian Carr's ministry at UCF.

SEVERAL BROTHERS just began working with congregations in the fall but have already to see great results. During the last fall quarter there were: 9 baptisms in Clemson, South Carolina with John Owen; 15 baptisms at Indiana University in Bloomington where Jeff Hill is Minister; 14 baptisms at Purdue University with Scott Dykehouse in West Lafayette, Indiana; 10 baptisms at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville where Paul Ramsey is Campus Minister; and 3 baptized by Elwood Peters at Kansas State University in Manhattan. Brothers just accepting positions with congregations are: Andy Llado, Minister at Poway, California; Christ; Adrian Carr, Minister with the University Boulevard congregation in Orlando; Wright at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana; and Mike Dollar at the University of Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Carlos Ulate who recently returned to his native Costa Rica is preaching for the church in San Jose.

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