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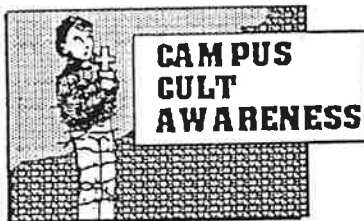
FOCUS

Recruitment tactics of religious group questioned

THIS WEEK



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By SCOTT P. ABEL

Opinions differ.

Steve Staten describes the Indianapolis Church of Christ as a campus ministry group that promotes Christian values and whose members reach out to spread the word of God to others.

Staten is the head of the Indianapolis Church of Christ, also recognized by the Office of Student Activities as Operation Saturation.

But if you ask Dorian Kordas, a freshman religious studies major, he will give you quite a different description of the religious group that he said regularly canvases the IUPUI campus searching for new recruits.

"They're a cult that utilizes mind-control techniques to manipulate people into joining their group," said Kordas, who claims his first-hand experience with the group is not unique.

"Just ask around, and you'll be very surprised at what you find," he said.

How it starts

Kordas was first approached by a member of the Indianapolis Church of Christ while studying for a religious studies test in the University Library with fellow classmates last spring. The group had been discussing the differing viewpoints of various religious sects.

After the study session ended, Kordas said he was approached by Mark Danielson, a member of the Indianapolis Church of Christ. Danielson, Kordas said, must have overheard the group talking about religion and decided to approach him.

Danielson introduced himself as someone who would like to sit down and discuss the word of God with him, Kordas said. Danielson, however, did not identify himself as being affiliated with any religious group and asked Kordas if he would like to get together.

Kordas, who said he had always had spiritual interests, agreed and gave Danielson his home phone number.

The two shook hands and went their separate ways.

Kordas said he didn't think twice about giving his phone number to Danielson. "I was simply trying to get involved in something I was interested in," said Kordas, who added that there weren't many social opportunities to meet people on this campus.

"I was extremely excited when Danielson called me," said Kordas, who described Danielson as friendly and relaxed.

"I never thought I would find a real Christian, one who was really into religion and wanted to have discussions about it."

Danielson had called to invite Kordas to a one-on-one Bible study at the University Place Hotel food court.

To Kordas' surprise, Danielson showed up with a friend. The one-on-one Bible study that Kordas anticipated unexpectedly turned into a two-on-one guided Bible tour.

Butler student agrees

One former member of the Indianapolis Church of Christ, Cindy Dormans, who claims she left the group because of their manipulative and unethical practices, said that each Bible study session is guided and has a specific purpose.

The one-on-one study sessions, Dormans said, are known within the group as "faith sharings" and are designed to prompt the prospective member to be open and extremely candid with their new-found spiritual partners who are known as "disciples."

"One of them read the Bible to me while the other one took notes on what I said," Kordas recalled. "It was really strange. It was like they were keeping tabs on me. They never let me ask questions about the portions of the Bible I wanted to deal with."

Kordas said although he found it strange that the three of them weren't debating or discussing the Bible, he didn't become upset or discouraged, only more curious.

Against a close friend's advice, Kordas returned again and again to meet with his personal Bible study partner, who was usually accompanied by at least one other person.

"A day never went by that I didn't meet with or talk with him. He was very insistent that we met as often as possible," Kordas said.

Danielson continued reading Bible verses to Kordas, occasionally asking him to examine himself and how the biblical messages might apply to him.

"It was almost like they were purposely guiding me away from what I wanted to know," Kordas said.

Situation causes administrators concern

IUPUI administrators said they are extremely concerned about recent complaints of harassment and mind control techniques allegedly conducted by shepherding/discipling groups like the Indianapolis Church of Christ.

In reaction to these types of complaints and other safety concerns, the Student Activities office is planning to release a student safety handbook next fall. The book will include information designed to aid students in recognizing aggressive, coercive religious organizations and cults. (See accompanying chart.)

Other students agree with Kordas that the group has a hidden agenda and they limit their Bible studies to certain por-

- Religious groups are permitted to recruit members in public places such as cafeterias, but not residence halls.
- Groups do not have to 'register' with the university in order to talk to students, as long as the talking does not cause a public disturbance.
- Coercive groups try to 'zero-in' on lonely, shy or socially inept students who are not likely to resist what appears to be overtures of friendship.

- Once in a coercive group, a person may find it difficult to leave the membership. Loads of guilt are heaped on the swaying member so that some feel compelled to stay, others carry such emotional scars that healing may take years and sometimes leads to suicide.
- When you don't want to talk to someone, you don't have to.
- If they persist - persist right back. You can also enlist the help of a person in authority.

tions of the scripture.

"I was in the group and can definitely say that there is one overriding purpose of these guided Bible study sessions — to eventually get the person to become baptized," Dormans said. "But, if you ask them about it, they won't be able to see anything wrong with what they're doing."

The group's local leader said they do concentrate on some portions of the Bible.

"It's true we will guide them (prospective members) to the scriptures that seem most appropriate to where they are at (spiritually)," Staten said. "But people do not need us to understand the Bible."

Staten added that the group also "lays out definitions of some of the scriptures" in order to help people understand what it means to be Christian.

The Indianapolis Church of Christ is an off-shoot of the Boston Church of Christ, a controversial shepherding/discipling ministry that has gained media notoriety on the East Coast. Neither the Indianapolis nor its progenitor the Chicago Church of Christ are affiliated with the mainstream United Church of Christ.

Dormans, a senior at Butler University who spent nearly six months with the group, said that after the initial contact and the subsequent group meeting, new members are strongly encouraged to study the Bible one-on-one with a group member.

Members keep 'sin list'

These faith-sharing sessions, Dormans said, are meetings which allow members to get potential recruits to open up and share intimate secrets. She said one approach was to have them write a list of "sins" committed in the past.

These sins are placed on a "sin list" and are resurrected to taunt the prospective member during later meetings, she said.

That meeting, both Kordas and Dormans said, focused on sorrow and repentance and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

During that meeting, a graphic description (written by Christian medical doctors) is presented to the group describing what great pain Jesus Christ must have felt during the crucifixion.

After the presentation, both Dormans and Kordas said they were asked to step into Christ's shoes and imagine what the crucifixion must have felt like.

Both students shared the same type of experience. Each of them were reacquainted with their sin lists, they said, and were told by group leaders that they (respectively) were personally responsible for Christ's violent death on the cross. In order for them to be fully cleansed, they said, they were told by campus group leaders that they must be baptized within the church's specific guidelines.

Dormans was baptized in an apartment complex swimming pool immediately following the meeting.

Prior to the baptism, questions such as "Are you ready to become a member of this group?" and "Are you aware that some people consider this group to be a cult?" were asked, Dormans said.

Kordas, who was not baptized by the group, said he still remembers group members pressuring him emotionally.

"I can still remember them getting out my sin list, holding it up and saying, 'Dorian, you were responsible for Christ's suffering. You killed Jesus Christ,'" Kordas said.

But it was the lack of emotional response to these presentations that differentiated Kordas' experience from Dormans'.

"They had already tried to make me feel guilty," Kordas said. "They confronted me with the cross thing and that I killed Jesus Christ, but I wasn't carried off on a tidal wave of feeling."

"I think they were disappointed that I didn't fit perfectly into their plans for me. I just didn't want to be a full-time, totally committed member," he said. "I just wanted to study the Bible with someone."

Kordas said he believes his lack of emotion disappointed group leaders. He soon began to realize that if he did not conform to their beliefs, the support of his new-found friends would be cut off.

At times, Kordas said, he wondered if perhaps the group was right and he was wrong. He faced what he called "a spiritual dilemma," to conform or not to conform.

Group seeks students

In the past, students have reported (to various university officials) being accosted by members who were carrying clipboards and claimed to be conducting a survey. Persons who encountered surveyors said they were surprised at the questions they were asked.

One questionnaire asked respondents questions about religious beliefs and was accompanied by an invitation to attend one of the organization's Bible study meetings.

Staten said the group sends disciples to campus because "it is the only thing we see in the Bible. We do what we see in the scriptures. We're not into any of that televangelism stuff. We just want to help each other be like Christ."

After leaving the group, Kordas began researching groups that he believed might use mind control techniques.

"What I found is that this group (the Indianapolis Church of Christ) is a cult," Kordas said. "No two ways about it. They use the same pre-meditated mind control techniques to elicit emotions and responses just as other cults do. They just hide under their church group mask."

The Indianapolis group leader disagrees.

"That's (charges of mind control) humorous," said Staten. "Since I've been here people are free to come and go. We do not use peer pressure or group pressure, although the Bible study that we do with people is definitely going to have an impact on their mind."

Staten said he has worked with the Indianapolis group for a year and five months.

Problems with peer and group pressures have been recognized by the group in the past, Staten said. Those problems were identified and dealt with before his involvement with the group, he added.

"If we have somebody being overly zealous or abusing their power, disciplinary action could be taken. But I think I would have been notified by now if this were truly happening," Staten said, adding that the group has open communication channels to members of the hierarchy.