

Church of Christ: Many young adults belong

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get you in. If you leave you end up isolated.

"They control the dating lives of even middle-aged members, how you spend your money and everything," he said. "It's a total hierarchical construction completely at odds with Church of Christ polity."

A recent Sunday service at Golden Hall began with announcements and a hymn, "Lest I forget, lead me to Calvary." A young leader of the congregation, James Hemet, spoke about focusing on Jesus as the congregation prepared to receive the Lord's Supper, something they do at every Sunday service.

After a collection for the poor, several members of the young adult group came up to the platform to share their recent experiences in joining the church.

Steve Roland, a student at SDSU, said he was "a complete flake. The more I think about how bad I was the more I am thankful for James Coutts," he said. "He kept after me every day with love and caring."

Shana Matthews said she became a Christian a month ago. "I did not have God in my life. I would get depressed and was crying at volleyball practice and on tour. Now that I have God in my life, it will be awesome," said Matthews, a student at San Diego State University.

Teresa Sampson, a Grossmont College student, told how she came to San Diego from Texas. "I went to a denominational church for a year and didn't know one person. Then Kim (Allbright) and Lisa (Westbrook) came around and loved me. It was scary to think I would have to change all I had been taught, but they kept loving me," she said.

The minister commented on the number of engagements announced at the beginning of the service, say-

Weger said he wanted to find a church that was making disciples. "Have you heard we are aggressive in our evangelism? I hope you have," he said. Weger also gave thanks for members who had brought in family members to the church.

The Church of Christ was a part of the Restoration movement of the 19th century which grew out of the work of Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. People in this movement looked at the array of competing denominations on the American scene and yearned for the unity they believed had belonged to the church of the first century.

They rejected denominationalism, but eventually their work led to the formation of at least three new denominations, said Flavil R. Yeakley, author of "The Discipling Dilemma," a book that summarizes criticism of the "discipling" churches. These denominations included the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which number almost a million members, a group whose congregations are called either Christian Churches or Churches of Christ, also numbering almost a million, and the most conservative, known as churches of Christ, with 1.2 million members in the United States.

It is in these most conservative churches that the discipling movement arose and membership quickly expanded in the churches where it was practiced. In this system, new members of a congregation are given a discipler who is responsible for guiding their growth as a Christian.

It began with the Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville, Fla., in the 1970s, but the leadership has since passed to the Boston Church of Christ. The Boston church trains

leaders for sister congregations throughout the world who are in turn responsible for supervising the work of other churches. The San Diego church is discipling churches in Phoenix and Tucson and will soon start work in Albuquerque and Orange County.

Unlike many congregations where the same few people are leaders or officers of the church from year to year, the San Diego church — like other discipling churches — periodically sends its leaders off to create new congregations in other cities, forcing the people left behind to raise up new leadership.

The emphasis is on making converts, and Yeakley said that only those making many converts are considered fruitful Christians. The churches grow fast, but some critics have suggested that discipling churches "resemble a giant reproductive system, rather than a whole body."

The Rev. Kevin Witham, minister of the El Cajon Boulevard Church of Christ and host of "Know Your Bible," a program on XETV Channel 6, said the San Diego church differs from regular churches of Christ in its "emphasis on human control of people rather than an individual's submission to Jesus Christ."

Witham said that his 500-member congregation does emphasize evangelism and nurturing Christian relationships, but does not try to exercise control over very aspect of a person's life.

Miles Gentzkow, director of Youth for Christ, a national evangelical organization, said that over the years people have called him and asked about the San Diego Church of Christ.

"It appears to be more of a cult than a ministry," Gentzkow said. "They place an overemphasis on

human authority. They ask their people to make incredible sacrifices and direct everything they do and where they go."

Gentzkow said he is convinced the Bible says all people have personal responsibility and "You can't hand it over to someone else."

"I've met some delightful people who are leaders in that church. They are loving and really want to help people, but the chain of authority is too one-way," he said.

Yet Weger said many people need persistent direction to develop a Christian lifestyle. "We have some teen-age gang members who are now Christians. They need guidance," he said.

He denied the church alienates young people from their families and pointed with pride to the list of college graduates in the church's quarterly bulletin. "We encourage them to bring their families into the church. We certainly don't want to antagonize them," he said.

"If people say no to it, that's fine. There are enough people in this city that we can find the ones who are serious about walking with Jesus and making radical changes in their lives," Weger said.

Religion News

San Diego church emphasizes 'human control of people'

Church of Christ here concedes 'guidance' but denies it's a cult

By Rita Gillmon
Staff Writer

Leaders of the San Diego Church of Christ figure if people are condemning them, they must be doing something right.

"If the world hates you, remember they hated me first," Evangelist Dave Weger quoted Jesus to his congregation on a recent Sunday morning, preaching from the 15th chapter of John's Gospel.

Weger addressed almost 2,000 people gathered in Golden Hall for a worship service. The congregation was mostly young people of all races, dressed in mixed styles — casual, Sunday dressy and punk. There was also a sprinkling of older people and young couples.

This congregation is enthusiastically engaged in evangelism. It raised \$600,000 recently to support a mission effort from a sister church in Mexico City to Guadalajara, Monterrey and Puebla, Mexico.

"Some of our brothers and sisters sold cars and furniture to meet their personal goals," Weger said in an in-

terview.

For Weger, this is admirable, but others think such enthusiasm goes too far.

Several complaints have been made about this church, especially from parents who feel their young adult children are becoming too involved in church work, to the detriment of their work or studies. One hired a private detective to find out if the church is a cult.

A couple recently called *The San Diego Union* to complain to a reporter about their experience.

"It's all consuming and manipulating. They don't want you to have friends outside the church," said Patty Lipsay, who with her husband, John Lakstigala, attended the church after their baby died in February.

"We were looking for something solid to hold on to. Everyone was so welcoming and friendly, but I delayed making up my mind," Lipsay said.

The couple was split up for Bible studies and urged to make a decision to join the church, she said.



**San Diego
Church
of Christ**

- **Office:** 10695 Treena St. Suite, 101, Scripps Ranch
- **Members:** 1,500
- **Minister:** Dave Weger, evangelist

Members are divided into zones with about 250 members in each. Zone meetings are held weekly at midweek and many home Bible studies are held in addition. The congregation contributes to missions, to local needy and to get underprivileged children in to sports events.

"My husband was told, 'Your baby is in heaven. Don't you want to be with him?' It seems to me like blackmail," Lipsay said.

Yet to evangelist Weger and other church members, bringing people to walk with Jesus is the most important thing in life.

"Basically we are a revival movement in the Churches of Christ. The churches were dying and we wanted to turn it around," Weger said.

Weger is in his mid-thirties and dropped out of college to seek training at the Boston Church of Christ, the leading church in the movement today.

"I wanted to be a preacher and minister to people's needs. I felt learning in the local setting was more helpful than a college-type atmosphere," Weger said.

His parents are members of the Church of Christ, and he is the third generation of his family to belong to the church, he said.

"They are astounded by the growth, but aren't sure yet about our way of doing things," Weger said. "Our objective is to call people to a Jesus lifestyle, to be like him, not like me."

The San Diego church reported 400 baptisms from January to June this year. It sponsors 200 Bible talks, small study groups in homes — held from Camp Pendleton to Tijuana and from El Cajon to Coronado — and has about 250 persons involved in eight zone meetings, some geographical and some grouped by age.

These groups meet one evening a week. It is part of a movement that now has churches throughout the United States, Europe and South America, many in cities where old-

style Church of Christ congregations already exist.

Weger said in an interview that the idea is to have one central church in each city, with ministry conducted throughout the area. Zone meetings are to create a family or community in each geographical location.

"With so many members in the church, we couldn't get to know each other well otherwise," Weger said. "We want to support families and help them in a time when so much in society is attacking them."

About half the Sunday worship meetings are held in rented zone locations and the other half at a central rented location where the entire congregation can gather. The church has met at the El Cortez, Symphony Hall and Golden Hall.

"We spend about 13 to 15 percent of our income on rent, but would need to spend much more to build," Weger said. The church also donated close to \$100,000 last year to helping the needy in San Diego and Mexico, he said.

Most of the rest of the church income goes to pay office staff, the evangelist, which is Weger's title, and the leaders for the eight zones.

Everything is expected to lead to bringing more people into the

church. It is organized on the discipling principle in which each member of the church is under the direction of a leader who guides his growth as a Christian.

Weger said the church teaches the Bible, how to develop a prayer life and to develop relationships with other Christians. "We encourage daily contact with church members," he said.

He defended the practice of having members clear every activity with their discipler. "They are called to do what Jesus wants them to do, rather than what they want to do," he said.

The San Diego church began as the Poway Church of Christ. It began to use the discipling program to grow from 75 members in 1979 — when Andy and Rita Lindo arrived from Boston — to 400 members two years later.

The church has since relocated and grown to about 1,500 members. It has offices in Scripps Ranch, where North Central Zone meetings are also held.

Denny Sheffield, who was a member of the church for two years, said the church tightly controls the lives of its members. "They kind of dangle perdition over your head once they

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