



The 'Church' That's Brainwashing Britons

BY PETER BROWNE

Outwardly a respectable charitable organization, the London Church of Christ is, in fact, an active and dangerous cult

LUCY STEELE was on a London Underground train travelling to the research laboratory where she worked as a biochemist, when a pleasant young woman started chatting to her. By the time they parted, she had accepted an invitation to a barbecue that weekend, given by members of the Central London Church of Christ.

Living at home at 28, Lucy was hoping this church would be more friendly than the local Baptist one

she attended. She returned from the barbecue in high spirits. "They made me feel one of the crowd," she enthused to her parents. "It's exactly what I've been looking for."

But within weeks her mother and father were worried by the way the church was taking over their daughter. The warmth had gone out of their close relationship with Lucy. She was becoming withdrawn and losing weight. Recalls her mother, Christine: "She would look at me

with a penetrating, emotionless stare, almost as if she were on drugs. I couldn't break down the barrier."

Lucy Steele was in the grip of a cult widely regarded as dangerous and the most active in Britain. Operating under the cloak of respectability conferred by charity status, it can split members from their families and seems totally to control their lives. It was founded in 1979 in Boston, USA by breakaway preacher Kip McKean, and practises an extreme form of Christianity based on its rigid interpretation of the Bible, with followers believing that they are the only ones who will achieve true salvation.

The church, now organized from Los Angeles, is disavowed by the traditional, mainline Churches of Christ which have existed in Britain and the United States for some 200 years. It claims 50,000 members in some 50 countries—around 1,300 in Britain, where it was first "planted" in 1982.

Gripped by Britain's fast-growing cult at last year's annual meeting at Keele University

The London congregation is said to be one of the largest outside the US. According to *Shining Like Stars*, a London Church of Christ manual which Reader's Digest has obtained, "There are 12 million lost souls living in London destined to go to hell."

The cult uses different names, which ex-members claim are often chosen to cause maximum confusion with respectable religious groups; typically, in Edinburgh the disguise is the Edinburgh Christian Church. The Central London Church of Christ has recently been known as the International Church of Christ, while other branches in the capital may go under such titles as London City Fellowship.

Members are all trained in the techniques of "tubing"—approaching people on the Underground—and

"blitzing"—recruiting in shopping centres and high streets. The aggressive touch is characteristic: the manual describes a recruiting campaign as "Operation Devastation", while the effusive welcome for potential members is termed "love bombing".

Students are a prime target, with university halls of residence described as an "evangelistic paradise". In 1992 cult activists were discovered to have infiltrated most, if not all, of the ten halls at University College London. The National Union of Students has warned student unions across the country, and International Church of Christ recruiters are now banned from many campuses including London, Manchester and Birmingham.

Soul Search. Not all recruits are young, though they are in the main middle class, intelligent and idealistic; they include businessmen, solicitors, accountants, engineers. Often they are friendless in a big city, beset by spiritual uncertainty, or in the aftermath of a broken relationship. Says Ursula MacKenzie of London-based Family Action Information and Rescue (FAIR), which advises relatives of cult victims: "Recruiters tend to seize on weakness."

Marine engineer Bill Wildsmith had moved from Sheffield to Surrey to take up a new job. On holiday in Tunisia, two girls befriended him and, back in England, persistently telephoned to invite him to go to church with them. "I was short of a social life, so eventually I agreed,"

says Bill, who had no religious convictions.

"My first impression was that it was a load of rubbish—people dancing around, clapping and singing 'Jesus will fix it'. But they were so friendly that I got drawn in. Within six months there was nothing else in my life. I had completely lost interest in my career and my family."

The key characteristic of a cult is that it uses psychological coercion. The International Church of Christ demands total submission, through "discipling"—a sort of spiritual buddy system. To Ian Haworth, founder of the Cult Information Centre, which receives up to 80 calls a week from anxious families, "It's a systematic technique of mind control."

Every recruit is answerable to his discipler, someone "more mature in the Lord", who in turn has *his* discipler, and so on up the hierarchy. Dr Betty Tylden is a consultant psychiatrist who has treated many former members of this and other cults for psychological disorders. She describes it as "a totalitarian system which puts untrained people in positions of complete power".

Divine Rights. New "disciples" soon learn that there is no room for doubt. "Because leaders claim to be appointed by God, to question what they are saying is to question God," says Greg Williams, a civil servant who spent seven years as a disciple. "When that is instilled in you day after day, you come to believe it."

Disciplers try to control every

aspect of disciples' lives, even how they spend their money. When Bill Wildsmith paid £350 for a camera, he was smitten with guilt for not seeking his discipler's advice first. "I rang him from a phone box outside the shop, and he told me it was far too expensive. He instructed me to change it for one costing less than £100, and make a donation to the church from the remainder."

The disciples' primary duty is to evangelize, and the more people they recruit, the faster they rise in the church. Frank Bennett*, now a 24-year-old Sussex university student who joined the church at 17, was told to approach ten people and provide at least three names and phone numbers of potential converts every day. "Sometimes I would be sent back on to the streets until I had met my quota. I knew disciples who were out there till past midnight."

A good monthly score brings public praise from the preacher during a service, a poor one rebuke as "a struggling Christian". Declares Ayman Akshar, who fell out with the leaders after seven years as a trusted senior member: "The whole system is founded on manipulation—one moment encouragement, the next humiliation until you comply. Most disciples become people-pleasers, and will do anything to look good in the eyes of their superiors."

Akshar came to London from Damascus as a 25-year-old in 1984 to study the English legal system.

* Name has been changed to protect privacy

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Two years later, seeking an answer to his doubts about Islam, he joined the Central London Church of Christ and soon became an ardent discipler. Today a leading opponent of the cult, he admits frankly that his discipling was "a very, very bad abuse of power—though at the time I believed it was what God wanted me to do".

Sunday Best. He was encouraged to "hammer" his flock, and "break" them, until they meekly bowed to demands which no one in the outside world would tolerate. In their anxiety to please, disciples are driven to conform to the American cult leader's perception of the correct image: shortish haircuts, sharp clothes. Frank Bennett describes it as "basically a yuppy look", and adds, "Many dress like their disciplers, and even speak like them."

They also feel obliged to reveal intimate details of their lives. Records of "sins", income, relationships, weaknesses, sexual habits, are passed to church leaders and could be used against those who step out of line.

The church's preoccupation with guilt leads many to become compulsive confessors. Bill Wildsmith remembers ringing his discipler to admit to masturbation, and being reduced to tears. "We prayed over the phone for half an hour, and then I had to drive up to London from Surrey to study the Bible with him till 4am."

The cult's attitude to sex is bizarre. Says Bill: "When a group of us were watching television and there was a kissing scene, we had to avert our

eyes." Disciples can date only if their discipler approves—and even then, only on one evening a week, with another church member; any other alliance is liable to be broken up.

Ayman Akshar himself came under attack when he fell in love with a fellow member, a computer consultant. "They said 'Jane's not right for you. She isn't broken. You must choose another.'" He refused. After they were married, Jane told him how leaders had forced her to have her beloved cat put down. "They wanted me under control," she says.

Forbidden Fruit. A dating couple is restricted to 35 minutes a week on the phone, and often a discipler lurks in the background to make sure they don't exceed that time. When the church authorizes a marriage, disciplers decide the length of the honeymoon, and couples are expected to seek permission to have children.

Single people are pressed to move into overcrowded communal houses, where their lives can be even more closely supervised. Frank Bennett, at 17, found himself sharing a three-bedroom house with seven other "brothers". "I slept in the kitchen, another in the bath."

Says Lucy Steele, who moved into a commune several months after the fateful barbecue that introduced her to the church: "On Friday nights we went out in a group—to the cinema, ice-skating or bowling—to prove how worldly and sociable the church could be. Underneath, it was a way of isolating you from anyone outside.

The church wormed its way into every part of my life while I thought I was still making my own choices."

Typically, disciples spend at least an hour a day in Bible study, an hour in prayer and an hour on the streets recruiting. Services are compulsory, as are regular "fellowship" meetings held far into the night. At the end of the day, they must complete a schedule of everything they have done.

Many live in a state of permanent exhaustion. Some give up their studies—Ayman Akshar had to abandon his ambition of gaining a doctorate in international law—and other young members often find it impossible to build a career. "If it gets in the way, they tell you to give it up," says Frank Bennett. "I knew very well-educated members who just flitted from one dead-end job to another."

Disciples are constantly dunned for money to spread the word—around a million pounds each year. Every convert is strongly encouraged to "tithe" a minimum ten per cent of gross income—even if they depend on student grants or social security.

Nor is that all. There are "special contributions"—twice-yearly levies of ten times the normal weekly contribution, plus collections at services. In 16 months, Bill Wildsmith was milked of around £6,000. "I was constantly overdrawn. When I told my discipler I might have to borrow from the bank to meet my mortgage, he told me just to do it, and trust in God." The discipler even tried to persuade Bill to buy a bigger car

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IF YOU are approached by people who are excessively or inappropriately friendly, the Cult Information Centre advises you to avoid allowing them to engage you in conversation. If you feel you must talk to them, ask specific questions. What group do they represent? To whom is it affiliated? What do they believe? Who is their leader? What is the purpose of any lecture or seminar to which they have invited you? Mainstream religious organizations are happy to be frank, but cults are usually evasive. If you don't get clear answers, be wary.

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Inevitably, many go heavily into debt, but the pressure to bring in money is relentless. Members have been advised to go to a major hospital to earn money by volunteering for an unpleasant experiment involving a biopsy—removing tissue from the nose and inserting pollen to induce hay fever. Yet church administrator John Partington insists: "Our one desire is to bring people to a happy life."

Although the British organization claims autonomy from the US, the Los Angeles headquarters houses a database of worldwide finances. So money-orientated is the cult that at least two ex-cult members claim this database shows each Monday morning how much any member in any church has given the previous day.

In order to leave the cult, many fear that they will have to forsake God, and this fear is used as a form of group discipline: if you go, you will go to hell. At the beginning of last year the church banished some 400 "lukewarm" disciples who failed to bring in their quota of new recruits. Says Ian Haworth of the

Cult Information Centre: "They had their world exploded. One minute they thought they were the only truly saved people on earth. The next, they were heading for eternal damnation."

Even those who quit voluntarily live in fear. Bill Wildsmith left because he was deep in debt, his career was in danger and he could no longer take the demands of his overbearing discipler. But, he recalls: "For months I would drive to work very slowly, in case some idiot under the influence of the devil shot out of a side street and smashed into me." It took him two years, with intensive counselling, to recover.

Bodies like the Cult Information Centre, FAIR and INFORM, a government-supported charity that gathers intelligence on new religious groups, are inundated with calls from parents pleading for guidance on rescuing their alienated children. Some parents resort to drastic action.

Christine Steele was so convinced that Lucy was being destroyed that she risked arrest for kidnapping. She persuaded her daughter to come home for a weekend, bundled her into a car with two security men, and

drove to a remote cottage in Suffolk. There, for ten days, a former member of the Moonie cult reasoned with the young woman.

After that had failed, her mother called in Graham Baldwin, a former London University chaplain who has helped more than 200 people to break away from cults by facing them with home truths about the way they have been manipulated. Only then did Lucy's illusions crumble. Today she is among the ex-members who help Ayman Akshar "to show people still in the cult how their minds are being stolen".

Paradise Lost. Graham Baldwin, who recently founded an organization called Catalyst to provide counselling and therapy, knows how traumatic it can be when cult members leave. "Once they try to come back into society, some can't cope. They don't know how to find a job or a place to live, or even how to deal with other people."

Betty Tylden likens leaving any cult religion to bereavement. "People have put their friendships, jobs, security and interests into one basket—and lost the lot. Many of my patients from the International Church of Christ were jettisoned because they had outlived their financial usefulness. Some are so disturbed and mentally ill that they have to go to

hospital. They hear voices, see things, even believe they are being consumed by the flames of hell."

The cult is now itself under fire. Its financial administration is being looked into by the Charity Commissioners and it is reportedly being scrutinized by the Inland Revenue.

Meanwhile the church apparently continues to expand, boasting that it will "win as many as possible" new members. The only effective action against it is coming from the loose network of underfunded groups dedicated to raising awareness of the cult and helping its victims. Many of them see chilling similarities between the renegade church and the Branch Davidian sect, at whose headquarters in Waco, Texas, 27 Britons died in the fire that destroyed it after an armed confrontation with the FBI a year ago. There is the same power lust, a similar warped interpretation of the Bible and use of mind control.

There is still no legal remedy for parents trying to recover family members. And last year Prime Minister John Major ruled out specific legislation to curb cult activities, saying, "It would be difficult to determine what groups should be included and what excluded."

Those whose lives have been wrecked by the International Church of Christ have no such doubts.

PHOTOGRAPH: NEWS TEAM INTERNATIONAL LTD

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APRIL 1994 £1.80

Reader's Digest

SHARK ATTACK!
PAGE 54

FOODS THAT FOOL CONSUMERS
PAGE 68

MAKE TV HELP YOUR KIDS
PAGE 150


Crime's Spectre Haunts Europe	David Miller	41
Prince Charles: The Greening of Highgrove		48
Shark Attack!	Hilary Jones	54
'What'll Become of Fred?'	Dennis Leeson	54
Life's Like That	Fred Ebbels	61
Do You Know What You're Eating?	Tony Denny	68
Escape From Sarajevo	Nashua's Story	73
Sex Hormones—Every Woman's Guide	Gemma	79
Personal Glimpses		85
Factory Where the Future Works	John Perry	87
Love Is...	A Marriage Made in Heaven	91
When Pneumonia Strikes	Donald and Joan Stewart	93
How to Beat the Daily Grind	Jane Soren	103
Stop This Animal Traffic!	Robert Jones	104
Laughter, the Best Medicine		111
Michael Dell's Billion-Dollar Dream	Fred Ebbels	112
Slurp... by Summer	Eddie Hunter and Shyenne Jones	117
The 'Church' That's Brainwashing Britons		123
Bottoms Up, Barossa	John Hinchey and Miriam Pugh	127
Fighting Spirit		137
No Defence for Land Mines	Frankie Chantrel	142
Make TV Help Your Kids	Pat Shook	150
BOOK CHOICE		
Dog Sled Across Alaska	Gary Pender	155

Wanted—Your Laugh Lines, 3; Word Power, 9; He Went Where Others Did Not Dare, 15; News From the World of Medicine, 31; Picturesque Speech, 149

FEAR IN THE STREETS

BEGINNING A THREE-PART SHOCK REPORT ON CRIME IN EUROPE PAGE 41

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Reader's Digest


Crime's Spectre Haunts Europe	David Holmes 41
Prince Charles: The Greening of Highgrove	48
Shark Attack!	54
'What'll Become of Fred?'	61
Life's Like That	67
Do You Know What You're Eating?	68
Escape From Sarajevo	73
Sex Hormones—Every Woman's Guide	74
Personal Glimpses	85
Factory Where the Future Works	86
Love Is	91
When Pneumonia Strikes	95
How to Beat the Daily Grind	100
Stop This Animal Traffic!	104
Laughter, the Best Medicine	111
Michael Dell's Billion-Dollar Dream	112
Slurp... by Summer	117
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Bottoms Up, Barossa	132
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