

Daily Nebraskan

Thursday, November 10, 1983

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Vol. 83 No. 53

'Cults' grow despite poor image

By Christopher Galen

This is the first article in a series about non-traditional religions. In today's article, sociology professors, spokesman from mainstream religions and a state senator give their opinions on so-called "cults." Subsequent articles will give the views of leaders of two non-traditional religions and of a UNL student who said she had to be deprogrammed after joining such a group.

"*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,*"

The First Amendment

While Americans have always cherished their religious freedoms, seldom has the right to practice a religion been disputed as it is today, with many new denominations having sprung up outside the traditional bounds of mainstream religions.

Many, branded as "cults," conjure images of fanat-

ics following a demi-god in search of something more than salvation and indoctrinating susceptible young believers. The whole issue of what is legal and legitimate and what is dubious and dangerous can present a dilemma to sociologists, lawyers, clergy and most of all, the American public.

"A cult technically is a religious belief system that is different from mainstream religions," said Hugh Whitt, a UNL sociology professor who has researched religious trends.

"There is a kind of deep paranoia in this society about these religious groups," he said.

Because most people in the United States regard themselves as followers of some religious tradition, the growth of unconventional and unfamiliar new denominations has many people confused and frightened, Whitt said.

Also, because the influence of "mainstream" churches is dropping, new denominations can greatly appeal to certain types of people, he said. This is especially true of people raised in a religious

family who turned away from religion, only to find something missing.

"They're ready for a return of religion in their lives," Whitt said. "These other religions can give them a sense of community and meaning."

Charles Harper, a sociology professor at Creighton University in Omaha, has researched "cults" in Nebraska.

"America has always had lots of exotic religious groups," Harper said. "Now they're becoming more popularized, with more attention focused on them. Something happened and it became a large issue."

That "something" probably is the number and type of persons entering new faiths apart from the mainstream, he said.

"Historically, they have recruited marginal persons, from the fringes of society," he said. "Now, it's more young middle-class people, whose parents become outraged when they find out."

"Many people who enter cults do so because they want to, but some may be misled. Those groups that take people out of the mainstream are the most controversial."

— Charles Harper,
sociology professor at Creighton University

Harper said there is a tendency to lump all unconventional religions into a group and call them cults, which he said is a prejudiced stereotype.

"We've developed this public image of them that is really malevolent," he said.

One of the main reasons for this poor image is the idea that new religions brainwash and depersonalize their adherents, removing their individuality as they take them from what is considered a "normal" lifestyle, Harper said.

"Many people who enter cults do so because they want to, but some may be misled," he said. "Those groups that take people out of the mainstream are the most controversial."

Because many of these denominations do represent a drastic and sudden change in lifestyle, especially for young people, parents perceive this conversion as a rejection of their values and the resulting hurt motivates them to act, Harper said.

"They believe their child has been brainwashed, so they want to deprogram him," he said.

Whitt said a negative bias definitely exists against non-traditional religions and sociologists debate the methods some of them use to recruit new followers.

"Some say it's brainwashing, others don't," he said. "There's no doubt most such methods work and as long as they respect the dignity of the person, you might as well use them."

One person who questioned some of the recruitment tactics used is Mark Randall, director of Wesley House, a Christian ministry of UNL sponsored by United Ministries and Higher Education.

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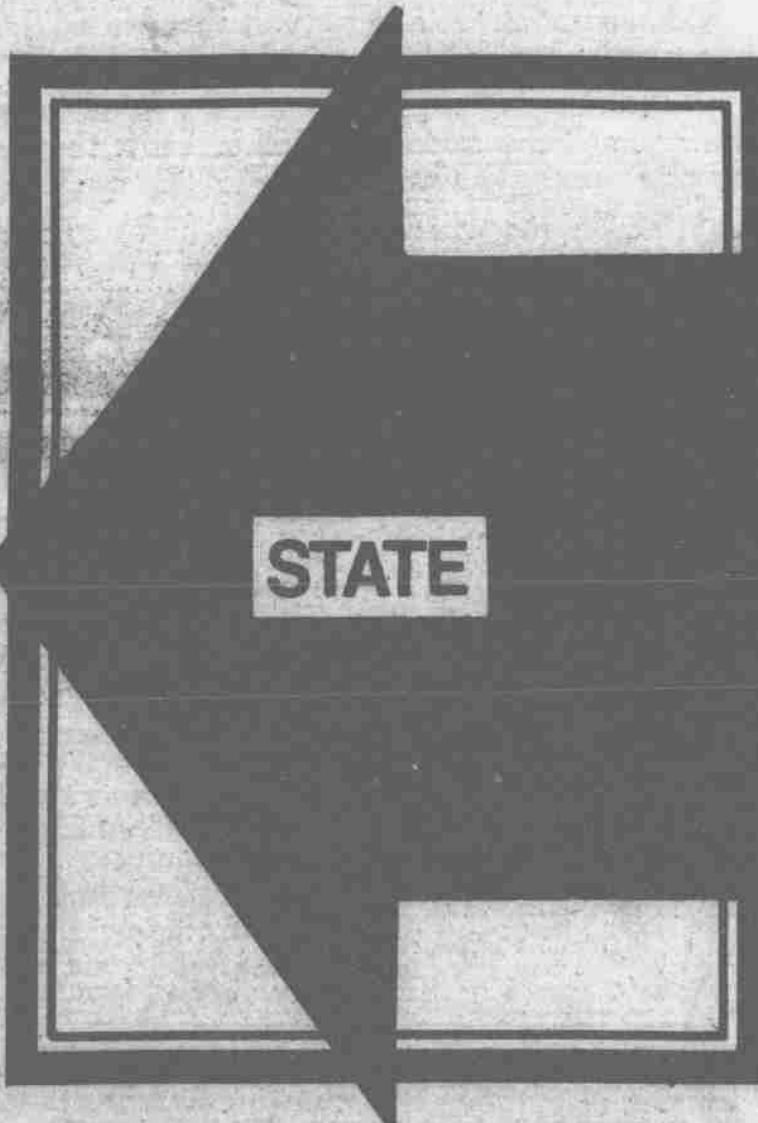


Illustration by Billy Shaffer

ASUN senators give testimony on proposed budget changes

By Jann Nyffeler

Following last week's decision to research specific areas of proposed budget changes, ASUN members presented testimony to the Academic Planning Committee after their meeting Wednesday.

Agriculture College Sen. John Langemeier spoke on the proposed cutting of funding for teaching laboratories and intercollegiate judging teams.

Since agriculture is an applied science, Langemeier said that laboratory exercises are essential to the quality of applied education.

APC member Kevin Goldstein asked if monitor labs, which show laboratory activity on film or video tape, would adequately replace current labs. Langemeier replied that teaching laboratories wouldn't be as beneficial without hands-on experience.

He also said that intercollegiate judging teams are crucial for building leadership. The program gives students the opportunity to express what they have learned and to justify their reasons in a competitive atmosphere. This eventually results in strong alumni support, Langemeier said. He added that most contests are funded by grants and gifts.

Arts and Sciences Sen. Andy Carothers informed the APC about ASUN's opposition to the proposal to reduce the State Museum research budget by 25

percent. Carothers said that the proposal is inaccurate in stating that the museum is entirely research-oriented. He found that the museum currently supports 10 curators, which accounts for 64 percent of their total budget. Actual research takes up 53 percent of their time, he said. The other 47 percent of a curator's time is spent in teaching, public relations-type activities and the care and collection of specimens, according to Carothers' findings.

In regard to this, Carothers questioned the statement that the museum reduction would not impair other university programs. He said that State Museum's collections are used directly by 13 university departments.

The proposed budgetary reduction also states museums are infrequently associated with universities. Carothers said he found that over 50 North American universities have natural history museums, including Colorado, Iowa State, Kansas and Missouri. The NU State Museum is ranked among the top five university collections in the country.

"Over the past 112 years . . . it (the museum) has made many diverse scientific contributions to the world of scientific thought," Carothers said. "The museum also adds cultural and aesthetic qualities to our university."

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