

Insight

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"Our goal is to evangelize the world in one generation. And it's definitely happening."

Cult network

The international group has been keeping the Cult Awareness Network busy, director Cynthia Kisser said.

The network is a national, nonprofit organization based in Chicago that works to increase public awareness of mind control practices, Kisser said.

Kisser said the network didn't label any church a destructive cult, but it provided this list of behaviors to help identify cults:

- Mind control, coercive persuasion without informed consent.
- Charismatic leadership, claiming divinity and demanding unquestioning obedience.
- Exclusivity, secretiveness by followers regarding activities or beliefs.
- Alienation, separation from family, friends and society.
- Exploitation, financial, physical or psychological.
- Totalitarian world view, affecting dependence and promoting goals of the group over the individual.

"There's definitely a large body of people that speak critically of the (international) group," Kisser said in a phone interview. "We get more complaints on this particular group than any other Bible-based group."

Casey said he was not bothered by the criticism. He said he expected it.

"Our church lives according to the Bible," he said. "We do make a stand on what the Bible says, and sometimes that doesn't go over with other people."

"In any group, if you take a stance that you believe in, you always have opposition."

Lyons agreed.

"The Bible says 'blessed are you who are persecuted,'" he said.

Bible study

Larson said he had gone to only a couple of services when he was introduced to two church members who would join him in a personal Bible study. One would teach, and the other would take notes.

"You're basically put in a passive position to just receive what they're saying," Larson said.

He said the study sessions, which lasted from one to five hours, covered set topics.

The sessions would last as long as it would take for him to accept the material, he said.

Larson said the only objective of the first session was to get people to admit they were not Christians.

In a later session, the Light and Darkness study, they must confess every sin they can remember from their lives, Larson said — including every sinful thought.

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CASEY

Lincoln Christian Church minister

After about seven or eight sessions, the new members are baptized into the church, he said. The church believes baptism should take place when people are adults, he said. And that means full submersion, in a lake, a bathtub, a Jacuzzi, a horse tank — whatever is available.

Daily confession continues once people become members, Larson said. He had to confess daily to an assigned spiritual advisor called a discipler. If members don't confess, they are going against the church, Larson said.

The role of discipler goes beyond confession and teaching, Larson said. They also manage what people do during the day, how many classes they take, who they see and how they act, he said.

"First, it's just the spiritual, Christ-like qualities (you must imitate), then on to their personality," Larson said. "You're at the mercy of this

person. You should submit to your discipler the same way you would submit to God."

Larson said the church began to take control of his life before he knew what was happening.

"Your world is the Lincoln Christian Church, and anyone outside that world is sinful," he said. "I was over and over again told how prideful I was because of my tendency to be independent ... I would ask questions here and there. You don't question it. This is a church of God."

Dedication to the church went beyond just the spiritual, Larson said. There were financial commitments as well, he said.

Members were required to donate 10 percent of their income to the church each week, he said. For students, that sometimes meant money from loan checks. Then, twice a year, members gave special contributions to start new churches. Members were asked to give 10 times what they normally gave, he said, or 100 percent of that week's earnings.

Not a cult

Casey said the perception of the church as a cult was an illusion.

The church does not force ideas on members, Casey said.

"We encourage thinking," Casey said. "Not a collective thought."

Casey said he encouraged people to examine the Bible. The idea that members are forced into a submissive role goes against the structure of the church, he said.

"Everyone in the church is a disciple of God," he said. "We don't believe in clergy and laity. I'm no better than anyone else on the church — God's just chosen me to lead."

Casey began leading the church a few months ago, he said. He came to UNL for graduate school to get his master's degree in animal science.

The church tries to imitate first-century churches, Casey said, which expected strict adherence to the Bible. Church services are held twice a week, he said, in space it has rented at Elliot Elementary School. Services last one to 1 1/2 hours, he said.

Bible study sessions usually last only a half-hour, he said. Sometimes they last longer, but he said no session ran five hours.

Confession is required, Casey said, but not daily. The commitment to one's discipler isn't that harsh, he said.

The discipler role plays an important role in the church, he said, dating back to biblical times.

"A discipler role, in Bible terms, is to care for and help the person grow spiritually," Casey said. "We all need to be taught, and there's always someone who can teach us something."

Casey said even he had a discipler.

Campus code

The church has tried twice to become a recognized student organization and has failed both times, Blake said. Both times, their academic advisers pulled their support in the final stages.

Blake said the university could not block a group from forming an organization on campus.

The church also has refused to sign the Association of Campus Religious Workers Code of Ethics, which calls for respecting and recognizing the beliefs of others.

Casey said that portion of the code wasn't what prevented his church from signing it.

He said the church realized other religious beliefs existed, but he added that the Bible was clear that only Christians would be saved.

Casey would not comment on whether anyone outside the church was seen as Christian.

The church refused to sign the code because the code said students had to come to the church, he said, and the church should not reach out to them.

That goes against the church's practice of actively sharing its faith, he said.

Following the movement

Other Lincoln churches do not see the Lincoln Christian Church as harmless worship.

Larry Rouse, a preacher at the East Side Church of Christ in Lincoln, has been following the movement since it began.

In that time, he has worked closely with people who have come out of the church, and he has been involved with a support group of members' parents for several years. At least 10 to 20 other local churches also have become involved, he said.

"Other churches are finally realizing that this just isn't another religious movement," Rouse said. "Their worship is very intensely emotional."

"It's instant family," he said. "But their best friends in the world, with one command, can be told to turn and have nothing to do with them. And that's very damaging."

Rouse said that from his experience, members were isolated within the church and cut off from friends and family.

"All your close friendships are in there, and they start pulling the strings (to get you to conform)," he said. "It's done in very subtle ways to the person being controlled."

Lyons said those type of stories had put a preconceived image of the church in everyone's minds.

"We go by the Bible," Lyons said. "(The church) takes a hard-line stance of following the Bible very closely. We follow what Jesus taught, and that's very challenging."

Leaving the church

Larson stayed in the church for nine months. He was about to become the discipler for a high school student when a conflict arose. Larson wanted to date someone outside the church — and it was forbidden.

Casey said that belief was supported by the Bible.

"We follow what the Bible says, in that it says we need to remain pure," Casey said. "It says 'do not be yoked with unbelievers.'"

For Larson, it was a reason to leave.

"I suddenly woke up and realized how much control they had taken over my life," Larson said. "They make all this seem so innocent, but really you're giving up your rights to make your own decisions."

"If it isn't their way, then there's something wrong with you. They're not open to other ideas. Anything that deviates from that — you're in sin."

