

Cult

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programming, but that her mother drove her to a strange house where her family and Royal had gathered. "It took two days to get through to me," she said. "After that, I just moved out of my apartment (rented with church members) and never went back to church. Thomas has since made radio and T.V. appearances to educate people about the cult, and said she has since met with people who got out of the church. "They say the evangelist told the church members to stay away from me, that Satan had gotten me," she said. Although Thomas said she has resolved her experience with the church, repercussions of those nine months remain. "I still feel guilty sometimes," she said. "It's really hard for me to trust people."

Exit counselor's views

Mike Royal, a Charleston real estate investor, has good reasons for his concern about cults. He used to be in one. Royal was involved with Great Commission International, which is recognized by both the American Family Foundation and the Cult Awareness Network as a cult, from 1976 to 1980. At one point, he was the executive editor of *Today's Student*, GCI's national newsletter. GCI was founded by Jim McCotter in 1972 in Iowa and has since grown to an international organization with 80 churches associated worldwide. Royal said he was close to McCotter himself until he walked away after being deemed "unspiritual" for questioning McCotter. Since then, Royal has dedicated his life to helping others get out of destructive cults. He received a master's of social work at the University of Georgia and has done intervention and counselling to cult members in several states. "These groups (Boston Church of Christ and GCI) are using mind-control techniques to get people in and to keep them in," he said. Royal said most cult members are sincere in their beliefs and aren't aware of the techniques being used.

"Part of mind control is you're not aware you're under it," he said. "These groups strip you of your critical thought processes. If you find yourself doubting them, you're no longer under their control." This is the reason for involuntary intervention, which many exit counselors are wary of participating in because of increasing legal action by the cult members, Royal said. "If you're taught that your beliefs are going to be persecuted by unbelievers, why would you voluntarily listen to someone tell you're brainwashed?" he said. Royal said his interventions, which are free and usually arranged by friends and families of the cult members, are not always successful. "Whether people leave through intervention or not, they need support," he said. "They feel foolish for believing and often, they've lost their only social outlet. They need to resolve their feelings of guilt." Royal said cults operate on guilt. "In other churches, you are offered salvation if you believe," he said. "In these groups, you're never fully 'saved' — there's always something you could do wrong." Cults also separate members from their family, he said. "That's one of the first things they do," he said. "They want you away from people who care, who question your relationship with the church. They tell you to expect persecution because that's part of testing your faith." "Most people in the cults are sincere," he said, "but the leaders are aware of what they're doing. They control minds for money, for power, for the security of having people at their beck and call.

The churches respond

"Baloney," said Lynn Lowrie, evangelist of the Columbia Church of Christ. "The idea that we're a cult is completely false." Lowrie said anyone against the church just doesn't know what went on. "I challenge people to visit and see if they still believe we're dangerous," he said. "I know Kirkland, and I think she's a nice girl," he said. "But I wonder if she wasn't exposed to mind control by her deprogrammer." Lowrie said he didn't know exactly what happened with Thomas, but he thought it was an isolated problem related to the former evangelist. "We might have been having discipleship problems," he said. "But those problems are gone now." He said he thought Royal was sincere, but he was uninformed because he had never attended the church. He also denied being part of the Boston Movement, even when confronted with the fact that a delegation from the church attended a national Boston Movement meeting in Boston in the Fall of 1989. "We have no headquarters," he said. "Our way is the way of God." He said they don't use mind-control techniques, restrict dating or have membership quotas. Riverbend Community Church Pastor Dan Willis, who says the church is part of an association known as Great Commission International, said the USC campus group merely attended their church for worship. "I'd rather not discuss this," he said. "We're not a cult, we're not deceptive and we're not out to control minds." He referred questions to the national GCI headquarters in Washington, D.C., which was not open when called. "I've done research on Royal, and he has personal problems," Willis said. "His problems with GCI are 15 years old and unsubstantiated."

Task force member Paul Fidler said even though the university is aware some groups are destructive, the Student Life office recognizes them as student organizations because they have no legal grounds for barring them from using the Russell House and recruiting members. "They haven't done anything illegal, so our hands are tied," Fidler said. "We have to respect freedom of religion." After reviewing their findings, which focused primarily on Columbia Church of Christ, the task force recommended educational intervention. These include increasing residence hall and CARA staff's training so they would be better informed about such groups, developing a list of speakers who are willing to talk to various campus groups concerning the approaches taken by religious cults, developing a specific module that could be included in the University 101 curriculum, developing a publication about typical problems faced by students at USC, informing faculty about cult activities, and letting the Religious Affairs Committee be a point of contact for dealing with students who are facing problems with cults.

University's stand

Over mounting concern about destructive cults on the USC campus, university officials have started planning intervention programs to counteract such groups. Student Affairs became concerned about religious cults in June of 1989 and formed a Cults Task Force to investigate the problem and make recommendations for intervention.

How to recognize cults

- In order to help differentiate between the various types of cults and their degree of destructiveness, the Cult Awareness Network has devised the following "working definition" of a cult, which consists of four categories.**
 - Use of brainwashing techniques** as defined by Robert Lifton in his book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. These include:
 - Milieu control.** The control of the internal and external environment of the cult.
 - Mystical manipulation.** The orchestration of individual experiences by the group, which are often interpreted as being spontaneous examples of the group's divine or perfect teachings.
 - The demand for purity.** A doctrine that divides everything into the absolutely pure and the totally impure... good vs. evil, black vs. white.
 - The cult of confession.** The misuse and insistence upon using confession primarily for the purpose of controlling the confessor.
 - The sacred science.** A doctrine that claims to have a perfect logical, scientific, philosophical, political or religious system, even in the face of

- obvious distortion. This enables the cultist to justify his "god-like" superiority over non-cultists and critics.
 - Loading the language.** A technique that limits critical and questioning thought by making a person speak in "thought-terminating cliches" or in terms that only the group can define.
 - Misuse of mind-altering techniques.** These may include chanting, praying, meditating, hypnosis, speaking in tongues and various forms of repetitive action. The purpose of using these techniques is to stop critical thought by limiting it (sensory deprivation) or by overloading it (sensory overload).
 - Deception.** Generally, deception about the group's purpose, beliefs, goals, activities, history and leadership. Some groups even have codes that justify such deception in such a way that members have difficulty believing that what they say is truly deceptive even when it is blatantly so.
 - Authoritarian, pyramidal, organizational structure.** A structure dominated by a leader or group of leaders who refuses to accept any criticism or responsibility for any wrongdoing in the organization.

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