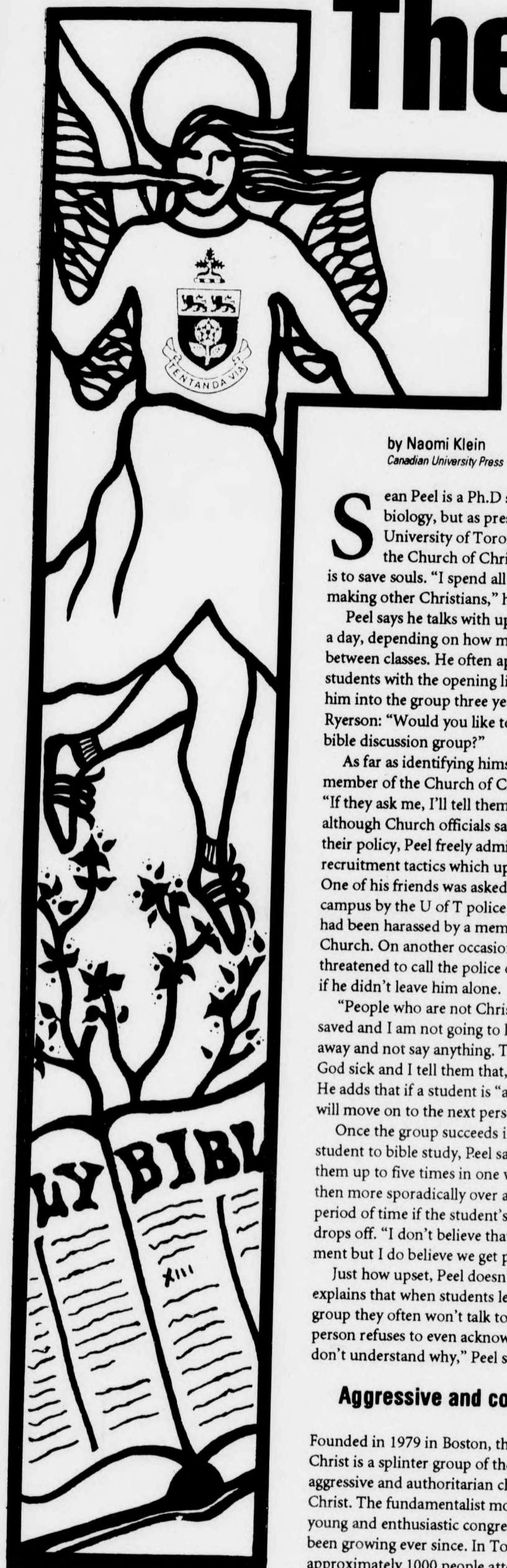


# The fear of God

*The Church of Christ wants you to come to a bible study meeting. And they won't take no for an answer. Is that a good reason to kick them off campus?*

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**S**ean Peel is a Ph.D student in biology, but as president of the University of Toronto chapter of the Church of Christ, his mission is to save souls. "I spend all of my free time making other Christians," he explains.

Peel says he talks with up to 25 students a day, depending on how much time he has between classes. He often approaches students with the opening line that drew him into the group three years ago at Ryerson: "Would you like to come to a bible discussion group?"

As far as identifying himself as a member of the Church of Christ, Peel says "If they ask me, I'll tell them." And although Church officials say it is against their policy, Peel freely admits that he uses recruitment tactics which upset people. One of his friends was asked to leave the campus by the U of T police after a student had been harassed by a member of the Church. On another occasion, a student threatened to call the police on Peel himself if he didn't leave him alone.

"People who are not Christian are not saved and I am not going to let them walk away and not say anything. They make God sick and I tell them that," Peel says. He adds that if a student is "adamant" he will move on to the next person.

Once the group succeeds in attracting a student to bible study, Peel says he will call them up to five times in one week, and then more sporadically over a longer period of time if the student's attendance drops off. "I don't believe that it is harassment but I do believe we get people upset."

Just how upset, Peel doesn't know. He explains that when students leave the group they often won't talk to him. "One person refuses to even acknowledge me. I don't understand why," Peel says.

## Aggressive and coercive

Founded in 1979 in Boston, the Church of Christ is a splinter group of the less aggressive and authoritarian churches of Christ. The fundamentalist movement's young and enthusiastic congregation has been growing ever since. In Toronto, approximately 1000 people attend weekly services.

Because of its recruitment techniques, many universities have banned the Church, or, like York, have refused to grant it official recognition or allow its non-student members to recruit on campus (see news article on page 3).

Critics, including many former members, hold that the Church of Christ does

more than share its faith — it enforces it. They say that aggressive and "coercive" recruitment techniques followed by threats of divine retribution for sins like drinking, premarital sex, putting family and friends before god and, perhaps most importantly, trying to leave the Church of Christ, exact an excessive amount of control over members' lives.

But current members tell a different story. They say the Church has changed their lives, given them friends, support and an understanding of God. They protest that their freedom of expression is curtailed when universities attempt to restrict their freedom of movement.

## Balls and chains

Peel was recruited in one of a series of heavy Church of Christ drives at Ryerson. This year, the Ryerson Student Union circulated a pamphlet titled "Danger: cults on campus," warning students not to "be caught off-guard" by the Church of Christ. The pamphlet instructs students who are approached not to give out their name or phone number and to "report the incident

recruitment techniques.

"It is not because of what they believe — we don't care if you believe in the god of marbles — but they are not up front about who they are," explains Dashko.

## Love bombing

Bob Attaran, a third-year University of Toronto student, was once a member of the Church of Christ. When he left the Church last year, he says they told them he had been "brainwashed by Satan."

Attaran recalls that when he joined the group he was asked to give the names and phone numbers of everyone he knew, marking off who was "hot" and who was "cold" to attempts at proselytization.

Bob Shantz, the University of Toronto chaplain, says this is typical of the Church's techniques. He has counseled students who are trying to get out of the Church of Christ.

"They ask, 'am I going to go to hell if I leave?' It affected them quite profoundly and quite negatively — no doubt about that. For one student, the fear was so debilitating that she was worried about her



to the RSU or to security."

"Our students are suffering. They are dropping out of school and sitting outside for eight hours recruiting. They have lost everything," explains Danielle Holmes, president of the RSU. "It's quite out of control. I have students and parents call me on a day-to-day basis."

But Gnyeshwar Sing, campus minister for the Toronto Church of Christ, holds that members of his group should be free to engage students as they wish at Ryerson.

"Nobody is in balls and chains. Ryerson has a very narrow view of what it means to be a campus group."

Christina Dashko, a chaplain with the York Catholic Community, shares this "narrow" view. She says religious tolerance is not the issue but rather the Church's

[academic] year," Shantz recalls.

Perhaps most disturbingly, Shantz tells of students who have been encouraged to sever ties with their families through what he terms "spiritual manipulation." Forced isolation, which increases dependency on the group while removing outside "reality checks," is a classic cult technique.

Attaran says that the Church also engages in another cult technique. "Love bombing" — when a senior member is responsible for calling and keeping up with the progress of a new recruit on a daily basis — replaces the loss of exterior support with a heightened sense of love and belonging within the group.

continued on page 14