

Student tells tale of escape from 'cult'

By SHERYL STEINBERG

Since *Excalibur* published a feature article last year on the Central Church of Christ, it has remained a hot topic among students.

Although the Office of Student Affairs reports a decrease in complaints about the Church of Christ, interest in the Church has not waned.

Excalibur regularly receives inquiries about last year's article.

And a group of York students is making a video documenting the experiences of past members of the Church.

Earlier this month, a student came forward with the story of his involvement with the Church. *Excalibur* reporter Sheryl Steinberg spoke to him and tells the story of his struggle to come to terms with what he calls its "cultic" recruiting methods.

While many York students spent reading week basking in the sun, Richard (not his real name) stared at the walls of his dorm room and wondered whether he would go to hell.

Richard was immersed in a total self-examination — a trauma he alleges was triggered by his involvement with the Church of Christ.

The Church of Christ is an evangelical, fundamentalist group that was founded in the early 19th century. Toronto's Christian community is concerned about the Church of Christ's recruiting methods, which include "love bombing" lonely people — like university students who have moved away from home.

Richard estimates that 40-50 Church of Christ members are York students. The Church's newsletter recently announced that one week's service attendance was 550 people, who contributed a total of \$8,649.

Richard calls himself the latest York student to "get out" of the Church of Christ, and he doesn't want other students to get "sucked into it." Rather, he hopes that if its system is revealed, people will see how it works as a cult and stay away. It was this motivation, Richard said, that pushed him through *Excalibur's* door to tell his story.

Early last month as Richard was walking near Bethune College, he was approached by two strangers. After initiating a friendly conversation, the couple invited him to join them in a discussion on "dealing

with reality."

Richard had been feeling lonely and the topic appealed to him. For almost two hours that evening, he found himself part of a Bible talk with members of the Church of Christ.

He became more active in the

Jesus in the area of being friends of sinners . . ."

Normally addicted to his schoolwork, he began having trouble concentrating and finishing his assignments.

"After that discussion, it seemed like I couldn't think about anything

make a bigger commitment. He had decided to become a disciple of the group.

But he said, "My schoolwork was falling behind. They [Church leaders] were making all of the decisions in my life and destroying my schedule. They told me to work God in,

to be sure that everybody's rights are upheld," added Student Affairs assistant director Polly McFarlane.

Last June, due to an overwhelming number of complaints, Student Affairs met with Church's Toronto leaders. Dusk asked the group not to be so persistent in approaching students on campus.

She is certain that the declining number of complaints lodged is a result of their co-operation.

The main concern Student Affairs has had with the group has been its recruiting tactics. Church members have been reported to "befriend" unknowing students, not telling them they're from the Church until a sense of trust and dependence has been established.

Mancini, who would not talk to *Excalibur* this year, has said, "We're not recruiting people, we're trying to share the love of God and help people come into a better relationship with God 365 days-a-year."

For this reason, the group was expelled from York's Interfaith Council last year. The Church also let its club status with Student Affairs expire this fall.

In a two-hour video series just received by Student Affairs, groups like the Church of Christ are labelled "destructive cults."

In this 1988 production — based on a previously published booklet evangelist F.H. Martin examines a list of cultic characteristics, coupling each factor with specific practices used by these ministries.

For instance, Martin would categorize Richard's self-examination process as the "confession" factor. He says that "confession" is carried beyond its ordinary religious, legal, and therapeutic expressions to the point of becoming a cult in itself."

The evangelist suggests that this strengthens the group's control on the members and their guilt.

Although Richard hasn't gone back to the Church, he thinks of it often. He has done a lot of crying and looking inside himself. He has even had the occasional nightmare of Church members haunting his family in efforts of retaliation for his having left.

But he believes it's almost over. When asked if he had any final words for the Church, he slowly tilted his head upward and said, "I feel sorry for you all and I hope God will be easy on the [group's] leaders when they do attempt to go to heaven."



ILLUSTRATION: BRIAN KRUG

group. He remembers wanting to learn more about the Bible, and feeling that he wasn't doing enough for God. Several times that week, he met with the group's leader during lunch, each time learning the next lesson from the Church's strict study plan.

Social activities, often athletic, were also integrated into Richard's schedule. It was at these events that he began to feel more a part of the group, he said.

"When you don't have that many friends to begin with, and all of a sudden you have at least 10 who tell you that you're awesome and you're great and that they love you for what you are," it feels good, said Richard. He added that his self-confidence got a tremendous boost.

He calls this practice "love-bombing" — associated with most cult groups.

"They say they love you for what you are . . . and they come up to you and shake your hand . . . and occasionally [they] hug you," said Richard.

At his first lesson — "The Glory of God" — another group member was assigned his notetaker. At the following lesson, this person, the group leader and Richard focused on Richard's sins.

At the same time, the Church's newsletter dedicated the month of February, ". . . to becoming like

else. Nothing else mattered — just whether or not I would get to heaven," he recalled.

Richard said the Church believes that 99 per cent of the earth's population won't go to heaven. Only Church of Christ members will be saved because they — as opposed to other faiths — spread God's word correctly.

He also explained that instead of concentrating on personal relationships with God, the Church of Christ emphasizes a group feeling towards God — something Richard describes as impersonal.

Toronto Church of Christ evangelist Mark Mancini told *Excalibur* last year that, "We try to really emphasize one another's Christianity, and the Bible is full of passages about the need to pray with each other, to serve and confess sins to one another. And we're really serious about following the Bible with that kind of relationship."

Because of these reasons, Richard said it wasn't easy for him to leave the group.

"It was a lot of hell and fear. I felt alone and hollow in the world. I had no one to turn to because everyone [outside the Church] was evil."

And Richard believes that the Church of Christ almost got him for life. Only two and a half weeks after his first Bible talk, he felt ready to

because God had to come first. And then it sort of hit me. I said to myself, it's these guys who are making the decisions — not God."

Still confused, Richard left the group and went home. Luckily, he says, he did turn to someone. He called his sister to tell her how he was feeling. The familiar voice over the phone soothed Richard and assured him that the group he had described didn't sound like a real church — it asked too much of its members.

Since leaving the Church, Richard has been approached by a small group of its members who said they felt sorry for him. But he said their "peer-pressure tactics" didn't change feelings.

"I understand it now," he said. "I'm in a situation where I know what it is that they're in — they don't."

With new-found realization, he filed a complaint against the Church with Student Affairs. By telling Student Affairs his story and giving it copies of his Bible notes, Richard believes that its file will be more informative.

According to director of Student Affairs Cora Dusk, that is all her office can do — educate, inform, and hope students use its help to their benefit.

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