

## UPDATE

# Have Children of God Cleaned Up Their Act?

*Ex-COG members dispute the group's new image.*

**T**wo former high-ranking leaders with the Children of God movement claim their recent infiltration of the organization's Philippine operations have confirmed their suspicions that the organization is polishing its public image without cleaning up its act.

The Children of God (COG) movement, also known as The Family and widely recognized as an aberrant sect, persists in a widespread deception of its followers and the public, according to allegations made by Ed Priebe and Daniel Welch, former COG leaders, during an interview with *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*.

Before they bailed out of COG, Priebe and Welch served for years in the COG movement, a radical religious group born during the 1960s, which called on members to forsake their material possessions and live communally. COG members fell into disfavor once official teachings condoning sexual promiscuity became public.

Yet Priebe and Welch, who have now moved into the evangelical mainstream, report they recently pulled off a covert operation in order to gather new information about COG's future plans.

They say the information they gathered demonstrates that COG:

- Remains an international force;
- Has thrived by selling itself as a mainstream religious group to the spiritually naive;
- Uses mind control and brainwashing tactics contrary to its newly fashioned public image.

## Going underground

"They have gone so far underground," Welch told *CT*, "and are so secretive and are using so many aliases, that they are still there and still very active."

Indeed, Steve (all COG members go by a biblical first name only), a Tokyo-based-COG spokesman, gave *CT* information indicating that the group is active in missionary outreach in 100 countries. While outside observers estimate the number of full-time members at 25,000, the group probably has a much larger influence because the core 25,000 members have links to other followers outside.

But Los Angeles-based COG spokesman John Francis insists that Priebe

and Welch cannot be trusted. "These two men are proven liars.... I wouldn't trust them as far as I can throw them."

"They skipped warrants for their arrest in Manila.... They were released, I imagine, on bail, and then they fled the country the next day."

Francis said the two men stole "several thousands of dollars" from the Manila commune, as well as documents and videos.

COG's vigorous defense to *CT* may illustrate their choice to begin defending themselves more in the public eye. A COG statement says:



The early days: Moses David Berg by candlelight.

"We prefer not to become embroiled in battles to defend ourselves. However, the time has come when we must take a stand."

The statement further says: "The Children of God organization... was officially disbanded in 1978... [and] our present membership, modus operandi, and ministry practices are very much different from those held previously by the Children of God. This is why we ask the public to view us on our own merits in the present, and not as we are often portrayed by virulent anticult organizations, hostile special interest groups, or the media."

Welch and Priebe say that documents they gathered this fall after infiltrating a COG commune in Manila, the Philippines, show that the group seeks a new, mainstream respect.

## The COG connection

Welch and Priebe joined the movement at its origins. Before leaving the group in 1986, Welch was an editor and teacher with COG. Priebe left the group in 1990, after rising to the post of editor of the "prophetic words" of the group's founder, David Berg.

Berg began the group as a ministry to hippies in Huntington Beach, California. He called his followers to give up everything and witness full-time. Later called Moses David by his followers, Berg started deviating from orthodoxy. His teachings came to his followers via "Mo Letters," which Priebe edited.

Berg began espousing sexually deviant practices and building unusual doctrinal arguments to support them, says Deborah Davis in her 1984 book, *The Children of God: The Inside Story* (Zondervan). By the mid-1970s, members were encouraged to have illicit sex.

Berg also began teaching a doctrine called "Flirty Fishing," which encouraged certain female members to develop

sexual relationships with men outside the group under the pretense of witnessing to them. COG's recent statement to *CT* says: "Contrary to rumor, you will discover that we are diametrically opposed to any form of sexual abuse or exploitation of children whatsoever, and that sex with non-members has not been allowed for many years. In fact, all such behavior is now an excommunicable offense in our fellowships. Although we have a liberal attitude towards adult sex, in actual practice, sex plays only a very minor role in the lives of community members,

being confined to consenting adults where lawful."

## In the Philippines

When Priebe left the group in 1990, he was living in a commune with Berg outside Manila. In October, Priebe was able to gain access to another of the COG communes in Manila because they did not know of his exit. Impersonating Berg's voice, Welch had told the group to receive Priebe and give him access to whatever information he needed.

After entering the commune, Priebe says he was able to convince the two local leaders from America to return to the United States.

"Once the American leaders were gone, the members of the home [about 20 adults and 35 children] began opening up and telling me of all the abuses

that they had been suffering. The COG will undoubtedly deny that this happened, but I still have the letters the members wrote me," Priebe said.

In fact, the COG statement to CT says that they refute "the ridiculous allegations that The Family practices malicious mind-control techniques on its members. Those making such charges (which have been discredited by many professionals) are taken to task."

With the American leaders gone from the Manila commune, Priebe says that he and Welch began to reteach the local members and to repudiate Berg's teachings. The commune members "began rejoicing, literally dancing and weeping with joy," he recalls.

But COG leaders from Thailand were alerted to Priebe and Welch's efforts and forced them out.



Enroth

### A believable story?

Cult expert Ron Enroth, the author of the recent book *Churches That Abuse*, has worked with former COG members. He has met Priebe and Welch and says their stories and knowledge of the group ring true.

"These guys, I think, are legitimate," Enroth told CT, though he added that due to their years in COG they still may be "a little bit confused . . . with regard to the larger society."

Priebe says he uncovered the following information in Manila:

- International COG leaders have by design been encouraging regional COG groups to work with the mission ministry of Brother Andrew, in a two-fold attempt to gain his imprimatur and also converts from among his workers.

Priebe says that when he learned of this information, he alerted a worker for Youth with a Mission in the Philippines, who in turn alerted Andrew's ministry to COG's plan.

"It strikes me as a preposterous thing that The Family would try to do anything of that nature," says COG spokesman Steve. ❀

- COG's numbers are exploding throughout the spiritually impoverished countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

- COG in the past has chosen to avoid litigation and confrontation with the media. But that has changed, Priebe notes. "While in the COG home, I read publications which showed that COG is getting top-flight legal advice and aid from Scientology," a nationwide group that often uses the courts to bring its agenda to public attention.

- COG is very active in Japan.

By Joe Maxwell