

CONFRONTING CULTS ON WORLD MISSION FIELDS

Will We Rise to the Challenge?

by Paul Carden

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From Central Asia, an evangelical missionary asks a western parachurch agency for help. His problem: Whenever a Muslim converts to Christ, he or she is immediately set upon by Jehovah's Witnesses bent on indoctrinating the new believer.

A Christian in Cuba writes: "I have seen a great number of friends and people in search of truth absorbed into religious institutions like the Jehovah's Witnesses ...who claim to hold the truth and that no other church outside of their doctrines practices it and therefore will not be saved. These groups are very much in style in these times, mainly the Jehovah's Witnesses, who are gaining ground like a horrible plague, deceiving sincere people."

From Moscow another believer writes: "We have lots of sects with cultic tendencies in our region. Could you please help us with materials about those destructive cults? How to fight them, what to do?...Help us, for Christ's sake!"

When most people think about missions, they usually don't think about cults.

That may soon change.

Today, the Church of Scientology recruits foreign missionaries in glossy, full-color magazines and boasts that its fastest growth is taking place in Hungary and Russia. A convention of "Bible Students" (Watchtower splinter groups) draws nearly a thousand delegates from across eastern Europe. Latin Americans dabble with the teachings of increasingly popular Japanese sects like Seicho-no-Ie and Mahikari. Disciples of the deceased prophet William Branham produce millions of tracts, pamphlets, and cassettes in languages ranging from Lithuanian to Swahili.

Around the world, cults and controversial new religions are multiplying as they gain cross-cultural sophistication, increase their missionary forces, and step up their translation capabilities. They appear at disaster sites to distribute relief supplies and counsel refugees, and they're going toe-to-toe with evangelical missionaries in the most unexpected places. Their proliferation points to the need for greater awareness among missions strategists and a wider, more effective response on the field.

Characteristics of cultic groups. Today, while secular scholars define cultic groups largely on the basis of behavioral factors (authoritarianism, unethical manipulation and exploitation of followers), evangelicals focus primarily on a group's beliefs. Robert M. Bowman, Jr. of Watchman Fellowship defines a cult as "a religious group originating as a heretical sect and maintaining fervent commitment to heresy." (Bowman further explains that heresy is "Doctrine which is erroneous in such a way that Christians must divide themselves as a church from all who teach or accept it.")

Of course, Christians regard cultic movements as a danger to the life and outreach of the church because the New Testament says they are. In apostolic times the Body of Christ was faced with cultists and divisive teachers, and the epistles give repeated warnings about deadly spiritual impostors. In Jude 3–4 we are exhorted to “contend earnestly” for “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” because that faith has sworn enemies. In Acts 20:28–31, the apostle Paul warns the elders of Ephesus that such enemies of the gospel appear from both outside the church (“savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock”) and from within (“from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them”). In 2 Corinthians Paul makes it painfully clear how very vulnerable the church was to error (11:3–4, 13–15), and in his second epistle Peter spares no words in warning his readers about the threat of false teachers in their midst, calling them to “be on your guard” (2:1–22, 3:15–17).

Growth patterns. Cults lost no time in entering the former Soviet Union, where Jehovah’s Witnesses grew at the amazing rate of about 30% per year between 1991 and 1997, tripling in size. If they continue at this pace for the next six years, there will be half a million active Witnesses there, spending 150 million hours per year spreading the Watchtower message. The Witnesses already boast of being the “fifth-largest Christian group in Russia,” and the damage from the cult’s efforts extends well beyond its own membership: Jehovah’s Witnesses distribute nearly 5,000 tons of literature per year in Russia alone — material which undermines trust in the Trinity, the biblical Jesus, and a host of core Christian doctrines, thus inoculating untold numbers of people against the Gospel message, even if they don’t fully commit to joining the sect.

The Mormon Church has found especially fertile soil in Latin America. After English, the languages spoken most widely among Mormons are Spanish and Portuguese, with over 3.5 million combined. Half of the cult’s 18 Missionary Training Centers are in the region. And in Africa — largely off-limits to Mormon missionaries until 1978 because of their church’s racist policies — the “Latter-day Saints” are actively proselytizing in 26 nations, and some half a million Mormons worldwide are of African descent.

In some countries, cults are coming close to achieving a sort of dominance. For example, in the island nation of Tonga, one third of the population is Mormon (as are a quarter of the population of both American and Western Samoa). In Spain there are nearly as many active Jehovah’s Witnesses as Protestant church members, and in Poland the Witnesses outnumber evangelicals outright. Long-term trends are not promising: realistic projections by secular sociologists like the University of Washington’s Rodney Stark estimate that there will be more than 260 million Mormons and 195 million active Jehovah’s Witnesses worldwide before the end of the 21st century.

Growth factors. Two keys to cult expansion are a commitment to mobilization and translation.

The Mormon Church spends an estimated \$770 million per year on its missions program and currently fields some 60,000 full-time missionaries in 160 nations who proselytize almost exclusively. At its current rate of expansion, this workforce will increase to 110,000 by the year 2015. (In comparison, the MARC 1998–2000 Mission Handbook

reports that 825 U.S. and Canadian Protestant agencies combined are fielding only about 40,000 career and short-term [1 to 4 years] missionaries of all kinds.)

The Jehovah's Witnesses go a step further, mobilizing virtually all 5.9 million active members for proselytizing; of these, over 700,000 commit 50 hours or more per month to spreading their message. Mormon missionaries receive systematic training in over 50 languages — impressive, until one realizes that the Jehovah's Witnesses are disseminating their message in over 300 languages, adding as many as 18–25 per year. (The cult's deceptive version of the Bible, the New World Translation, is now available in 34 languages, from Norwegian and Croatian to Tsonga and Yoruba.)

But today's cult problem is not limited to U.S.-based multinationals. Some cultic movements, like the Philippines-based "Iglesia ni Cristo" and Mexico's "Luz del Mundo," draw their adherents mainly from distinct ethnic and national groups scattered around the world. Others, like the Bahá'í faith, actively seek to erase cultural boundaries, while loose-knit spiritist movements like Umbanda adapt to local cultures.

Beyond the consequences of the sheer numerical growth of cultic movements is, of course, the damage done in human lives as cultic groups split congregations and divide families, sowing confusion and heartache while replacing hope in Christ with empty substitutes for salvation.

Answering the call. For a variety of reasons, the response of missionaries and nationals in the developing world has not been proportional to the challenge. Evangelicals need to see cult proselytizers not merely as unwanted "competition," but as a growing mission field in their own right, and some are seizing opportunities for practical outreach:

Roger DeLozier was a successful computer programmer in Maryland when he answered the call of God to help pastors in the former Soviet Union deal with the burgeoning problem of cults. In May of 1998 he joined the team of the Center for Apologetics Research in St. Petersburg, Russia, putting his seminary degrees and twenty years' experience in cult evangelism to work training pastors and seminary students.

Joel Groat, research associate at Gospel Truths Ministries in Grand Rapids, realized that his Spanish-language skills could be used to help Christians in Latin America to evangelize Mormons and warn potential converts. Now he is leading nationals and short-term missionaries in evangelistic outreaches to Mormon temple dedication events in Ecuador, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic.

Former Jehovah's Witness Cindy Marty and her husband, Paul, moved from Minnesota to southern Ukraine to begin AWANA club and help nationals develop small businesses. When local Christians learned of her past they began asking her to share her testimony in churches. As a result, Cindy was able to lead a number of Witnesses to the Lord and warn thousands of Christians about the cult, encouraging some to pursue such ministry full time.

Strategies and solutions. What strategies can help evangelicals to counter the advance of cults on a broad scale? Missions agencies should seriously consider the following:

Pastoral training should include practical instruction about how to protect congregations from the methods and message of cultic groups and impart biblical discernment skills to lay Christians.

Organizations which emphasize evangelism and discipleship should take special care to specifically inoculate new converts and young believers against cult recruitment, since they are especially vulnerable.

Western missionaries with experience in cult-related research and outreach are especially needed in developing nations and in cultures newly exposed to cult influences — as are specialized organizations to monitor and respond to such groups locally.

One promising development is a gradual increase in the variety and availability of non-English language resources for both evangelism and warning potential cult converts.

Using his computer skills, Roger DeLozier has set up an extensive Russian-language web site of camera-ready tracts and pamphlets on cults and apologetics (http://www.apolresearch.org/eng/cfar_eng.php3) and is developing a Ukrainian-language counterpart. *Vestnik*, a special bulletin on cults and discernment for pastors, is also online at the site.

Joel Groat and Gospel Truths Ministries produce high-quality literature on Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormonism in Albanian, Chinese, Estonian, French, Greek, Hungarian, Korean, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, and Tagalog, much of which is available online at their *web site*.

Finally, because the battle is a spiritual one, intercessors need to make cult prevention and evangelism part of their global prayer priorities (Eph. 6:12, 18). By God's grace, followers of counterfeit gospels can be set free to walk with Christ! 🙏

This article first appeared in the April 2000 issue of Evangelical Missions Quarterly.



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