



CULT?

Campus Maranatha...just another religious order or a group of Christian 'shepherds'?

This article is the second of two parts on Maranatha, a national religious group that has started a University ministry this year.

Charges of cult techniques such as mind control, brainwashing and "shepherding" follow the national Maranatha Christian Ministry as it locates on campuses throughout the United States.

But no one at the University is ready to identify the local Maranatha ministry as a cult, partly because Pastor Buster Landwehr is doing his best to convince the campus community otherwise.

Landwehr says he's heard the allegations. "I don't leap for joy, but it's just not true. One mother said, 'You sound just like a cult.' I can understand parental concern," he says.

His wife Pat dismisses parents' concerns as "just a reaction to the '70s." Lots of campus groups have been called cults, she says, and students who become involved in those groups may offend parents who "aren't excited about the Lord."

Dick Beswick, president of the campus Religious Directors Association, says Landwehr has been open and willing to talk with him about Maranatha's

religious practices.

"My direct contact with him has been good," Beswick says. "He said all the right things. He wasn't belligerent at all."

As a researcher of cults, he isn't ready to hang that label on the local Maranatha ministry. It comes down "just this side of the fence," but could easily move away from or leap over that fence in the next six months, Beswick says.

Two Californian groups that conduct research on Christian groups have equally ambiguous positions on Maranatha.

Spiritual Counterfeits of Berkeley, Calif., has no specific statement on the group yet, but a representative says Maranatha "takes a highly charismatic approach to their view of Christianity."

"They seem to be having a tendency toward the shepherding movement," which stresses strong authority figures called "elders" within the group, says "Mary." (Spiritual Counterfeits researchers do not release their surnames.)

Paul Carden, a research consultant at the Christian Research Institute in San Juan Capistrano, says that while the institute does not consider Maranatha "a non-Christian cult,"

researchers have identified "some abusive authority practices" and "unjustified pressure on members to contribute money for various things."

"What we hear is not good. I haven't heard anything good (about Maranatha) yet, as a matter of fact," Carden says.

Parents and administrators are concerned by the "100-percent commitment" to the Lord that is asked of Maranatha members. A "Statement of Commitment" that members sign includes a section, attributed to the Bible, that says "No matter what my opinions, objections, etc., might be, they must be brought into submission to God's Word."

Another section states that "I realize that Jesus said unless a man be willing to forsake everything (emphasis theirs), he cannot be my disciple."

Landwehr says all the statements mean is that anyone who feels "born again" should be willing to make a total commitment to God. But that doesn't mean withdrawing from school and friends, he says. One way to show God working in your life is to do well in school, Landwehr says.

"I know what it's like when you go to college and you're studying," he says.

Other, more serious, charges have been leveled at Maranatha groups on campuses in other states. The father of a former Maranatha member at Kansas State University says "they practice mind control — period."

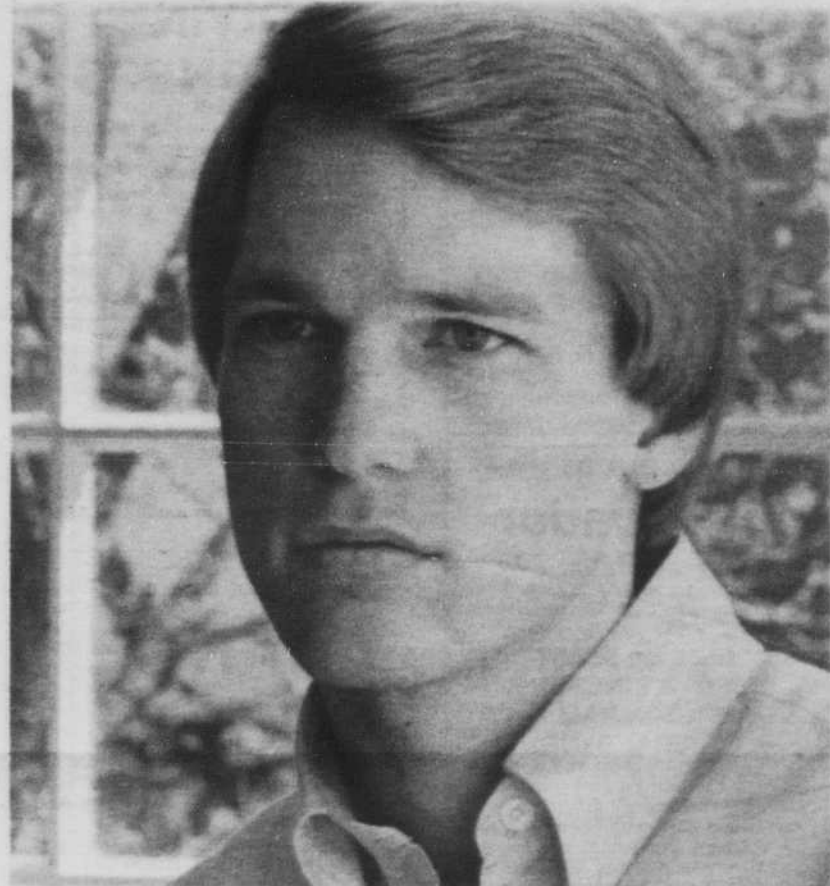
Frank Tilman, a KSU faculty member, says that after his daughter Deedee was deprogrammed she was able to identify eight different mind control techniques that had been used on her.

"They just commit themselves to the whole group in everything they say and do. That's called mind control," Tilman says. "They hide behind the Bible" and take a third-grade approach to interpreting it, he says.

After becoming involved with Maranatha, Deedee gave away all her record albums, stopped dating because she was instructed the Lord would choose her husband at the proper time, prayed from 5 to 8 every morning, attended Maranatha meetings at night, and tried to convert her sisters, Tilman says.

Of 27 members involved with the KSU Maranatha Ministry, 10 have been deprogrammed — all by their own choice, he says.

Is Maranatha a cult?
"Sure — without question,"



Buster Landwehr

Photo by Mark Pynes

Tilman says, and gives students interested in joining this advice: "Stay away absolutely. Have no truck with it. If you like Moonies, you'll like Maranatha. All they want is money for themselves and more people to be members."

Tilman is, of course, speaking of the national group. He hadn't heard of the ministry at the University, although he says he knows of groups at many other college campuses.

At the University, Pastor Landwehr paints a different picture of Maranatha and its time requirements. Members are asked to attend a Tuesday night Bible study, a Friday night celebrational meeting and a Sunday service. However, students can miss any of the meetings as long as they leave a message, he says.

There are no set requirements for individual prayer, although members paste posters on walls around the house suggesting Biblical sections on different topics.

The emphasis on giving up material goods that is present in the Statement of Commitment and that led Deedee to give away her record albums may be misinterpreted, Landwehr says.

The statement, which reads "My material possessions are committed to the saints. If any has a need, my abundance is available to supply his want," just means that people should help each other out, and feel

free to ask for that help, he says.

The local ministry does participate in at least one activity identified as typical of cults. Each month, Maranatha members poll students on campus about national issues and send the results to Pres. Reagan "so he knows what youth are thinking."

Many cult groups use this technique to approach lonely students, encourage their interest in the religious group, and get their names and addresses, according to Gregory Bliming, Dean of Students at Louisiana State University.

Landwehr denies that Maranatha considers itself the only way to God or that the group wants to convert every Christian to its particular religious practices.

"We're not it as far as Maranatha is the only thing. Your commitment is not to Maranatha — it's to the Lord first. We're only a part of the experience of the body of Christ."

Maranatha's goal isn't to bring every student into its fold, Landwehr says.

"With 17,000 students on this campus, what would I do if everyone wanted to join Maranatha? Talk about your stress factor."

"We come not just to be a blessing to the campus, but to be a blessing to the community as well," he says.

By Ann Portal



Dick Beswick

Emerald photo