

Combating Cult Culture

Michael Wolloghan profiles an organisation fighting against cultic behaviour ... and fighting for the victims of cults.

Beautiful beaches, a sun drenched outback, coral reefs and cute koalas and kangaroos. When many people think of the 'Land Down Under' these are the immediate images that come to mind. In our diverse cosmopolitan cities we have a number of languages, cultures and religions represented.

Many Australians claim they belong to one of the various denominations of the Christian religion. However, interestingly there have been marked increases in those reporting an affiliation to non-Christian religions, and those reporting 'No Religion'.

Within this kaleidoscopic diversity of beliefs in Australia there is an often forgotten darker, unruly side – that of destructive religious cults.

Cult watchers alleged that these groups are bigger than ever and if left unchecked have broad ramifications to society. Normal, intelligent people can give up years of their lives to destructive groups and beliefs that appear completely

perplexing and irrational.

I spoke to Ros Hodgkins, the current president of Cult Information and Family Support (CIFS) in New South Wales. She is a softly spoken but confident, committed woman who has helped numerous cult victims get their life back on track.

"CIFS is an incorporated voluntary organisation whose purpose is to support and work with people who have been adversely impacted by cultic groups. Our aims and objectives are to offer support and information to those individuals and families who have experienced harm from cults, to inform the general public, particularly the youth through a schools education program on the nature and dynamics of cults within our society, to lobby politicians on the dangers and human cost of cult activity within Australia," Hodgkins explains.

"CIFS was the outcome of a few parents who had lost family members to destructive cults meeting together in the early 90s for support. It was a time



“ Normal intelligent people can give up years of their lives to destructive groups.”



when there was very little knowledge, help or information available on cults in Australia, parents were either told “don't worry they will grow out of it”, or made to feel something must be wrong with their loved one to join such a group. It quickly grew to include ex-members and others interested in cults and their effect on individuals and society.”

I asked Hodgkins how she initially got involved in CIFS.

“I was involved from the beginning when a small number of parents began to meet in Sydney for support. This came about because my daughter was recruited in a Bible-based cult in Sydney in 1990 that originated in Boston,” she responds.

“It targeted mainly young people who were in a transitional time in their life. Our daughter had moved from the country to Sydney. It was very active in the universities and grew very quickly,



planting churches around the world. Members/disciples were sent out to recruit each week.

“It was referred to as an Amway-type church cult and regarded around the world as very damaging to members who became totally committed, giving their time, money, separating from family and old friends, in the belief that this was now the only church that had the truth. Our daughter left a dream job to become a fulltime worker for the cult. She had come totally under the cultic control influences and dynamics of this group.

“My knowledge about cults prior to this was extremely limited. That all changed with a crash course in reading, researching, finding people in Australia and speaking to people in America who had an understanding of cults, particularly the one our daughter was in.

“Thankfully this information and

knowledge led us after two years to organise a successful exit counselling for Emma.

“Not an easy exercise to organise, but information was able to be given to her over three days, her mind began to critically evaluate the fundamental beliefs she had taken on as truth and understand the dynamics of control and manipulation. She left in 1993 and became involved in CIFS.”

The last few years have proved to be positive, productive years for CIFS. In November 2011 a conference took place at the Parliament House in Canberra called “Cults in Australia - Facing the Realities”. Over 100 people attended the conference to discuss responses to abuses and harm in deceptive, destructive cults. The attendees included psychologists, lawyers, politicians, teachers, students, ex-members of cults and affected families.

“Although small in member numbers, CIFS continues to increase its presence nationally,” Hodgkins says.

“This has primarily been through our internet and phone answering services, along with the web site information, holding conferences and through word of mouth. There are increases each year in enquiries and calls for help.

“We also receive enquiries for help from overseas, some having family members caught up in a cult in Australia. CIFS NSW and CIFS Victoria are the only two groups operating and holding support meetings.”

Recently CIFS NSW has been involved in a joint research project with Gerard Webster, a forensic and counselling psychologist, and Professor Jude Baker into child abuse within cults.

CIFS NSW has also issued a submission to the Australian Government Royal Commission of Inquiry into Institutional Child Abuse.

Disturbingly, as reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, within its first month of private hearings in Sydney, the Royal Commission referred four matters to police. No doubt, more will follow.

Of course, one of the most common questions asked of CIFS is “What is a cult?”

Hodgkins says that she believes the criteria set out by clinical psychologist and a part-time adjunct Professor Margaret Singer (1921–2003) is best.

If a group is involved in the below following practices, they can be defined as a cult:

- Gaining control over a person’s time, especially his or her thinking time, and physical environment.
- Creating a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency in the recruit, while providing models that demonstrate the new behaviour that leadership wants to produce.
- Manipulating rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to suppress the recruit’s former social behaviour and attitudes, including the use of altered states of consciousness to manipulate experience.

Combatting Cult Culture

Continued...

- Manipulating rewards, punishments and experiences in order to elicit the behaviour and attitudes that leadership wants.
- Creating a tightly controlled system with a closed system of logic, wherein those who dissent are made to feel as though their questioning indicates that there is something inherently wrong with them.
- Keeping recruits unaware and uninformed that there is an agenda and a process to control or change them. Leadership cannot carry out a thought reform program with the person's full capacity and informed consent.

What types of destructive religious cults do CIFS NSW receive the most inquires about?

"This varies from year to year. We now see such a variety of new age spiritual groups combining various forms of beliefs, but recruit as self-development groups.

"Many enquiries for help come from a close family member. They see changes and signs in their loved one who becomes committed to the group that set alarm bells warning there is some form of indoctrination happening."



Ros Hodgkins

"A high number of calls for help and support are from former members of Bible based new religious movements who have no accountability. Many of these churches split and pop up using another name, but peddle the same message and use the same harmful techniques.

"More recently recognised are the one-on-one cultic control relationship that we have had many enquiries about in recent times," Hodgkins says.

CIFS certainly played a significant role in urging the government to establish the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC), which is the independent national regulator of charities. One of the roles of the ACNC is to "maintain, protect and enhance public trust and confidence in the sector through increased accountability and transparency".

However, when dealing with religious charities, the ACNC's powers are severely limited, at best.

David Crosbie, a member of the ACNC advisory board and chief executive of the Community Council for Australia, has said some churches and other tax-exempt religious groups are clearly run to benefit

their leaders. Crosbie has called for a public benefit test to be applied to these groups but this request continues to fall on deaf ears.

While genuine steps have been made to curtail the activity of destructive religious cults, there is still much more work to be done.

As our conversation concluded, I asked Hodgkins how people can assist CIFS NSW.

"By lobbying, letter writing to politicians and their local member to bring pressure on reforms to take action to make groups accountable for emotional abuse. Bring attention to religious groups exploiting tax-exempt status outside the reforms made by government. Congratulate good media's exposés and reports on harmful groups' quacks and charlatans. Encourage politicians who have responded to the enormous issues surrounding cults and the havoc they cause to individuals and society. Too often and for far too long they have been swept under the carpet!"

It's important to note that CIFS receives no government funding and runs on a completely voluntary basis. If people wish to show financial support, they can visit the CIFS website to find out more information (<http://www.cifs.org.au/>).

Hopefully, further robust and innovative measures can be made to stop malevolent cultic groups before anything tragic happens. Unquestionably the tireless, determined, often unsung good work of Ros Hodgkins and the members of CIFS will help pave the way.

As South Australian senator Nick Xenophon boldly put it: "In Australia, there are no limits on what you can believe but there are limits on how you can behave. It's called the law, and no one is above it." ■



About the author:
Michael Wolloghan
is an investigator of cults.