



## Church 'worse than death'

Parents mourn children lost to 'cult' Christian group

By Victoria John

YOUNG people from upmarket Durban suburbs have been caught up in a church their parents have described as a "mind-controlling" Christian cult where, it is alleged, some have been married off to men they hardly know, chosen for them by the church.

Some parents went so far as to say it was worse than dealing with the death of their child.

The church, identified as Grace Gospel Church (GGC), is a branch of Church Team Ministries International (CTMI), an international Christian group with head offices in Mauritius. In Durban, CTMI meets at Pinetown Boys' High every Sunday.

The group's leader, Basil O'Connell-Jones, was sent to Durban from another CTMI branch, Selborne Park Christian Church in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in 2003 to start the local branch.

Many young people, aged between 18-30, are alleged to have abandoned their studies and careers and left their families to live with O'Connell-Jones in his Hillcrest home and other church leaders' homes.

O'Connell-Jones is well known in charismatic Christian circles for his autobiography *Amazing Grace*, which details his time as a soldier in the then Rhodesian army and his near-death experience of being shot in the head and, not just surviving, but overcoming the horrific injury.

CTMI is led by founder and televangelist Miki Hardy, who is said to live in luxury in Mauritius. The group is alleged to encourage its members to leave their home countries and go to the island to help build the Mauritian church and "serve the Lord".

A former GGC member, who wished to remain anonymous and who has been to Hardy's home in Mauritius, said he lived on a luxurious estate. "There are stables, a jumping arena; an 'infinity' pool; floodlit tennis courts as well as a mountain stocked with deer to provide for Hardy and his family's hunting hobby."

Parents who have "lost" their children have formed a support group called the Concerned Parents Group, with the aim of restoring damaged relationships and normal family communication and educating other people about the dangers of the church group.

In response, CTMI is considering legal action against the parent group for defamation, citing accusations that they are a cult and taking away children.

But parents say they "remain convinced the church displays signs of a cult and, while open private discussion is the right way, if they refuse this then we welcome legal action as then it will be all out in the open and something can be done about this".

Keith Brown, who was part of a team of members from other churches at a meeting with GGC leaders, says a CTMI leader bluntly told them: "Jesus did not come to bring peace in families but a sword."

Brown says his eldest son Stuart (then 27) was diagnosed with cancer in 2006 and died in a hospice after being cared for in church leaders' homes because the leaders "felt uncomfortable visiting Stuart in our home".

Steve and Heather Goddard of Kloof say their daughter, who they did not wish to name, has been a member of the church for almost three years and while "we were always supportive and assisted her in her endeavours to follow a good Christian life, she started neglecting and avoiding her other Christian friends in favour of members of Grace Gospel".

"I sincerely hope that no other family should go through what we have had to endure," said Heather Goddard.

"Losing our daughter to this church feels like we are mourning her death," she said.

Anthony and Romaine Chaplin, of Durban North, said their son was a top student at Kearsney College and had gone on to study at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

But in April last year he told his parents he needed to leave UCT immediately and desperately needed to get to Mauritius.

Parents have now set up a website - [www.ctmiconcernedparents.com](http://www.ctmiconcernedparents.com) - with stories of their children and links to websites about dangerous cults and characteristics of cults.

According to the website, the Concerned Parents Group began when "heartbroken" parents began to speak up about their children who became "obsessed with this group and changed their attitudes towards homes and churches where they grew up".

The Independent on Saturday met some of the members of the group, which includes the Goddards, the Chaplins, Duncan and Wendy Gillon, and Keith Brown and others who did not wish to be named.

"This church has brainwashed our children. They are encouraged to reject their biological families, their studies and will more than likely be pushed into an arranged marriage," said one of the parents.

But O'Connell-Jones's daughter, Kara-Jane, and her husband Richard Seynisch, defended the church, saying they were like any other young person in their age group.

"My life started and ended with drinking, clubbing, fornication and all other 'youthful lusts' which surrounded me.

"Then during my first three weeks in Mauritius, I was bowled over by the light, the joy and the freedom that was so evidently oozing out of the people in the church," she said.

A former member of the church in San Diego, US, Victor Jubber, belonged to the church in Zimbabwe in the 1990s.

#### Incidents

"They then started sending their leaders to different countries, and when we left Zimbabwe we came to support the branch here in the US. After numerous bizarre incidents, we left the church in 2004."

Melany Wood, 21, who attended a youth camp in Mauritius at the end of 2007, says: "People there are blinded. They are so struck by this church that they cannot see reality."

Leaders of GGC did not wish to respond to the allegations. "CTMI is a non-denominational missionary organisation with thousands of members across 25 different countries. We do not wish to be involved in the dispute between four families and their relationships with their children, all of whom are major citizens.

"We have chosen therefore not to reply to any allegations against us and to leave it to the young adults themselves to address the issue as they are the ones who are directly concerned," said church leaders in an official statement to The Independent on Saturday.



## Broken by heartache gospel

Parents tell of grief of losing children to church

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Victoria John

STEVE and Heather Goddard of Kloof, whose daughter has been a member of the Grace Gospel Church (GGC), a branch of Church Team Ministries International (CTMI) with its headquarters in Mauritius, for almost three years, say she spent five weeks in Mauritius at the end of 2007 and returned home in time for Christmas that year.

Although the plan was for their daughter - whose first name the Goddards want to withhold - to attend a university in Cape Town last year, she decided to postpone her studies and rather spend six months in Mauritius.

Once she was back in South Africa, her family and friends were concerned at how she had changed.

"Dull expression, no spontaneity, robotic response, repetitive jargon, such as 'I have it on my heart'. Very little emotion was shown," said Heather Goddard.

"She spent many hours a day at the homes of church members and elders and was reluctant to participate in family gatherings.

"If we had been educated about cults and how they recruit, we would have been able to prevent our family from being devastated by her involvement with CTMI. I sincerely hope no other family should go through what we have had to endure."

Alienated

Anthony and Romaine Chaplin, of Durban North, said their son, whom they did not want to name, was an A student, had been head of the Student Christian Association (SCA) at Kearsney College and head of Boarding House, and was studying at the University of Cape Town when he told them in April last year that he needed to leave UCT immediately and desperately needed to get to Mauritius.

"He completely alienated himself from long-standing, beautiful Christian friends and we noticed a complete personality change. From being a gentle child he became judgemental and arrogant," Romaine Chaplin said.

"We managed to get him through the year at UCT and then he came home to help the church. Our son became more and more agitated living at home, and eventually moved in with Basil O'Connell-Jones, the GGC pastor in Hillcrest.

"We went to visit O'Connell-Jones last year to discuss why our son should study through Unisa and not be at university. He told us that we were irresponsible for exposing him to alcohol and drugs. We were adamant that this was a cop-out as Christians and our son had always been strong enough to resist anyway.

"We very soon realised that if he was away from them, they would have no hold over him.

"When he left home I had a nervous breakdown and the impact on our two younger children - who adore their brother - and Anthony, has been terrible.

"We would hate other families to go through this pain. In some ways it is worse than dealing with a death as you experience your child rejecting you and your family in favour of this group.

"We know from attending services and from speaking to him that this total devotion to their church and the exclusion of his natural family are praised by the elders and these individuals are put forward as examples of truly committed members."

Kara-Jane, who is the daughter of O'Connell-Jones and married to Richard Seynisch, said in her testimony: "During my first three weeks in Mauritius, I was bowled over by the light, the joy and the freedom that were so evidently oozing out of the people in the church. They were joyful, they were loving, they carried a freedom which showed in their faces and I knew then that what kept me from that same freedom, that same joy, was the bondage of my sin.

"We are both so grateful for the gospel we have heard preached by Miki Hardy (the founder and leader of CTMI) and other elders and for the way it changed our lives. How could we do anything but serve Jesus with hearts full of gratitude?"

Hayley, 19, who did not want her surname to be used, joined GGC in 2007. She defended the church group, saying she loved it, the people and what was preached.

"When I finished matric, my parents gave me a wonderful present where I had the opportunity to go to Mauritius on a youth camp.

"I had a wonderful time with 500 other young people from 15 different countries and it was during my stay that I felt led by the Lord to return and spend some time in Mauritius.

"My only aim is to serve Jesus and unfortunately my parents have chosen not to respect the way in which I have chosen to do so. And they are putting the blame for that on GGC and CTMI, who have nothing to do with this situation.

"My parents asked me to see a man who calls himself a pastoral therapist, who questioned me about my life and then circulated reports about me and my relationship with my parents to the whole world, without my consent. He has tried to discredit CTMI and its leaders, which I think is very sad.

"I really don't agree with what is happening as it is based on false accusations.

"I would love to study, but for the time being I don't have the means to do that since my parents will support me only if I study in South Africa, so I am still unsure of what I would like to do with my life.

"I am enjoying this time where I am not under pressure to make any major decisions.

"I hope to study further one day, but am using this time to gain greater life experience. I love my parents and brother and hope that this drama ends soon."

Keith Brown speaks about how his eldest son, Stuart, then 27, was diagnosed with cancer in 2006 and died three years later in a hospice after being cared for in a GGC leader's home because the leaders "felt uncomfortable visiting Stuart in our home".

"He attended GGC with some friends and shortly after that became very involved."

After marrying Louise, who had come out from the UK, and having a bowel operation to remove tumours, he resigned from his job as a copywriter and moved to Mauritius.

In August last year, Stuart was diagnosed with a brain tumour and immediately returned to South Africa. He and Louise lived at home with his family for five months, while Stuart received intensive treatment.

"They had no earnings and were fully cared for and loved. All visitors were welcome," Brown said.

Over Christmas the couple were asked to house-sit a GGC leader's home, and did not return. Three months later Brown met a GGC leader who said O'Connell-Jones had told him Stuart had been kicked out of his home by his father and that church leaders were caring for him.

O'Connell-Jones denied saying this, and Stuart denied that this was the case.

As Stuart's health deteriorated, his father made an impassioned plea for the privilege of caring for his son at home.

"This was not even acknowledged," Brown said.

A request to discuss these matters with Stuart's wife and brother was turned down. Stuart was not really able to communicate by then. He died soon afterward in August this year.

At Stuart's funeral, after moving family tributes, "Basil spoke for an hour and hijacked the event for his own personal agenda by attacking his detractors and defending himself. He hardly mentioned Stuart. Many people walked out - unheard of at a memorial service - and the family received a glut of angry feedback about the ... inappropriate and repetitive diatribe that was entirely without Christian compassion."

Rachel, 23, from Durban, who did not want her surname to be used, joined the church after attending a youth camp in Mauritius in 2006. She said: "God really spoke to my heart about my way of life. I'm teaching at a Christian school in

Mauritius. I have got to know many young people from all parts of the world and it is such an encouragement to see the great things the Lord is doing in our lives.

"In no way do I want to undervalue the family unit, in fact I have wonderful Christian parents from whom I've learnt a lot. I do miss Durban and everyone at home and I look forward to going back to see everyone soon. I have no idea where my future may lead, but what an exciting life to trust the Lord for all of these things."

Melany Wood, 21, who attended a similar youth camp at the end of 2007, says: "People there are blinded. They are so struck by this church that they cannot see reality. I was told by a leader that the Lord had spoken to him and told him that I must stay in Mauritius. I asked him, if this was so, then why hadn't the Lord spoken to me directly? After that I felt ignored and left out.

#### Questioning

"I think they left me alone because they could see I was not easily influenced. In Mauritius we didn't have time to go to the beach even once."

Wood returned to Durban after the camp, but did not go back to the church.

Another girl, 22, who did not wish to be named, attended the church from childhood but left it midway through high school after questioning the leaders' teachings.

"They believe their way is the only way. They are not bad people, but they are elitist. They have stopped seeing reality. I've seen my good friends, girls of 18 and 19, give up their dreams because the church labelled them 'worldly' and 'of the flesh'.

"They've had their lives mapped out for them by the church and some have been married off to men chosen for them by the church, guys they hardly know.

"These girls had good relationships with their families, but not any more. The church told them these are emotional relationships and not right, and they must distance themselves from their families.

"No one is forced to go to Mauritius, but they are strongly advised to move there.

"If you question the leadership and share your own views, then you are ostracised - that's it. This is out of control."

A former GGC member, who wished to remain anonymous, said he had been to the luxurious estate in Mauritius that Hardy owned with his extended family.

"There are horse stables, including a jumping arena, an infinity pool, floodlit tennis courts, as well as a mountain stocked with deer to provide for Hardy and his family's hunting hobby."

In a speech at the CTMI Durban Leaders' Conference last year, Hardy said: "The church today needs to be rebuked. Too many pastors are seeking material blessings, yet the whole of the Bible points to the cross for life in the spirit."

Parents say their efforts to engage with leaders of GGC and CTMI have been "futile".

"We long for peace, especially in our homes," they said.

"There is a persistent pattern of refusal to listen and dismissive denial of feedback. Attempts to address issues with CTMI leadership, in meetings or by e-mail, were met with similar responses - aggression, denial, brushing aside or refusal to engage at all. Even lies."

Some parents sought help from a pastoral therapist, Sean Semple of Kloof, who said: "There is justification in using the term 'cult' when referring to CTMI because the young people I have worked with exhibit symptoms of extreme and unhealthy indoctrination.

"I am deeply concerned about the influence this church has, particularly over the psychologically vulnerable and spiritually immature."

Clint Archer, who is the senior pastor at the Hillcrest Baptist Church, said: "GGC is without a doubt cultish. They twist the original meaning of the Bible to suit their purposes and have denounced other churches. They believe they have a superior gospel."

"Other churches in the Highway area that meet once a month agree, and have warned their congregations."

"Biological families are very important and no church should encourage its members to disrespect their parents."

Brown, a member of the Hillcrest Baptist Church, attended a meeting with GGC leaders and says: "Other church leaders were called 'pathetic Pharisees' and were told they were 'scared of losing people because CTMI had something they did not have - apostolic anointing and revelation'."

"No compassion was shown for hurting parents and a CTMI leader bluntly said, 'Jesus did not come to bring peace in families but a sword'."

Leaders of GGC did not wish to respond to the allegations. They said they did not wish to be involved in the dispute between four families and their children, all of whom had come of age

## **'Cultish' church debate rages on**

Congregants and concerned parents air their views

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### **Victoria John**

Reaction to the report headed "Church worse than death" (The Independent on Saturday, November 7) has been heated with response from church members as well as people who have had similar experiences with the church.

The report detailed how a group of parents accused a church in Durban's upmarket suburbs of "stealing" and brainwashing their children.

Parents called Grace Gospel Church (GGC) in Pinetown a "mind-controlling" Christian cult and claimed that girls had been married to men they hardly knew, chosen for them by the church.

Some parents added the experience was worse than dealing with the death of a child.

The church is a branch of Church Team Ministries International (CTMI), an international Christian group with head offices in Mauritius and led by televangelist Miki Hardy.

GGC leader Basil O'Connell-Jones is accused of ministering to many young people, aged between 18 and 30, encouraging them to abandon their tertiary studies and careers and leave their families to live with him in his Hillcrest home or in other church leaders' homes.

The parents have formed a group called the Concerned Parents' Group, which consists of Steve and Heather Goddard, Duncan and Wendy Gillon, Anthony and Romaine Chaplin, Keith Brown and others who wished to remain anonymous.

CTMI is considering suing the parents' group for calling it a cult and for accusing it of kidnapping their children.

Speaking to a representative earlier this week the church still refused to comment, saying that CTMI had nothing to do with this issue and testimonies from church members themselves would be sufficient.

The parents' group has responded to feedback, saying: "The CPG were aware that the article could cause hurt and discomfort, even to fellow Christians."

"We are saddened by that. Since our inception we were reluctant to go to the press in the hope of avoiding this very effect."

"It was only after very careful consideration that some of us agreed to be interviewed, having been approached by The Independent on Saturday. What prompted this decision was CTMI's persistent failure to respond to our appeals for engagement and an increase in the teachings and practices we have been trying to address."

The Independent Online news service, which is an internet site of The Independent on Saturday and its sister titles, carried both the front page report and an inside page background on the churches. The articles provoked numerous comments.

'Let them be free' wrote:

"This reminds me of when I was first saved 30 years ago and we all loved the Lord in the church yet very subtly we were encouraged to cut ourselves off from those who were not saved or not believing the same things like we were. Mind control is very subtle. I weep today when I think of how I deprived my own mother of time with her grandchildren because I believed her influence would have an adverse effect on my children."

'See Straight' called the article "vague and sensationalistic".

He said that the "issue I have is that the children (how old are they anyway?) seem to be completely happy. It's the parents that are unhappy. Truth is that any church that really promotes the Gospel will be persecuted."

But CTMI and Hardy have received negative publicity before, according to former members of GGC who received a newsletter from CTMI last year that stated "all his followers must please send positive responses to TBN with the e-mail address as TBN wanted to take them off the air due to negative feedback with regards to his interviews and preaching".

'Also concerned' wrote:

"Having been peripherally involved in this church due to them targeting my daughter at an upmarket school, I can testify to the agenda of separating children from families. Fortunately, my wife and I were able to exercise some parental control before she became totally immersed in the group."

But Justine Hellberg, 19, defended the church:

"I live in Cape Town and I came to Grace Gospel Church at the end of last year. All I know is that what was preached always pointed me to the Lord; they didn't point me to principles, they didn't advise me to take any decisions about my life, other than to follow Jesus."

Keegan O'Connell-Jones, the son of O'Connell-Jones, also defended the church and spoke of his marriage to a fellow church member:

"I recently got married to a young girl also from Durban. We have been and are accused of being in an arranged marriage, due to the fact that we never dated before our engagement. For us as Christians we regard the covenant of marriage as something holy and serious before God, we, therefore, chose to abstain from sinful desires and acts before being united before the Lord. It has been falsely said that the leaders of CTMI and GGC choose partners for the young people to marry. We are living proof of the contrary; we fell in love with one another, were engaged for close on nine months and today are enjoying the benefits of a Christian marriage, without anyone telling us or coercing us into getting married."

Editor of South African Christian magazine JOY Erin Georgiou labelled the report as one-sided and sensational.

"I feel it achieves nothing other than harming the whole body of Christ in South Africa and just brings every independent church under the spotlight or under suspicion," she said.

She added: "Obviously the parents involved in this dispute have very real grievances but to sensationalise them via the secular press is very disappointing and totally misleading. May I also encourage you to investigate both sides before publishing articles like this."

Earlier this year parents approached JOY magazine, asking the magazine not to promote CTMI.

The magazine responded by publishing an article titled "When Christianity appears cultish" and another "The Fifth Commandment: Honour Your Father and Mother".

The article featured two letters from parents who are part of the parents' group.

A leading cult expert, Dr Stephan Pretorius, was approached by parents for advice on how to best deal with their situation.

He met former members of GGC and a current member and confirmed that the church "displayed some cultish traits" but "would not place the church in the same category as some destructive groups such as Jim Jones and the People's Temple where more than 900 followers died tragically in the '70s".

Pretorius, who is also the founder of the new organisation Rights of Individuals Grant Honour To, which aims to expose the infringement on basic human rights in religious cults, offered advice to parents of children in similar situations. "Try to keep contact with them, make sure they know you love them. But boundaries need to be set. Keep on fighting for the welfare of your child!"

A message to all parents from Pretorius was: "Make sure you know what religious groups your children get involved in. Ask questions and be watchful for any radical behaviour changes."