

New Jo'burg church has more than a whiff of cult

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Victoria John reported on an infamous Mauritius institution in 2009. When a new branch opened, she took another look.



If you attend a church service at Jo'burg North Christian Church in the Robin Hills Scout Hall you will be welcomed with open arms. At that first service you will not hear chilling stories about the powerful mother church, Church Team Ministries International (CTMI), under whose umbrella this church sits. Instead, you will find a gathering of about 50 people of different ages and races listening attentively to their preacher.

You will not have an inkling of its alleged involvement in rape, the surgical sterilisation of congregants and arranged marriages. Because, on the outside, it looks like any other charismatic church, not one that has crossed the line between radical Christianity and a cult.

CTMI is a Christian group based in Mauritius with partner churches in France, Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Kenya and India. It claims to work "with more than 1000 churches in 25 countries, mainly in Africa", according to its website.

The group's Durban affiliate, Grace Gospel Church, opened in 2003 under the leadership of Basil O'Connell Jones. In 2011, the Jo'burg North Christian Church opened its doors in a leafy middle-class suburb not far from Randburg's Cresta shopping mall.

Little is known about CTMI's Mauritian founders, Miki and Audrey Hardy, who look like your average middle-aged couple, the sort at whom you would not look twice if you walked past them in a grocery store. The couple maintains a wary distance from everyone and everything outside the church that might hamper the recruitment of new members, so they are shrouded in mystery.

Stocked with deer for hunting

According to their website, the Hardys graduated from bible school in South Africa in 1980 and returned to their native Mauritius where they founded CTMI. They have two grown-up daughters who are also part of the church.



The Robin Hills Scout Hall in Robindale, the location of CTMI's new Jo'burg affiliate. (Madelene Cronjé, M&G)

The Hardys live in what former church member Howard Silk, who has been to their home, describes as a "palatial estate with tennis courts, stables, an infinity pool and a hill behind the house stocked with deer for hunting".

Silk claims that the Hardys' homes, including their beach villa in the Black River district of the island, were mostly built by artisans in the church, some of whom did the work "out of love" and for no pay. He says church members were also used to build the two church auditoriums in Trianon and Curepipe at the centre of the tropical island. Ex-members say they are dome-shaped, with state-of-the-art sound systems and seating for 3200 and about 1000 people respectively.

I first heard about the cult in 2009 when working as an intern journalist at The Independent on Saturday in Durban.

I was living with my parents and my father brought home a letter that a colleague had shown him. It was doing the rounds of traditional, well-established Christian churches in the city's affluent northern suburbs and warned about the "dangers" of CTMI.

At the office the next day I called one of the writers of that letter. It was the beginning of weeks of investigation and a four-year-long interest in a church that allegedly brainwashes young, educated people, encouraging them to abandon their families and studies and move to its headquarters in Mauritius.

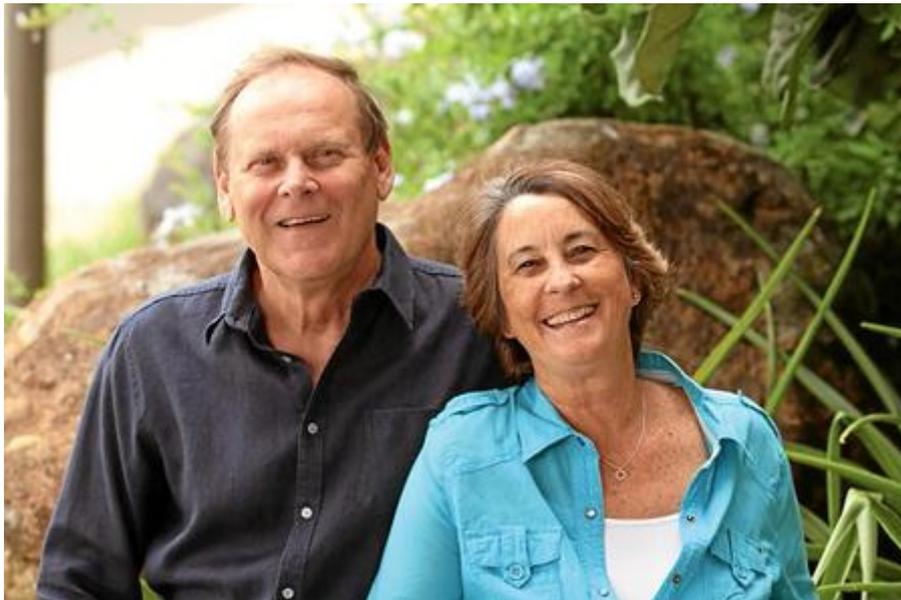
Serious allegations

This church was different to the ones whose members might raise a few eyebrows when, in passionate moments, they speak in tongues and think the Twilight movies are evil. The allegations against CTMI were serious. In fact, the accusations made over the years in local Mauritian media had been so serious that they had prompted the government to launch an inquiry into the church in the late 1990s, but it seemed to lose momentum in 2000 with a change of government.

In November 2009 I wrote an article about the church and the heartbroken parents whose children had shunned them and their bright futures to give their lives to the church.

After it was published, Carte Blanche went to Mauritius to investigate an allegation by a Mauritian man that a non-governmental organisation linked to CTMI had kidnapped his children and other NGOs had been set up as fronts to raise money for the church.

But the extensive media coverage that followed, including interviews with church leaders, produced more questions than answers.



CTMI's founders, Miki and Audrey Hardy, who allegedly live in luxury in Mauritius. (Supplied)

The church members I interviewed in 2009 were young, spirited people desperate to defend it against allegations of mind control.

"The church saved my life," several told me, and the church leaders, who were polite, even warm, towards me, firmly denied the allegations.

Yet, as the weeks progressed, I began to get Facebook messages, phone calls and SMSes from church members imploring me to "do the right thing", saying I had to open my eyes to the "bitterness in the hearts" of the concerned parents I had spoken to. They questioned my - journalistic integrity as well as my personal values.

Happy now

One email, from a former fellow university student, said: "Vic, you know me." He reminded me about what he was like with "drinking and ... all that stuff at Rhodes [University]" where we had both studied and said he had changed and was happy now. I believed him. A former school friend harassed me with SMSes saying church members had prayed for me. "We spoke about you in the service today" and "I'm just trying to help you ... what you're doing is evil". She did not want me to go to hell. I blocked her number.

I heard that church leaders, in response to my article, welcomed the "persecution" as a sign that members were living according to God's plan.

It was also evident that, apart from the disturbing accusations whipping around, many of the church's members had not had any damaging experiences. The members in question were, in fact, over the age of 18 and some of their jobless, drug-addicted lives had been rescued from destruction because of their involvement in the church.

But when I found out that the church had opened its doors in Johannesburg, where I now live, I had to take a second look. And so I headed off to the Robin Hills Scout Hall, where I was told by church leaders that God had brought me there.

There was no unusual ritual or preaching. I was, however, approached by at least five church leaders who wanted my contact details and an explanation for my being there. Just "checking it out" was not good enough. I was early and in the half an hour before the service started I was not left alone for more than a few seconds.

Were they excited about recruiting a new member? Or were they just being friendly and welcoming? One congregant told me over the phone weeks later: "These allegations you talk about are false. It's just like any normal church. About the manipulation - it has not been like that for me."

I went to Durban in September and called a church leader to arrange a meeting. He refused to comment, returning my questions with: "Are you married, Victoria? No? Do you have a boyfriend? If you are not prepared to answer these questions, then how can you ask us such personal questions about our lives? You need to question your own heart."

Formal questions sent to the church's headquarters in Mauritius about ongoing as well as more recent allegations went unanswered.

So where does a church end and a cult begin? Experts reel off characteristics: zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leaders, distance from family and friends, members radically changing their personal goals and activities after joining the group, unreasonable fear of outside views, leadership dictating how members should act, such as getting permission to marry, - prescribing what types of clothes to wear, where to live and how to discipline children, and the expectation that members devote excessive amounts of time and energy to the group.

Absolute control

That is exactly the sort of behaviour that former church members and their family describe in excruciating detail.

Diana Bradford, a South African, moved to Mauritius with her husband in 1990 to join the church. She posted on the Concerned Parents Forum - a site set up to educate people about CTMI - about how members were told to give at least 60% of their salary to the Hardys and were even encouraged to hand over signing powers to their bank accounts. Members had to get permission to go on holiday, wives had to be totally subservient and children were to be disciplined with corporal punishment. Former members said that girls were not allowed to wear skirts or shorts above the knee and had to swim in the sea fully clothed.

But one of the most startling accusations involves a group of men and women who allegedly underwent surgical sterilisation in 1997. Under pressure from church leaders, Mauritian Patrick Monasie told me he had encouraged his wife to be sterilised. She eventually complied. She was 30 years old.

Couples could then be free to "serve the Lord, to have place in our homes to take other children from the church who came from outside", said Monasie, who was a member for more than 20 years before he left three years ago. He and his wife, un-able to come to terms with what he had pressured her to do, separated in 2007.

Another woman, who is now in her 40s, recalled how she had been raped when she was a teenager by a CTMI church elder.



Keith Brown (front row, second from left) poses with his arm around his wife Barbara. Next to her is son Geoffrey, who joined CTMI church with his brother Stuart (standing behind him to the left). (Supplied)

She had moved in with the elder and his wife in Mauritius when she was orphaned as a teenager. The man began molesting her when she was 17, she said, and in the same year she was forced to marry a man 20 years her senior. On the night of the wedding, the elder allegedly

raped her in a garage. After she told her husband and church leaders what had happened, the church elder was sent to the neighbouring island of Rodrigues. Criminal charges were never laid.

I recalled a meeting I had with Steve and Heather Goddard in 2009. It was the year after their 18-year-old daughter, Hayley, had joined Grace Gospel Church. She gave up offers to study at two Cape Town universities and eventually moved to Mauritius.

I sat down with the Goddards in their comfortable home in Kloof, Durban, within walking distance of the private St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, which Hayley and I had both attended. The Goddards' dogs lay at my feet and family members smiled from photos hung on the walls. Heather told me that "losing" a child to the church was "worse than death".

The Goddards stopped speaking to the media after recent tentative contact was made with their daughter and I was unable to ascertain where they stood with her. But Keith Brown, who "lost" two sons to the church, filled me in in September.

Weeks after my meeting with the Goddards the couple received a phone call from their daughter saying she planned to marry a man they had never met. When they asked to meet the man before they gave the marriage their blessing, everything went silent. According to Brown, Steve Goddard eventually flew to Mauritius to try to speak to his daughter, but while he was there and without him knowing she got married.

When the couple eventually returned to South Africa, Steve wrote regular letters of love and affection to his daughter until a big envelope from her arrived one day last year, returning all the letters unopened.

Heartbroken family

Brown, of course, had his own heartbreaking story. He told me how his 30-year-old son, Stuart, was diagnosed with cancer in 2006 and joined the church shortly afterwards. Stuart's wife, Louise, and Brown's younger son, Geoffrey, also became members.

In May 2007, after receiving medical treatment, Stuart left behind a successful career as a copywriter in Durban and moved to Mauritius. His family was baffled by his sudden decision, but was comforted by fairly regular emails from him and calls on Skype.

Eighteen months later and now very ill with a brain tumour, Stuart returned to South Africa. He was cared for in his family's home and received treatment for five months, after which he "mysteriously left, never to return", said his father.

Brown said that his son had been led by church members to believe that his open questions about the church were perceived as "active persecution" of it and had decided rather to be cared for in fellow church members' homes.

The day Stuart died in a local hospice the family was there.

"The next thing," said Brown, "there were a whole lot of church people we'd never met before standing in the room of my dying son." It will be a "wound for life that, while my son was dying, the church estranged him from his family", he said.

His son Geoffrey and his family and Stuart's wife, Louise, are all still with the church and living in Mauritius. Keith and Geoffrey remained in "reasonable contact" but Louise had nothing to do with Keith's family anymore, he said.

Keith and I went for a drive while I was in Durban. Ten years ago, he said, he could never have predicted that he would be "sitting with a journalist telling her how a cult church had derailed relationships in the family I love so much. Never in my wildest dreams."

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