

A father describes how group came

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TEARS well up in Keith Brown's eyes when he speaks about how he lost his late son, Stuart, to the Grace Gospel Church cult.

Stuart, then 27, joined the church in 2006, shortly after he was diagnosed with cancer.

"It was around this time that he started attending the church with some old friends.

"Initially, I rejoiced because spiritually he had been in a wilderness, and we had spoken often about his need to find peace with the Lord and settle in a church where he was happy."

Stuart then married his English sweetheart, Louise, in a beautiful wedding at Shongweni Dam.

Despite Brown's reservations about his son's involvement in the church, he supported his son's decision to be rebaptised.

Brown's other son Geoff and his wife Terri also joined the Grace Gospel Church.

In April 2007, Stuart and Louise attended a Church Team Ministries International (CTMI) conference in Mauritius, where they decided that they would settle and work for the church.

"We wondered about treatment for Stu ... We were simply informed that this was God's will for them. They wanted to give their lives for God."

Stuart kept in contact with his father while he was in Mauritius but he did not elaborate on the work he was doing there.

"All we knew was that Stu was working for an ad agency doing copy writing and helping Miki Hardy with articles and a book."

Brown prayed after learning that Stuart had developed more tumours.

In August 2008, Stuart had a massive seizure and was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He decided to immediately return to South Africa for treatment.

Brown said Stuart and his wife then decided to house-sit for a CTMI family.

“Then we became aware that the family had returned and that Stu and Lou were staying on without a word to us.

“I cannot describe the deep sense of loss, rejection and confusion I felt as a father.”

Stuart died in a hospice.

“The church leaders felt uncomfortable visiting Stuart in my home, which is why he was cared for in their homes,” he said.

At Stuart’s funeral, Basil O’Connell-Jones allegedly spent an hour defending his cult and condemning Christians. Brown said that hundreds of people walked out during his speech.

“There is a sense in which I do not hold my sons and their wives responsible for this.

“Rather the leadership have to answer for their powerful influence, which requires the children of parents who ask questions to distance themselves, believing that they are doing the will of God,” said Brown.

Former member 'was enthralled by the church's teachings'

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FOR 17 years, Howard Silk, a financial adviser from Hillcrest, thought his church was a normal religious group that encouraged people to follow the teachings of the Bible.

Little did he know that the Grace Gospel Church was an affiliate member of Church Team Ministries International, an organisation that was fast becoming notorious as a cult group that was associated with fraud, and with luring young people from their families and encouraging them to marry within the cult.

Silk stumbled across the Grace Gospel Church in 1992, when his former friend Basil O’Connell-Jones introduced him to the leaders of the church.

“I have been a very close friend of Basil’s for almost 40 years. We lived together in a ‘mess’ during the Rhodesian war. When he was shot I was at the hospital when he came out of surgery. I was determined to visit him each and every day for as long as it took.”

O’Connell-Jones described this “wonderful” church to Silk and encouraged him to visit its headquarters in Mauritius.

“I left my three toddlers with my in-laws and flew to Mauritius. I attended the prayer sessions and was enthralled by the church’s teachings,” he said.

Silk and his wife stayed at the home of a church member and listened to the church’s teachings.

“The teachings were interesting. They took Christianity to another level. At the time, the teachings made sense to me,” he said.

In 1993, Silk took his family and settled in Mauritius.

“I found it strange that we had to lie to immigration officials when we arrived. The church told us that we couldn’t tell the officials that we were involved in the church. They said the church was under persecution in Mauritius and we would not be allowed in,” he said.

Silk attended the conferences that were held regularly and listened intently to the teachings.

However, he soon started questioning the teachings of the church.

“When I started asking questions about certain teachings, I was sidelined and called names. Members told me that I had a bad attitude and I was ostracised from the group,” he said.

He said that cult members are forbidden to question elders about teachings.

“Members are taught that our group is unique and superior to other churches. It’s scary as we are almost like robots, following these leaders without even thinking about what we are doing,” he said.

Silk left the church in 2008, after he heard that young adults were being instructed to abandon their families and join the cult.

“I received a call from a member of a large church in Hillcrest to let me know that their pastor had warned his congregation about the Grace Gospel Church, as it was ‘cultic’ in nature at best, and a cult at worst.”

“The leaders are so convincing. These kids leave their studies, family and friends, and join the cult. It’s like they are brainwashed. O’Connell-Jones is a very charming, powerful personality and can easily convince people to join the cult.”

Cult luring Christians

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Sharlene Packree

CONCERNED parents have rallied against a cult, which lures young adults with the promise of salvation, and then encourages them to abandon their studies and jobs, shun their families and leave their homes to live with cult leaders.

The cult operates as the Grace Gospel Church, an affiliate member of Church Team Ministries International (CTMI), which is based in Curepipe in Mauritius.

Experts say that the methods the church adopts and the promises it makes are typical of cult behaviour.

They “prey on young people” who are already committed Christians and convince them to leave their church and join CTMI.

“They emphasise the need to embrace the church as their new family and to reject their biological families.

“Their next move is to subtly manipulate the convert to marry somebody selected for them by the elders.”

Some minors are sent to other churches where they are kept in seclusion so that their families or the authorities can't find them.

The group's leaders have even fought court battles to keep these children away from their parents or guardians.

CTMI was started by Miki Hardy and his wife Audrey in 1980. After completing their Bible studies in South Africa, the couple returned to their birthplace, Mauritius, and started the church.

Nowadays it has branches in India, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, the UK and South Africa.

The church is well-known in Mauritius for its derogatory statements about other religious groups.

Riots broke out in 1989 when the church was targeted by Mauritian Muslims, after the it made inflammatory statements about Islam.

Former members of the cult told the Weekend Witness that cult leaders have set their sights on a Pietermaritzburg church, where they have started to recruit members.

They have also allegedly attended sports days at St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, in Kloof, and at Kearsney College in Botha's Hill, in the hope of recruiting new members.

The group of concerned parents was formed when churches in the upper Highway area raised concerns about the teachings and practices of the Grace Gospel Church.

They have ascertained that the cult's main agenda is to recruit young people from other churches. The cult preaches that Hardy should be the accepted apostle.

The cult's leaders change the original meaning of the Bible so that it justifies their actions.

“Their strategy involves the criticism and denigration of all other churches, ministries and ministers — stating that other churches are teaching a ‘false gospel’. They hold ‘leadership’ meetings, designed to encourage pastors to cut any previous associations and to affiliate their churches to CTMI,” said the organisation’s website.

In Durban, the Grace Gospel Church is led by Basil O’Connell-Jones, who has openly defended his church’s teachings.

Sources told the Weekend Witness that some people were sent to help build Hardy’s church in Mauritius, where young girls are often married to older men in the cult.

It is also believed that the elders choose partners for the followers, encouraging them to marry within the cult.

Sean Semple, a pastoral therapist in Hillcrest, met with some of the members of the cult. After conducting interviews with them, he was concerned.

He found that they displayed a loss of independent and critical reasoning, robotic emotional responses and were heavily dependent on church jargon during conversations.

Semple circulated a letter to local churches and schools, in which he shared his concerns that “at best CTMI could be described as a sectarian group, and at worst a cult”.

“There is justification in using the term ‘cult’ as the young people I have worked with exhibit symptoms of extreme and unhealthy indoctrination,” he said in a letter to the community.

O’Connell-Jones refused to speak to the Weekend Witness, saying that the reporter should attend their church if she wanted to do proper research on their teachings.

“I do not want to be involved in this. I have no comment,” he said.
