



STATEMENT DC260

Victims to Victors
The Journey to Wholeness for Two Former “Children of God”
by David Hiebert

It was just one week after my wife and I — along with our five children — had left the “Children of God” cult and temporarily moved in with my sister that she asked us to go to church with her. Just to be polite, we said we’d go. For years in the cult we’d been indoctrinated against the church and were led to question the sincerity of believers. So we braced ourselves, thinking that once we moved out of her place, church attendance would be one nuisance we would not have to put up with.

It’s funny because I had been brought up in the church. Born and raised in Western Canada as a Mennonite, my earliest memories were of my parents’ faith through good and bad times, church activities, and visits to our home by preachers and missionaries.

By the time I reached my teens, my childhood faith gave way to insecurity and doubts. In my confusion as a teenager, I was continually “losing my salvation” and desperately getting “resaved.” I wondered where the vitality, unity, and purpose of the believers in the book of Acts was today.

When the hippie movement dawned with its communal living and “love and peace,” I thought I might have found the purpose, acceptance, and camaraderie I was looking for. During my time in this movement, I turned over some pretty strange rocks as I looked for God in all the wrong places — including the teachings of Mao, drugs, and music gurus.

Over a year in the hippie lifestyle, by then fast going sour, I met some exuberant ex-hippies who had been radically “set free” through Jesus. “He is relevant today,” they said. So I rededicated myself to Jesus and started an exciting life of service with a “Jesus People” group called “The Jesus People Army.” There followed a fulfilling year of witnessing in Seattle, Washington and then back to Vancouver.

In the summer of 1971, our Jesus People leader took a trip to California where he met the “Children of God.” At his invitation, we were invaded by what we thought was an even more radical fringe of the Jesus People movement. I was ready for what I thought was the next step in more dedication and greater service to the Lord. So, along with many other Jesus People, I joined the Children of God in August, 1971.

My fifteen-year odyssey in the Children of God began. They said the book of Acts was the “blueprint for the church,” and that they were the only ones living it. Finally, I thought, I had found what I was looking for. Having worked on the Jesus People newspaper, I moved into the Children of God’s publications department. This took me to Seattle, Dallas, and then England where I met Mary Lou. She became my wife in 1973.

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Mary Lou's upbringing in El Paso, Texas was the picture of stability. Her's was an Anglican, middle-class family. After graduating from college with honors, searching for direction in life, she spent a year in VISTA, the domestic Peace Corps, and then dropped out altogether. She became "house mother" to a communal group of drug addicts and runaways in Knoxville, Tennessee.

A year later, in the aftermath of an abortion and disillusioned with her lifestyle, Mary Lou was at a vulnerable point in her life. She was soon approached by the Children of God who invited her to "receive Jesus" and live for Him with them. In desperation and relief that her search was over, she readily joined.

At the time we joined the Children of God (hereafter "COG") in the early 1970s, we weren't aware of David Berg (also known as "Moses" or "Mo") and the tight control he exercised on COG members through his *Mo Letters*. It was only as the months and years went by that distinctive COG doctrines — such as Berg being "God's End-time Prophet" and the COG being "God's elite avant-garde witnesses for the Last Days" — were revealed. Other doctrines that surfaced include the teaching that "all things are lawful," the supremacy of the COG group over marriage and the family, sexual freedom, and the use of sex in proselytizing ("flirty fishing"). All these were backed up by the twisting of Scripture, all the while adhering strictly to the King James Version!

Almost everything we had learned before "in the system," Berg said, was wrong and he was going to re-educate us. We were like the Children of Israel and he was our "Moses," leading us out of "Egypt." Our modern-day "Mo" began to write letter after letter from his secluded hideaway, and these were printed and sent to his "children" around the world. Everything from politics, economics, sex, child care, health, car repair, camping, and the Bible was "explained" to us and its true meaning shared with us "for fortunate few." By 1973, these *Mo Letters* became the main thrust of our witnessing as we left our Bibles at home and passed out his provocatively illustrated ramblings and ravings to the unsuspecting masses in return for a donation to "help our work with youth."

We felt blessed to be right in the center of it all, working at headquarters where it was all happening. We were appointed news editors for COG publications and worked directly under Berg's supervision.

After eight years as news editors, we received word from Mo that we were all fleeing the doomed northern and western countries of the world and going south and east. Berg instructed us to pick a mission field, take a few months off, and do some personal witnessing. Then, he said we'd regroup somewhere else in the world and resume our jobs.

We were excited to be able to openly witness on a mission field. We chose India. But after four months there, we received an impersonal Xeroxed note stating that we were being relieved of our jobs as news editors. Our jobs were being given to single people, as we had too many children.

We were hurt and felt cast aside without even a personal word of thanks. We had been told that children were a "blessing." We had gone along with Mo's stand against birth control, and now we felt penalized for our obedience.

Disillusioned but still committed, we and our four children spent almost five years proselytizing for the COG in southern India where our fifth child was born. It was an eye-opening experience in more ways than one! For it was in India that the cult doctrines and policies became too incredible and absurd to be swallowed anymore. We began to become more and more disheartened with the dictatorial control that governed every aspect of our lives. We became dissatisfied with the erratic whims of a leader that broke up marriages, separated children from parents, and generally inflicted mental and emotional torture.

Finally, it was mutually agreed on by us and the local leadership that we take a "furlough." With the help of my father and sisters who provided air fare and a place to "land," we arrived back in Canada in May, 1986.

So here we were — I, my wife, and our five young children — setting up camp in my sister's spare bedroom. We were extremely disoriented, trying to grasp onto some reality, struggling to relate to the Western world after over

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four years in India and the “real world” after fifteen years of cloistered cult life. And now we were going to my sister’s church!

That first Sunday was unforgettable! Though many of the worship songs were unfamiliar to us, the presence of the Holy Spirit drew us in and we began to sense a whole new dimension of entering into God’s presence through praise and worship. Here was a congregation of believers who obviously had deep devotion, great thankfulness, and a sensitivity to the majesty, holiness, and awesomeness of God — something distinctly lacking in our cult experience.

When the pastor gave the sermon, the Word became alive. There were no “greater revelations,” no explaining what it “really” meant, and no “better translations” like we had been used to. It was just the pure Word of God. It was so refreshing!

I found myself moved emotionally to tears many times during those first few months. After having been fed contaminated and poisoned spiritual food for so long, it was almost unbearable to get a healthy serving of the pure Word and true Spirit.

After the service that first week, my sister introduced us to the pastor and some others. We were expecting people to shrink back in horror when they found out we had been with “an evil cult.” To our surprise, they reached out to us in genuine concern.

About a year later, we asked our “home group” in the church to pray for us to help heal us from our past. As we publicly renounced it and asked forgiveness, we knew the Lord was taking us step by step to spiritual wholeness.

Our recovery process is a continuing one. We were fortunate to be together and have all our children with us, to have a supportive family who helped us set up house, and a pastor who ministered God’s grace and truth to us. But it’s taken a long time to be free from the hold the COG doctrines and lifestyle had on us.

For a while, we went through a stage where we were searching for an “infallible” leader and prophet to replace our former cult leader. We’d read books or listen to the radio ministry of some evangelist, subconsciously hoping to find the one with all the right answers, only to be disappointed when he’d write or say something we disagreed with. Or we’d look around for a substitute ministry, thinking that if the COG was not perfect then there must be another one that is.

But we’re learning that true Christianity is not a *program* but a *Person*, that our worth is not based on what *we* do for God but what *God* has done for us through Christ. Through our experience, we have discovered the depths of God’s loving grace and mercy, and are rebuilding our relationship with Him.

On that basis, we founded a support group for ex-Children of God called “No Longer Children.” Other ex-COG members with whom we came into contact have echoed the need for such a support group.

When someone leaves an all-encompassing cult, it’s a major upheaval — not only to find a job, a house, start a career, and make friends, but also in struggling spiritually to overcome months or years of mental programming and conditioned patterns of thinking. There is also an emotional struggle with feelings of bitterness, loneliness, and hopelessness.

The goal of “No Longer Children” is to help ex-cult members overcome bitterness toward God and the people in their past, and to renew their relationship with God and His Word. The support group encourages them not to turn away from God, but to work through their negative feelings and confusion, and to depend on the grace and strength of the Lord as they rebuild their lives. We seek to help them change their perspective — from one of being a *victim* to one of being a *victor* in Christ. We also publish a newsletter that features testimonies of ex-COG members.

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We're grateful for the support of our pastor, Barry McGaffin, who is on our Board of Directors. We thank God daily for the truth of His Word and His ever-enduring grace. He is our unfailing support.

To contact the Hieberts, write c/o No Longer Children, Box 415, 8155 Park Road, Richmond, B.C. Canada, V6 Y 3C9.

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