

Statement: DC685

COMMUNITY CHAPEL AND BIBLE TRAINING CENTER

For several years now we have received requests to comment on the teachings and practices of Community Chapel and Bible Training Center in Seattle (hereafter CCBTC), pastored by Donald Lee Barnett. Based on our research, there is more than sufficient evidence to show that CCBTC is, in the theological sense of the term, a cult. That is, it is a religious organization which professes to be Christian but which teaches heretical doctrine on the fundamentals of the Christian faith (see CRI's statement on the meaning of the term "cult" for more details).

Specifically, CCBTC denies the biblical, orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, teaching instead a variation of the doctrine of God known as "Oneness." Barnett's doctrine, though not identical to the usual Oneness view as taught, for example, in the United Pentecostal Church (on which see "Oneness Pentecostalism and the Trinity," available from CRI), is sufficiently similar that it may be broadly classified as Oneness. In any case, Barnett and his church and school explicitly deny the doctrine of the Trinity, claiming along with other antitrinitarian cults that the Trinity was a fourth-century paganization of Christian doctrine. In so teaching, CCBTC has separated itself (compare 1 John 2:19) from the fellowship of Christian churches. The fact that it seeks recognition as an evangelical church and that its members consider themselves to be born again does not make its rejection of the Trinity any less heretical.

Also of concern are the destructive efforts of CCBTC's teaching that Christians can be demonized or demon-possessed (a view which CRI considers erroneous; see our statement on exorcism and deliverance for further details). Though this teaching can be found in many orthodox charismatic and pentecostal churches, the extreme form in which it is found in the CCBTC makes it not merely erroneous, but heretical.

Finally, the teaching and practice of "spiritual connections," which was reported in newspapers nationwide in 1986, and which involves church members developing extremely intimate relationships with the spouses of other church members, is both unbiblical and socially deviant. The destructive effects of this teaching, as well as their teaching on demons, are described in the article attached below.

The foregoing should not be construed to mean that we regard every member of the CCBTC as necessarily lost. Many persons who were Christians before encountering the

cult joined it without recognizing it as such, and many such believers have left the cult and joined sound Christian churches. However, the organization and its teaching are definitely heretical, and Christians should not seek to have fellowship with those involved.

(This article taken from the 1986 Spring/Summer issue of FORWARD)

***COMMUNITY CHAPEL FIGHTS CULT LABEL
DIVORCES, SUICIDES, AND MURDER BLAMED ON CHURCH'S
TEACHINGS***

A Seattle-based church has lost over 300 members, including many leaders, and become widely regarded by concerned Christians as a cult, following numerous divorces, a suicide, a murder, and several allegations of rape and other charges of sexual misconduct.

The teachings of Donald Lee Barnett are blamed for the recent crises among members of Community Chapel and Bible Training Center. Barnett, 57, began the Chapel in 1967 as a small home Bible study; it has since grown to roughly 3,000 members and several satellite churches, including a few in Canada and the Philippines.

Although Barnett says his church welcomes all “born-again Christians,” he holds to a variant form of the “Oneness” doctrine of God (see FORWARD, Fall 1985) and denounces the doctrine of the Trinity.

Most controversial among Barnett’s teachings is a practice called “spiritual connections.” In 1983 Barnett had taught his congregation to “dance before the Lord,” which involved solo dancing in the aisles of the church sanctuary. Then, in spring 1985, he began teaching that “dancing before the Lord” could involve couples dancing together. Eventually, members were encouraged to dance with other persons’ spouses and develop intimate relationships with them (“spiritual connections”) in order to enhance their spiritual union with God and perfect the unity of the church. Such couples spent hours dancing, staring into each other’s eyes, hugging, kissing, and so forth — though Barnett has said that such relationships are to remain “spiritual” rather than “carnal,” and adultery is forbidden.

Another controversial teaching of Barnett is the demonization of Christians. This doctrine, found in some charismatic and Pentecostal churches (though usually not in the extreme form taught by Barnett), warns Christians about demons of lust, anger, jealousy, and other such sins, and recommends that such problems be resolved by casting out the demons. What is unusual about Barnett's teaching on this matter is that everyone is considered demonized, and almost any problem is blamed on demons.

The combination of these two teachings apparently led to several tragedies. The first of these involved Kelly Scott, 25, who shot herself in the head on December 14, 1985. Kelly's husband had developed a "spiritual connection" with a woman who was so close to him that when he contracted pneumonia she stayed in their home to care for him. When Kelly became depressed over this situation, she was told by fellow "Chapelites" that she had a demon of jealousy. Unable to rid herself of the "demon," Kelly committed suicide. Since then, one other member of the Chapel has committed suicide for similar reasons.

National attention was focused on Community Chapel in April 1986, when Janet Cole, 37, was found guilty of having murdered her five-year-old daughter Brittany. Cole, a member of the Chapel for 18 years, had reportedly fallen in love with her "spiritual connection" and her resulting emotional breakdown was diagnosed by her husband and other Chapelites as demonic. Cole also feared that her daughter was demon-possessed by a "demon of hyperactivity." Believing Barnett's teaching that a young child who dies automatically goes to heaven, Cole decided to take Brittany's life to ensure her salvation. She drove to Portland on March 20, 1986, and drowned her child in a motel bathtub. She then attempted suicide by drug overdose, but was unsuccessful. The court sent her to a mental hospital in Maryland.

Barnett denies that these incidents had anything to do with his teachings. Faithful members of the Chapel agree. But critics, such as Harry Stegman, a former Chapel teacher who now helps people leaving the church, argue that Barnett's teachings are directly to blame.

Troubles have rocked the church before. In 1981 roughly 100 members left, charging Barnett with teaching elitism and exercising undue control over the personal lives of the members. Those who left were ostracized and warned that their salvation was in jeopardy. Defending the church, Barnett said at the time, "We are in no danger of becoming a cult."