



STATEMENT DM494

“LIFESPING” FOR CHRISTIANS? MOMENTUS AND MASHIYACH MINISTRIES ATTRACT FOLLOWERS AND CONTROVERSY

Daniel Tocchini’s Mashiyach¹ Ministries, best known for its Momentus Training Seminars, has launched into the general trade book market with the publication of *Killing the Victim before the Victim Kills You*, authored by Tocchini and his two close associates, Derek Watson and Larry Pinci. Additionally, the organization has established a strong presence on the Internet through its web site (www.momentus.org). The web site promotes the book and the organization’s various trainings and seminars, as well as providing a limited amount of information and teaching in downloadable format.

Mashiyach Ministries has received considerable criticism from secular and Christian religious movement researchers, both for its roots in the New Age human potential group Lifespring, and for its assumptions and practices that critics say are contrary to social and mental health and to sound biblical principles of discipleship and personal growth. In addition to noting widespread reports of personal dissatisfaction and church division, the Christian Research Institute observed in an interim statement that “a number of principles embraced and promoted by the Human Potential movement (in particular Lifespring) have been carried over into Momentus Training Seminars under a thin veneer of Christianese.”² Secular sources such as the *Los Angeles Times*³ and the *Santa Rosa (California) Press Democrat*⁴ also note personal and church reports of dissatisfaction as well as its similarities to the human potential movement.

Killing the Victims contains the most comprehensive public statement of Tocchini’s beliefs and practices. It will probably receive close scrutiny and criticism since it distills the focus of the trainings into written form and gives positive acknowledgment to Lifespring founder and leader John Hanley. In fact, Tocchini, now in his early 40s, was a Lifespring trainer for almost a decade after his conversion to Christ in the early 1980s.

Researchers who seek to assess the validity of the numerous complaints from ex-participants of the Mashiyach programs find that hard, documentable evidence is almost entirely lacking. While it would therefore be easy to dismiss the complaints as unfounded, their consistency from person to person in many different parts of the country over most of the previous decade (since the inception of the Momentus trainings) naturally leads thoughtful researchers to continue digging for solid documentation. Additionally, while Tocchini and his associates are extremely careful to ensure that their written and verbal statements, taken in context, do not directly contradict Scripture, the overall impression most reviewers receive is that Tocchini’s philosophy is more human-centered than God-centered. They further sense that the emphasis is more on personal effort than on trusting the power of the Holy Spirit for sanctification and the maturing of the Christian life. Additional difficulty for researchers arises because trainees agree never to divulge the actual contents of the training sessions to anyone who has not already been through them.

Advocates of Mashiyach Ministries, which include Tocchini’s staff, independent trainers, and satisfied graduates, have responded to past criticisms in three ways. First, they point out that any academic, social, or religious movement is going to have some disaffected members or graduates, and the praises of satisfied graduates offset the complaints of dissatisfied graduates. Second, they argue that since most critics have not actively participated in the trainings they therefore are speaking from ignorance. Third, they have sometimes encouraged their critics to attend trainings.

Critics in turn have ready replies to these tactics. They say that the persistence and consistency of negative reports from dissatisfied graduates do indicate that a fundamental problem surfaces wherever the trainings are held. Therefore, the testimonies of estranged graduates are significant. Moreover, when public materials available from a ministry read or sound more like a human potential group than basic Christian discipleship, it is legitimate to question both the confidential information and the movement itself.

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Furthermore, critics have generally had good reasons to be leery of accepting invitations to participate in Mashiyach trainings. In addition to Christians' moral concerns about making blind pledges, the lack of hard data makes it difficult for critics to know whether the training they attend has been modified because of their presence and thus is not representative of the normal training. Critics also point to the "fruit" of Mashiyach Ministries, which includes a significant number of emotionally troubled graduates; failure to produce tangible, notable changes in many graduates' lives; and a number of churches that have undergone destructive internal battles and divisions between the Momentus advocates and church members who have not attended any trainings.

As noted, the history of Mashiyach Ministries goes back to the human potential group Lifespring, and its founder, John Hanley. Daniel Tocchini explains that he became a Christian in 1979, shortly before he became a Lifespring instructor from 1981 to 1988. In 1988, Tocchini resigned as a Lifespring trainer "because of an underlying conflict between the group's training and his own religious beliefs."⁵ Regardless of Tocchini's crisis of conscience, he repeatedly praises John Hanley and includes those he trained in Lifespring without any distinction among the many thousands he trained over the years who experienced "the most transforming experience of their lives,"⁶ He also includes companies for which he conducted Lifespring trainings in his current ministry profile.⁷

Momentum trainings emerged in Tocchini's Northern California hometown, Santa Rosa, in early 1992. Largely by word-of-mouth and active recruiting by Tocchini, the movement, first called Equipping the Saints Training, quickly spread to some of the biggest churches in Santa Rosa and established additional trainings in Southern California and Texas. At that time, the basic training cost was \$300 and graduates were actively solicited not only to encourage others to attend but to become trainers themselves. By mid-1993, numerous critics questioned Tocchini's previous ties with Lifespring, the surface similarities in vocabulary and conduct between Momentum and Lifespring, the reports of graduates who believed they had suffered spiritual and emotional damage in the trainings, and the sometimes overpowering recruitment techniques employed by enthusiastic supporters within congregations. In fact, one of the churches most impacted by the trainings, Santa Rosa Christian Church, eventually suffered a church split over the issue.

In late 1993, Tocchini briefly suspended the trainings. He promised that he would not return to business until he had completely revamped the entire program and philosophy, with assistance from mature Christians, to ensure that everything in the trainings was compatible with biblical teaching and practice. The trainings resumed in early 1994, but critics were still not satisfied that substantive changes had taken place. The *Los Angeles Times* article from April 1994 noted that controversy continued to follow the trainings, that some of the activities criticized by Christian leaders had not changed, and that charges of divisiveness in local congregations and reports of disillusioned graduates continued.

Today Mashiyach Ministries operates a thriving business, providing trainings throughout the nation several times each month and offering a variety of courses from the Momentum trainings for novices to advanced leadership seminars for trainers. The initial individual fee has dropped from \$300 to \$150, which the local sponsors of the four-day seminar collect and keep. The \$150 is collected with the initial application fee and is non-refundable, even if the trainer declines to allow a potential student to attend on the basis of his or her application.⁸ At the end of the basic training, an offering is taken from participants and turned over to Mashiyach Ministries. This arrangement provides a strong incentive for local sponsors to hold as many trainings and recruit as many participants as possible, since local sponsors have a direct financial benefit from frequent, large sessions. Additionally, by conducting the "free-will" offering at the end of the training, Mashiyach Ministries realizes its maximum benefit from grateful new graduates before they have a chance to think twice about their experiences. As one recent graduate told the *JOURNAL* concerning his donation, "If I was willing to invest \$150 in something I hadn't even experienced and knew relatively little about, how much more do you think I was willing to give when I thought I had just experienced the greatest life-transforming event of my Christian walk?"

From a *financial* perspective, the current arrangements align Mashiyach Ministries with other kinds of multilevel marketing groups such as Amway, Avon, and Mary Kay. Like most other multilevel marketing programs, the financial success of the parent organization is assured by its continuing recruitment of new trainers and new students and by the financial motivation given trainers to practice aggressive recruitment and to identify additional potential trainers as well. There is also a strong motivation to press Momentum graduates to attend the variety of additional advanced programs, each with its own price tag. Some Christians find this focus on multiplication for financial gain incongruous with an organization whose stated purpose is to promote Christian discipleship and sanctification.

Little that is published and openly available from Mashiyach contains enough substantial theology to enable adequate doctrinal analysis. A careful examination of the materials available on the Mashiyach Ministries web site reveals a general tendency toward human effort in personal transformation. Nothing overtly denies the necessity of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and renewal: in fact, that teaching is affirmed repeatedly. Nevertheless, when materials focus on the unique attributes of the various trainings, the emphasis is on human effort, not divine transformation. This is also the case with the new

book, *Killing the Victim before the Victim Kills You*, which speaks, for example, of “taking responsibility in life — investing [our] lives in a future worth living for, and if need be, dying for.”⁹ The trainings themselves are described as “transformation through Self-government.”¹⁰

Sociological and psychological concerns also arise regarding the trainings. The basic Momentus training involves four intense, 13-hour days of group personal teachings and exercises designed, as one graduate put it, “to tear down who you are and then rebuild you from the bottom up.” Exercises are reported to include some of the best known from the human potential movement, including making hypothetical life-and-death decisions for group members, confessing personal sins to one another, and facing personal criticism from others. Each prospective trainee is asked to sign a “hold-harmless” contract acknowledging that he or she is attending the training willingly, that the training does not promise benefits and is not conducted under standards of professional psychological techniques, that emotional and/or psychological damage may occur but is not the legal responsibility of Mashiyach Ministries, and that the trainee will never reveal the contents of the training to any nongraduate, (Mashiyach Ministries says the nondisclosure clause protects the “spontaneity” of participants’ reactions to the teachings and exercises.¹¹) This contract is virtually identical to the contracts used in Lifespring, the Forum, and other human potential movement groups.

The organization admits that the confrontational core of the training can be a harrowing experience for trainees: “You are challenged by constant reference to core Biblical principles. In the training, there is no attempt to relieve the pressure that comes from the confrontation between what you say you believe and inconsistent behavior. Participants are encouraged to use the discomfort and tension they may experience as energy to compel them to change their lives.”¹²

While Mashiyach Ministries has its outspoken advocates, including medical doctors, psychiatrists, pastors, business-people, and the popular Christian musician, Sheila Walsh,¹³ it has scores of detractors as well. Dick Williams of Grace Fellowship in Santa Rosa, California, notes that “the foundational presuppositions behind the training are essentially the same as Lifespring.”¹⁴ Williams also brings up the use of swearing during the trainings. This phenomenon continues in today’s programs, and one of the more persistent complaints received by the Christian Research Institute from churches is that parishioners who have completed the Momentus trainings develop speech habits of swearing that are highly offensive to other Christians. As one pastor told the JOURNAL, “Liberty in Christ is one thing. This isn’t liberty: it’s an offense to Christ.”

David Serio, a Christian who left part way through a Momentus training, comments, “The very act of regressing people back to their past and encouraging the free, uninhibited expression of anger, including the use of profanity, if need be, is totally and completely unbiblical. This is not biblical Christianity, it is humanistic psychology,”¹⁵ Serio explained: “At the point at which I withdrew, I was thoroughly convinced that what I had observed was in complete agreement with others [negative] testimonies of the training. I prayed intently asking God whether I should stay or leave — I was willing to do either and He confirmed this to me....To put it bluntly, you don’t have to stay in the sewer to know it’s going to keep stinking.”¹⁶

Probe Ministries in Texas received the testimony of a Christian who had refused the training despite strong pressure from graduates. Toni Harrison was especially concerned about the “hold-harmless” agreement. She explained, “An invitation to a decision based on less than full disclosure or the terms and conditions of the contract or experience into which I am entering limits my capacity for real *choice*. To the extent that you limit my knowledge, you presume to choose for me. In that case, my personal power and freedom are eroded and your judgment about what is best for me is imposed upon me without my consent.”¹⁷

Today Mashiyach Ministries operates offices in Santa Rosa, California and Hawaii, conducts an average of 40 trainings of various kinds around the country and overseas per year, and draws thousands of attendees into the Mashiyach vision of Christian discipleship. Whether altruism or greed, or something in between, motivates Tocchini, the other leaders, and the regional trainers, the organization has yet to silence successfully the concerns raised by critics. Nor has it successfully convinced critics that its behavior and teaching are essentially and qualitatively different from the human potential movement and are instead thoroughly Christian.

Pastor Peter Bertolero of Fresno Christian Growth Center in California is an outspoken critic of Mashiyach Ministries. Having researched and interviewed more than 50 people, he concluded, “Momentus simulates the work of the Holy Spirit without the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.”

— *Bob and Gretchen Passantino*

1 *Mashiyach* is a Hebrew term meaning “anointed one,” or the Messiah. The organization says it uses the name “to remind ourselves to Whom we are in service” (web site www.momentus.org/full/name.htm).

2 Statement no. 3.270, Christian Research Institute International, 1993.

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- 3 Roy Riverburg, "Faith or Fad? Energize the Fervent Beliefs of Some Christians with Techniques from the New Age Human Potential Movement. The Result? *Momentum*," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1994.
- 4 Robert Digitale, "A Momentum Divide among Churches," *Santa Rosa (CA) Press Democrat*, 3 October 1993.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Web site (see n. 1).
- 8 Web site.
- 9 Daniel Tocchini, Derek Watson, and Larry Pinci, *Killing the Victim before the Victim Kills You: Establishing Responsible Relationships through Making and Keeping Promise* (Santa Rosa, CA: Mashiyach Ministries, 1997), 2.
- 10 Web site.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Dick Williams, *Testing the Momentum Training* (one-page statement), Grace Fellowship, 1 June 1993.
- 15 Unpublished letter on file at the Christian Research Institute, 12 January 1994.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Unpublished letter on file at the Christian Research Institute.