

Doubt, secrecy circle Followers of Christ

Insiders say some in the faith-healing church see doctors clandestinely and are irked by the lack of a preacher

The Oregonian/June 28, 1998

By Mark Larabee

OREGON CITY -- Since the death of their powerful, charismatic preacher in 1969, the faith-healing believers of the Followers of Christ Church have degenerated into a cult like group ruled more by peer pressure and fear of outsiders than spirituality, current and former members say.

Many Followers have begun to see doctors secretly, some traveling out of town to avoid notice. But they still refuse to publicly challenge the church's faith-healing beliefs for fear they will be kicked out of the church and shunned, never again to see family members, said Tommy Nichols, 66, a current church member and son of a former Followers minister.

Most church members think the last preacher, Walter White, was God's hand-picked apostle. Over nearly four decades, White and other preachers established a man-dominated society guided by them and the church.

Since White's death 29 years ago, there hasn't been a minister to baptize the young, anoint the sick or interpret Scriptures -- the most basic tenets of the church's beliefs.

Nichols said many younger church members are privately questioning the church's lack of spirituality and faith-healing practices. But they won't share their frustrations openly, he said, and dozens have quit the church.

The remaining members have become even more secretive in recent weeks following the legal scrutiny and publicity surrounding the deaths of three

Followers children this year. The state medical examiner said two of the deaths could have been prevented with routine medical care.

The controversy has caused turmoil within the church. Dale Morris, Followers president and head of a five-man board that takes care of church business, said he will resign his position. An election is scheduled today. Morris and other board members have politely refused repeated requests to discuss the church.

Current and former church members who talked to The Oregonian say big changes in the church are unlikely. Nichols says even with the current unrest, intense peer pressure maintains a vice like grip on members' beliefs that discourages dissent. Nichols was carried out of the church in 1982 after he stood up during a service and criticized the church's lack of spirituality and strict adherence to faith healing.

"This church has forgot their God," said Leroy Worthington, 72, a lifetime member who was ostracized for speaking out and whose attempts to become the church's minister have been rebuffed. "I know there is a cult in this church." Most disturbing to Worthington and Nichols is the fact that children are dying unnecessarily in the name of faith.

Children's deaths

The Followers believe in a literal translation of the Scripture, which states that the sick shall be anointed by elders and that faith will heal all. Death, if it comes, is God's will, they believe.

Because of that, child deaths have plagued the church for decades. At least 21 of the 78 children who have died at the church since 1955 likely could have been saved with routine medical care, The Oregonian reported earlier this month following a two-month investigation.

Thirty-eight children buried in the church's cemetery outside Oregon City never reached their first birthdays. An additional 15 are listed as stillborn. Doctors say the lack of prenatal care and trained assistance during the deliveries probably contributed to the deaths. Officials suspect many of those died needlessly, but

they can't be sure because government investigations of the deaths were either inconclusive or nonexistent.

In the past 10 years, three women in the 1,200 member Oregon City congregation have died giving birth at home with only church midwives attending. That's about 900 times Oregon's rate of maternal deaths, according to a conservative estimate by the Oregon Health Division. By comparison, two women in 25,000 births died at Legacy Emanuel Hospital and Health Center in Portland during the same period.

Although they practice faith healing, members of the Oregon City church visit the dentist, wear glasses and use birth control openly, members say. Nichols had a doctor remove skin cancer from his forehead. Nichols, Worthington and several former members said many people in the church consult doctors regularly, often driving to Portland or to Salem to avoid being found out by fellow church members.

"We're all not against doctors," Nichols said. "I think they're selling out their religion. They have no religion if they allow their children to die or their women to die."

Clackamas County and state officials have known for years of preventable deaths within the church. But they think state and federal laws prevent them from prosecuting parents. The fact that some adults are regularly seeing doctors confounds prosecutors and police.

"That's an inconsistency that amounts to fraud," said Clackamas County District Attorney Terry Gustafson, who last month asked the public to help prevent further child deaths by reporting illnesses among church members' children.

"They're misrepresenting their religious practices. Kids don't have the ability to walk into a medical clinic on their own."

Closed to outsiders

Opinions about Walter White differ among current and former church members. Some said his use of intimidation -- such as rebuking people from the pulpit for

perceived misdeeds, or predicting the end of time -- created the cultlike pressures that remain today.

Others, such as Nichols and Worthington, say White was a true man of God. They say he and other ministers established a church that attracted Followers from other congregations in Oklahoma, Idaho and California. It was a true communion that was open to outsiders. But in the years since White's death, the church society has closed itself off from the rest of the world even as it sits in the middle of a growing Portland suburb.

White told his flock that God spoke to him through visions and dreams, and many Followers believed the only way to get to God was through him.

"His job in life was to teach people and to try to persuade them to save their souls from hell," said Worthington, a West Linn resident.

Either way, White's legacy lingers. Some church members are waiting for his replacement. And some have leadership ambitions of their own, creating factions within the group.

The Followers believe, a minister is called by God, through a revelation, such as a vision, which is then corroborated by other members. Worthington said he had such a vision years before White died, and that White had a similar vision the same day, confirming Worthington as a called man.

"I was put here to protect this church," he said, holding a well-worn, black-covered Bible. "They're not recognizing me now as a preacher. That doesn't mean I'm not one."

It's been years since Worthington attended the church or spoke to two children, four grandchildren and five great-grandchildren who remain in the congregation. He says the cult in the church has them, and that he will fight as long as it takes to win them back.

"They're the outsiders," he said of the majority people in the church. "They've just got the numbers."

Much of the doctrinal debate in the church in the past three decades has centered on the fact that it has no preacher and no spiritual guidance. The last of

White's ordained elders died in 1986. White's two sons, who run a small Oregon City market, have declined to comment.

The once-fervent, Bible-thumping services White presided over have been reduced to Thursday and Sunday gatherings of hymn-singing and silent prayer. Some former members have said that was not enough to maintain them spiritually.

"I got tired of going out there and doing nothing but singing songs," said one man who left the church a year ago. "It didn't feel like church. It just felt useless."

The 35-year-old, who asked that he not be named for the sake of his relatives still attending the church, is concerned that there are no elders to heal the sick or minister to teach the Scripture.

"Some people out there think they don't need a minister," he said. "They think it's fine the way it is."

That concerns Nichols because children are growing up in that environment and will pass on those misguided traditions to their children, he said. Nichols recently protested those practices in an 18-page letter he mailed to most of the families in the congregation. He said if children are not baptized they don't have the spirit of God within them.

"They cannot gain eternal life under these conditions," Nichols said. "They're mocking God and they don't realize it because their parents have never taught them the truth.

"They're playing church."

Legal battle

The children's deaths have put the church at the center of a debate about religious immunities in Oregon's criminal and civil laws. Gustafson, the Clackamas County district attorney, is calling for changes to state laws that offer immunity to parents whose children are injured or die as a result of their religious beliefs. Gustafson is trying to form a task force of like-minded legislators, prosecutors and legal experts to rewrite the state law, and has asked Attorney General Hardy Myers to help her.

"I want to do it better than other states have done, and I want to see if we can accommodate religious differences while writing a law that protects children," she said. "We can change things here and I'm quite confident we will."

About 40 states include religious immunities in their criminal and civil codes. Only six, including Oregon, allow religion as a defense to homicide.

Gustafson's call in May to church members, their neighbors and school officials to monitor the Followers has resulted in social workers checking on two ill children in the past several weeks. They determined the children were not in danger.

One former member said it's logical, from an inside perspective, that the Followers are isolating themselves more than before.

"They think the world is out to destroy the church," he said. "This is what Walter (White) predicted."