

www.smh.com.au

Spare the rod and spoil the ...



Money making ... the sect's Common Ground cafe at the Royal Easter Show yesterday. Twelve Tribes members work long hours for no pay.
Photo: Dean Sewell

March 24, 2008

Harsh discipline of children is a central tenet of a religious sect operating in Picton, writes Tim Elliott.

In 1999 Matthew Klein had a revelation. Fed up with mainstream Christianity, the then 30-year-old industrial chemist, his wife and two young children went to live on a nine-hectare commune at Picton run by a Christian sect called the Twelve Tribes. "I wanted to be a good Christian, and I admired what I thought was this group's commitment."

Klein sold his house and business, emptied his bank account and surrendered it all to the "community", whose members were only known by biblical names. "When you join you abandon your 'worldly name' and adopt a Hebrew one," he says.

"I became Lev Qadash, which is Hebrew for 'dedicated heart'."

But it wasn't long before Klein began noticing "odd things" about the group. He knew that the 60 or so members weren't allowed to marry outsiders or to vote, and that they had no access to newspapers, magazines or TV. But questioning the elders was also strictly prohibited. "We were told that reasoning was the same sin as witchcraft," he says.

Then there were the "ridiculously long" work hours. "The group owns bakeries and cafes and operates a restaurant at the Royal Easter Show. Sometimes you were working 20-hour days, for no pay. There's plenty of money coming in, but no one who works there ever sees any of it."

Most disturbing of all, however, was the child discipline. In an effort to keep their minds pure, Twelve Tribes children aren't allowed to have toys, play games or make-believe. If a child disobeys these rules or fails to respond to an adult, he or she is hit on the bare bottom

or hand with a 45-centimetre, reed-like stick, one of which is kept above the door ledge in every room.

"One spanking generally consisted of three to six hits," Klein says, with the rod regarded as "an instrument of love, not punishment".

"One day I left my two-year-old boy with an elder while I went and worked. When I came back, I asked how it went and he said, 'We had a few problems but we got over them'. He said that my boy wouldn't come to him so he'd spanked him. When he still wouldn't come, he spanked him again. I asked him how many times that happened and he said, 'About 10 or 12'. So he'd hit my boy about 60 times in the course of the day."

It was then that Klein realised something was "majorly wrong". But such was the sect's power that he spent another year with group, during which time he and his family were moved to a community in Canada, to avoid the attention of his parents. "That's what they do: if you talk out against them, you get cut off from family members who are still in there. And if you kick up too much of a stink, they just move you overseas."

Klein finally left in 2001, and has since regained custody of his children. But he hasn't seen his wife for seven years. "The kids wonder why she doesn't get in touch. I'm not even sure where she is."

FOUNDED in 1976 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, by a former high school guidance counsellor, Elbert Eugene Spriggs ("Yoneq"), Twelve Tribes now has 3000 members worldwide, with communities in the US, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, Spain and England. Australia has three, including at Katoomba, where the Twelve Tribes recently bought a \$1.7 million property that it is converting into a Common Ground cafe.

Following a hybrid of Judaism and Christianity, the group's aim is to re-create the 12 tribes of Israel, thereby ushering in the return of Yashua (Jesus), who will arrive like "a King coming for his Bride when she is fully prepared for Him". Members claim to use the Old Testament as a blueprint for their lives, but guidance also comes from Spriggs's prolific and frequently bizarre teachings, many of which, it is said, come directly from God. (Spriggs claims the Lord first spoke to him while he was working at a carnival in 1969.)

Spriggs's teachings include assertions that "submission to whites is the only provision by which blacks will be saved", and that the civil rights leader Martin Luther King was "filled with all manner of evil" and "deserved to be killed".

BUT it is the Twelve Tribes' attitude towards children that has proved most controversial. Harsh discipline is one of the group's central tenets, as detailed in its 267-page Child Training Manual, copies of which have been handed out to parents at Picton. Written by Spriggs, the manual codifies when, why and how to hit children, saying "you must make it hurt enough to produce the desired result" and that "stripes or marks from loving discipline show love by the parent".

Peter Baker ("Nathaniel"), an elder of the Picton community, would not answer questions about the manual. But he defends the Twelve Tribes, saying "we are devoted believers in Jesus Christ". Baker, who came to the Twelve Tribes from the Exclusive Brethren, says no staff get paid, explaining that members "work only for love, like the disciples of old". They

don't vote, he says, "because we look forward to the Kingdom of God coming to Earth, so we don't involve ourselves with government business". As for the sticks, "we have found them to be more effective than wooden spoons."

Yet others say the community is a law unto itself. "Once, when I was making some food in the kitchen, I saw an eight-month-old boy being repeatedly hit with a stick for 40 minutes by his mother," George, a former member from Picton, says. "All because the kid kept dropping a lid that she'd given him."

David Pike, a former member from the tribe of Mannasah, in the US, told of seeing a two-year-old "switched" for eight hours "because she didn't want to eat a bowl of millet, which is what they eat all the time. I also saw young boys who couldn't sleep on their backs because their buttocks were so welted and bloody."

The group has been embroiled in several high-profile scandals overseas, with members in the US recently convicted of child-sex offences and child labour violations. In 2000 two members in France were sentenced to six years in jail for negligence after their 19-month-old son died of malnutrition.

"It's particularly harmful to children because there is no one who can be an advocate for them outside the system," Ros Hodgkins, a counsellor who has treated former Twelve Tribes members, says. "And by claiming to have the sole path to salvation, the group exerts considerable power over members."

Other control mechanisms include the systematic informing by wives on husbands and children on parents. "If you don't inform on your family, you're told you don't love them and you won't receive salvation," a former member, Michael Curry, says.

Curry, who now runs a picture-hanging business in Coogee, spent a year with his wife and daughter at Picton, but left in 2001. "My wife and daughter stayed inside - they were totally brainwashed, and I couldn't convince them to leave. I haven't seen my wife for seven years. I've heard that she's living with them in America and has remarried someone from the Tribes. My daughter would be 22 now. I saw her a few years ago at the group's cafe at the Royal Easter Show, but she told me that I was evil and to get away from her."

THOUGH numerically small, the Twelve Tribes is remarkably well resourced, especially in the US, where it operates furniture stores, leather shops, soap and candle factories, wholefood outlets, cafes, bakeries and several building businesses, the biggest of which, BOJ (Builders of Judah) Construction, specialises in nursing homes. A former member in the US says BOJ grosses \$US15 million (\$16.6 million) a year, most of which is used to finance the sect's property acquisitions.

In Australia, Twelve Tribes has run a range of businesses, from demolition, plumbing and painting to import-export, plus several Common Ground cafes, mobile versions of which have made appearances at events such as the Royal Easter Show, the Woodford Folk Festival and the Sydney Olympics. ("They recruit at some very reputable places," Hodgkins says.)

The group's holding company, The Community Apostolic Order, has assets worth \$4.55 million but claims tax-exempt status as a charitable institution. Though "members' equity"

is at \$2.8 million, only one former member the *Herald* spoke to had managed to recoup anything on leaving, and only after threatening legal action.

Each Twelve Tribes "community" sends a 10 per cent tithe to the US which is spent on evangelical pamphlets or "freepapers", and on purchases such as the Avany, the Tribes' 38-metre private yacht, which features Limoges porcelain, spas and handcrafted mahogany finishings.

"This is one opulent boat," David Pike, who worked on the Avany's restoration, says. "We used to take it for evangelical tours to Savannah and ask people for donations, until the Coastguard told us that was illegal."

The US cult investigator Rick Ross has called Spriggs a "jet-set cult leader. There is no question he controls millions of dollars. Where is it? Only [Spriggs] knows."

When Zeb Wiseman, a son of the Twelve Tribes second-in-command, Charles "Eddie" Wiseman, defected in 2001, he told of Spriggs's extravagant lifestyle, travelling by chauffeured car and going on shopping junkets with his wife. Spriggs is thought to travel almost constantly, staying in homes in the US and France.

"But the houses are always in someone else's name," Pike says.

Pike insists, however, that Spriggs is "not doing it to get rich. He actually believes God speaks to him, that he is doing God's will and building the Kingdom and gathering the Bride and the Chosen Ones to bring about the return of the Messiah."

Both Klein and Curry complained to the Department of Community Services about the group's treatment of children. "But they said they can't do much because it's hard to get evidence," Curry says. Klein says approaching the authorities about the group's work practices proved similarly fruitless: "They wanted stuff that I couldn't give them like official names of the companies and directors."

So the group keeps operating.

"There are lots of families who've been ripped apart," Klein's mother, Maree, says. "And they can't speak out, because they're scared of losing contact. They're still hoping their kids will come home one day."