

2010-11-02

## **NBC News Investigates Child Abuse Practices In Twelve Tribes cult**

NBC Action News - July 16, 2009

Investigators: Some Claim Mo. Church is a Cult

by Russ Ptacek

An NBC Action News investigation has uncovered allegations of stillbirths and infants being spanked with a rod in a Missouri church which critics are calling a cult.

In undercover video recorded by NBC Action News in Warsaw, Mo., Elaine Elias is seen pleading with members of the Twelve Tribes church to speak with her daughter. A police officer tells Elias and our undercover news team to get off the street.

The woman's daughter, 24-year-old Megan O'Leary, says she joined the Twelve Tribes of her own free will.

"I'm her daughter, and I'm here, and I want to be here," O'Leary is heard saying.

Twelve Tribes recruited O'Leary outside a Christian youth conference in Kansas City last December. They took her back to Warsaw, Mo., population 2200, about two hours southeast of Kansas City.

After researching the Twelve Tribes online, Elaine Elias flew to Missouri from Florida, determined to get her daughter out and to sound the alarm about what she had learned about the church.

Elias went door-to-door and business-to-business in Warsaw in an effort to turn residents against the Twelve Tribes church. Most residents had either never heard of Twelve Tribes or know very little about them.

"I want you to know who's living in your town," Elias said as she worked a Warsaw tavern like a seasoned politician.  
Discipline, Modesty Pillars of Church Doctrine

Twelve Tribes' strict doctrine was established by Eugene Spriggs.

"Discipline is essential to this end," Spriggs says in a [church video](#) from 2000.

There's no TV, and only approved books. Women dress modestly, even during recreational activities such as swimming.

[Cult expert Rick Ross](#) defines unsafe cults as groups that abuse or exploit their members. He says he has fielded repeated complaints about Twelve Tribes. He points to allegations of harsh corporal punishment of children when he calls the organization a destructive cult.

Although no one at the Warsaw Twelve Tribes community agreed to discuss the church with NBC Action News, the national group discusses past conflicts with the outside world on a Web site section titled [Controversies](#).  
Members Leave Over Lack of Medical Care & Discipline of Children

Some former members attributeseveralstillbirths to Twelve Tribes shunning traditional medical care.

The group formerly lived in St. Joseph, Mo., and divorce papers filed by a former member allege while there a member "was not taken to the hospital, even though she was in labor five days."

Court documents say the mother survived but the baby did not. The mother left the church.

Former member David Pike describes Twelve Tribes as "A high-control, fundamentalist, Christian group."

Pike networks with other ex-members on a site called [twelvetribes-ex.com](#).

He and other former members say official church policy for raising children is contained in a 192-page document called "[Training Up Our Children in the Way They Should Go](#)."

The policy describes the church's rod of discipline as a "thin stick (like a balloon stick) used on a rebellious child by his parents." It calls for spankings that begin at six-months old with "more pressure in both intensity and frequency" for a "strong willed child."

But Pike says, "Sometimes these children were switched from sun-up to sundown, just for being kids."

No one at Twelve Tribes would confirm whether the document represents church policy, nor would they agree to talk on-camera.

In 1984 Vermont authorities raided one of Spriggs' communes, alleging

truancy and child abuse.

A judge threw out all allegations saying prosecutors were wrong.

The group was fined for child labor violations in a New York community, but there have been no official allegations against the group in Warsaw.

Warsaw's police chief and the city's mayor say Twelve Tribes has a good reputation in town and that the church has not been the source of any problems.

Scholars, Neighbors Defend Faith

Many religious scholars defend Twelve Tribes.

"To me the test is, are people there voluntarily," says University of Kansas Professor Tim Miller, who has studied and written about Twelve Tribes. "I guess I don't see evidence that there is anything that would raise a red flag to me."

Despite Elias's door-to-door campaign, few in Warsaw have anything negative to say about Twelve Tribes, but she did get what she wanted. Her daughter left the group and went home where she is currently living with her mother.

"I have nothing but good things to say about the 21/2 months that I stayed there," O'Leary said in a recent phone call to NBC Action News.

O'Leary acknowledged she saw a two-year-old spanked with a rod, but says she never saw children younger than that physically disciplined.

"The children there were extremely healthy, well cared-for and loved," O'Leary said.

O'Leary said she left because her mother's efforts were creating turmoil between her, her family and the church.

She says for now, she is focusing on her family, but she is considering returning to the church in Warsaw.

"From what I saw, it was a good thing," O'Leary says about Twelve Tribes.

This article was found at:

<http://www.nbcactionnews.com/news/local/story/Investigators-Some-Claim-Mo-Church-is-a-Cult/YcsF205G2kixAdgACX6kOQ.csp>

Posted by Perry Bulwer at 7:40 PM 

