

Controversy Pervades Yellow Deli Offerings

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There are six Yellow Delis in the Chattanooga area, and patrons of each agree that the restaurants offer delicious sandwiches and friendly service. But the organization whose members operate those restaurants, a group known as the Vine Christian Community Church, has found itself the subject of increasing controversy among area Christians and non Christians alike.

Former members have branded the church a "cult," and some have accused its leader, Gene Spriggs of "brainwashing" susceptible young people, isolating them from the community and alienating them from their parents. The approximately 150 members of the group are for the most part young people who live communally in houses owned or rented by the church. In Chattanooga, the Vine Community owns a series of houses on Vine and Oak streets valued at approximately \$100,000. Members of the community operate the Yellow Deli on Brainerd Road and the Areopagus. They have established branch delis and branch communes in Dayton, Trenton, Mentone and Dalton. And negotiations are almost complete for locating a seventh restaurant in the Plaza Hotel on Market Street, according to Edward E. Crittenden, co-owner of the hotel.

They believe themselves to be one of the very few true churches in the United States and probably the only one in the Chattanooga area. "There are two kingdoms on earth," says church member Tim Pendergrass, who joined the community after graduating from Baylor School three years ago. "The kingdom of God and the kingdom of man." "The rest of the world, for the most part, is of Satan." "God's not out there," he said pointing at the window. "True Christians must be willing to give up everything for the Lord, not just give a little on Sunday and feel saved."

But Clifford Daniels, who was the first Chattanooga to join Gene Spriggs when the group started in 1972, has a very different conception of the church. "They are worse than the Hare Krishna's or the Moonies because they are so subtle," says Daniels, who left the community two years ago after a violent confrontation with the other leaders of the group. "I began to realize that Gene Spriggs is just a power hungry person," Daniels recalls. "Gene was our eyes, our ears - we would know what to do by what he told us to do." "He put everyone in mental anguish so that they all became totally dependent on the group." "They became zombies." He is not alone in his criticism of the group.

Mr. and Mrs. H. Alan Horton were so convinced that the group was a "cult" and that their daughter Melinda had been "brainwashed," that last year they had Ted Patrick, nationally known for his fight against the religious cults, flown in to "deprogram" their daughter. "After they get you in, you're taught not to think," says Melinda now more than a year after leaving the Vine Church. "You had to submit, the guilt is so strong." "They teach you that if you leave God will strike you dead." "It destroys your ability to make decisions." "You become a slave - a mental slave." "There was so much love there I felt accepted and I trusted the people."

She was put to work in the Dalton deli and seldom allowed to see her parents. When she did see them, she says, it was usually in the company of another member of the group. "We worked 16 to 18 hours a day, 6 days a week, until we were so tired we couldn't think." "But we couldn't question anything. Any doubts that came into our minds were from Satan."

How do the leaders of the Vine Community respond to this extreme criticism? Publicly, not at all. They refused to be interviewed by the Times, or to make any statements concerning the charges of former members. (After these articles had been written, three of the elders of the Vine Church changed their minds and consented to an interview with the Times.)

"Anybody who wants to know what we believe can come by and ask us," says church elder Eddie Wiseman. "We're here 24 hours a day." "Our lives are open and our hearts are open." Truth, Wiseman believes, will never be found in a newspaper article that looks at all sides of an issue. "That's the hypocrisy of today," he said. "Everybody is sitting on the fence, looking at both sides, saying 'this is a little good over here and this is a little good over there, but there are no absolutes.' "We're saying there are absolutes. The truth is revealed by the spirit of God."

In the Vine Community, those absolutes extend to every aspect of a person's life. Members live communally in houses owned by the church, and virtually every action that a member takes must first be sanctioned by one of the group's leaders. Men and women both often work up to 16 hours a day in the delis, and receive no pay other than the right to remain in the community.

All marriages must be sanctioned by the elders and be with members of the community. Premarital sex, drugs and alcohol are all strictly prohibited. Property is commonly held, and the basic needs of the individual are met from the coffers of the community. Members give their personal property, including cars, stereos and cash holdings, to the church. An extreme example is that of Paulette Kendricks, who inherited more than \$20,000 and turned it all over to the church.

Members see themselves as making a total commitment to Christ, and quote scripture, like the following verse from the second chapter of Acts, to justify their communal living: "and all that believed were together and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need."

But former members, like Jules Laramee, see the commitment in a different light. "You don't commit yourself totally to the Lord," he says. "You commit yourself to the control of the elder brothers." Jules is a French Canadian who came to this country illegally in 1975 after getting into trouble in Canada. He somehow ended up in Chattanooga and had an automobile accident directly in front of the Yellow Deli. "I was in the hospital for nine days," Jules recalls. "The people from the Yellow Deli came over to see me and said if I was ever hungry or needed a place to stay to come and see them. They didn't preach at all." "When I got out of the hospital, I was hungry, I didn't have any money, and I went to see them. Nice people, free food, free clothing." "So I decided to move in." "I was weak mind, very submissive. Easy to bend and easy to play with." "I was the perfect instrument for what they were then, as far as the control that the elder brothers needed to exert." "They taught me that God dwells in the heart of the believer through a direct relationship, but that God cannot work except through a government." That government is the elder brothers. "I eventually believed in salvation."

"And then somehow, I can't explain how, why or who did it, I did not learn about a loving God. I learned about a God that if you don't behave, don't submit, He will punish you. He will cripple you neck down, He will kill your mother." They held me through fear and fear alone."