

Suffer the Little Children

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A BIZARRE bible cult, which advocates beating children before they are old enough to walk, is recruiting in Queensland.

Sources say it plans to set up at Maleny on the Sunshine Coast.

Twelve Tribes Mission, also called the Messianic Communities, runs a catering outlet at the annual Woodford Folk Festival.

Promoting a stress-free lifestyle, the group is attractive to teenagers and young adults.

But the parent cult has a lengthy court history of child abuse and abduction in the United States.

In one high-profile case, Darlynn Church, 13 claimed she was stripped to her underwear and given a seven-hour "scourging" with a cane.

Defecting senior members Michael Painter and James Howell have claimed some children had been beaten almost to the point of death.

US authorities have discovered infants who died at childbirth, buried on cult property. Child deaths, often through negligence, go unreported.

Their treatment of children makes Twelve Tribes a favourite subject for US documentary makers.

Cult children are not allowed toys, pets, or bicycles and are schooled on-site.

They can be beaten for showing emotion, imagination, for playing make-believe, for not responding on the first command and even for crying.

Children are taught to love their beatings and neglecting to discipline a child is regarded as an act of hatred.

"It - (the discipline) was from people who wanted to cleanse me from what I had done and wanted to forgive me for it," one American-child

says on film. "I see now how it totally changed my whole personality."

The Sunday Mail was told the cult was planning communities at Maleny, Sydney, Melbourne and in northern NSW.

It recently began building on a 9ha site at Picton, about 70km south-west of Sydney, and it owns 445ha at Bigga, west of Sydney.

Cult expert Jan Groenveld said the Australian group had almost doubled in a year. "I have heard at least two Queensland families are involved and I suspect there are more."

A visitor to the Picton community said toddlers were taught to hold their hands out to be beaten and were hit more if they cried.

"David", a visitor to the Picton community who did not want to be identified, said children were lashed up to six times with a 1m cane. In some cases the beatings were repeated 20 times a day -- even for a two-year-old.

"The rod is forceful enough to cause pain. But I think what hurts me more is that the child's spirit is broken," David said.

The cult is based on strict Old Testament teachings and is led by Elbert Eugene Spriggs, a former American school counsellor who claims a special relationship with God.

The four-times married Springs is called Yoneq — Hebrew for "young sapling or sprout". His teachings promote anti-Semitism and racist views-about American-blacks.

Sprigg's cult began in Tennessee in the 1970s and now has more than 28 communities in the USA Canada, France, Germany, Spain, Brazil, Argentina, Great Britain, and Australia.

TV, newspapers, radio, magazines, caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco are banned.

Births are at home, children are not inoculated and followers are told to avoid medication and hospitals. They attend prayer meetings morning and night, sing and dance, and eat organic food.

They make money through cottage industries. Members sell their houses, leave their jobs and sign over their life savings.

Followers strictly obey elders and women strictly obey men. But they are all free to lie to non-believers because they are not "obligated to tell the devil the truth".

Bob Pardon, director of the US-based New England Institute of Religious Research, has studied the cult for five years and has visited the US community.

Children cannot use their imagination and they can be disciplined if they are caught doing that. They cannot fantasise. "So a little girl would never have a doll to play with because that is a fantasy world.

Little boys wouldn't have a truck to run around in the dirt because they have to stay 'rooted in reality'."

"A parent usually does the whippings but because this is a communal group, other adults can discipline children." He said Spriggs proclaimed the Christian church had died in the first century and there was no true church until he came on the scene in 1972.

"They have to replant geographically the Twelve Tribes of Israel on the - Earth or Yashua (Christ) cannot come back," Pardon said.

The 70-member group at Picton runs cottage industries — including candle-making, a mobile cafe, specialty bread, house painting, plumbing, demolition, landscaping and electrical work — at the Peppercorn Creek Farm.

"When they do the big festivals, everyone works 20 hours a day up to five weeks straight, there's a lot of sleep deprivation and that helps to control them," David said. "They do the Woodford Folk Festival at Maleny, the Easter show and the cafe is catering for a trial at the Olympics. (Sydney Olympics could not confirm this), "But the cafes don't really don't make money. It's more evangelism. If they bring back one disciple they're happy.

A lot of young people — 18, 19, and 20-year olds — are joining up,"

David said Spriggs was expected to visit Australia soon.

"They're keen to have something up around Maleny."

The Picton group would not comment.

SIDEBAR:

Spriggs

ON LYING

"Our definition of lying means the intentional deception of those who had a right to now. Are we obligated to tell the devil the truth? Do the courts have a right to know what you know?"

ON SLAVERY

"It is horrible that someone would rise up to abolish slavery. What a marvellous opportunity that blacks could be bought over here to be slaves."

ON JEWS

"No Jew living today outside Palestine has any true backbone nor do they have any right to speak about 'God' or 'their nation' or 'the Twelve Tribes'.

ON DISCIPLINE

"The disobedient don't live long. The life span of a homosexual is about 40 years. This is not because of AIDS. They die of a bad conscience."

ON AUTHORITY

"Honouring those who are over you, those who are honourable (especially parents) releases a special hormone from your brain, permeating your body, that gives long life. If you don't do this, that hormone dries up and your bones dry up."