

All Isn't Well in a Popular Christian Diet Program

Its links to an authoritarian group cause concern.

Christians are into the lean look. That is the message of our culture—with a little help from physical fitness devotees and the makers of designer jeans. The surge of interest in weight reduction has resulted in the development of several Christian diet programs, the most successful being Diet, Discipline, and Discipleship (3D), which bills itself as “a Christian counterpart to national weight-watcher programs.”

Three-D began in 1973 and has grown tremendously under the leadership of Carol Showalter, wife of William Showalter, senior minister of the Parkminster United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York. The first 3D group, consisting of 10 women in the Rochester church, expanded to include a program with more than 5,000 churches by the fall of 1981. According to a brochure, 100,000 people have completed a 3D program.

Despite the testimonies of satisfied customers and the upbeat image projected by its publications, all is not well in the world of 3D. Rumblings of discontent are heard throughout the country concerning the overall management of the program and the sharply increased costs of membership. More serious problems have surfaced regarding the negative impact of 3D on some participants and uneasiness over the program's link to the controversial Community of Jesus on Cape Cod (Mass).

The 3D program consists of three 12-week segments and is designed to help participants “seek God's will and direction in helping one another in the various areas of their lives where self-discipline is a problem.” Each group, comprised of about 10 members, is sponsored by a local church and is guided by a leadership team of two persons. Each participant agrees to follow the 3D diet plan (Better Homes and Garden's *Eat and Stay Slim*), keep a daily record of food input, pray daily for other group members, and make one “caring phone call” each week.

Andy Andrews, pastor of the Foundry United Methodist Church in Houston, is enthusiastic about the program.

“I have found it beneficial to become personally involved in the lives of the leaders,” he said. “I evaluate their reports and food sheets each week and write them a personal note” encouraging them.

For many, 3D has been a helpful, caring, life-changing ministry. Because of the structured nature of the program, many people report having formed needed habits of personal devotion, such as prayer and Bible reading. Ruth Brandenberger of the First Presbyterian Church of Babylon, New York, cites friendship as a positive by-product of involvement.

But there are disenchanting customers. Although specific figures are difficult to obtain, dozens of churches have pulled out of the program in recent months, and several more are considering severing ties. In the Portland, Oregon, area, for example, more than 30 accounts (churches) asked to be dropped or have become inactive since last summer. Local leaders in the economically depressed Pacific Northwest cited the “skyrocketing costs” of 3D as the primary reason for quitting. In 1979 the cost to individuals was \$15 for a 12-week session. Area leaders were told in June 1981 that the cost of member kits would rise to \$25. But it jumped to \$40, not \$25. “Rising infla-



Mother Cay (seated) and Mother Judy.

tion costs” were given as the reason.

More troubling may be the often unrecognized link between some teachings of 3D and the philosophy of the Community of Jesus. Critics claim that the top-level leadership of 3D is not being totally “up front” about its association with the Massachusetts group and the degree to which this relationship affects the entire 3D program.

The Community of Jesus is a non-denominational, charismatic Christian

Community of Jesus headquarters on Cape Cod



Paul Fortin photo

community composed of 200 resident members and hundreds of nonresident members scattered throughout North America. The community uses the liturgy of the Episcopal church, although Bishop John Coburn of the Massachusetts diocese has stated that "they are not a community of the Episcopal diocese of Massachusetts in any way, shape, or form."

Members of the faculty and student body of both Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary have noticed some disturbing aspects of the nearby Community of

Jesus. They, along with many visitors to the community, view the organization as a highly authoritarian, manipulative, guilt-inducing structure, operating in the context of an oppressive, works-oriented spirituality. Gordon-Conwell students Ann Rodgers and Tom Morton assisted *Boston* magazine in an investigation of the community. The resulting article described the community's lifestyle as "authoritarianism cloaked in sanctity." The community is led by two women, Cay Andersen and Judy Sorensen, each called "Mother" by the residents.

Curtis Hartman, executive editor of *Boston* magazine, said he continues to receive letters asking for information on the community and 3D ten months after the article was published. The popular TV news program "60 Minutes" considered a piece on the community but abandoned the project when the community refused cooperation, Hartman said.

Another characteristic of the group frequently cited by critics is the divisive impact it has had on families. Resident members have been known to denounce their "idolatrous families" and virtually sever all ties with the past. One Christian parent, Marion Vaccaro of Centerport, New York, was labeled a "controlling mother" by her daughter when she questioned the daughter's involvement in the community. "She wrote us a vile, accusing, disrespectful letter telling us she never wanted to hear from us again. I send her cards and short notes on birthdays and holidays reminding her that we love her, but she has never answered," Mrs. Vaccaro said.

The Community of Jesus, like the 3D leadership, strongly defends what it perceives to be its unique mission and ministry. Honest criticism, even by other concerned Christians, is seen as the work of Satan. Mother Cay has told her followers, "You are wrong if you enter into controversy about this community or its work."

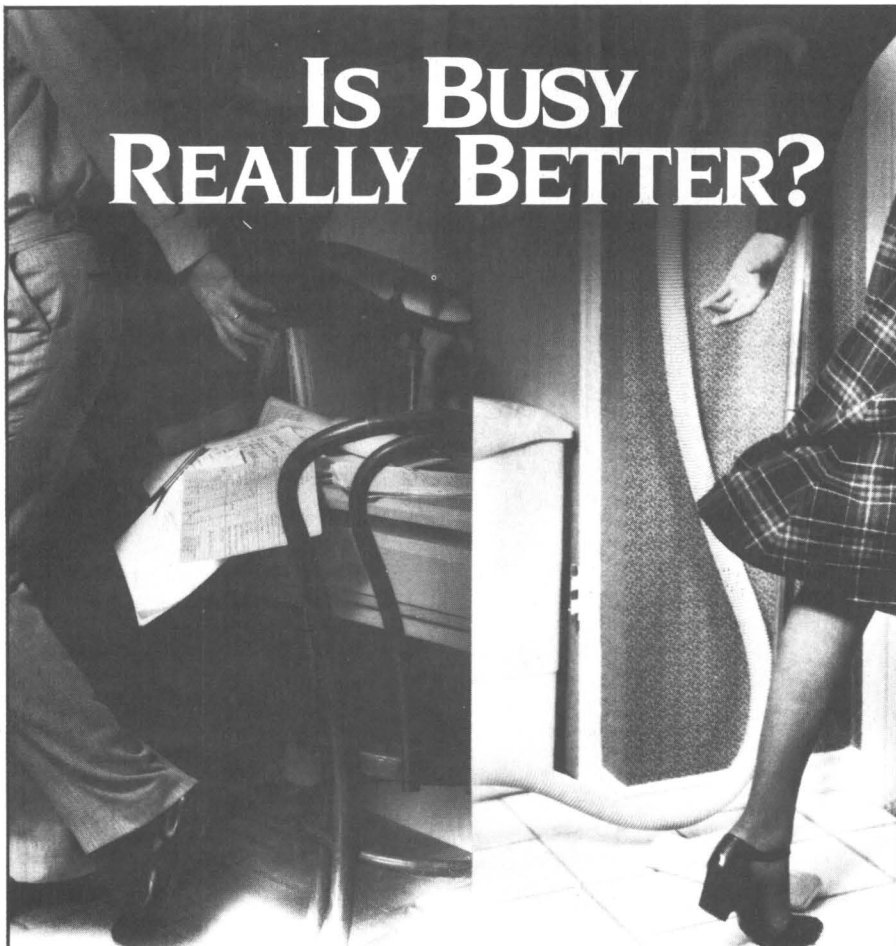
The exact nature of the relationship between 3D and the Community of Jesus is disputable. Three-D headquarters personnel, during public information sessions, have flatly denied any connection with the community. (Co-directors Carol Showalter and Mary Haig declined an interview with *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*.) However, the informal ties between the two organizations are obvious:

- The Community of Jesus is frequently mentioned in Carol Showalter's book, *3D*, which tells the story of the founding of 3D. The cloth edition of the book was published by the community's Rock Harbor Press in Orleans, Massachusetts (Fleming H. Revell purchased the paperback rights in 1980).

- Informational brochures describing the community have been distributed at some 3D meetings.

- William Sorensen, husband of community cofounder Mother Judy Sorensen, signs checks issued by Diet, Discipline, and Discipleship, Incorporated. He is business manager of the Community of Jesus.

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• Most top-level 3D leaders, as well as office staff, are either nonresident or resident members of the community. This includes the codirectors of 3D.

• Many 3D materials are printed and mailed at the Cape.

• The codirectors of the community occasionally travel with 3D leadership teams and make appearances at 3D functions, as they did on the West Coast last January.

• Leadership retreats for 3D are often held at the community compound on the Cape.

• The message and methods of the community are evident in the ministry of Pastor Showalter at Rochester's Parkminster Church, the founding church of 3D. Also, in January, assistant minister Thomas Witter left Rochester for Orleans, Massachusetts, and the Community of Jesus.

• The teaching tapes supplied to 3D leaders feature speakers like Pastor Showalter, Peter Marshall, Jr. (son of the famous Senate chaplain), and Mothers Cay and Judy. In short, virtually all the recorded speakers are associated with the Community of Jesus.

• Finally, and significantly, 3D headquarters officially moved to Orleans in January. Officials of 3D say the change is strictly a business move to improve efficiency of operations.

Some of the more controversial teachings of the community seem to filter down into 3D groups and have the potential for negative spiritual and emotional impact on vulnerable members. A member of a Caledonia, New York, church who was once active in 3D said, "The emphasis was on sin and making you feel guilty, [as if] that's the way you lose weight."

Jean Coombs, a Rochester, New York, housewife and former 3D participant, feels that some 3D leaders encourage a kind of self-flagellation and occasionally resort to heavy-handed correction. "I was scared to death to speak up, lest I be corrected and made a fool of publicly. It seemed to me that if you ended up crying, the leaders were delighted, because it showed you were breaking," she said.

Critics contend such problems stem from the "theology of control," which characterizes the community leadership and influences 3D. In the 3D leader's manual, "speaking God's word" is clearly not limited to the speaking of Scripture. "God's word" includes whatever the leader feels the Holy Spirit is revealing about sin in the participant's life.

Another major teaching of the com-

munity that is central to 3D is death to self. While dying to self is biblical, it can almost become "crucifying self" in an unbalanced, unscriptural sense in 3D.

Although the leader's manual cautions against the "tendency to dig for the person's sin," former members say that there is a preoccupation with sin, especially attitudinal sins like jealousy, rebellion, willfulness, idolatry, and haughtiness. Former 3D leaders said that whenever they raised uncomfortable questions, they were accused of harboring a "rebellious spirit" or jeal-

ously against those in authority over them.

Harold Bussell, chaplain at Gordon College, is concerned about 3D and its ties with the Community of Jesus. Although Bussell does not believe the community is doctrinally heretical, he is bothered by what he terms their theology of power. "It is in the context of the abuse of power and the manipulation of emotionally vulnerable weight watchers that Christians are beginning to have second thoughts about 3D. Because of the subtle connection between the community and

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3D, some fear that large numbers of people could unknowingly be exposed to the "unbalanced" teaching of the community.

Jane Herman, a member of an independent Bible church in a Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C., has used 3D successfully to lose weight. Her group used only the first of the three 12-week sessions, because it emphasized weight reduction and valuable Scripture lessons on self-control. Herman felt the next sessions dealt too much with the emotions and that tapes accompanying those sessions by Cay and Judy were not at all helpful.

Betty Rickard, former 3D area co-

ordinator for the state of Oregon, summed up such feelings. "It was not so much a matter of heresy, but of extremes of control of one person over another and the lack of the basic concept of the work of grace that convinced me to let go of my emotional liaisons with 3D and the Community of Jesus," Rickard said. She suggests using the "plumb line of the Bible to be sure God is the "Master Builder of any work with which we become involved." That is good advice for anyone wishing to check out a program called Diet, Discipline, and Discipleship.

RON ENROTH

COCU Still Struggles for Mainline Church Union

The Consultation on Church Union (COCU), recounting its largely lackluster 20-year history during a national convention in Louisville, Kentucky, last month, nevertheless pledged to continue its painstaking plan to unite 22 million American Protestants into a single denomination.

After four days of blunt discussions, delegates from the ten mainline churches participating in the COCU effort endorsed a scheme that would bind the denominations together in a "covenant" of commitment to each other. The concept of COCU's "covenant," an ancient term used to describe God's special relationship to his people, must now be approved by the ruling assemblies of the ten member churches.

The architects of the plan hope that it will provide a much-needed infusion of vitality and fresh vision for COCU, which has been plagued in recent years by internal disagreements and a flagging passion for ecumenical endeavors among many in American mainline Christianity.

"Living in covenant together would not yet complete the one body we seek," admitted Gerald F. Moede, a United Methodist minister and general secretary of COCU. "[But] the covenant would give us joints, ligaments, [and] a few sinews to put onto the theological skeleton we have, so the body could take shape."

In his keynote address to the plenary gathering, Moede assailed both the "resurgence of denominationalism" and the church-growth movement in the United States, arguing that those trends deny the "catholicity" that Christ coun-

seled for his "obedient" church.

"It may well be that groups of like-minded people grow faster," he said, "but we argue that this growth may well be built on a false foundation, pandering to a consumer mentality, and not on the gospel of Christ, who reconciles and makes one of Jew and Gentile, male and female, black and white."

But in its effort to erect a Protestant body that is "truly catholic, truly evangelical, and truly reformed," the COCU planners have been stymied by theological divisions, as well as the more troublesome structural problems emerging from the various understandings of the nature of ordained ministry and ecclesiastical authority. Some of the member churches are administered by bishops, for example, while others prefer the more autonomous, "congregational" tradition.

Still, the most serious obstacle to COCU's merger plan may be the widening disinterest in such broadly based cooperative Christian efforts. A recent forum of United Methodist bishops placed ecumenism at the bottom of a list of 15 priorities for the church in the coming years. Avery Post, the president of the United Church of Christ, allowed that it is growing increasingly difficult to "find a constituency for the ecumenical movement today." And Kenneth Teegarden, the chief executive of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), admitted that his denomination "preaches ecumenism with power, but we practice it with reservation."

Nevertheless, COCU delegates appeared committed to combat the discouraging signs of the times, girding

themselves with the words of John Hotchkin, a Roman Catholic ecumenical specialist and an official observer at the COCU convention.

"A cold critic might well send you a telegram congratulating you on your twentieth anniversary and expressing the wish that your next 20 years will be just as happy," Hotchkin told the delegates. "But much has been accomplished. COCU has never sought to escape or build castles in the sky. You are coming to the brink, and, for God's sake, you must continue on."

BRUCE BUURMSMA

In Norway's State Church, a Pastor's Abortion Protest Has Wide Implications

For the last three years, Børre Knudson, the pastor of a small Norwegian church in Balsford, inside the Arctic Circle, has been sending back his paycheck and refusing his duties. It was his protest against Norway's state policy of granting abortions on demand. The measure narrowly passed Parliament in 1979.

As a pastor in the state church of Norway, Knudson, 43 and the father of five, is a civil servant, hired and paid by the government.

Knudson insists that the abortion law conflicts with Norway's Christian and moral traditions, and "reflects an incontrovertible clash of values between church and state." Under it, some 14,000 abortions were performed last year.

To provoke a court test of the "heathen" abortion-on-demand law, Knudson, who is said to be loved by his congregation and respected by fellow clergy in neighboring parishes, not only returned his salary, but also refused to conduct marriages and to maintain the church register (the method by which the Norwegian government keeps its census records).

A case was duly filed against him by the government, and in January it came to trial.

The most prominent testimony on his behalf was delivered by Per Lønning, a noted former bishop who resigned in 1976 to protest a 1975 abortion law. The 1975 measure permitted abortions during the first trimester if "the pregnancy, birth, or care of the child . . . place the woman into a difficult life situation." The statute required that a committee of two doctors judge the merits of each application, but most requests were granted, so that soon 23 percent of all pregnan-