



## Reachout Subject Guide

### *5 Reasons People Join Cults*

We are frequently asked why people join cults, often with a tone of incredulity. The truth is no one joins a cult. People find themselves in a cult having joined a community of people with whom they have come to identify, a settled community that seems to have answers not found elsewhere. They have been invited, included, taken seriously, treated well, and encouraged.

Cults are proactive in seeking out converts and when they find one they know exactly what they want to do with them. Jehovah's Witnesses will want to visit regularly and do a book study, to get you to the Kingdom Hall, get you integrated into their community.

Mormons will want to spend time with you, to take you through a set of lessons, get you to meet other Mormons, to integrate you into the LDS community. Every cult will have a route to have you follow, from first contact to full commitment. The contact doesn't think of this as an invitation to join a cult. Neither does the cult member think they are doing anything but good. No one joins a cult.

There are five things that stand out as key to gaining people's trust and loyalty, building a conversion experience.

#### **1. The Invite**

Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have well established outreach programmes. Every Jehovah's Witness, health allowing, is expected to give time to 'field work,' to knocking doors, or standing in the street with their increasingly familiar literature carts.

While the Mormon Church is known for its army of young missionaries, generations of Mormons have been encouraged to play their part in witnessing. Church president David O McKay, while heading the European Mission (1922-1924), coined the phrase '*every member a missionary*' and it was eventually taken up across the church.

Of course, as with orthodox churches, cults always have those people with nominal involvement who fail to turn out. But there is no question in anyone's mind about this most fundamental aspect of involvement in their respective organisations. Cults have a membership that takes seriously the call to '*go and make disciples.*' (Mt.28:19)<sup>2</sup>. The Narrative

Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons have a story to tell. For both it is about apostasy in the early church and a swift decline into heresy. Both see the early church councils and the resulting creeds as evidence of confusion born of a falling away from plain and simple truths.

## 5 Reasons People Join Cults

This plays well into the common perception that the church is confusing and irrelevant and the claim is fundamental to Christian cults. For Jehovah's Witnesses the story tells of a restoration of those plain and simple truths through Charles Russell and his early Bible students. For Mormons that restoration of truth and authority came through their founding prophet, Joseph Smith.

Both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are very familiar with their founding story and its development. Philip cried, *'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law, and about whom the prophets also wrote.'* (John 1:45) So cult members want to say, 'We have found the way!'

### 3. The Purpose

The purpose of all this activity for Jehovah's Witnesses is to gather people into 'the truth.' For Mormons its much the same, to offer people 'God's great plan of happiness.' Convinced of the good in their message and the urgency of the need, they will invite friends and family, neighbours and work colleagues to church events, to do a book study, to meet the missionaries, to discuss further their pressing questions about the purpose of life.

They are quite certain life has a purpose and simply wish to clear away what they see as the fog of confusion in people's lives and put them on the path to redemption. The woman at the well ran to tell her neighbours, *'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?'* (John 4:29) So cult members believe they have found clarity and want to share it with others.

### 4. The Doctrine

Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have a well rehearsed apologetic for their faith. They will understand it at different levels, from the most basic arguments through to the more complex explanations for what they believe. Most can, however, give an account of themselves at some meaningful level and have a range of resources to hand when they get to the end of their personal knowledge and understanding. Doctrine is high on a cult's list of priorities. Like Paul in Athens (Acts 17), they can, when asked, answer the question *'What do you believe?'*

### 5. The Community

Behind the cult's activity is a local community of believers who belong in the story and who will wholeheartedly welcome newcomers into that story. And it is into the story newcomers are invited. It is an invitation to understanding, to involvement, and to commitment. It involves discipleship, development, encouragement, and ownership of the narrative of the faith.

People don't join cults. They join communities that seek them out, give them answers, offer them love, provide purpose and structure for their lives. There are issues with cults, of course, such as doctrinal error, legalism, the control and manipulation that distinguishes the cult.

Reachout exists to warn about these and has not gone soft and interfaith on cults. But the basic principles of invitation, narrative, purpose, doctrine, and community are fundamental to our own Christian faith. How might we better use these to reach the lost, to guard against error, and what will it take for a local church to become effective in equipping its members to share the good news with confidence, to deal with the threat of the cults?

### **Discipleship**

Discipleship is key to building a people who know and love God, to understand what it is to be Christian, and who are confident in talking about their faith. Jesus' Great Commission' is not to go and make church members but to, *'Go and make disciples...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'* (Mt.28:19-20) This means building a community that increasingly identifies with each other as beneficiaries of and witnesses for the good news of Jesus Christ.

#### Definition

*'A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.'*

(Lk.6:40)

*'They said to him, 'John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.' (Lk.5:33)*

A disciple is not simply trained in knowing but in being, being like their teacher. A disciple seeks to learn and adopt the way of life of the teacher. This includes everything we think, do, and say, how we look at and engage with the world. The first thing a disciple must know is how does the teacher understand things? This brings us to the question of narrative.

On 6th April 1830, in upper New York State, a new church was founded. The story of the church is that, ten years earlier, a young man of 14 went into the woods near his home to pray about which church to join. The official account is that the Father and the Son appeared and told him to join none of them. He had been chosen to be the prophet of God's 'restored' church.

Visitations from angels and resurrected Bible characters followed and a body of teaching developed. This is the story of Mormonism. Ask any Mormon and they will relate this narrative and the teachings and practices of their church.

In many Christian churches, ask members and they will tell you their personal narrative, their particular understanding of faith and what the church means to them. There is nothing wrong and a lot that is right about testimony but, where the Jehovah's Witness or Mormon will naturally have something bigger than themselves, a meta-narrative, with which to identify, for many Christians it is a story of 'me and Jesus.' The gospel is the story of us, but our collective identity has been lost somehow as the world's cult of the individual has encroached on the church. One of the attractive things about a cult is a rediscovery of the bigger 'us.'

Church can be no more than a community centre where people come and park their own interests, beliefs, and world-view, a gathering of broadly like-minded people rather than a community of the redeemed in Christ.

It is possible to end up with a range of denominations in one local church because its a 'good church,' a church with a good children's work, or youth programme, a family ethos, or a lively atmosphere in which people can 'find themselves.' These are good things but they do not finally define a good church in the biblical sense. The Bible describes the church in terms of devotion, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer and the common life. (Acts 2:42-47)

## 5 Reasons People Join Cults

Believe it or not, even in cults there are sometimes a range of views and understandings, though usually within narrow parameters. The difference is that the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the cult is not defined by the loudest voices, but by a settled understanding kept in trust by the leadership and members whose responsibility it is to hold the centre.

Loyalty to correct belief and conduct is reasonably required, especially of leaders and teachers, and people who don't yet subscribe know they don't, and know what that means. In such a church there is direction, purpose, and an understanding of what is required of each one.

### **Narrative**

In many local churches there exist such different and disparate ideas about 'what we believe' about all sorts of things; what the gospel involves, what church is, what 'tradition' we hold to, what we are about. There needs to be established in everyone's mind a clear narrative. It is perhaps there in official literature, perhaps in a Membership Booklet, but often not impressed upon people. People don't have to subscribe to it, of course, but neither should they be given a platform to contradict it. I fear some consider church to be a social movement where consensus rules. In their book *The Vine Project* Marshall and Payne sum up the problem well.

*'The world we live in is not neutral territory. It is not a bright sunny place where nice people just get on with their lives, and work, and interests, and where Christians are people who happen to have a particular interest in going to church...According to the world [someone turns] to religion and spirituality to fill certain needs in [their] lives-for meaning, for belonging, for comfort, for certainty, to be the best possible version of [themselves], and more...to become the person they were always meant to be.'* (Marshall and Payne, 'The Vine Project, Matthias Media, 2016)

The Bible paints a very different picture, of a dark world filled with lost souls, slaves to their own impulses and desires, saved only by the grace of God through the sacrifice of the cross. (Eph.2:1-7; 5:8; 6:12; John 12:46; Col.1:13) saved for God's purposes and glory.

Christians are not decent people who have found each other in a nice liberal community of enlightened souls. Christians are sinners bound for a lost eternity who have found a Saviour who calls them to work for the good of the church and kingdom, to a life of servant-hood.

### **Vision**

Not all churches have formal membership arrangements but, whether formal or informal, a member should be reasonably expected to hold to the one narrative. Eugene Peterson describes discipleship as 'A long obedience in the same direction.' In his book of that name he writes:

*"There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."* (A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society, IVP Books, 2000)

## 5 Reasons People Join Cults

One of the roles of leadership is in identifying vision, values and world-view for the community they lead; giving direction. This means 'comforting' people in the true sense of Psalm 23, encouraging them to 'own' the church and not just create busyness where their interests lie. Too many simply shop for their religion, picking off the shelf the bits of church that serve them. This is because, *'Where there is no vision [narrative] the people cast off restraint.'* (Prov.29:18)

### **Covenant**

Christians are a covenant people and *'belong to another.'* (1 Cor.6:20) We are a kingdom people, born-again citizens of Christ's kingdom, people who should be about kingdom business. This is not negotiable, not a matter of personal preference, but a kingdom imperative. We should be reminded of this, challenged about it, which is what discipleship does, that is, hold people to account otherwise, *'every man does what seems right in his own eyes.'* (Judges 21:25)

### **Involvement**

Loyalty to the narrative of church and kingdom ought to be the mindset before people are invited to lead, teach and preach. Some activities, in this respect, are non-negotiable, fundamental to our spiritual health as individuals and as a community. These are:

Corporate Prayer – in praying together we practice the 'belonging together' that covenant means.

Discipleship – which draws us into kingdom living, ensures we are living out the apostles' teaching to which we are devoted, and indicates we are accountable to and for each other.

Evangelism – which is the New Testament imperative to tell the good news. But if we don't have a clear kingdom narrative what are we inviting people to be a part of? Surely not going to church until we go to heaven?

### **Preaching and Teaching**

Preaching isn't instruction, it is to earnestly correct, rebuke, and encourage (2 Tim.4:1-5) Teaching is more than informing, it is instruction in the ways of the kingdom (2 John 1:6). Preaching and teaching are the vehicles used to tell the narrative. It should be strongly led and managed to ensure we don't have people delivering and receiving mixed messages, *'For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine.'* (2 Tim.4:3)

This involves the pulpit, small groups, prayer meetings, Bible studies, courses, etc. What is your church's narrative, what is the best way to put it across, how can you ensure it is consistent and 'body-building?'

### **Leadership**

The focus of leadership should be in these core areas and activities. If these values and activities are not already central the temptation is to worry about adding something else to an already busy schedule, about what else might suffer if our attention is taken away from what we are already doing. But if we are too busy to pray, disciple, and evangelise we are too busy.

## 5 Reasons People Join Cults

Administration of an overloaded calendar should not distract us from building the church, from building people's faith and lives, around the fundamentals of prayer, discipleship, and evangelism. These core activities of the church should follow clear leadership, revolve around our active involvement, and be inspired by our consistent telling of the narrative of the church and its beliefs. The things people, especially young people, seek and find in the cults are there in a properly led church.

Leaders need to decide whether they are leading or simply managing the church. If leaders are leading, the first question they ask when facing any challenge is, 'How do we lead the sheep to safety in the Lord?' They realise that those Christians are safest who are most involved in kingdom-building activities that prepare them to meet the world with confidence.

If leaders are simply managing the first question will inevitably be, 'How can we protect our people by keeping their encounters with the world to a minimum?' A lot of church leaders ask the latter, especially when it comes to the cults, and the consequences speak for themselves.

The wider church is facing major challenges as the world becomes more hostile to the gospel. Into this world the cults come with an alternative message that appeals to human nature, dethrones God, and puts man at the centre.

Ironically, part of the appeal of the cults is their adherence to a conservatism from which the Christian Church is found to be retreating. Cults are demanding of their membership and still manage to recruit. There is a lesson here for the Body of Christ.

At such a time the local church needs leading in prayer and discipleship so that we can confidently get the message of the gospel to a dying world. The church at its best is a community that, untainted by the world, understands what God is about in the world, makes that their purpose, and carries that narrative into the world with an invitation to join with them in God's great work of redemption.

*'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage-with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.'* (2 Tim.4:1-5)

### **Family and Friends**

What are family and friends to do when they suspect a loved one has become involved in a cult. We can feel hopeless and helpless in our concern for someone, but there are things we can do, steps we can take towards being of practical help.

The first step is to calmly consider your reasons for thinking there is cult involvement. Sometimes a change in behaviour, lifestyle, and choice of friends is an indication the person is simply cleaning up their act because of legitimate church involvement. Show an interest, ask questions. A genuine church is readily identifiable, easily accessible, open to questions, prepared to talk.



## 5 Reasons People Join Cults

If suspicion remains, or is confirmed, quietly go about finding out as much as you can about the group, its leaders, history, and activities. This can be an empowering process. It equips you to speak intelligently when opportunities come, gives you some measure of control, and helps ensure there are fewer surprises for you further down the road.

Newspapers typically carry articles about the more secretive, controlling groups. The Internet can be a good source of information, with the usual caveat to be selective in what you take, trust, and use.

Identify and work with others who share your concern, other families and friends, churches, cult ministries. There is usually a lot of information out there to help you understand what you are dealing with. There are always people who have done this before you and who can save you a lot of work and point you to good resources.

Keep your home and the lines of communication open. Rather than being judgemental be nurturing, caring, loving and patient. The cult will have taught that critics are dangerous, enemies of the cause. If you love them then you disabuse them of this idea, and demonstrate that the cult must be mistaken. It is often the case that your loved one will have a crisis of faith, a time of questioning. When that time comes they will need somewhere to go, someone to turn to. The right approach helps identify you as that go-to person, home as the go-to place.

### **Church**

One of the great errors people make is in having nothing to offer in place of the group. Your loved one has reasons for joining the cult and those reasons don't necessarily go away when they leave. Their questions remain, their sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo may still be there. The cult will have taught them that the churches are hopelessly confused and lost, and it can be difficult to let go of this idea.

Be involved in a church that is '*devoted to the apostles teaching,*' (Acts 2:42) that is not afraid to address the difficult questions, that is more than coffee mornings and guilds. Christ's church is dynamic, living, and makes a difference. These are often the qualities that attract people, especially the young, to cults.

Such a church educates people in the Bible, and this is essential if the challenge of the cults is to be met. Know your Bible and you can identify and demonstrate where a group has got it wrong, demonstrate that the Bible has the answers people are looking for.

### **Prayer**

Prayer is essential in addressing the challenge of the cults. There are secular organisations that are of practical help and can prove very useful, but prayer can reach places simple explanation and intervention cannot. Prayer changes circumstances, reaches hearts, changes minds. '*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*' (James 5:16, ESV)

If you can, seek the strength in praying as a group, pray as a church. Pray intelligently, guided in your prayers by the information you have gathered, by the latest understanding you have of circumstances. Pray saving prayers, prayers for deliverance, for opportunities to talk and share, for wisdom in those conversations, for hearts and minds to be challenged and changed.



## **5 Reasons People Join Cults**

Keep in touch with us. Reachout is always ready to come and speak to groups and churches, ready to sit down with cult-members prepared at last to listen, ready to advise those who have finally taken that step away from error and don't know, perhaps, what comes next.



### ***Reachout Trust***

Website: [www.reachouttrust.org](http://www.reachouttrust.org)

### ***Office***

Email: [office@reachouttrust.org](mailto:office@reachouttrust.org)

Tel: 0203 196 2391

### ***Michael Thomas***

Email: [reachouttrust1@gmail.com](mailto:reachouttrust1@gmail.com)

Tel: 01792 709 470