

Religion

The psychiatrist said:

'Either be deprogrammed here or s

BY LOUIS MOORE
Chronicle Religion Writer

Joyce Daly, 20, says she was suspicious when her parents, Jim and Teresa Fischer, stopped their car at the Ramada Inn on the Southwest Freeway.

She says she was wary of her parents' story that they wanted to visit out-of-town relatives because weeks earlier they had tricked her into seeing a psychiatrist to talk about her involvement in a religious group called "The Church in Houston."

Once inside a hotel room, Daly came face-to-face with the same psychiatrist. With him were his secretary, a man whom Daly describes as a "body guard" and the Rev. James Cunningham, a local Assembly of God campus minister.

The psychiatrist told her, Daly says, that she could either agree to go through his deprogramming sessions at the hotel or he would sign the papers to have her committed to a mental institution for 90 days.

Faced with that option, she says she agreed to the deprogramming session. She did not have much choice. Her parents had earlier obtained a 30-day conservatorship over her from a state district court here, so they could have legally

forced her to stay.

Daly describes her deprogramming this way:

"They (the psychiatrist and other workers) kept me up talking from 6 that evening (when the session started) till 5 the next morning. They let me sleep three hours, from 5 (a.m.) to 8 (a.m.). We started again at 8 (a.m.). I lost track of time after that.

"After I broke (agreed to leave the church), they let me sleep. After I awoke, they got me to send a letter to The Church in Houston. The letter said, 'I'm trusting the Lord Jesus and I am putting The Church to the test.' It concluded by saying, 'I have no present intention of returning to The Church.'"

The deprogramming session occurred last February. It took 24 hours and afterward Daly was sent to an out-of-state rehabilitation center. She is now back in Houston living with her parents in their elegant home in the Memorial area.

Teresa Fischer says the entire deprogramming cost about \$5,500. She feels it was worth the cost to get her daughter out of a religious cult.

Spokesmen for The Church in Houston, 6355 Windswept, emphatically deny that

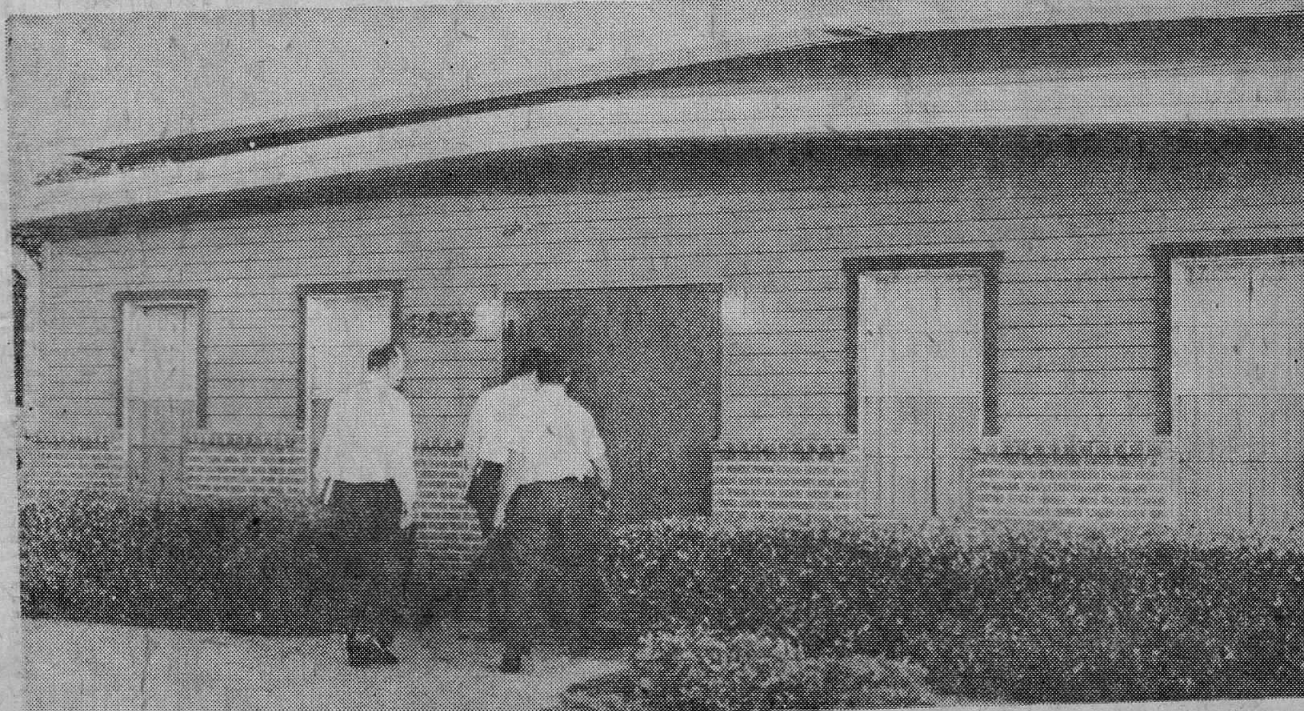
their church is a cult. Groups that are fighting cults here identify the church as one of the new dangerous religious cults.

Unlike similar deprogrammings here, this one is different in at least four ways:

- Members of The Church in Houston are willing to discuss the circumstances of the deprogramming as well as their beliefs and practices in depth with the press. Church leaders, including some well-established businesspeople here, offered to go so far as to provide copies of their church's budget and any other documentation necessary about their group — a pledge even established churches are sometimes wary of providing.

- The family is willing to go completely public with their story. Only the psychiatrist insists on remaining anonymous.

- Cults are repeatedly charged with attempting to capture wealthy young people in order to obtain their money. In this case, Daly has a sizable private trust fund. Her parents are also wealthy. Daly and The Church in Houston leaders say she was never asked to give any money to the church. She says she voluntarily donated very little to the church during the one-and-a-half years she spent in the group. So in this case, money could have



Photos by Mike Robinson, Chronicle Staff

Three members of The Church in Houston enter the church's building at 6355 Windswept near the Southwest Freeway. A mem-

ber of the church was recently psychiatrist. Church members cla

spend 90 days in a mental hospital'

been a significant factor, but was not.

• On the surface, this situation could easily be viewed as a fight between high church and low church elements. Daly and her family are Roman Catholic. The Church in Houston appears in many ways to be a hybrid cross between Southern Baptist and Church of Christ theology with some unusual theology thrown in for spice. If the church is a cult, it is not as developed as others like the Body of Christ, a Bible-oriented group involved in numerous deprogrammings and suits throughout the United States.

Daly says she believes now that The Church in Houston is a cult. She says it is a cult mainly because of its narrowed theological base and the fact that it so closely follows the teachings of one man, Witness Lee of Anaheim, Calif.

She says The Church in Houston is one of numerous "local churches" that are autonomous from but loyal to Lee.

"We said there are other Christians, but that we are the remnant willing to give our all (to Christ)," she says.

"They (members of The Church) believe they are here to accomplish God's true purposes.

"We believed that God was using us to

shame Satan because we were giving our all to Christ."

Members of The Church in Houston deny Daly's charge.

She says she still feels warmly about The Church in Houston because it was there that she was "saved" or came to have a personal relationship with God. She says she truly believes she came to know God through the church.

Daly is not highly critical of the group, and says she is currently trying to sort out her feelings about the entire situation.

Ray Graver, one of the four elders of The Church in Houston, says the group is upset about the deprogramming.

"We are not a cult. We do not brainwash," he says. "We do not practice anything that resembles brainwashing."

Daly says she feels she was brainwashed by the church mainly during the three 10-day sessions she attended in Anaheim, Calif., over a year-and-a-half period. Between 50-100 members of The Church in Houston twice a year attend the seminars. They usually travel to California by charter plane or bus.

The seminars are taught by Lee, a Chinese-American whose teachings are sometimes identified as cultic.

She says she feels she was "brainwashed" because the sessions were intensive. Daly says she feels the "brainwashing" done by the group is subtle. She says the church teaches members never to doubt.

Seminar participants spend about four hours a day listening to Lee.

Graver, a former Baptist, says the sessions are no more intensive than those held at the Baptist encampment in Glorieta, N.M. or other church retreats.

Daly says members of the Church in Houston are not encouraged to listen to tapes of Lee or follow some daily ritualistic study or work which are usually associated with charges of brainwashing. They are, however, taught to use a chant "Oh, Lord Jesus" whenever they are faced with a period of doubting. "They don't tell you to do it, but it is understood that you should because everyone else does it."

Daly says she first became involved in The Church in Houston while a freshman at the University of Houston. She says she met another student there who was a member of the church and slowly through conversations with him became interested in it.

Trying to dispell the idea that the church is a dangerous cult, Graver brought nine other members of The Church to The Chronicle to talk with this reporter. The group included an attorney



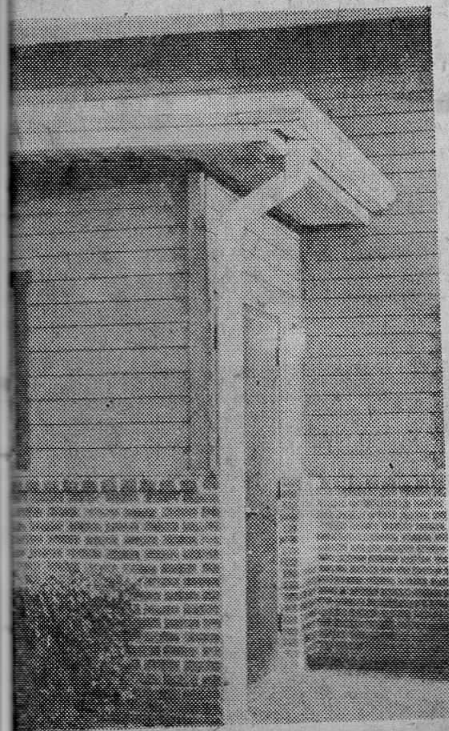
Joyce Daly was deprogrammed by a local psychiatrist.

who works for one of the major oil companies in Houston, a chiropractor, a secretary, a housewife, a typesetter, a guidance counselor for a school district, a draftsman for an oil company and a teacher at a local college.

The group ranged in age from 23 to 64. Wilma Heathcott, 64, was one of the nine. She says she is a former Baptist. She says she was attracted to The Church in Houston because Lee's teachings offer "a great insight into the Word (the Bible). This is light that I did not get anywhere else," she says.

Billy Lockhart, 23, was another of the nine. He says he was a Catholic before he became a member of The Church in Houston. He says he was a high school dropout who has an arrest record for drug abuse. He says he was "saved" in 1969 and later became a member of The Church because of the love and acceptance he found in the group. He says his parents live here and are pleasantly shocked by the change in him.

Other members who came to The Chronicle emphasized that they chose on their own to join The Church in Houston because of various appealing aspects of the church.



deprogrammed by a Houston psychiatrist. Their organization is not a cult.

'The Church in Houston' de

What is The Church in Houston, located at 6355 Windswept? Is it a cult or simply another of the unusual expressions of Christianity that from time to time emerge?

Ray Graver, one of the four elders of The Church, denies that the group is a cult. But he says, "We follow the teachings of Witness Lee and if following his teachings makes us a cult, then we are a cult. But I don't think we are."

Graver says members of The Church in Houston follow Lee's ministry and teachings, but do not worship him.

"We don't worship him like others worship Sun (Myung) Moon (the founder and leader of the Unification Church)."

Lee, of Anaheim, Calif., is a Chinese-American whose books include "The Church in the Psalms", "The Practical Expression of the Church," and "The Experience of Life." The books can be purchased in some area bookstores.

Graver says the church utilizes the writings of other theologians, but places its greatest emphasis on Lee's writings and teachings.

The local Committee Engaged in Freeing Minds considers The Church in Houston a cult, because the group follows the teachings of Lee. A group called Spiritual Counterfeits of Berkeley, Calif., has dubbed Lee and his followers cultists.

Spiritual Counterfeits has made theological charges against Lee's teachings and has issued a brochure attacking him. Lee and his followers deny each of the charges in the brochure. This week Spiritual Counterfeits announced that it is restudying Lee and his "local churches" and asked those who have copies of the brochures to stop distributing them. The group said it has a new statement about Lee coming out soon.

Graver describes Lee's teachings as mostly traditional Christianity. He says Lee believes in the Trinity, Virgin Birth and Resurrection. He says the area of Lee's teachings that provokes controversy is that of ecclesiology.

Lee teaches that there should be one church in one city.

By that he does not mean that all congregations of Christians must or should be merged into one congregation, says Graver. Lee means that Christians should be grouped together by location rather than by denomination.

He says churches in the New Testament appear to have been united in various towns and are identified by their town's name. For example, the book of Revelation is addressed to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

"We believe in a united Christianity based on locality," says Graver.

Joe Davis, another elder in the Church in Houston, says the group here does not consider itself the only group of Christians here. Nor does it consider itself a new type of revelation.

Davis, a former Church of Christ minister, says, "Our burden is to practice church life without doctrinal difference. There is no sense that we are the only Body of Christ, that we are 'it'."

The brochure put out by Spiritual Coun-



Ray Graver is one of the four elders of The Church in Houston.

terfeits and now being withdrawn does not attack Lee's ecclesiology. It attacks specific points of his theology.

Lee is charged with:

- Teaching Modalism or Sabellianism, the belief that God was first the Father, then became the Son (Jesus) and then became the Holy Spirit. "There are not three person's in Lee's Trinity, but only one person who appears at different times in the three different modes," says the Spiritual Counterfeits' brochure.

- Attacking other churches.
- Teaching a pantheistic philosophy about an "all-inclusive Christ" who is both "the Creator and the creation."
- Teaching belief in a "cosmic Christ."
- Encouraging Eastern mystical practices that resemble the Hare Krishna chants.

Lee has issued a statement denying the charges. Graver, Davis and other members of The Church in Houston also deny the charges.

They say they:

- Believe in the Trinity as it has been understood in traditional Catholic and Protestant circles. They believe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three entities that are all part of the same God and that they exist simultaneously.

- Are not pantheistic. "Only those who are grossly foolish and erring in heart would equate Christ, the Almighty Creator, with the physical materials of bread, light, a door, a lamb and so forth," Lee says.

- Do not teach belief in a "cosmic Christ." Graver says he has never heard the expression "cosmic Christ" prior to the Spiritual Counterfeits pamphlet and still doesn't understand what "cosmic Christ" means.

Lee says he understands the charge to mean that "we are assumed of equating Christ with an ethereal, mystical, impersonal influence that pervades all."

He says, "This is far from the truth. We know Him, we love Him and we worship Him not as an influence, power or force, but as the very Lord Jesus Christ who walked in the flesh among men and is now seated at the right hand of God."

- Do not indulge in any Eastern mystical practices. Graver says The Church in Houston does nothing that resembles an Eastern chant.

"We strongly assert that we do nothing that is not supported by the clear Word of God (The Bible)," says Lee. "We pray, we read the Bible, we give testimonies of the Lord's working in us, we call on the name of the Lord. We neither teach nor do we practice a vain mouthing of the Lord's name or any other words or phrases."

Joyce Daly, who was recently deprogrammed from the church, disputes Graver and Lee. She says The Church subtly teaches members to use the expression "Oh, Lord Jesus" in a way similar to a chant. She says members are not told to use the chant, but develop it because of its widespread use by other members.

- Do not attack other churches. Graver and Davis say Lee believes in local churches but not in nationwide denominations and has been critical of those denominations.

Daly says members of The Church call denominations "Satan's counterfeits."

This week, after his first interview with The Chronicle, Graver drew up a statement he says reflects the beliefs of The Church in Houston. It says:

"We believe that the Bible is the fully, verbally inspired Word of God. We believe that we must pay the closest attention to every word of the Bible, taking it and following it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God."

"We believe in the God revealed in the Bible—the only one eternal, almighty,



The Church in Houston has no Christians are ministers. Their "me

enies that it is a cult

Triune God. Who is Father, Son and Spirit. We believe that the Son of God was incarnate in the flesh in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He died upon the cross shedding His blood for our sins, that He was resurrected from the dead the third day, that He ascended to the right hand of God, that He also indwells us as our life, and that He is coming again to receive us unto Himself.

"We believe that this wonderful Person — our Savior, our Lord, and our life — has one Body in the universe, the Church. The Church is universally one, and this oneness of the Church, the Lord's Body, must have an expression in each locality. We do not agree that the Lord's children be divided into so many denominations, groups, sects and divisions. We do not recognize any divisions, but meet together just as the blood-washed, born-again Christians on the basis of our one faith and one life in Him.

"We wish to testify to the reality of our daily experience. We have a marvelous enjoyment of the Lord Jesus in our daily lives. We are enjoying Him as the One who is not only saving us from our sins in a practical way, but also filling us to overflowing with the wonderful Holy Spirit, and being our very life in our daily living. Many of us are young people who have been gloriously delivered from lives of drug addiction and crime. Christ has transformed us. Our meetings are glorious beyond description. A good number of us came from many kinds of denominational backgrounds. We can testify that we never had seen such a glorious Christ as we see now in the local churches, nor have we ever experienced and enjoyed Him to such an extent. Come and see.

"We declare that we do not want mere Christian tradition and dead form and ritual. We want to wholly and absolutely return to the pure Word of God, opening ourselves and abandoning ourselves to the living God and Holy Spirit. We are intent upon seeing a living expression of the living Christ on the earth today that He may

come back to a Bride prepared.

"We deeply love all true believers and want to go on together and be built up together with them in the Body of Christ. May God vindicate the truth and His way upon the earth for His own testimony."

The worship practices of The Church in Houston differ from those of Baptist, Pentecostal and Catholic churches here. The services, called meetings, are spontaneous and unstructured.

The emphasis is on corporate worship, Bible teaching, prayer and testimonies.

Davis says during the services members occasionally shout "Hallelujah" or "Praise the Lord". The services, however, are not Pentecostal, he says. Members do not speak in tongues publicly, although it is not forbidden privately.

Davis describes the services as less noisy than Pentecostal services but more noisy than Baptist or Church of Christ services.

Daly says frequently during the meetings someone will say a Bible verse and then others will begin repeating that verse or portions of it over and over.

The services generally last about two hours.

The group participates in the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion) every Sunday evening.

The church has no paid clergy. There is no one person designated as the pastor of the congregation. The church emphasizes the ministry of all believers.

The four elders of the church hold secular employment. They function somewhat like elders in the Churches of Christ.

Davis says the church does not have communes, but some married couples in the church have opened their homes to others and have set up "households" similar to those at Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, the charismatic congregation south of downtown Houston.

Davis says only singles are allowed to live in these "households" with the sponsoring married couples. He says the households are set up spontaneously and

are not as rigidly supervised as those of Redeemer Church.

Graver says the church does not encourage its members to contribute money to the church. There are no sermons on giving and no collections taken during the church services.

He says there is a "letter slot" in the church's meetinghouse where members deposit any contributions they wish to make.

"We do not in any way take money from our people and send it to our leader," he says. The money is spent to keep the church operating and to help needy people, he says.

Several members of The Church as well as the young Houston woman who was deprogrammed say they were never asked to contribute to the church.

The group is evangelistic. Daly and Davis both say members are encouraged to use their school or work as a medium for telling others about their faith.

Daly says the evangelistic efforts focus on university campuses and the medical center here.

The Church in Houston has been instrumental in establishing similar churches in Oklahoma City, Dallas and Austin. In each case, members of the church here moved to the other cities to help establish the new congregations.

The Church in Houston began forming in 1967 when Dr. James Stringer, 40, a local chiropractor, started a prayer meeting in his home with another couple. There was no intention at that time to establish a church, says Stringer.

"We met together to pray. This was what most of our early meetings were about.

He says, "As a result of our praying, this (the church) came about." The prayer meetings grew and slowly the church's structure emerged, he says.

The church has no roll. People become members simply by attending the services at the church.

—Louis Moore



astor. Members believe all Christians are informal and spontane-

ous. Seats are arranged in circles, so members face one another. Pictured is a group that met for Tuesday night prayer meeting.