

CAMPUS

By Stephanie Griest
Washington Post Staff Writer

Fresh out of Cornell, Miguel Antonio Longo ventured to his parents' home country of Puerto Rico to teach English and, as his father says, "do something significant for the people." He'd been there just a short while when he met a friendly Christian at an art gallery in San Juan. Miguel, a devout Catholic, readily accepted an invitation to a Bible study.

Two years later, Miguel handed himself in his Adams-Morgan apartment. His parents blame the International Churches of Christ.

"When they kill the mind, kill the soul, it's impossible to prove. But if you're a parent, you know what he was like before he went in and what he was like after he came out," said Antonio Longo, Miguel's father, a physician in Alexandria.

Miguel had suffered bouts of depression during his senior year of

college. Aug. 8, 1993, could have been a relapse. After severing ties with the church, he had seen a therapist and counselors and told them that he was overwhelmed with guilt over the pain he caused his parents, as well with embarrassment about having been, in his words, "conned" by the church. He did not leave a suicide note.

Could all this be the fault of a church? The evangelist of the Iglesia de Cristo de Puerto Rico, a member church of ICC, has since left; ICC church officials in the States did not know the details of the story and would not comment. Miguel was a member of the church for only five months. Could such a short involvement affect him so deeply?

Teresa Longo isn't thinking of such questions now. She just remembers how much her son changed in Puerto Rico. Gone was his sense of humor, his joking demeanor. He only wanted to talk about Scriptures and his new "family." When she finally asked, "Miguel Antonio, do you think these

The fast-growing International Churches of Christ welcomes students with open arms. Does it let them go?



CRUSADERS

people who six months ago did not know you existed, could possibly love you more than us who conceived you, raised you, love you more than anything else in the world?" he said, "Yes."

Joi Buckner, a 22-year-old graduate of American University, for two years refused to join ICC because she heard it was "a cult." She even warned incoming freshmen about the church's alleged tactics of "mind control" when she was a summer orientation adviser. But eventually, Buckner said, it burdened her conscience to be so close-minded about a group she knew little about. She decided to attend a Sunday service in October of '92.

Buckner said she was "cold and aloof" at first and didn't let anyone get close to her. But certain things impressed her, such as the congregation's racial diversity. Its energy. She attended one Bible study, then another. She researched "cults" in the library—every day, she said. For eight months.

It happened just before her 20th

birthday, in March 1993. Buckner was sitting in her room, looking at all of her crowns, her trophies, her possessions. She was a co-captain of the speech and debate teams, an ambassador to the College of Arts and Sciences, Miss Washington, D.C. 1993-1994.

"And I was thinking, 'I have a boyfriend some people would kill for, and enough trophies to melt down and make a car, and I have so many friends and my parents are wonderful, but deep in my heart, I am unhappy,'" Buckner, who now works as a concierge, remembered. "From the outside, I had an ideal life, but from the inside, well, I felt I had been sufficiently humbled by God. And I said, 'Well Joi, you can give this God thing a try, or you can choose death.'"

She chose the D.C. Church of Christ and said it changed her life. Gave it meaning. Happiness. She's still a member today. It was the same church Miguel joined, just a different location.

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The International Churches of Christ, though still tiny, is one of the fastest-growing churches in the nation, according to Church Growth Today, an independent Missouri-based research center. ICC has a goal: world evangelism by the year 2000. It claims to have already planted 175 churches in 70 countries in 17 years and boasts a 70,000-plus membership. Congregations rent auditoriums for their Sunday services. The Los Angeles Church of Christ, ICC's headquarters, sometimes meets in the Shrine Auditorium, site of last year's Oscars. The D.C. Church of Christ has at times filled Constitution Hall.

Services are dynamic. Seats fill up front-row first with zealous parishioners armed with legal pads or blank books, ready to take notes on the evangelist's sermon. New visitors receive overwhelming welcomes of hugs and kisses by strangers who call themselves "brothers" and "sisters." Asians and Caucasians mingle with Latinos and African Americans. It's a young crowd: about half of the District's 1,000-plus congregation consists of college students and recent grads.

"This is the only place you can be totally committed and be normal! Be commended!" Doug Arthur, a D.C. evangelist, shouted at a recent Sunday service. His comments were received like those of a politician at a party convention.

Members say their beliefs and practices are based solely on an exact interpretation of the Bible. They are expected to attend church services at least twice a week, in addition to regular smaller gatherings for Bible study. Current members say they spend anywhere from 15 to 30 hours a week on church activities. All new members must be baptized into the church before becoming "disciples."

Then there are the ex-members. They also make an impressive group: For every three who enter the church, two leave, church officials say. Many have formed communities of their own. Nationwide, support groups abound. Telephone hot lines just for questions about ICC field calls on a weekly basis in New York, Los Angeles and Boston. More and more universities are adding sessions to freshman orientation about what they call "destructive groups," which are sometimes led by former ICC members.

The New Religious Movement Resource Center in Boulder, Colo., says former ICC members are its most frequent callers. The Cult Awareness Network, based in Chicago, claims that it sends out more information packages about ICC than any other Bible-based group. And the Wellspring Resource Center, a recovery center near Albany, Ohio, says it admits more ex-members of this church than all the rest.

"We feel like we've been spiritually raped," said 21-year-old Walter Lee, a first-year medical student at George Washington University who was involved with the church for several months. He started a support group for ex-members in the spring of last year. "There were all of these people we trusted and thought were our friends, and now we feel like our world is down the tube."

In the Beginning

It started with Crossroads, a '60s movement of the mainstream Churches of Christ, now totally separate from ICC, in Gainesville, Fla., that was designed to recruit college students. Crossroads was led by Chuck Lucas, the campus minister at the University of Florida. Lucas practiced a controversial "discipling," or mentoring, method called "one another Christianity," an evangelistic-style of group Bible study. He inspired hundreds of students.

Kip McKean was one of Lucas' proteges. He delved into the Crossroads Movement upon graduation and, as he explained in a 1992 issue of the ICC magazine UpsideDown, grew angry

with the "so-called Christian students" and deemed the spiritual condition of the mainstream Churches of Christ "lukewarm to disgusting." Other ministers became suspicious of McKean's discipling methods; one church even cut off its support and let him go.

In June of 1979 in Boston, McKean led 30 would-be "disciples" in a discussion of the doctrine of their church. The Boston Movement, later to be called the International Churches of Christ (or Boston Churches of Christ—ICC can be distinguished from mainstream Churches of Christ, because the location city usually precedes "Churches" in the name) slowly evolved from these meetings. McKean, who declined to be interviewed for this story, became the undisputed leader of the group, and still is today.

In August of 1985, Lucas was fired from Crossroads for what church officials call "recurring sins in his life." He is now a marriage counselor in Thomasville, Ga., and did not return a reporter's calls. Elders from both churches say it was about this time that the Boston Movement completely severed its ties with the mainstream Churches of Christ. The disciples had already mapped out a plan for world evangelism. It was time to get started.

Bible Talk

Early in the movement, McKean developed a series of nine Bible studies. Church members were told to memorize them and then teach the lessons to possible recruits. The studies are still used today and, according to Dave Anderson, are part of the group's "cult-like tactics."

"The studies are a narrowing progression of options," said Anderson, the coordinator of both the telephone hot line and a support group for ex-members in New York called Right Side Up. "Your options are reduced to your agreement that this is the only church."

Al Baird has a different opinion.

"If you studied the whole Bible, that would take years," said Baird, the ICC spokesman. "The studies are just an attempt to

boil the Bible down to the basic ingredients of how you follow Jesus."

The Bible studies are intricate, and each one lasts two to five hours, depending on the number of questions a recruit has. Passages are taken straight from the Bible, but they are interpreted in a way that some scholars call "Scripture twisting."

"Their isolation of passages and lack of understanding on how they were spoken then and how they apply today cause extreme problems," said Rick Bauer, a minister at a Montgomery County Christian church who has a master's degree from Harvard Divinity School. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in Biblical studies at Catholic University. "They are playing fast and loose with God's word, and they've refused to entertain the possibility they may be wrong."

One of the first lessons is called "Discipleship Study."

"[My discipler] wrote, 'Disciple equals Christian equals saved equals heaven,'" Matt Ledoux remembered. He was a freshman at George Washington University last year and attended a few Bible studies at the suggestion of his resident assistant. "And underneath that, he wrote, 'Not a Disciple equals not a Christian equals not saved equals hell.'"

Steffi Rausch, a 1995 graduate of the University of Maryland, was told to write down every immoral thing she'd ever done and give it to her discipler in the "Sin Study."

"I just cried and cried so much, and [my discipler] did as well. She said, 'I did that too; it's okay. Now it's time to stop. Now you know the church, and you cannot go back and commit those sins again,'" said Rausch, who belonged to the church for about four months during her sophomore year. She

has since started a group called Students Educating Against Mind Control at Maryland.

The church sees the studies as part of the challenge of being a Christian. "You can't be a disciple and living in immorality," said Baird, the ICC spokesman. "And you can't be a Lone Ranger Christian."

That's where the passage "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men [Mark 1:17]" comes in. According to church members, "fishing for men" or "reaching out" is a biblical duty.

"I just make it a natural part of my lifestyle. If the person standing in front of me in lunch looks friendly, I'll ask them [to church]," said 21-year-old Fred McConnell, a senior at George Washington. He's been with the church since his freshman year. "I reach out to maybe five to 10 people a day."

Reaching Out

Some school officials, like those at Georgia Tech, Marquette University and Boston University, have another name for "reaching out"—they call it "proselytizing," and campus recruiters have been kicked off numerous universities for "harassment." But the church isn't an easy group to control, as both members and school officials will agree.

"It's a sales organization," said Flavil Yeakley, who was a minister of the mainstream Churches of Christ for 25 years and is now a professor of religious studies at Harding University in Arkansas. "It's a system based on production—how many converts you make—and reward."

Jon Goodman, a 27-year-old ICC evangelist-in-training, said there are anywhere from half a dozen to 75 members of the D.C. Church of Christ at each of the following universities: George Washington, American, the University of Maryland, Montgomery College, George Mason, Howard, Georgetown, Morgan State and the University of the District of Columbia.

Several of these schools have allowed their students to form officially recognized organizations, but not one campus group calls itself "the D.C. Church of Christ." At George Washington, for example, students go by "G-Force." At the University of Maryland and Howard, they're known as "Upside Down." In fact, names changed from university to university nationwide. "Campus Advance" seemed popular. So did Greek names: students went by "Alpha Omega" at several universities in Geor-

gia. At the University of Southern California, they chose "The Chinese Engineering Society" until the student activities office noticed that their president was white and a Spanish major. Students quickly switched their name to "The Good Clean Fun Club" after that.

Baird says there is a simple explanation for this. "We're dealing with college students who are used to teams. They're interested in picking a name for the team," he said. "Now, you might think that's being deceptive, or that we're trying to hide something, but that's all we're doing."

Some universities complained of non-students entering campus grounds and proselytizing the vulnerable freshman and international populations. A reporter heard several accounts of church members positioning themselves outside guidance counselors' offices for "reaching out" and of resident assistants recruiting lonely students on their floor.

"Everyone has the right to their religion. The line gets drawn when they start proselytizing or harassing students," said Jan Sherrill, the assistant dean of students at George Washington. "The first thing [church members] say is that we're doing it because of what they believe. They love being victims; they adore being martyrs."

According to former member Lee, students aren't always asked to attend Bible studies right away. "They make contact

with you—it's called 'love bombing,'" he said. "People start calling you, and to a freshman or international student, it's like, 'Wow, I automatically have 20 friends who are always coming over and baking me cookies and inviting me to movies, dinner and volleyball games.'"

But Baird and Randy Jordan, an elder for the D.C. Church of Christ, said that the church wants to recruit everyone—not

just students. Baird stressed that the church's population is only about 20 percent college students, though former members and leaders said it is much higher.

"The message we have is to meet people's needs, and needy people respond," said Jordan, a lawyer in the District.

The Baptism

Ashley and Anne are 41 and 27, respectively—a gregarious, athletic, highly educated couple. One's a professor, the other an instructor at the same local university. They chose to go by their middle names because they didn't want to reveal too much personal information, just their story. The two got involved with the D.C. Church of Christ in February. They left in mid-July. Their phone hasn't stopped ringing since.

They were in a rocky part of their three-year relationship, Anne says, when she first met an evangelist of the D.C. Church of Christ at a health club. Anne was looking for an intangible something—a feeling, a meaning, a new church, perhaps. She wasn't ready to attend a service with the evangelist just yet, but she wanted to learn more about it. After three months of her probing questions, the evangelist finally introduced Anne to his wife. The two became fast friends and started studying the Bible together.

"And she just started [quoting] Scriptures, answered my questions with Scriptures, and I was impressed by that," Anne said of the woman who became her discipler (she did not wish to release her name either). "I had never had anyone sit down and study the Bible with me before."

A few weeks into her studies, Anne moved out of the house

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she shared with her fiancé. "What they teach you is that appearance is just as important as anything else," she said. "I went to them and said, 'Look, we're celibate and we want to be married.' And they said, 'Nope, you've got to move out. What do you think it is for somebody looking on the outside? Are they going to think you're a Christian seeing you living together?'"

Anne moved into a house with four other women from the church. That, she remembered, is when she "got real busy." There were Bible studies with her discipler, "Bible Talks" in groups, "Quiet Time" each morning at 6 for private reading and prayer, Sunday services, mid-week services, social functions, "reaching out," "Family Gatherings." Anne estimates she spent maybe 30 hours a week in church activities. Leaders said the average is more like 15 hours, but most current members echoed Anne's guess. One said his was even higher.

"I spend 168 hours a week, even in

my sleep. The Bible says you need to love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength," McConnell, the senior at George Washington University, said enthusiastically. "I even write music about God."

Although she was baptized into the Catholic church as a child, Anne was re-baptized into the D.C. Church of Christ on Mother's Day because she was told it was the only way she could be a "disciple" and be "saved." Ashley followed, not long after. That's when the trouble began.

"I got semi-rebuked one time because [Ashley] and I had gone out to dinner with another couple, and I was hugging him in the parking lot, and [the other wife] said, 'You know, I noticed that you were hugging him from the front.' And I said, 'So?' and she said, 'We were taught that you should only hug men from the back so you don't cause them to struggle,'" Anne remembered.

Dating is just one activity regulated by the church. Members are to date within the congregation, in groups of four or more, on Saturday nights. Curfew is usually midnight.

"We almost always date with another couple because we want to protect each other from impurity," said 22-year-old Paula Flores, a senior at George Washington and student leader of "G-Force." "The best thing is, there are no expectations afterward, there's no kiss, there's not the worry of 'What's he going to want afterward?'"

Money was another issue. Anne groaned when she was asked about it. She said she gave \$25 a week in tithing,

\$375 for the biannual "special contribution," \$5 to \$10 a week for the "poor collection," and maybe \$50 total for song books, shirts, tapes and other "incidentals."

"The [evangelists would] say, 'Look, we don't want you to give just that, we want you to blow out the special contribution so we can be the leading church,'" Anne said. "And there were people who were mowing lawns and selling vegetables to make their special contribution. There were people selling wedding rings."

Baird argued that almost all churches ask for a weekly 10 percent tithing, and many have special contributions and collections for the needy. But Anne and Ashley said it was the way the church collected money that gave them problems. Anne remembered in particular an evangelist rebuking a roofer for not giving enough.

"There's an envelope that gets passed around [during mid-week services] and most people write checks. Apparently, the weekly [goal] wasn't met and they

found out it was him. And the evangelist came up and said, 'This is totally unacceptable!' [The roofer] was made to feel *this high*," she said as her index finger barely hovered over her thumb.

Still, members say they don't mind giving.

"That's where trust comes in. I totally trust the church," said 21-year-old Jacob Scott. He's been a member of the church since his freshman year at American University. "I have total confidence that the money is being used wisely and biblically."

Something else worried Anne though—more than the time commitment, the rules, the money.

"I never saw anybody question, not one teaching," she said.

Former members said there was a reason for that: They were rebuked for asking too many questions. Lee said he used to get "torn apart" by his discipler for interrupting Bible studies and referred to the entire process as a "breaking session." Rausch, the former member of the U-Md. group, said a church elder once pointed a finger at her and sternly said, "You have been a very bad girl," when Rausch wanted to postpone her baptism.

"'Clone' is the perfect word for the people in the church," Anne said. "All the leaders are alike, they all preach the same thing, the disciplers become more and more alike. You're happy because you're one of the crowd, but you lose yourself."

Those in the church had different feelings.

"We're all trying to become like Christ, so I'm encouraged that we're more alike in mind and spirit," said Scott, who is a nationally ranked captain of American University's wrestling team. "If that's the modern-day definition of cult, then yeah, we're a cult."

Leaving

Ashley laughs when he says he was a disciple only for "three days,

11 hours and 45 minutes." That's when Anne's mother called. She had done some research on the church and had a phone number of two local exit counselors: Rick and Sarah Bauer. Ashley says he had been suspicious of the church all along—now he just needed help getting Anne out.

According to Rick Bauer, exit counseling is the non-coercive process of in-depth Bible discussions, video viewing, long walks and longer talks with willing church members. The Bauers had been leaders of the

Still, Anne admitted that many good things came from their involvement. Their faith was strengthened, as was their desire to raise a Christian family.

Boston Movement for a decade and a half before they started counseling. Rick Bauer says he was fired from the church for challenging its doctrine; Baird says Bauer left independently to pursue his doctorate at Catholic University. Nevertheless, the Bauers and all of the papers and books they have since written are considered "marked" and "spiritual pornography" by church officials.

In 1991, the Bauers founded Freedom House Ministries, a Christian ministry in Bowie that has since helped some 200 people out of religious groups, according to the Bauers. They boast a 99 percent success rate and say it takes the people they counsel three days, on average, to independently decide to leave. Anne took even less.

"It's so amazing to me that I can sit down and in just a couple of hours, in a very calm discussion with Anne, show her biblically where the group is off . . . and in just a couple of hours, show her how this totally wonderful system can be dismantled before her very eyes," said Bauer.

It was pretty amazing to Anne too—and nothing like she expected.

"I was told they take your Bible away from you and they kidnap you

and put you in this padded room and like, torture you or something, I don't know."

Anne was probably referring to so-called "deprogrammers," who have been known to charge parents \$50,000 or more to "kidnap" their child and "deprogram" them of indoctrination. Both Rick Bauer and Baird agreed that deprogrammers sometimes use the very tactics cults are accused of.

Anne shook her long ponytail, leaned into one of the Bauers' chairs and sighed. "This has just been a really frustrating thing. We want to make people understand who have not been through it, how people can get involved. It has nothing to do with weakness of character, or having a screw loose. It's affecting people from all walks of life, every educational background and every family upbringing," she said.

Still, Anne admitted that many good things came from the couple's involvement. Their faith was strengthened, as was their desire to raise a Christian family. Their relationship was nursed back to health. They've even set a wedding date.

Such wasn't the case for everyone.

Rausch no longer goes to church, except for an occasional holiday. It's too difficult, she said. She's no longer religious, but rather "spiritual." "God gave us the ability to make our own decisions—that's the greatest gift—and they took that away from me," she said. "And it's taken me three years to get it back."

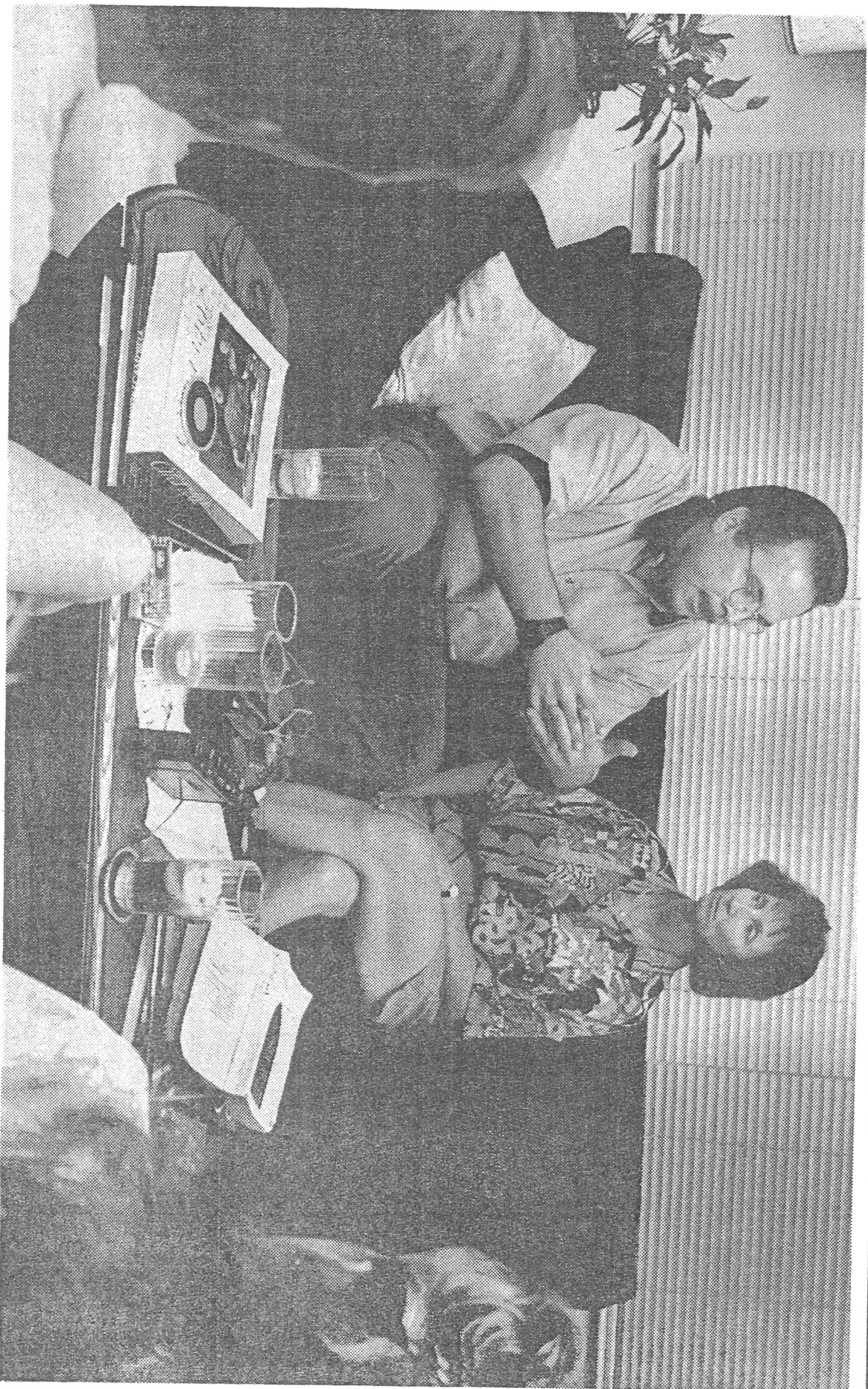
Some members never get it back, like Miguel Longo. Antonio Longo says his son couldn't escape the guilt or "the embarrassment of getting conned." Religion was ruined for him and he never went to church again, according to his parents. "They thrived on guilt and that's what killed him. The therapists, the counselors—we just didn't have time to remove the damage," Antonio said.

But what about the 70,000 members still in? A reporter heard countless uplifting stories of students who claimed the church "saved their life" from sin and damnation.

"I'm sorry there are people who have not been happy with us. I wish they could be like most people whose lives have changed," Baird said.

People like Paula Flores. "How long will I stay in?" she said, her coal black eyes surprised. Flores joined the church six months after she moved here from her home country of Bolivia in 1990. "As long as I have breath."

She smiled and finished her iced coffee. Her eyes are innocent and sweet.



"Exit counselors" Rick and Sarah Bauer founded a Christian ministry in Bowie that has helped 200 people out of religious groups.

BY RONALD MARTINEZ—THE WASHINGTON POST