



The "Closing" of The Way International

by John P. Juedes

The Way International, the pseudo-Christian cult founded by Victor Paul Wierwille, has suffered such a steep decline in its membership that even its own publication could not ignore it. *The Way Magazine* reported in its Nov.-Dec. 1997 issue that the decline is the result of Way President L. Craig Martindale's initiation of "changes to build a spiritually pure and sweet household" ("The Prevailing Word Report," pg. 22).

The decline began about the same time Martindale became The Way's president. In 1982, The Way said 3,100 Word Over the World Ambassadors went out to recruit followers. By March 1997, only 43 members of "The Way Disciples Outreach Group," which replaced the WOW Ambassadors and worked in six cities, finished what is now a six-month term. That is 1.4 percent of the number of WOW Ambassadors in 1982. If two groups were sent out per year, it would still amount to less than 3 percent.

The Way also said it graduated 415 Corps and Family Corps in 1982. Since the Corps class of 1997 included about 43 adults and The Way usually inflates its Corps number by counting children — who are officially Junior

and Mini Corps — and since many of the Corps members are married to one another, this may represent only 25 or so households.

Martindale, in his book, *The Rise and Expansion of the Christian Church in the First Century*, writes about the importance of expansion, "... the Book of Acts vividly illustrates God's passionate will and concern for the 'expansion' of His Word by way of those who speak it in love. Expansion occurs numerically and geographically and in impact throughout the whole inhabited world. ... In the principles and techniques found in its records, the Book of Acts presents the godly blueprint for success in outreach to the end of the expansion of the Word over the world" (pp. 6, 7).

The catastrophic decline that has marked Martindale's term suggests that he has not learned or followed the Book of Acts' "godly blueprint for success." The early Church faced opposition and persecution hundreds of times greater than any opposition Martindale has faced, yet it prospered.

While The Way says the changes were intended to build a "sweet" household, the hundreds who have been reprovved, purged, marked, avoided, or who left in disappointment, describe their experiences as sour. A large proportion of these don't reject Way teaching, but all reject Way leadership.

The Way has made great efforts to close its doors to everyone who does not seem to be completely committed to obeying its president. It has restricted access to its new classes, refused to sell publications, ejected many members, ended or replaced activities, consolidated its locations and increased security at its campuses. Martindale hoped that these changes would prevent potential critics from closely examining the group and would further divorce TWI from its many ex-followers and splinter groups.

The centerpiece and primary recruitment tool of TWI for nearly thirty years was the *Power for Abundant Living* (PFAL) class by the late founder Victor Paul Wierwille. However, the class had become well known to outsiders over the years, who then published critical analyses

of it. In addition, thousands who accused top Way leaders of error and left TWI still held Wierwille's class in high regard.

Martindale then replaced PFAL with his own class, *The Way of Abundance and Power*. He has tried to keep the class secret by allowing only people who are regular participants in a twig (home fellowship) to take the class. Nonetheless, reviews of the class (by this author) are available on the World Wide Web.

Martindale also replaced other classes by Wierwille and restricted access to its publications. At one time The Way allowed anyone to buy any publication except Wierwille's book, *Power for Abundant Living*, because it contained the first four sessions of the PFAL class and The Way wanted to limit that information to paying registrants.

Currently, The Way will not sell its publications to anyone who is not an active participant in a Way twig — except for subscriptions to Sunday Night Service recordings and *The Way Magazine*. (However, as this article was going to press, this writer's new subscription to *The Way Magazine* was cancelled.) A standard form from its bookstore reads:

"It is our policy that we sell only to those who actively attend our fellowships. Our records indicate that you are not currently attending a Way International fellowship. If our records are incorrect, please have your limb coordinator contact us so that we can update our information."

The Way probably found itself selling Wierwille's books to its "competitors" — its splinter groups and critics — and thought that refusing to sell the books might hinder or spite them. It also hoped to reduce the number of articles criticizing the slipshod aspects of its "research."

PURGE, MARK AND AVOID

The Way also booted out many of its followers and closed the door behind them. "Purge, mark and avoid" became The Way's rallying cry

of the 1990s. It started by purging all who seemed to be homosexuals or "homo" sympathizers. (The Way seems to enjoy using "politically incorrect" terms and profanity.) Then leaders went on to purge all who appear not to obey Martindale unquestioningly. Many seemed to fear questioning even a few practices in private, afraid word would get back to zealous leaders. Those who were purged were "avoided," and were escorted off Way campuses and utterly ignored, even by longtime friends.

One result of this is increased tension in marriages. Leaders often pressure devoted followers to either induce their mates to actively participate in Way gatherings (twigs, limbs, etc.) or to separate from or divorce them.

Many Way followers are also encouraged to move closer to the New Knoxville, Ohio, headquarters. Those who live within 250 miles of New Knoxville are pressured to attend all Sunday night services there. Those beyond that range are expected to get a live telephone hookup to the Victor Paul Wierwille Word Over the World Auditorium during the services. This practice closes ranks, and gives leaders more control over their followers.

TWI ended the WOW Ambassador program in 1994, fearing that nearly 10 percent of that year's applicants were homosexual. A year later it began the "The Way Disciples Outreach Group" program to replace the WOWs. The Disciples were to find new recruits for TWI as the WOWs did, but serve only four months instead of the year the WOWs served. But the Trustees limit the Disciples to only Advanced Class graduates in order to assure that they are more entrenched in Way practices and more answerable to leaders.

TWI has also reduced its number of campuses, closing Tinnie, N.M., and selling its Emporia, Kan., campus at a great financial loss to reduce debt brought on by diminishing financial

resources and a decline in experienced leadership.

The Way has always controlled visitors to its campuses much more than any college or institution. Its members always use name tags so that they can instantly identify any outsiders. Since the split, its security force has become increasingly aggressive, approaching and running off anyone who is not currently active in a Way-controlled twig. (Being involved in a "stick," a home fellowship of ex-Way followers not now answerable to New Knoxville, is a quick ticket off campus.) Security personnel try to intimidate outsiders by dressing as police officers — complete with police-style utility belt, holster, CB-style microphone, badge with the word "patrolman" stamped on it, and white vehicles with a seal painted on the door and emergency lights on top. The fact that security was busy confronting ex-Way followers during the last Rock of Ages gathering contributed to The Way's decision to discontinue that annual event as well.

These efforts to close circle the wagons have backfired. The increased pressure to control Way followers has actually forced many of them out, as the blatant manipulation tipped them off to the unhealthy nature of the group. These, and others who were forcibly purged, took their class materials and books with them, and passed them on to others. Those who leave, then become an exit point for some of their friends or relatives still in The Way. Computers and the World Wide Web have enabled former Way followers to contact one another and exchange information previously unavailable. Overall, the increasingly restrictive nature of The Way is showing no sign of subsiding anytime soon.

Editor's Note: John P. Juedes is a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor in California and serves on PFO's Board of Reference. He has a large collection of articles and information on The Way International available on his church's Web site: www.empirenet.com/~messiah7. 