

Life after a sex cult: 'If I'm not a member of this religion any more, then who am I?'

Michael Young grew up immersed in the Children of God church, which was labelled as a sect by the FBI and dogged by child abuse allegations



Michael Young and his family. Young was unaware that his parents' church was labeled as a sect by the FBI . Photograph: Michael Young

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Of his eight siblings, Michael Young was the most zealous street missionary. As a child growing up in Monterrey, Mexico, he preached up to 10 hours a day, three to four days each week. He spoke to strangers on the streets and often went door-to-door. He'd ask them, in broken Spanish, if they wished to go to heaven. If they said yes, he would pray for them. If they said no, he would ask for at least a donation to The Family International, a church formerly known as the sex cult The Children of God.

Young's parents, devout American missionaries who moved to Mexico in 1998, told him that such work was his destiny and duty. The alternative was an afterlife spent in the slums of heaven, a place only slightly better than hell.

When he was eight years old, in 2000, Young's family moved to Texas and started their missionary work anew in mini-malls and Walmart parking lots, handing out theological tracts about the imminent apocalypse that would soon wipe out the unbelievers.

Young says he was happy. "I was spiritual in a way that was kind of very obsessive and very determined," he says.

But Young was unaware that his parents' church was labelled as a sect by the FBI and hounded by child abuse allegations. In a 1974 report, The New York attorney general's office had also called the Children of God a "cult". The group's practices drew investigations from the FBI and Interpol, which were on the hunt for its leader, David Berg. One anonymous informant spoke of rape, incarceration, kidnapping and incest inside the group.

The investigations ended in 1994, with Berg's death. But in 2009, the organization started to crumble. The church disintegrated and Young was suddenly forced to forge himself a new life, along with thousands of other isolated missionaries who had to assimilate into a society that they had long rejected.



Michael Young: 'I was spiritual in a way that was kind of very obsessive.' Photograph: Michael Young

The Children of God started in 1968 as a small group of runaway teens and hippies who, under the direction of Berg, a charismatic evangelical preacher, devoted themselves to the worship of Jesus Christ and promiscuous sex, according to the New York attorney general's office.

The report documented Berg's proclivity for incest and witnesses testified that child rape was used as an excuse to "increase the tribe", leading to many pregnancies in various communes.

"A 14-year-old runaway who spent nine days at a COG commune testified that she was raped and because of her refusal to cooperate with the elders, was held in solitary confinement on no less than three separate occasions," the report states.

The late actor River Phoenix, who grew up in the Children of God, told Details Magazine in 1991 that he was four when he first had sex while in the group.

Young says he never personally experienced sexual abuse from members of the church, but witnessed it. "It definitely wasn't a safe place to grow up, especially if you were a girl," he says. "Close friends of mine growing up were abused and raped."

Berg's philosophy, which he called the Law of Love, was a blend of Christian dogma and the free love ideals of the 1960s' sexual revolution. To recruit new converts, he advocated that women of the church proposition men, which Berg's daughter Deborah Davis described in her autobiography, *The Children of God: The Inside Story*, as a "world-wide prostitution network" that brought "dad unwanted publicity and attention from the law".

"The Law of Love is a doctrine that's meant to justify and conceal sexual exploitation," Young says. "It's made to make other people feel obligated to give up their bodies to others' so-called sexual needs. That your body is not your own - you're supposed to give it up to God."

Berg, with his long white beard and apocalyptic visions, saw himself as the last prophet before Armageddon. His message was relatively simple, if not terribly original: God would soon be returning to Earth to hand down judgment. To avoid His wrath, Berg advised his followers, they should live an austere life and abandon all their possessions. And they did.



David Berg. Photograph: Children of God archive

The New York attorney general found an estimated 120 Children of God communes in 1974, many of whose members were required to surrender their personal belongings and money to leaders of local homes. More than three decades later, in 2006, there were over 1,400 communes in more than 100 countries, according to the group.

Berg discouraged members from working and sending their children to school, according to interviews with 10 former members who were born in the group. The Children of God were to eschew the world. Members lived in large communes, typically with four or five families under one roof, as they waited for the impending apocalypse.

The Children of God had communes in small and big cities as dispersed as Staten Island, Tucson and Coachella, the report shows. It recruited among disgruntled teenagers from school dropouts to draft dodgers, who would end up giving all their money to the group.

Berg renamed his movement the Family of Love shortly after the mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978, which brought negative media attention to other fringe Christian sects. In 2004, the Family changed its name again to the Family International.

“We were always fundraising for cash, using that cash to pay rent and then fundraising the next month so there was a lot of anxiety,” Young recalls. “We didn’t buy food from the grocery store, it was usually donated.” He’d spend much of his time teaching Bible courses and “the New Testament, where there would be the signs of the times and Jesus was coming back at the end of them”.

But the apocalypse would never happen.

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In 1993, allegations of sexual abuse finally caught up with Berg. Interpol launched an investigation into Berg’s activities in Argentina and, according to documents obtained by the Guardian through a Freedom of Information Act request, the FBI was investigating him as well. Berg was on the run. He fled to Portugal, where he died in 1994. Karen Zerby, Berg’s widow, assumed leadership of the group, along with her new husband, Steve Kelly.

Faced with growing disillusionment among members, Zerby and Kelly decided it was time for a change. In February 2009, they made the surprise announcement that the world would not be ending after all, at least not imminently.

“It looks like they were just trying to stem the flow of members out of the movement,” says Laura Vance, a sociology professor at Warren Wilson College who studies the Family and other new religious movements. “They went in the direction of stricter enforcement of the rules first, and then when that didn’t work, within a few years, they went in the opposite direction.”

In a series of letters to their followers, the two leaders admitted they really couldn’t be sure when Jesus would return, and that the Lord showed them that they needed to “set goals up to 30 years or even farther into the future”.

According to Family materials, they told their followers that if Jesus wasn’t going to come earlier to take them to heaven, they needed to worry about financing the care of aged Family members and the future of their children.

“The whole cult was built on the theory that the antichrist was coming so you didn’t have to save for retirement. You didn’t know how long you were going to live so nobody looked ahead,” says Angel Yamaguchi, a former member who was born in the group and left at the end of 2009. “They’ve left a bunch of people that they’ve damaged struggling to try and cope and find out ‘how do I move on?’”

Over the next year, Zerby and Kelly told Family members that they weren’t required to live in communes or devote themselves entirely to the organization. Members were free to enroll their children in school or to find regular jobs, which had previously been known as “system jobs” held by “systemites”. They could seek relationships with nonbelievers, an activity they’d been told for decades was reprehensible.

The proclamation came to be known as “the Reboot”. Zerby and Kelly framed it in terms of giving the group a fresh start. But to many members, it was devastating.

“All of a sudden, we started thinking about the tomorrow,” says one missionary member who asked to be identified as Clara. When contacted by phone, she said she was trying to distance herself from the group and would only speak on condition of anonymity.

Clara panicked when she realized that after two decades in the Family, she was ill-prepared to lead a normal life with her husband and four children. “Now I feel like I’ve wasted a lot of my life. I don’t regret our missionary work but I regret not having a proper education and being so restricted with what we chose to do with our lives.”

The Family’s 15,000 members were free from the oppressive rules that dictated their lives. Communes were disbanded as dazed members began planning for the future, something completely foreign to Family members who grew up in isolation and thought that they’d never reach adulthood (because the world would end long before their 21st birthday).

That was four years ago. Today, they’re adjusting to society and letting go of the strange beliefs that had dictated their lives since birth.

“They started giving us more freedom to think about things and maybe ask questions without just trying to force ourselves to believe things,” Young says.

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In a series of phone conversations, Young told me how he struggled to leave the group. He said he grew disillusioned with the Family after the Reboot but he didn’t immediately turn away from the church. He studied the Bible from cover to cover in search of God’s meaning.

“I was definitely still working through what I was supposed to do and why did I leave. And should I have left? And is Jesus real?” he says. “I was pretty freaked out and I had panic attacks where I thought I’m going to hell.”



Michael Young: ‘I had panic attacks where I thought I’m going to hell.’ Photograph: Michael Young

He couldn’t find a job, with no experience other than missionary work. But he was good at making balloons for kids and blew them up in restaurants in exchange for tips.

Once, a hostess asked him out on a date at work. She bought a balloon, gave him a kiss and her number. They went home to her roommates and talked about video games and TV shows. “I was just paralyzed with not knowing how to say anything and just sitting around being weird,” Michael recalls. “I liked her a lot and I was really devastated because she never called me back after that.”

Dr Marlene Winell, a psychologist who studies religious indoctrination, says it can take a long time for former members of cults or extreme religious groups to feel comfortable in their new reality.

“It’s a common thing to feel like you have to adjust to the secular world because there are so many expectations and

behavior patterns that you're not familiar with," says Winell. She says it can take them a long time to leave those groups, especially if they were born into them. "They also are reconstructing who they are. If I'm not a cult member or a member of this religion, then who am I?"

More than a year and a half after leaving the Family, Young joined a community college honors program, which helped students get scholarships and transfer to a four-year college.

"That was the first time that I felt like I had friends. We talked about art, music, dancing," he says. "I felt instantly like I belonged with these people."

After the Reboot, many former missionaries landed where the movement originated four decades earlier. Clusters of the Family appeared in places like Houston, Texas, and San Diego, California, according to interviews with former members.

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Some younger members, like Martin Merour, 28, have kept one foot in the Family. Merour was very candid about his life in the Family and their unconventional beliefs.

His family had sometimes discussed the Law of Love, Merour said by phone, and read some of the literature on the subject, but people mostly kept their sex lives private.

"Because they're not living communally, there are not as many opportunities to engage in sexual sharing," says Vance. "So, in practice, it's rare but it certainly is still allowed."

Martin spent most of his childhood on the outskirts of the Niger Delta in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, where his French and German parents moved in 1997 to preach Berg's gospel to the locals. The Reboot didn't seem to affect the Merours who were far removed in the mission field. They stayed in Nigeria and continued on with their work. But most communes collapsed.

"It was a bit disconcerting seeing that other branches were closing down or other people, even friends, were deciding that perhaps the missionary work was no longer for them," he says. "You're wondering if you're going to be the only one left for a while."

Today, the Family counts only about 2,500 members in some 80 countries.

In 2015, Martin moved to Berlin, Germany, discovering life outside the missionary world. He enrolled in a soccer club and went to school to learn German. Still a proud Family member, he sends a donation every month to the Family and remains fond of his childhood years in Nigeria. But he doesn't know if he'll go back to mission work anytime soon.

"Ultimately, I still want to serve the Lord," he says. "I'm just not sure how."

For Young, who recently started his master's degree at Penn State University, there is nothing about the old days of the Family to be nostalgic about.

"What I worried about the most when I left was, will I ever find friends, a girlfriend, fit in, a place where I belong," he says. "I found people I connected with once I found people who shared my values and goals, rather than trying to fit in."

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