

The hippie Christian cult that encouraged sex with children is still around today

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A Children of God congregation met in Los Angeles in 1971. (AP Photo/George Brich)

In the beginning, it was innocent enough.

Teens for Christ seemed like many other liberated hippie crews in 1968. They wore long hair and colorful caftans. They played acoustic guitars at the beach. There was nothing unusual about them.

But the group existed on the fringe of the era's explosive youth counterculture. They were considered Jesus People, a growing movement comprised of different faiths, but which generally preached simple living and good deeds. No wonder they got along with flower children.

But their founder, David Berg, would eventually pervert Teens for Christ into his own international religious cult, exploiting young people to accomplish it. Horrific reports of sexual violence, incest, and brainwashing haunt the religious organization, which still operates today.

David Berg was an itinerant preacher who traveled to various churches with his children in the 1960s. They sang hymns and [spread the word](#), encouraging "a teenage witnessing revolution to prove that Christ is more than the Monkeys [sic]."

The message wasn't catching on.

Discouraged and running out of money, the family moved to Huntington Beach, California, in 1967 to run a coffee shop. As they worked, they preached, and more Jesus People began to listen. It was at this point Berg realized that, in order to attract the day's youth, he had to completely change his approach. In a 1979 newsletter, Berg recalled his lightbulb moment:

"I saw something was really happening and was really going to explode! I just knew it! I saw the Lord was really doing something! That's when I began to come down and teach in my dark glasses, beret, baggy pants, old torn jacket and tennis shoes..."

He changed the name of his religion from Teens of Christ to Children of God, hoping to appeal to a wider group of vulnerable, disaffected youth.

By early 1969, COG counted 50 converts, and eventually Berg hit the road with his "family." Over eight months, they grew to 200 members. People dropped what they were doing to join this caravan of pious revolutionaries.

COG returned to southern California in early 1970 — and that's when it all got really weird.



Panels from David Berg's propaganda promoted his "flirty fishing" initiative.

Members of the COG moved in together around the country. Communes housed a dozen adults and their children. Each was called a "home," its occupants referred to as "families." Members did not work in traditional jobs, but dedicated their lives to proselytizing for more followers, like an ecumenical Amway.

Now living in seclusion, David Berg (also known as "Moses David") communicated to his converts through letter writing. His teachings and prophesies were known as "MO's Letters."

In a February 1971 letter entitled "A Shepherd-Time Story," Berg described his "happy folds," where COG members protected little lambs who "laugh and sing and dance and play and fuck and bear lots of little lambs! And the shepherds like it!"

In public, COG was invoking the name of God. In private, its prophet was running a child sex ring.

Berg's own daughter, Deborah, described her father's actions in a 1984 exposé. She claimed he attempted to have sex with her several times, and engaged in a continuous sexual relationship with his other daughter, Faith.

His actions weren't confined to his immediate family. Starting in the late 1970s, Berg preached "sexual sharing" to all of his followers — and their children. "God created boys and girls able to have children by about 12 years of age," Berg wrote in one of his letters. One photo pictured mothers orally copulating a little boy. In another, an adult woman and a toddler lay naked in bed, her hand suggestively near his penis. The caption read, "Well, they *told* us to go to bed!"

"It's just a piece of educational material," a father and COG member told [20/20](#) in 1988. "It's actually fun to watch a child, in this case, experience life." Parents like him were reassured that by allowing kids to explore sex at any age, they were "raising children the natural way."

"The free expression of sexuality, including fornication, adultery, lesbianism (though not male homosexuality), and incest were not just permitted but encouraged," writes Richard Kyle in *The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternate Religions in America* (1993).

In 1993, TV host [Larry King](#) asked former member Ricky Dupuy how he knew such policies existed in the COG. Dupuy replied, "Because I was ordered in the group to have sex with a 10-year-old by the leadership of the group."

"Did you?" King asked.

"Yes. It was to get me in so deep that I would be afraid to ever come out and speak against the group."

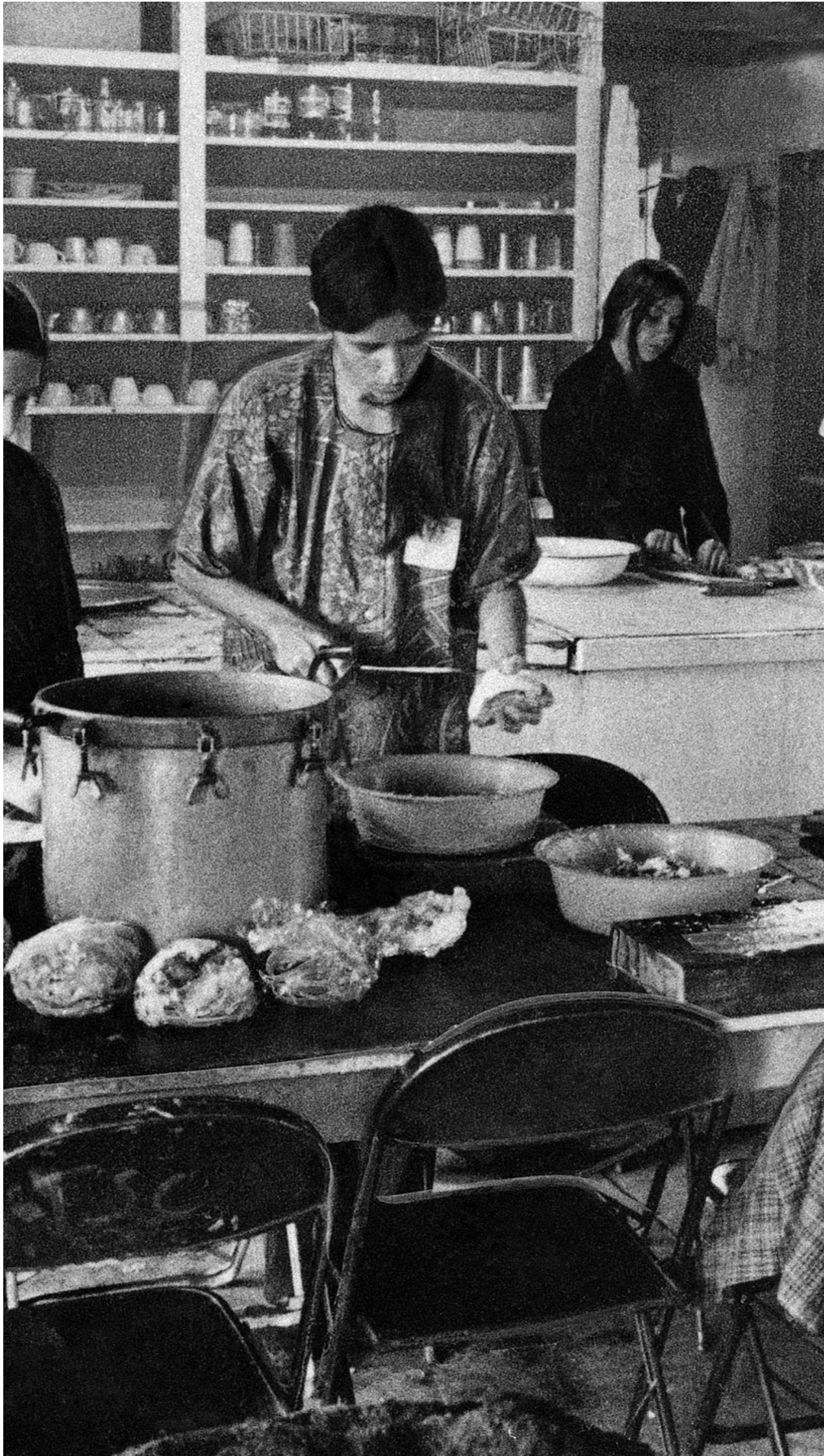
In 1977, Berg issued another edict: female members should have sex with men in order to convert them, in a maneuver he dubbed "flirty fishing." Even if women were married, Berg called on them to sacrifice their bodies in the name of God.

In Berg's own 1979 annual report, he [stated](#) that his FFers (flirty fishers) had "witnessed to over a quarter of a million souls, loved over 25,000 of them, and won about 19,000 to the Lord." By 1981, hundreds of "Jesus Babies" had been born as a result of flirty fishing. Eventually, the cult stopped the practice due to AIDS-related concerns.

"It was religious prostitution," Berg's daughter Deborah said. "I had to quit looking at the man as my father but as the leader of a worldwide movement that was destroying lives."

By 1977, COG had established more than 130 communities around the world. In 1983, the group reported more than 10,000 full-time members living in 1,642 homes.

The Children of God was officially renamed "The Family."



Children of God cult members prepared communal meals at a compound in Texas in 1971. (AP Photo/Ferd Kaufman)

Years later, the cult attempted to distance itself from Berg's pedophilic dogma, especially after his death in 1994. It wanted to be seen as a legitimate international religious sect, and issued charters that allowed for personal careers and independence from the residential family unit. The Family engaged in goodwill marketing campaigns. A group of children even sang for Barbara Bush at the White House during the 1992 Christmas season.

But controversy resurfaced in the 1990s and 2000s as more and more Family members defected. Specifically, original members had given birth to a second generation, children who were raised in communal, religious environments—and in some cases, households of sexual criminality. Such isolation meant these children knew nothing outside that existence. Even celebrities like Joaquin Phoenix and Rose McGowan were part of the cult.

Ricky Rodriguez was an extreme example. Rodriguez was born to one of Berg's wives in 1975, whereupon the cult leader adopted him into their personal Family. Berg renamed his new son "Davidito" and prophesied the young boy would be the religion's next leader.

From toddlerhood, Davidito watched people have sex, fondled his nanny's breasts, and was touched on his genitals. These actions were photographed or described for *The Davidito Book*, which Berg published as an instructional manual on how to raise kids.

When *The New York Times* got in touch with the Family International in 2005, a spokesperson said, "He was never taken advantage of. Rather, he was allowed to explore his sexuality freely. He was allowed to explore as a young boy what comes naturally, and usually in our society, we do not allow such exploration."

The paper interviewed more than a dozen former members who confirmed experiencing or witnessing sex as minors. Some were forced.

"At the time, I didn't think of it as abuse," said Peter Frouman, who left in 1987. "I had no concept that normal people didn't do this sort of thing. I thought it was perfectly normal for

parents to have sex with their children, and children to have sex with each other and with adults.

“When I was 11, I had sex with a 28-year-old woman, and it was with the approval of everyone in the room. I found out later that my mom was watching.”

Despite his father’s prophecies, Rodriguez defected in 2000. In 2005, he recorded a home video where he sat behind a table full of knives, tasers, duct tape, and gags. He sounds very rational, matter-of-fact: “The goal is to bring down my own mother.”

Instead, the following night he found his former nanny. They went to dinner, then he invited her back to his apartment and stabbed her to death. Hours later, he shot himself dead.

Though not all families experienced sexual abuse, defectors who integrated back into mainstream society had to grapple with the consequences. Sometimes their mothers and fathers remained behind. Lost and isolated, they turned to drugs and alcohol to cope. Several [second generation former Family members](#) killed themselves.

“Sex wasn’t the only thing stolen from them. It wasn’t even the biggest thing,” [James La Matterly](#), a member in the early 1970s, told *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 2005. “Their spirituality was stolen. God was stolen from them.”