

French pastor stands firm against persecution

Vince Esterman's ministry in Paris continues as a new anti-evangelism law turns up the heat

Pastor Vince Esterman is no stranger to opposition. Within the last six years, his personal reputation and that of his church have been attacked in scathing exposés by the French press. The church and church movement he founded have been branded an “evangelical cult” in a government commission report.

Most recently, with the passage of a new law hampering religious freedom, he risks imprisonment for sharing the gospel in a nation known for its motto: “Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood.”

But despite the opposition, Esterman has planted a new church in Paris and shares his faith every week on its public squares and boulevards. “We are more determined than ever to win the battle for France,” he told Charisma.

Born to French parents but raised in Australia, Esterman became a believer at age 15. After committing his life to the ministry, he wanted to serve God in a more populated region.

“Since I was a French citizen and spoke the language, France seemed like the perfect place,” he said.

In 1986 he and wife, Denise, moved to France where he pioneered a church of 300 in a Paris suburb and founded a network that established 30 churches in the country.

Opposition followed when, on a Sunday in February 1995, journalists from Le Parisien, a popular French newspaper, appeared unannounced at Esterman's church and took photographs and conducted interviews.

A reporter told Esterman the paper was featuring different kinds of churches in France. The pastor found a different story in the next Tuesday's paper.

The headline "What Is Christian Life Hiding?" was followed by articles that challenged the credibility and financial integrity of Esterman and the church and accused him of breaking up the marriage of one of his members. More articles and TV reports followed.

Things got worse when a mass suicide in Switzerland among members of a sect with ties to France prompted the French government to name a parliamentary commission to report on cult activity in the country. The commission listed 172 groups in France as cults.

"To our horror, we were named an 'evangelical cult that practices healing,'" Esterman said. "Their only proof were the newspaper articles. We had no opportunity to defend ourselves."

Some French leaders, sociologists and members of the press questioned the report, which was researched and written in just six months under intense public pressure. They doubted the validity of the commission's investigative procedures. Esterman's attempts to change the commission's report were unsuccessful.

Esterman spent five years trying to clear his name. His last appeal, to the office of President Jacques Chirac, was a dead end. "I have a letter from the [president's] chief of staff stating that he 'has no doubt of the legitimacy of my position as a pastor, but that neither he nor anyone else our name off that report.'"

Esterman changed the name of his church network, but he is still branded a cult leader on some French Web sites. The commission's findings stand as the definitive report on cults in France.

Many believed that legislative action in the form of the About-Picard Bill—introduced to the French National Assembly to protect the French public from "proselytizers, sects and cults" (including those defined as evangelical cults)—only capitalized on the widespread media coverage and the disputed commission findings.

Organizations that included the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Protestant Federation of France, and Human Rights Without Frontiers voiced concern over the bill. Despite pleas from 14 European countries to postpone the vote, it became law in May of this year.

Under the law, conviction of the crime of "mental manipulation"—a term that was left open to interpretation—carries fines and up to five years imprisonment. Charismatic-evangelical churches are especially vulnerable to prosecution under the law.

"Many evangelical practices, particularly charismatic expressions, will be targeted and interpreted as manipulation

of minors and weak people,” Esterman said. “For example, fasting will be seen as deprivation of food; baptism as initiation rites; speaking in tongues as hysteria; healing as preying on the weak; tithing as exploiting gullible people; biblical morality as intolerance; deliverance as psychological trauma; and worship as inducing mass emotional manipulation.”

According to Esterman, with the law in place these Christian practices now can be successfully prosecuted in court, church leaders can be jailed, and churches can be disbanded.

Just months before the report was made public, Esterman turned his church over to an associate so he could pioneer a new work, Paris Gospel Church, which today has 100 members. Esterman believes that as his new church grows, he will become a target again. But that doesn’t keep him from pressing on.

In fact, he ministers on the streets twice weekly through sketch-board art, appealing to the curiosity, intelligence and humor of the French. In the last 15 years, he has preached to at least 35,000 people and has won converts to his church with this approach.

“The first time I went out with my sketch board, I spelled God’s name wrong,” he recalls. “I felt so bad until a woman with tears in her eyes said that she would like to believe in God the way that I do.”

According to Esterman, France is “a bastion of humanistic philosophy, arrogance, pride and rationalism.”

“But we’re dealing with ordinary people who have human hearts, which can be touched,” he added. “And the human heart is one

area that French society cannot control.”

–Jeff Slaughter in Paris