Invading the Dark Side

As interest in spiritism grows in the United States, Christians who understand God's supernatural power are challenging the darkness.

Satellite TV dishes are one of the few visible modern concessions in Cassadaga, a charming Victorian oasis tucked away in the heart of central Florida's booming tourist industry.

But it's old-time fascination that draws thousands of visitors a year away from the well-beaten tracks of the beaches and theme parks to this quaint village north of Orlando. Although residents use the latest technology to keep in touch with what's going on in this world, they employ historic arts to tune in to the next one.

Though many drive past on the nearby interstate without even knowing Cassadaga is there, as one of the oldest spiritualist communities in the United States it is an international mecca for those seeking to make contact with the dead.

And as public interest in psychics, séances and spirit guides grows, Cassadaga also has become the unlikely focus of a Christian challenge to the mainstreaming of mediums.

John Ferro made headlines when he and his small congregation went to court to win the right to build the first evangelical church in the area. Their new home is just down the street from the long-established spiritualist camp that secured Cassadaga a listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Incorporated in 1894 as a winter getaway center for spiritualists from the movement's colder New York birthplace, the 57-acre Cassadaga spiritualist community is the hamlet's major landlord, leasing properties to members.

Objectors to Ferro's plans argued that a church would upset the spiritual atmosphere of the community, where licensed psychics and mediums advertise on shingles outside their Spanish moss-curtained homes and the purportedly haunted local hotel offers readings and Encounter the Spirits tours in weekend packages.

But Ferro and the members of his Dunamis Community and Outreach Ministries prevailed, eventually laying the cornerstone of their new home in March, six years after buying the land. As church members celebrated at an open-air service, Ferro—a one-time bartender—declared their desire to bring "the gospel of love and peace and deliverance" to the area.

Although he is pleased that visitors will soon pass a church proclaiming the name of Jesus on their way into Cassadaga—the new church is due to open its doors this month—Ferro sees the local resistance he has faced as symbolic of what is happening on a wider scale.

"The United States is in a spiritual void," he says. "People are not getting what they are supposed to when they go to church. If they don't experience the power of God's Holy Spirit [there], they will look for it elsewhere."

Lou Pratile, pastor of Praise Chapel in nearby DeLand, who has followed the Dunamis story, sees significance in the arrival of Ferro and his congregation that is far greater than their small number.

"I believe it's going to make an impact beyond that town," he says of the new church. "It's bigger than just Cassadaga—I think it will make ripples across the country. It will shake up psychics across the country because Cassadaga is well-known."

'Losing Faith in Religion'

Many find a resurgence in interest in spiritualism—highly

fashionable a century ago but in decline for decades—spotlighted in recent movies and TV shows such as The Sixth Sense, Ghost Whisperer, Medium and psychic John Edward's Crossing Over. Such productions are "becoming more prolific and are attracting thousands," observes Lelia Cutler, president of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches.

Ferro isn't alone in thinking that's not a good thing. Glenn Sparks, a professor of communication at Purdue University who has researched the impact of disturbing TV images on viewers, has observed that although paranormal-based shows are "a great form of entertainment," they "can be harmful when people are unable to sort out what is real and what isn't.

"For example, watching these shows could encourage people who can least afford it to start spending money on psychics," he says.

Sparks expressed concern too that, with their belief systems still forming, teenagers are "more susceptible to being influenced by these kind of shows," suggesting the networks post disclaimers about what they broadcast.

Nor is spiritualism drawing attention only in the entertainment world. The Parapsychology Foundation's 2005 international conference in Virginia focused on mediumship, with presentations on topics such as "Anomalous Identity Experiences: Mediumship, Spirit Possession and Dissociative Identity Disorder."

Last year the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted "The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult," a collection of images from private archives that captured "ghosts, spirit séances, levitation, auras, ectoplasm" between the 1860s and 1920s.

A study by The Barna Group released earlier this year found that 80 percent of teenagers said they had witnessed

supernatural themes in media during the previous quarter, while more than 33 percent had played with a Oujia board and 10 percent each had visited a medium or consulted a psychic.

Even more sobering, and adding weight to Sparks' concerns, was the discovery that only 28 percent of churched teenagers surveyed said they remembered receiving any teaching at their churches that helped shape their views on the supernatural world.

One of the few attempting to redress that is Ben Alexander, a former spiritualist now in his 80s who has spent the last 30 years speaking in churches across the country and overseas about the dangers of the occult, and especially the world of supposedly contacting the dead, of which he was once part.

"One of the tragedies of the growing interest in the occult is that it draws people to places like Cassadaga," he says. Alexander was alarmed when during a Sunday visit to the town many of those he spoke with "had been to church in the morning and were going to a séance in the afternoon."

That's because people "are losing faith in traditional religions," says Don Zanghi, a medium and spiritual counselor and former president of the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association.

"They want something, and they don't want to be told what to believe, they don't want to be told they are inherently bad or evil and in need of some kind of a prior salvation. … A lot of them are saying that the problems [in the world] are either being created by or agitated by the religions."

Acknowledging Jesus as the greatest medium-healer ever and the Bible as one way God has communicated truth, spiritualists don't believe in the devil, see heaven and hell as states of consciousness rather than literal places and maintain that people don't die but just "pass over."

Although classical spiritualism eschews the likes of tarot cards and crystal balls, newer practitioners are melding some of the New Age movement's beliefs and approaches. The trend can be seen across the street from the Cassadaga camp, where more recently arrived storefront mystics, spiritual counselors and guides offer everything from astrological readings to past-life regression.

Among the practitioners is AryellA, a minister-healer whose center declares "all paths welcome" and offers spiritual readings, aura photography and aura cleansing through "the gifts of the Spirit." A handwritten note in the window announced "closed due to illness" when Charisma visited town.

The blurring between old-time and New Age causes some confusion, says Elizabeth Owens, a medium and past Cassadaga association president. "Spiritualism is not New Age, but there are some similarities," she says—with a major shared theme being the rejection of God's judgment.

"This punishment and damnation stuff is awful," says the ordained spiritualist minister who turned her back on her Methodist upbringing more than 25 years ago because spiritualism "just makes sense to me; it just feels right." She adds: "We believe in a loving God, not one that will send us to hell—that makes no sense."

Although the Dunamis church and its camp neighbors are clearly at theological odds, and Ferro believes he is involved in a spiritual conflict, he does not see Cassadaga's spiritualists as the enemy. He has attended a spiritualist service at Zanghi's invitation and realizes "they really think they are doing a service to people."

If anything, Ferro is more critical of other Christians who have visited town for "turn or burn" evangelism outings and who perpetuate myths about the area.

"'Cassadaga' doesn't mean house of the devil, as some say," he

states. “If someone is going to witness to me about Christianity and what they say is all wrong, I won’t listen to them. They won’t win me, they will just alienate me.”

Cassadaga: A Place of Refreshing

Actually, Ferro says, “cassadaga” means “water running over rocks” and is rooted in the American Indian name for the local spring-fed lake. The town was founded when George P. Colby, a leader in the early spiritualist community, was directed to Florida from New York by his spirit guide, Seneca.

Dunamis members say that in prayer times through the years God has shown them that He wants Cassadaga to become a place of Christian refreshing—as the water of the Holy Spirit springs forth from the rock of Christ.

Despite recognizing that general media coverage of spiritualism has changed in recent times, from wariness or ridicule to positive acceptance, Rick Hayes was reluctant to call himself a psychic or a medium when he left the business world a couple of years ago to develop the gifts he says he’s had since a child.

To be labeled as such “was going to put me in a position I was not very comfortable with,” says the Jasper, Indiana-based, self-described paranormal communications consultant who numbers his late grandfather, a traveling evangelist, among his spirit guides.

Having been raised in a “very Christian, religious-oriented home,” Hayes “grew up with a lot of questions about my ability to see and hear others. … I kept it to myself for a long time.” He finally came to embrace his psychic side: “I truly feel that each person has a right to make their own choice and own their own beliefs in life because we really, truly don’t know the answers until we complete our plan here in life.”

Louis Gates, a long-time member of the Cassadaga community,

also chose spiritualism over an evangelical background mixed with “a houseful of mediums.” His father was a Baptist minister, his mother a medium. “I would spend summer months in vacation Bible school and the rest of the time at spiritualist revival camps,” he recalls.

Gates was one of those who spoke against granting Ferro’s church building permission, but he says concerns were more about the impact Dunamis’ proposed drug-rehab ministry might have on the area than, as widely reported, fears the spiritual atmosphere might be affected.

When local tensions were at their greatest, Ferro’s church was reported to the FBI for allegedly promoting hate crimes and warning that spiritualists’ homes would be burned down—a misrepresentation of one Sunday sermon when Ferro preached on the passage in Acts 19 that recounts how converted sorcerers publicly torched their occult materials.

Gates and the other spiritualists do believe Cassadaga has special significance, though, that could be adversely affected by development in the area. “Any place that has spiritual happenings over the years will have a certain spiritual energy,” Gates says.

For Zanghi, there’s a “natural vortex of energy” in the area. “It’s built up over the years. When people come here, they feel it if they are at all sensitive; some say they feel the peace, some feel the psychic vibrations.”

People who turn to Zanghi, Hayes and others often are looking for guidance or comfort regarding loved ones who have died. Historians note spiritualism’s popularity previously spiked following the great losses of the Civil War and World War I.

Observers point to the post-September 11 uncertainty and the aging of the baby boomer generation, now starting to gray and wondering what is next, as helping fuel the latest apparent rise in interest in the afterlife. Richard Russell, who runs

the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp office, suggests an additional, down-to-earth factor is at play. Many people are being drawn to the kind of spiritual healing offered by mediums, he says, because of the collapse of the health-care system.

“They don’t have insurance, so people are going to have to turn to alternative, preventative health care,” he says. “The integration of body, mind and spirit will take on a more important role in people’s lives out of simple necessity.”

For Alexander, those claiming contact with the dead are largely frauds—like the famous Fox sisters whose childhood experiences with mysterious nighttime rappings in their Arcadia, New York, home in 1848 led to the founding of the modern spiritualist movement. One of the sisters in later life admitted faking the phenomena.

Alexander says many psychics also use “cold reading” techniques to pick up clues from their clients, or throw out vague statements that wishful seekers latch onto. “Mostly it is bogus, but there are people that do have power,” he says. However, it simply does not come from those who have “passed over”—it’s demonic, he warns.

“They are working in the area of familiar spirits,” Ferro agrees. “A familiar spirit can give you some really true information about your life because they are following your life. If people are not biblically grounded they can easily be seduced.”

At her CANA (Christian Answers for the New Age) Web site, former professional astrologer Marcia Montenegro cautions that guides such as Zanghi’s Dr. Huxley “are not dead people or wise spiritual beings, but evil spirits.

“The messages from these spirits may mention God, but they never urge Bible study, worship of God or the need for Christ as Savior.”

Those are three messages Ferro and his members want to declare clearly to visitors to Cassadaga—some of whom are drawn by the town's annual Halloween celebrations. The church's Web site—at , so named to draw in any Internet users seeking general information about the spiritualist community—invites visitors to learn more about "the True Spirit."

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Preaching Jesus in a Land of Spiritists

Jon Ferro says Christians must reach outside the church walls.

With a ready smile and a gentle manner, John Ferro has a more laid-back and easygoing manner than you might expect from someone at the center of a symbolic spiritual clash.

But he's earnest about wanting to see the power of God released in a way that sweeps back the rising tide of counterfeits found not only in Cassadaga, Florida, but also across the country. "I'm aggressive spiritually," he says. "I don't play; I believe time is short and there's enough flakiness out there in the church. … We really have to fight against American Christianity all the time."

Raised Roman Catholic, Ferro did bar and restaurant work, including a spell with the Playboy Club and Resort. After accepting Christ, he and his wife, Ann, threw themselves into working with runaways in Daytona Beach, Florida, and youngsters in the local juvenile correction facilities.

"It's the church, what we are supposed to be doing," he says of the rough-and-tumble nature of the ministry. "Otherwise, why don't we just die and go to heaven? What is our purpose here on Earth? We could just worship God with a pure heart in

heaven.”

Founding a small home fellowship, Ferro and his congregants felt drawn to Cassadaga as they looked for a meeting place. But they continued their active involvement in various rescue ministries as they pursued their five-year legal battle to secure a foothold in the spiritualists’ territory.

And while they have celebrated the construction of their new facility, they remain focused on reaching beyond the church walls. Having taken “five years to be delivered from Bible college and seminary,” Ferro says he doesn’t want to be “stuck behind a desk while the whole world is going to hell.”

He has little time for church-growth strategies and introspective conferences. “It’s not about whether we change the name of the sign in the parking lot from ‘visitors’ to ‘guests,'” he says. “It’s about the supernatural power and presence of God.

“I have been there when the only so-called supernatural thing is a bunch of Christians getting up on their chairs and ‘jumping on the devil’ while he is just laughing and busy going after our kids.”