

6 Warning Signs of Spiritual Abuse

The church is called Word of Life Christian Center, but the tiny Pentecostal congregation in New Hartford, New York, is now known for death. It made headlines earlier this month when a 19-year-old member, Lucas Leonard, died during a so-called “counseling session” that involved 10 hours of beatings and interrogation.

Six members of the church now face criminal charges for the incident, which also left Lucas’ 17-year-old brother, Christopher, hospitalized. Most of the group’s 20 members were afraid to speak to the media. But a former member, Chadwick Handville, who now lives in Arizona, told *The New York Times* that the church had become a cult.

“Everybody who’s gone there is a victim of abuse,” Handville said. “This was a cult. This was not a church; I don’t care what words they use on the building. The spirit of that place was not freedom.”

How does this happen? Handville said Word of Life was not always unhealthy. But founder Jerry Irwin reportedly used manipulation, shaming, heavy-handed threats and even sleep deprivation to control the lives of church members. Even the parents of the young man who died felt helpless to stop the fatal beatings because members were never allowed to question church leadership.

How can we stop such an incident from happening again? We must recognize the warning signs of spiritual abuse—and be willing to challenge unhealthy leadership practices before they lead to tragedy. Here are six ways spiritual abuse operates:

1. An authoritarian leadership style. God calls church leaders to be servant-hearted, tender and compassionate. The apostle

Paul told the Corinthians that he did not “have dominion over your faith” (2 Cor. 1:24), but that he served in humility alongside them. Immature, untested leaders don’t know how to serve, and they end up wounding people with their harsh demands, threats and dominating attitudes. You can be certain that authoritarian leaders do not submit their lives to anyone; they are Lone Rangers, and they are unfit to be pastors.

2. A secretive atmosphere. The word *occult* actually means “secret.” And secrecy is always a hallmark of a spiritually abusive church. Leaders are not open about their own lives, they don’t allow members to question anything and the financial records of the church are closed. A healthy pastor encourages openness, welcomes input and invites participation. You can be certain that if there is secrecy in a church, there is something to hide. Don’t submit yourself to such a system.

3. Spiritual elitism. It’s interesting that most cult-like churches don’t grow to be large. In the case of Word of Life in New York, it had shrunk to 20 extremely loyal members. But in a spiritually toxic environment, members are told they are the “elect few” or the “green berets” who are spiritually superior to others. Spiritually abusive churches often bash other denominations, insisting that their doctrines are better. This becomes a breeding ground for strange teachings.

4. Financial manipulation. There’s nothing wrong with a church asking for money. God wants us to use our resources to fund the spreading of the gospel and to support its ministers. But in unhealthy churches, people are coerced, berated or threatened at offering time. I knew of a pastor who tracked his members’ finances and personally demanded that they give their annual tax refund checks in the offering. This is spiritual extortion. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says giving should be done cheerfully and without compulsion.

5. No respect for personal liberty. I knew of a pastor who

demanded that his assistant come to his house in the wee hours of the morning to take dictation for sermons—as if he could not write his own study notes! I have also been in situations where church volunteers were forced to work unreasonably long hours. In the case of Word of Life in New York, members were expected to put in long hours renovating the pastor's home. Mature Christian leaders, like the apostle Paul, view themselves as “bond-servants for Jesus' sake” (2 Cor. 4:5)—and they would never treat people like slaves. If you see slavery in your church, you can be sure the Holy Spirit is grieved. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty!

6. Hyper-spirituality. Leaders who have not been properly trained or mentored will overcompensate for their lack of experience by pretending to have an inside track to God. Insecurity breeds pride. And in charismatic churches where we believe in supernatural guidance, this pride can open the door for weird forms of abuse. Before too long, the super-spiritual leader will invent excuses for his bad behavior by saying that “God told him” to do unreasonable or unbiblical things. When a leader claims an inside track to God but never surrounds himself with godly counselors, watch out! He is headed for a train wreck.

The tragedy in New York could have been avoided if members of Word of Life Christian Center had challenged the leader's controlling behavior. In the case of this unhealthy church, a young life could have been spared. Don't ever submit to spiritual abuse. If your church is becoming cult-like, get out—and get your friends out before someone gets hurt.