



Jehovah's witnesses wish you'll answer the door

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By Charles Honey

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If you see John "Trey" Colburn III coming up your walk with a Bible in his hand, know this: He believes he holds the answer to all your problems.

That's why he's calling on you as a Jehovah's Witness.

"We view the Bible as having the solution to all mankind's problems -- being able to lead a much better life now and a perfect one in the future," says Colburn, a pleasant, articulate man of 24.

He realizes you may not answer the door, fearing a theological harangue without end. That's OK with him. He'll just move on to the next house, happily.

"I'm giving a witness of what the Bible says," insists Colburn, who with his wife, Shannon, knocks on doors about 70 hours per month. "Jesus commanded us to go talk to our neighbors. Just being out on the street, I'm doing what I want to do. I know I've been pleasing my creator."

While most people may dread their approach, Jehovah's Witnesses such as Colburn feel called to tell everyone the news of God's plan and Jesus' imminent return.

In recent weeks they have been handing out colorful fliers announcing "Deliverance at Hand!" -- invitations to the Witnesses' district convention this weekend in Saginaw.

Many of the area's 6,000 or so Witnesses were expected to attend the convention, the last of three statewide meetings at the Dow Events Center and one of 260 conventions across the United States.

Coming soon

Also convening in other countries, the Witnesses' annual summits promise deliverance from earthly ills by God's coming kingdom.

It's a message Witnesses have been preaching since their inception in the 1870s as a Bible study group. Belief that God's kingdom is coming soon -- 1914 is considered the beginning of the End Times -- is a core doctrine of the fast-growing movement.

Witnesses spread the word in their magazines, Awake! and The Watchtower, preach it in their Kingdom Halls and take it door-to-door, believing the Apostle Paul taught them to go "house to house."

Active members are called "publishers" who spread the Gospel, and their publications provide news of the faith. The August issue of Awake! features stories on Witnesses' prohibition against transfusions of whole blood.

'We're different'

That doctrine and others, including refusal to salute the flag or serve in the military, have heaped criticism and even persecution on the group. The U.S. government took legal action against them for defying the draft in World War I, schools have expelled students for not saluting the flag, and the Nazis threw them in

concentration camps.

Departures from Christian orthodoxy, such as their disbelief in the Trinity and non-observance of Christian holidays, have earned them scorn as heretics or a cult.

Witnesses gently deflect the criticisms with claims they are simply misunderstood, like the early Christians after whom they model themselves.

"We're different. We do stand out," says John Colburn Jr., Trey's father.

As a presiding overseer in the Grandville congregation, Colburn adeptly explains Jehovah's Witnesses complex doctrine. It involves the showdown of Armageddon, Jesus ruling for 1,000 years assisted by 144,000 "associate kings and priests" raised to heaven, the resurrection of the righteous and unrighteous, and eternal life on Earth for those who obey God.

As for criticisms and misconceptions, he answers them with mild patience.

"I get told all the time, 'You don't believe in Jesus,' " says Colburn, a real estate broker with Colburn Hundley. "We try to follow in his footsteps and imitate him. He's our only hope of salvation."

But he readily acknowledges major differences with mainstream Christianity. Jesus is not God but God's only son working with him to fulfill God's purpose, "to fill the Earth with perfect humans."

"He's going to remove wickedness and end suffering, and have Earth be a paradise, people living forever without sickness and death," says Colburn, 48, who lives in Jenison.

It was those very differences that persuaded Pete Wierenga to leave the Christian Reformed Church and become a Jehovah's Witness.

The co-owner of Godwin Plumbing became a baptized Witness in 1999 after unsuccessfully trying to argue his second wife out of the faith. As he studied the doctrine, things that had puzzled him in his upbringing started to make sense.

"In trying to prove it wrong, I started to find some answers," says Wierenga, 53, of Cutlerville.

He has found in the Jehovah's Witnesses a worldwide unity that makes him welcome in members' homes everywhere. He likes the small size of their congregations, their intense focus on Bible study and an uncompromising theological consistency he found lacking in the CRC.

"Jehovah's Witnesses is not about what we can do to be saved, but how can we help others," he says.

He admits he used to shut the door on Witnesses when they came calling. Now he loves being the caller and sharing a faith that has drawn him closer to God.

"He becomes so real to you, it's just like he's standing right there next to you. That is something I never had before."

Harsh realities

Despite such glowing testimonials, criticisms of the Witnesses are harsh. A prominent critic is Raymond Franz, formerly of the Witnesses' Governing Body. Franz has charged guilt is heaped on those who don't perform public service, and that many nominal members do not leave for fear of being shunned or having their families broken up.

John Colburn Jr. says cases of discipline are rare and usually addressed short of shunning. But if a member persists in serious sinning, Witnesses will "follow the Scriptural admonition to limit our association." Family members still can interact as needed, he says.

One scholar who tracks religious groups says he has not heard much about shunning in recent years. He considers the Witnesses "very benign."

"The idea of calling them a cult has fallen by the wayside," says the Rev. J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion. "We've gotten to know them, and we don't feel threatened by them."

Although the Witnesses are one of "the two most disliked religious groups" along with Scientologists, their persistent door-to-door calling accounts for their impressive growth, says Melton, editor of "Religions of the World." They are one of just five religious groups present in 200-plus countries, he notes.

Further, because the Witnesses won nearly 50 Supreme Court cases for civil and religious liberties, "Some of the basic rights we enjoy today they won for us," Melton adds.

That includes the right to knock on people's doors. Although house-calling is expected, Witnesses say they don't do it because they are forced to.

"We do the ministry because we love our God and we love our neighbor," says John Colburn Jr. "We're not there to force our beliefs on anyone."

Spreading the word

His son, Trey, has been going house-to-house since he was a boy. He insists he's had few doors slammed in his face.

"At least I've got them to think about God's Word at least once during the day," Trey Colburn says.

He plans to take the word farther than the Grandville Avenue SW neighborhood he and Shannon work. They plan to apply as full-time missionaries who could serve almost anywhere in the world.

Trey Colburn attends a Spanish-speaking congregation at the Grandville Kingdom Hall. He is a Spanish interpreter for Spectrum Health, having earned a degree in international relations from Grand Valley State University.

Dressed in a sharp gray suit at a Spectrum snack shop, Colburn says he long ago accepted the challenges of being a Witness. He did not take the candy bars given out by classmates on their birthdays. He patiently explained to them why he does not celebrate Christmas.

"It can be a difficult thing to be a Jehovah's Witness as a child," says the Jenison High School graduate. "Children can be rather mean." But he adds, "I was never afraid to be different."

He has held lively discussions with Catholics and Protestants. He says he respects their convictions but holds fast to his own.

"If I didn't feel Jehovah's Witnesses have the truth, I wouldn't be here," he says firmly. "I haven't found truth anywhere else."

He admits his close friends are all Witnesses and that other friendships cooled with those who left the faith.

"Our relationships are just never the same. They're turning their back on my best friend" -- Jehovah.

He also holds fast to the Witnesses' prohibition of military service even as the war in Iraq drags on.

"I cannot reconcile loving with killing," he says, citing Jesus' command to "love one another."

"I love this country. But I don't view myself as part of the world. We look to the kingdom to solve all the problems."

That belief gives him "a certain serenity" as he tracks worrisome international trends. He sees terrorism and warfare as a prelude to the coming kingdom.

"I understand why we have the problems, and they're not going to be around much longer. The solution is just around the corner."

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