

Changes in the North American Cult Awareness Movement

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The authors of this paper^[1] have been involved in the North American cult awareness movement (CAM) since its early years.^[2] Although the paper will include documentation for some points, much of the paper can be considered oral history based on the authors' recollections and impressionistic theorizing about the causes of certain phenomena. We limit our report to the two secular organizations with the largest networks of supporters and activists (Cult Awareness Network [CAN] and American Family Foundation [AFF], renamed International Cultic Studies Association [ICSA] in 2004^[3]). There were and still are many smaller organizations and individuals that had a specific geographic, activist, or treatment focus or that did not endure for long. There were also many religiously oriented organizations, some of which are quite large, e.g., Christian Research Institute. The changes we describe refer only to CAN and AFF and to their members or supporters.

Although the authors' views have certainly changed over the years, our views have always differed somewhat from each other and from other members of the CAM. Hence, the changes we describe refer to our opinions about the CAM as a whole, and not necessarily to our own views during any particular time period.

Our focus will be on those changes that most impact the relationship of the CAM to various groups, organizations, and individuals. The paper will approach the subject of change chronologically, using decades as a convenient, though arbitrary, classification, and will explore changes in the population entering the network, understanding of the phenomenon, action priorities, and attitudes toward cults, deprogrammers, former cult members, helping professionals, and researchers.

The Decade of the 1970s

Population Entering the Network

The driving force during the CAM's early years were parents concerned about adolescent children who had joined groups. Throughout North America and Europe, families were organizing to find ways to persuade their children to leave groups that the families viewed as fringe or dangerous, in part because so many of the children had dropped out of college to serve the missions of their groups (Langone, 1991), but mostly because of dramatic personality changes that families had observed (Clark, 1978, 1979; Singer, 1978). In North America, most of these small organizations joined together in 1979 as the Citizens Freedom Foundation (CFF) (Sweeney, November 15, 1979), which in 1984 was renamed the Cult Awareness Network (CAN). Two notable exceptions, which retained their independence, were the Cult Project (founded in 1979, renamed Info-Cult/Info-Secte in 1990) of Montreal, with which author Kropveld has been affiliated since its founding, and American Family Foundation (AFF/ICSA – founded in 1979), with which author Langone was and is affiliated.

Dependable statistics on the number of families do not exist. A 1982 CFF brochure said that the organization had 52 active affiliates in 31 states each of which presented an average of 45 educational programs per year. Together the affiliates mailed out approximately 7000 packets and letters and received 1508 telephone calls. A report by a public relations consultant (Zachary & Front, Inc., undated) describes CFF as “an organization of approximately 10,000 volunteers” (p. 1). Our recollections of those early years indicate that the large majority of parents became only transiently involved with the network, so the 10,000 figure may be a public-relations maximum estimate. We believe that a more reasonable estimate is that several hundred families were actively involved in the early to mid-1970s and probably well over 1000 families by the end of the decade. Fund-raising mailing lists that author Langone recalls seeing amounted to about 3000 names. Most families entered the network to get their children out of groups, and left the network when they succeeded or gave up. It is difficult to determine what factors led to some becoming activists and others to leave the network.

Most of the former members in the network had been extracted from their groups, usually through deprogrammings (about which more later), though sometimes with the authority of a conservatorship signed by a judge. Few of these former members had influential positions in the dozen or more family organizations that had formed. The former members were young and tended to come from a relatively small number of groups. In a survey drawn from the CAM network (Conway & Siegelman, 1978), 76% of the subjects came from just five groups: Unification Church (UC), International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Scientology, The Way International, and Divine Light Mission (DLM). Seventy percent of this survey's subjects had been deprogrammed, a figure similar to an informal survey of former Moonies in the emerging CAM (Eden, unpublished).

Henrietta Crampton, one of the first activists in the CAM told author Langone that in the early 1970s, parents were sometimes able to go to the groups and talk with their children, but when some parents succeeded in persuading their children to leave the groups, groups began to tighten their boundaries and block communications between families and members. The frustration of families trying to communicate with their children motivated some to use desperate means, including abductions, to gain access to their children. In time, a small group of interventionists, called “deprogrammers,” began to offer their services for a fee to families seeking to persuade

their children to leave cults (Patrick, 1976). These deprogrammers became prominent within the emerging cult awareness movement.

A handful of helping professionals were involved in the emerging cult awareness movement. Some professionals had a family member involved in a group, e.g., Lorna Goldberg, LCSW, PsyA. Others had had no personal or family involvement, most notably psychologist Dr. Margaret Singer in Berkeley and psychiatrists Dr. John Clark of Boston and Dr. Louis J. West, head of the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute.

Understanding of the Phenomenon

The families who began to organize in the 1970s often reported feeling that their children had been “stolen” by groups that seemed to wield an unusually high level of control over their members. As some groups closed their boundaries to the outside, especially to families of members, they began to teach their members how to respond to their own families and to criticism of the group’s doctrines or practices. Often the members’ responses seemed rehearsed or forced. Some families saw value in computer metaphors and said that their children seemed “programmed.” Other families, supported by mental health professionals, such as Margaret Singer, who had worked with Korean War POWs, noted the similarities of what they observed to reports of Chinese brainwashing programs (Lifton, 1961; Schefflin & Opton, 1978); Schein, 1961). The brainwashing analogies resonated with mental health professionals to whom some families had turned for help, in part because so many families said things such as, “That’s not my kid anymore.” Most mental health professionals, however, were uncomfortable with the sensationalized tone of much popular brainwashing literature.

Although the early clinical writings (Clark, 1978, 1979; Goldberg & Goldberg, 1982; Levine, 1976; Singer, 1978, 1979; Schwartz & Kaslow, 1979) contained some nuance and qualifications, the narrative that came to dominate lay discourse, in part because it was so attractive to the press, was that of brainwashing (Patrick, 1976; Stoner & Park, 1977). Cults were using powerful techniques of influence – brainwashing - to recruit, change, and hold onto young people, who were leaving their families and old lives behind to devote themselves to a messiah, prophet, or avatar. In desperation, families turned to interventionists who “deprogrammed” the family’s loved one from the cultic “brainwashing.” Deprogramming typically involved some degree of forced confinement, but it didn’t necessarily involve abduction. After deprogramming, many of these former members participated in the deprogrammings of other cultists or spoke out publicly about how they had been brainwashed. So many of the former members had been Moonies^[4] (about 40% according to Conway, Siegelman, Carmichael, & Coggins, 1986) that the Moonie recruitment experience (casual encounter, dinner, weekend workshop, week workshop, two-week workshop) became an overgeneralized template that was often used to describe “the” cult experience. The differences in research by Barker (1984) and Taylor (1982) on London and Berkeley UC centers, respectively, suggest that the overgeneralized template was even narrower, referring in particular to the Unification Church’s Booneville, California center.

Though perhaps not as systematic as the UC, other controversial groups also seemed to employ high levels of manipulation in recruitment.

A self-reinforcing theoretical circularity developed: Cults brainwash youth. Deprogramming, whether involving abduction or not, frees the young people from cultic brainwashing. Deprogrammed former members say that they are grateful for having been liberated from the brainwashing of their cult. Therefore, brainwashing must be the correct explanation for why kids join cults.

This circular explanation was strengthened by the occasional need to provide a legal defense for deprogramming abductions. Often, the defense argument was a version of the “necessity” or “choice of evils” defense: the abduction was necessary to prevent a greater harm, namely, the complete subservience and exploitation of the cult member by the cult leader(s) and all the psychological disorder that would ensue (Delgado, 1977, 1984; Notes, 1981).

This narrative was able to ignore contradictory or qualifying facts because it appealed to the press and provided worried families with an easy-to-understand explanation for the baffling changes they had observed in their children. Dozens of news stories were published about cult members who had been deprogrammed. Families who were concerned about a loved one in a cult related to these stories because their own kids seemed to have changed dramatically and were distancing themselves from family and friends. The brainwashing-deprogramming narrative provided families with an explanation and gave them hope that something could be done to fix the situation. Although most activists at the time probably overestimated the success rate of deprogramming, the intervention worked often enough, objectively speaking (about 60% of the time – Bromley, 1988; Langone, 1984), to maintain a steady flow of grateful families and former members into the CAM of the 1970s.

The brainwashing-deprogramming narrative became so dominant that some members of the emerging family groups believed that nobody left cults unless they were deprogrammed. Author Langone, for example, recalls giving a talk in the late 1970s to a family group in which he discussed an informal survey of about 60 former Moonies, drawn from CAM sources, which found that one-third had walked out on their own. Several parents vocally challenged that finding because “nobody leaves a cult unless he is deprogrammed.”

Certainly, people within the CAM knew that some cultists walked out of their groups and that “deprogrammings” didn’t necessarily require abductions or confinement to work. However, the energy and commitment of most activists at the time depended upon the brainwashing-deprogramming narrative. In part, this commitment was a function of the trauma families sometimes experienced, first when they became aware of frightening changes in their child and second, when they pursued the deprogramming option, which was full of uncertainty and, for most families, was seen as a morally distasteful necessity. This difficult, fear-laden situation set up a cognitive dissonance situation for families, whether the intervention succeeded or failed. In either case, families were motivated to affirm their commitment to the brainwashing-deprogramming explanation, for to question that explanation would be to acknowledge that they might have chosen a different course of action.

Action Priorities

The Peoples Temple tragedy in 1978 had a profound impact on the action priorities of the CAM during the 1970s (Committee on Foreign Affairs, May 15, 1979). News bulletins about the suicide/murders in Jonestown, Guyana began to trickle out on Saturday, November 18th. By night fall, all the major networks offered news specials summarizing what was known. The deaths of nearly 1000 people – adults, children, and a US Congressman - were horrifying. The media coverage was massive.

This tragedy caused the public to listen more closely to the CAM activists who had been speaking out about the broader problem of cults. Jonestown was an example of the worst possible outcome of cult activity. But within the CAM were people who could and did describe a range of personal tragedies, abuses, and pain that mesmerized the media.

Activists also participated in and called for governmental investigations (e.g., Final Report, 1974; House Committee on Foreign Affairs, May 15, 1979; Information Meeting, February 5, 1979; Massachusetts State Senate, March 21, 1979; New York State Assembly, August 9-10, 1979; Subcommittee on International Organizations, October 31, 1978) and pushed for new conservatorship legislation, which would have enabled parents to force cultic groups to let mental health professionals evaluate adult members of concerned parents^[5].

Though the media and government focused on Jonestown and its aftermath, the primary action priority of individual CAM activists throughout the decade of the 1970s was to provide emotional support to families and former cult members, and sometimes to connect families to deprogrammers. High profile media stories enabled families to learn about the CAM. But their attachment to the causes which the CAM advanced derived from one-on-one relationships. These personal bonds probably contributed more to growing and sustaining the CAM than any other factor.

Attitudes Toward

Cults. Given the dominance of the brainwashing-deprogramming perspective, cultic groups were viewed as the “enemy.” As CAM activists succeeded in extricating cult members via deprogramming and getting the sympathetic attention of the press and politicians, cultic groups essentially said, “We agree. We’re enemies.” Whatever dialogue might once have been possible ceased by the end of the decade. Stereotyping, simplification, and suspicion characterized each side’s view of its “enemy.”

Deprogrammers. For many, deprogrammers were the heroes of the emerging CAM. Although many – maybe most – were themselves former group members, some were not. Desperate parents typically came to them after spending many months, if not years, worrying and searching vainly for “people who would listen.” Once these parents met activists within the CAM, they could sometimes connect with deprogrammers. Many who succeeded in extracting their children through deprogramming felt an enduring bond with the deprogrammers, as did many of the deprogrammed former members. Verbal and legal attacks by cults added luster to the deprogrammers’ reputations within the CAM.

Former Cult Members. The former cult members were often called “the kids,” mainly because most were adolescents (Conway et al., 1986). If involved, their primary role in the emerging CAM was to tell their stories to the press (or at conferences) and to help with the deprogrammings or rehabilitation of other cultists. Mental health professionals who had worked with families and former members tended to view most as relatively normal people whose lives had been affected by groups with powerfully persuasive environments. Margaret Singer was particularly vocal in her advocacy of the normality of families and former members (Singer, 1978, 1979). Though basically in agreement, John Clark reported more pre-cult psychological problems in his clinical samples of former members (Clark, 1979).

Helping Professionals. Most helping professionals involved with the CAM were psychotherapists, although some were clergy. As noted, professionals served two main purposes during the 1970s: they helped “the kids” and they lent credibility to the CAM. However, many of the CAM activists correctly sensed that helping professionals tended to be more nuanced in their understanding of the cult phenomenon than activists and were often leery of deprogrammers, so there was an element of ambivalence toward professionals. One often heard families say during these early years that they “were the real experts.”

Researchers. Most researchers during these early years were sociologists of religion (e.g., Barker, 1984; Bromley & Shupe, 1981; Daner, 1976; Lofland, 1977b; Robbins & Anthony, 1971). These scholars tended not to study issues of harm, which CAM psychotherapists saw repeatedly in their practices. Moreover, these scholars had much more knowledge than psychotherapists about the history and variety of cultic groups. Many of the sociologists were also disturbed by the simplistic brainwashing-deprogramming narrative to which the press gave so much attention and by the ability of deprogrammers to kidnap adults and get away with it. Cults quickly realized that such scholars could be allies in the war against the CAM. Hence, CAM activists tended to view the scholars as “cult apologists,” or “pro-cultists,” even though a few of the CAM professionals engaged in respectful dialogue with sociologists.^[6] However, for the large majority of lay activists, the researchers were viewed as “out of touch” and useless, if not harmful to the movement, even though some research was relevant to CAM concerns (e.g., Galanter, 1983; Wright, 1987).

The Decade of the 1980s

Population Entering the Network

By the end of the 1980s noticeable changes had occurred in the population entering the CAM network. More ex-members and professionals entered the network, although families were still the dominant population, even at the very end of the 1980s.

These changes were probably due to three factors: First, the CAM’s success in eliciting media attention made many people aware of existing resources. These people contacted CAM organizations. Although most were families, some were people who had walked away from or been kicked out of their groups. These people were called “walk-aways” or “cast-aways” in order to distinguish them from the deprogrammed ex-members who were normally seen at CAM events in the early 1980s.

Second, the American Family Foundation (AFF) began to reach out in a systematic way to professionals. AFF began organizing annual “advisory board meetings” in 1981, as well as conferences in various cities. The advisory board meetings provided professionals with a peer network with whom they could consult and collaborate. Giving talks to professional associations (e.g., American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association) became a priority, and these outreach talks made more professionals aware of the organization.

Third, the recruitment push of certain active groups of the 1970s (e.g., the Unification Church) resulted in a delayed exodus of group members in the early 1980s. Some of these defectors found their way into the CAM, sometimes because they sought mental health counseling^[7], sometimes because they were angry and wanted to expose their groups as frauds or as abusive environments.

Although the majority of people in CAN were families, that was not the case in AFF, which had a predominance of professionals at its meetings – mostly mental health. As the decade progressed, ex-members became increasingly numerous as activists within CAN.

In 1989 AFF, unlike CAN, made a conscious decision that the future of the CAM lay with ex-members and initiated “Project Recovery,” which ultimately transformed the nature of the CAM.

Understanding of the Phenomenon

Professionals had a moderating influence on understanding of the phenomenon in the 1980s. Because of the sensationalistic connotations of the term “brainwashing” (which conjured up images of a Manchurian candidate assassinating people after hearing a code word), professionals searched for other terms and tried to relate the cult phenomenon to existing subject areas, e.g., the psychology of influence. Moreover, as more families and former members entered the network from groups that used subtle techniques of persuasion, even laymen began to question the brainwashing view.

So little had been written about the subject (except in sociology, but CAM activists deemed that literature irrelevant, if not harmful) that lay activists tended to scoop up anything that sympathetic professionals wrote (e.g., Clark, Langone, Schecter, & Daly, 1981; Goldberg & Goldberg, 1982, 1988, 1989; Langone, 1985; Singer, 1979). The perspectives of these writings weakened the “brainwashing” part of the brainwashing-deprogramming narrative that dominated the 1970s. The influx of walk-aways and castaways into the network weakened the “deprogramming” part of the narrative. Gradually, increasing numbers of lay activists (especially those who were new to the network and did not enter it as a result of a deprogramming) began to realize that the cult phenomenon was more complex than the simplistic brainwashing-deprogramming narrative implied.

A monograph written by Clark et al. (1981) and a booklet written by author Langone (1982) had a significant impact, not only in AFF, but in CAN as well, which distributed both publications.

Langone’s booklet talked about “mind control,” rather than “brainwashing.” “Mind control” was not portrayed in the stark, black-and-white terms of brainwashing narratives:

“Mind-control,” or, to use a less dramatic term, “unethical social influence,” is a process which can vary greatly in its intensity, the frequency with which a group employs it, or the length of time during which a group practices it. Hence, it is not surprising that many groups—educational, therapeutic, political, civic, and religious—occasionally utilize mild to moderate levels of unethical social influence. Most established organizations, however, have accountability mechanisms for protecting individuals against overzealous leaders or members. Destructive cults, on the other hand, take no such precautions and, consequently, employ unethical techniques to such an extent that its use is a distinguishing feature of the group. (Langone, 1982, p. 5)

The Clark et al. monograph explicitly talked about a person-situation interaction in its attempt to explain cult conversions. Cult joiners were not portrayed as helpless pawns completely under the sway of irresistible “brainwashing” forces. They were people with psychological histories and needs that made them vulnerable to high-level manipulation that other people might have resisted.

Let us not mislead. The nuanced perspectives found among members of AFF did not dominate the lay discourse of the 1980s. However, these perspectives had a moderating influence on that discourse and lay the groundwork for future changes in the CAM’s understanding of the cult phenomenon.

Action Priorities

The action priorities within the CAM varied among organizations. We will comment briefly on the two leading organizations.

In the early 1980s, CFF/CAN struggled with organizational issues. Individuals at the affiliate level continued to speak publically at churches, schools, colleges, etc., to work with journalists on media stories, and to provide support to families. The national office, however, took several years before it began to function as it was expected. Ronald Loomis, an experienced college administrator, took over the presidency of CAN in 1986 and turned it around organizationally. CAN opened an office in Chicago during that same year and hired a new executive director in 1987. Under Loomis, the Board of Directors began to function effectively as a policy-making body.

During the late 80s the CAN central office was very effective in media outreach. Increasing numbers of families contacted CAN for assistance. Many were referred to local affiliates, some of which became very effective at mobilizing volunteers. By the late 80s CAN had established a tradition of having various affiliates host and organize an annual conference. By the end of the 80s, CAN’s annual conference drew on average 200 – 300 people, including some mental health professionals and academics. Annual conferences were held in Tampa, Dallas, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, New York, and other cities. Some affiliates also conducted regional conferences.

AFF also conducted conferences during the 1980s, although it did not establish the convention of an annual conference until the late 1990s.

During the 1980s, AFF tried to work cooperatively with CAN, which by the end of the decade clearly had a much larger public “footprint.” AFF saw its mission as research, education, and assistance.

Research at this time mainly consisted of studying the cult phenomenon by collecting and analyzing written information (scholarly and non-scholarly) and reflecting upon and writing about impressions and findings obtained mainly through counseling and interviews of families and former group members. In 1979 AFF began to publish a bi-monthly newspaper, *The Advisor*, which reported on press accounts and the legislative initiatives that were still viable. In 1984 AFF replaced the newspaper with a bi-monthly magazine, the *Cult Observer*, which focused on press accounts, and the semi-annual *Cultic Studies Journal (CSJ)*, which published longer articles written by helping professionals, scholars, and others.

AFF also pursued special projects aimed at helping families. Because of the controversies surrounding deprogramming, Langone in 1982 posted a survey in *The Advisor*, in which he asked families to comment on their experience with coercive deprogramming. This survey produced the first systematically collected data on the effectiveness of deprogramming, a question that preoccupied most families as they contemplated the fearful decision of whether or not to deprogram their child. Langone (1984) found that deprogrammings succeeded 60% of the time, a finding supported by Bromley’s later study of Unification Church deprogrammings (Bromley, 1988). Langone also found that of his 94 respondents 62 had attempted a deprogramming and that 10 (16%) had become embroiled in lawsuits related to their deprogramming attempts.

In 1988 AFF published a book, *Cults: What Parents Should Know* (Ross & Langone, 1988), which gave families concrete advice on helping a loved one. This book made clear that deprogramming was only one option for parents to consider. Although this proposition seemed self-evident to most professionals, the “nobody-leaves-a-cult-without-deprogramming” myth of the 1970s had a residual effect on the CAM well into the 1980s. *Cults: What Parents Should Know* articulated how some mental health professionals looked at the issue; the book also provided concrete suggestions on how to communicate with a cult-involved loved one.

In the same year, Steve Hassan published *Combatting Cult Mind Control* (Hassan, 1988), which also began to move families away from the simplistic brainwashing-deprogramming narrative.

The AFF deprogramming study and book for parents reflected the difference in how CAN and AFF approached the matter of assistance. AFF developed written resources and mainly referred families to mental health professionals and local CAN support groups. Professionals associated with AFF, for the most part, focused on counseling former cult members and families. CAN volunteers provided emotional support for families through its local affiliates and referred families to resources (such as those AFF was producing) and people, including mental health professionals, but also deprogrammers (and later exit counselors, as deprogramming waned).

CAN and AFF focused on different areas with regard to education. CAN concentrated on media outreach and community education (e.g., sending speakers to churches, schools, etc.) through its affiliates. AFF’s professionals often contributed to media stories, but AFF did not put as much

effort and time into media outreach as did CAN, which had consulted a public relations firm as early as 1981. AFF professionals, on the other hand, put a significant amount of time into educational outreach to professionals, e.g., by speaking at local and national professional meetings, and by organizing professional conferences, such as one run jointly with the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute at the prestigious Wingspread Conference Center (West & Langone, 1986).

In 1988 AFF received special funding to begin the International Cult Education Program, which aimed to develop resources aimed at youth.

Although CAN and AFF were the dominant CAM organizations in the secular world, Paul Martin's founding of the Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center in 1986 (Martin, 2012) was a landmark event. Unlike most previously established "rehab centers," whose primary purpose was to prevent deprogrammed ex-members from backsliding, Wellspring was set up to provide professional psychological services. Moreover, Martin set up a structure in which residents were given a full battery of psychological tests before and after the two-week treatment program, and in many cases at a three-month follow-up. Ultimately, his decision to give psychometrics a central place in Wellspring's program led to a database of more than 1000 former members who received treatment at Wellspring. Research on this database (Martin, Langone, Dole, & Wiltrout, 1992) continues to this day.

Attitudes Toward

Cults. The black-and-white attitude toward cults that characterized the end of the 1970s moderated a bit during the 1980s. Langone's widely distributed booklet, "Destructive Cultism: Questions and Answers" (1982) distinguished between "cults" and "destructive cults" in order to emphasize the variability among cults. As the decade came to a close, however, the qualifying adjective "destructive" was customarily dropped. Indeed, in his revision of the booklet, Langone changed the title to "Cults: Questions and Answers" (Langone, 1988). This change in terminology wasn't a reversion to dichotomous thinking; instead, it was a recognition that the term "cult" had come to refer to a spectrum of groups that used psychological manipulation to varying degrees and that were destructive to varying degrees.

Although the concept "cult" became more nuanced and differentiated during the 1980s, the animosity between the CAM and certain cultic groups continued and even got worse in some cases, particularly that of Scientology. This animosity was fueled by the initial success some CAM attorneys had in suing cultic groups, e.g., for intentional infliction of emotional distress. Langone recalls an AFF Advisory Board meeting in the early 1980s in which an attorney was discussing his lawsuits against a cultic group. Some participants became excited and said something to the effect, "We have to hit them in the pocketbook." Herbert Rosedale, a New York corporate attorney who would later become president of AFF in 1988, said presciently, "It isn't going to be that easy." Rosedale had defended corporations with deep pockets, and, since the larger cults also had deep pockets, he realized that their response to these early successes would be hard-hitting.

Rosedale was right. The legal battles that began in the early 1980s and extended well into the 1990s caused further polarization between the CAM and certain cults and academicians, even, ironically, as some within the CAM were becoming more nuanced in their thinking about cults. As more activity occurred in courtrooms, suspicions toward cults and their defenders grew. Members of the CAM began to fear that cult members or their agents were spying on or infiltrating CAM organizations. These fears were rooted in reality, for spies did indeed exist (Kent, May 7, 2011); however, the emotional level of these suspicions sometimes resulted in what some believed was an overemphasis on security, which climaxed in the early 1990s.

Deprogrammers. Although some within the CAM continued to view deprogrammers as heroic figures, others, including some who had conducted deprogrammings, began to question the necessity and effectiveness of abduction or confinement in deprogrammings. Some deprogrammers who never felt comfortable with the coercive aspect of the process began to develop strategies and methods to persuade group members to participate in discussions voluntarily (Hassan, 1983, 1988). Although the term “voluntary deprogramming” was used initially, the connection between “deprogramming” and “kidnapping” had become so strong, that by the end of the decade “exit counseling” came to replace “voluntary deprogramming” as the preferred term, at least for most workers in the field.

Deprogramming began to decline in the 1980s. There was the impression many held, buttressed by the data in Langone’s study (1984), that deprogramming was not sufficiently effective, given its risks and costs. Moreover, the success of “voluntaries” (also referred to as “exit counselings”) called into question the standard “necessity” or “choice of evils” defense of coercive deprogrammings (Notes: Cults, deprogrammers, and the necessity defense, 1981). If voluntary methods so often resulted in “exit,” how could one reasonably claim that kidnapping or confining a cult member was a “necessary” choice of evils? The weakening of deprogramming’s moral and legal justification, which had been challenged in legal articles (Robbins, 1985), made it more difficult for deprogrammers to escape prosecution, which some had been able to do (Criminal charges dropped in deprogramming case – civil suit pending, 1982/83; Mistrial in deprogramming case, 1982; West Virginia deprogrammers get probation, 1982). By the end of the 1980s, most abduction deprogrammers had left the field or committed themselves to exit counseling (Clark, Giambalvo, Giambalvo, Garvey, & Langone, 1993; Hassan, 1988; Kent & Szimhart, 2002; Ted Patrick ending work, 1982).

Former Cult Members. By the end of the 1980s CAM activists clearly recognized that most people left cultic groups on their own without a family-initiated intervention. First of all, the growing number of former members who were active within the CAM all had friends who had left groups without an intervention. Secondly, increasing numbers of former members who had walked out of groups (walk-aways) or been kicked out (cast-aways) began to participate in the CAM.

The influx into the CAM of former members who had not been deprogrammed created some stress in CAN, which was still dominated by parents. This strain, which climaxed in the early 1990s, will be discussed later.

Helping Professionals. By mobilizing helping professionals and conducting educational outreach to professional associations, AFF significantly advanced the role of helping professionals, particularly mental health, within the CAM of the 1980s. These professionals spoke repeatedly at CAN conferences and to CAN affiliates. The professionals wrote articles and books that provided advice to families and former members (e.g., Goldberg & Goldberg, 1982, 1988a, 1988b; Ross & Langone, 1988). The helpers taught families how to communicate more effectively with loved ones in groups and counseled former members seeking to readjust to life outside the group. And some served as expert witnesses in the court cases that became so important in the 1980s. By the end of the decade helping professionals had supplanted deprogrammers as articulators of the dominant CAM narrative.

By the end of the 1980s the simplistic brainwashing-deprogramming narrative of the 1970s had been replaced by something more subtle but still sympathetic to the concerns of families and former members. This new narrative could be summarized as follows:

- Most who got involved were relatively normal people made vulnerable to persuasion because of life stress.
- Though varied, cults used a range of psychologically manipulative techniques to recruit, indoctrinate, and retain members.
- Teaching young people how to recognize and resist psychological manipulation would make them less susceptible to cultic enticements.
- By understanding cultic manipulations and learning how to communicate more effectively, families could improve their relationship with cult-involved loved ones and, with luck, facilitate a voluntary departure from a group.
- For other families, but not all, exit counseling might be a feasible and appropriate intervention.
- When they left their groups, regardless of how, former cult members tended to suffer adverse effects and often needed counseling to readjust.
- If properly educated, families could help their loved one readjust to life in the mainstream.

Researchers. One might be inclined to think that the growing influence of professionals within the CAM of the 1980s and the resultant increase in nuance would have made researchers welcome. This was true to a degree at the beginning of the decade. As noted earlier, in the early 1980s there had been notable attempts at dialogue between researchers (mostly sociologists and religious studies scholars) and helping professionals. This dialogue, however, was transient for at least two reasons.

First, the scholarly community disapproved of the brainwashing-deprogramming narrative. The popular brainwashing model was simplistic and ignored the diversity among and within cults. Second, deprogramming as a “solution” was morally repugnant to most scholars and turned some into civil liberties activists. Some scholars downplayed the harmfulness of even highly controversial groups (Bromley & Shupe, 1981) and attacked the CAM families and former cult members, whose critical accounts were derided as “atrocities tales” (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979). Certain sociological books enraged CAM members, particularly Bromley

and Shupe's *Strange Gods* (1981), which was dissected in a book review by philosopher Jeanne Schuller (1983).

The second factor that greatly decreased dialogue was the growing number of lawsuits (Hominik, 1995; van Hoey, 1991) initiated by lawyers, who used expert witnesses to attack and to defend cults. Before long, the researchers who tended to defend cults were called "cult apologists" or "pro-cultists" and the helping professionals who tended to criticize cults were dubbed "anti-cultists." Once academic disputes entered the legal arena, a new set of rules began to displace the normal rules of academic discourse, which welcome and may even require that participants change their opinions as they learn more about a subject. The legal rules implicitly said, "Before you speak or write, think about how lawyers might use your words against you (or colleagues who are your friends) in court or at a deposition." Shinn (1992) wrote an illuminating essay on the conflicts that some academic forensic experts felt during this period.

While the legal cases proceeded, pro- and anti-cultists maligned or, at best, ignored each other. Those who were most active also tried to enlist the support of various professional and scholarly organizations to strengthen the persuasiveness of their legal testimony, which at the time was subject in the USA to the Frye test of whether or not an opinion was generally supported by the scientific community.

Some have referred to these lawyer-generated academic disputes as "the cult wars" (Kent & Krebs, 1988a, 1988b). They dominated the 1980s, but in North America fortunately began to wane in the 1990s (Langone, 2005).

The Decade of the 1990s

Population entering the network. Data collected from research surveys and evaluation sheets at former member workshops showed a marked change in the former member population of the 1990s compared to the 1970s.

The Conway and Siegelman survey conducted in 1978 (Conway et al., 1986) used snowball methodology to examine a population of 426 former members from the CAM network. This population came from 40 groups, 5 of which accounted for 76% of the sample, with the Unification Church alone accounting for 44% of the sample. The average age of joining was 21, and subjects were in their group an average of 2.7 years. Seventy percent of the subjects had left their groups through a deprogramming. Langone's deprogramming effectiveness survey (Langone, 1984) had similar demographic results.

Langone's survey of the early 1990s (Langone, 1991), used a similar snowball methodology to collect a subject sample of 301, but had very different results. This survey's subjects came from 101 different groups. The 5 largest groups accounted for only 33% of the total, with the largest group accounting for 16%. The Unification Church subjects – 44% of Conway and Siegelman's sample – constituted only 5% of Langone's sample. Moreover, Langone's average age of joining was 24.8 and subjects had been in their groups an average of 6.7 years. Only 13% of Langone's subjects had left their groups through deprogramming, and 60% reported having had no intervention at all.

By the end of the 1990s, participants at AFF former member workshops tended to have an average age of about 36, had been in their groups about 6 years, and had been out of their groups about 6 years. These numbers are consistent with Langone's findings.

Clearly, the former member population entering the CAM had changed dramatically, a point of view shared by another writer who had been involved in the CAM from its early years (Rudin, 2002).

Unfortunately, systematically collected data on families do not exist. However, the authors of this paper, all of whom have answered phones, responded to e-mails, and led family sessions at conferences, agree that the family population has also changed markedly. In the 1970s and much of the 1980s, the typical family became alarmed when their college age child dropped out of school to devote all of his or her time to a group that the parents saw as deviant and harmful and/or exhibited dramatic personality changes. By the late 90s, there was no longer a "typical" family. The families seeking help from the CAM were markedly more varied than in the 1970s.

Given the changes in the former member population, it is not surprising that workers within the CAM began to encounter more families whose children were older, had been in their groups for more years, or were married with children. These cases produced much more complex interpersonal dynamics than were encountered when an adolescent dropped out of college to serve a guru or messiah. These 1990s family situations were not so easily "fixed" by exit counseling, and certainly not by deprogramming. More and more often, mental health professionals were called upon to help families "manage" stressful relationships, rather than merely "get their kid out of the group" (see Bardin, 2000).

As those who joined their groups in the 1970s and 1980s began to leave in the 1990s, CAM workers encountered more cases in which custody battles occurred because one parent remained in the group (Greene, 1989; Kandel, 1987/88). The workers also were called upon to help individuals approaching middle age who might have passed their lives in isolated communes; these people often had little education and no formal work experience on which to build a new life.

Also, for the first time, young people who had grown up in cultic groups that their parents had joined in the 1970s, entered the CAM. These people came to be called "second generation adults" or "SGAs."

In part because of the surge of interest in large group awareness trainings (LGATs), which were variants of the est (Erhard Seminar Trainings) model first put forth by Werner Erhard, CAM workers were contacted by spouses whose marriages were threatened because of the way an LGAT had affected one of the partners.

The late 80s and early 90s also saw a surge of inquiries about Satanism. Some groups could have been considered Satanic, depending upon one's definition of the term. Most activity deemed satanic, however, appeared to be related to teen dabblers in Satanism, a handful of deranged killers, or satanic elements in some child molestation cases (Langone & Blood, 1990). Much of the media, which sensationalized this phenomenon, initially accepted as fact claims that later

proved to be bogus (e.g., 50,000 children per year were sacrificed to Satan) or greatly exaggerated (e.g., the number of Satanic groups, the use of Satanic ritual in child molestation cases, recovered memories of Satanic ritual abuse). Eventually, the media reacted against its own early credulity and began to question the claims of satanic activity (Charlier & Downing, 1988). Today, we hardly ever get inquiries about Satanism. When media interest declined, so did inquiries to the CAM, giving greater credence to constructivist perspectives on the phenomenon (Richardson, Best, & Bromley, 1991).

The greater variety of groups and former members encountered during the 1990s led to a greater recognition that different people responded differently to the same cult environment, even when that environment was highly controlling. The CAM began to view its focus as those who were hurt. Not all groups hurt people. Even in abusive groups, not everybody was hurt. But many were hurt, and these people, when they came out, could find varying types and levels of assistance and support within the CAM.

Action Priorities. By the beginning of the 1990s, the role differentiation of CAN and AFF became clearer. AFF was moving in three directions: (1) mobilizing professionals, including the increasing number of former group members who were getting advanced degrees; (2) developing resources for former members, families, and youth that were more professional than what had been used previously; (3) conducting and supporting empirical research. CAN, on the other hand, was reaching out to media in a sophisticated way, while continuing its role of providing grassroots support to families and former members.

Both organizations officially rejected deprogramming, although individuals associated with the organizations continued to relate to and surreptitiously connect families to the small number of persons who still conducted involuntary deprogrammings. The leadership of AFF definitely kept its distance from those who still did involuntaries. CAN's leadership, on the other hand, appeared to have had more difficulty abandoning what remained of the 1970s brainwashing-deprogramming narrative. Indeed, when he was preparing his introduction to his edited book, *Recovery from Cults*, Langone had a long and interesting phone conversation with CAN's executive director. Langone had concluded that the term "deprogramming" had come to imply "kidnapping" in popular usage, so he preferred the term "exit counseling" to refer to interventions that were voluntary. The CAN executive disagreed and advocated continued use of the term "voluntary deprogramming." Langone did not take the suggestion. Besides being linguistically obsolete, the term "voluntary deprogramming," in his view, expressed an implicit solidarity with the old brainwashing-deprogramming narrative, which he viewed as a dangerous simplification of the cult conversion and deconversion processes.

CAN's residual attachment to the 1970s narrative and its media outreach aimed against certain groups made the organization vulnerable. The Church of Scientology and individuals connected with or supported by this organization led the attack against CAN, which had offered information and opinions to journalists who had written about Scientology (e.g., Behar, 1991). In 1991 the first of several dozen lawsuits against CAN was filed (Goodstein, 1996). CAN prevailed until 1994, when it was implicated in a lawsuit involving a deprogramming (Jason Scott v. Rick Ross et al., November 1995). Defeat in this lawsuit ultimately led to CAN's declaring bankruptcy in 1995 and eventually to its closing down in 1997 (Cult Awareness

Network forced to liquidate, 1996, September/October). Scientology eventually took copyright of the CAN name and received telephone calls under the CAN name. Several local CAN affiliates restructured themselves with new names and policies. AFF was able to work cooperatively with some of those affiliates, such as the Cult Information Service in the New York/New Jersey area.

There were attempts to resurrect CAN, and in 1998 the Leo J. Ryan Foundation opened its doors. However, this organization failed to reignite the old CAN network and closed in 2002.

Langone recalls a conversation during the post-bankruptcy planning that led to the Ryan Foundation. He asked one of the planners, what the new organization would do that AFF was not doing. The answer was telling. "Well, AFF isn't 'rah rah' enough."

This comment was accurate. AFF tried to be professional and balanced, eschewing sensationalism and simplification. AFF tried to apply professional perspectives to education and helping, and avoided "fighting cults." Perhaps that is why AFF thrived, while other organizations didn't.

During the 1990s AFF pursued projects and programs related to the International Cult Education Program (ICEP), directed by Marcia Rudin, and Project Recovery, which began in 1988 and 1989, respectively.

Although it had occurred 10 years earlier, the Jonestown tragedy of 1978, which had a profound impact on colleges and universities, as well as the general public, contributed to interest in ICEP. Schools that were vaguely aware of cult activity on their own campuses suddenly realized that they needed to activate programs to educate their own students about the techniques that such groups were using to manipulate and control their members. Ronald Loomis, a college administrator and president of CAN during the late 80s, developed educational presentations about cults specifically directed to college students, and lectured at over 150 colleges and universities, as well as at conferences for student affairs professionals in fields like residence life, student activities, student unions and campus law enforcement. He also helped connect AFF to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. This relationship resulted in a volume on the subject (Schechter & Noyes, 1987), which was later revised and expanded by Marcia Rudin (1991).

In addition, ICEP produced two professional videos, a lesson plan for high schools, an educational newsletter, and conducted dozens of programs for schools and colleges.

Project Recovery began with study groups that investigated various topics. These study groups led to chapters in a book, *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*, which was published by Norton and picked up as a selection of the Behavioral Science Book Service. Wendy Ford wrote a practical handbook, *Recovery from Abusive Groups* (Ford, 1993), while Carol Giambalvo (1992) wrote a practical guide for families contemplating exit counseling.

Project Recovery also developed weekend workshops for former group members, the first occurring in 1992. These workshops, coordinated by Carol Giambalvo, became an integral part of AFF/ICSA and continue to this day.

AFF's movement toward professionalism gained momentum during the 1990s.

In 1994 an article in AFF's *Cultic Studies Journal*, "The Group Psychological Abuse Scale: A Measure of the Varieties of Cultic Abuse," reported on an AFF empirical research study (Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994). Emanating from the Langone survey mentioned earlier, this was the first attempt to use standard psychometric methodology to develop an instrument that quantified individuals' evaluations of group environments. Carmen Almendros of the Autonomous University of Madrid has carried forth the development of this scale, which has been translated into Spanish, Japanese, German, and Swedish (Almendros, Carrobles, Rodriguez-Carballeira, & Jansa, 2003; Almendros, Carrobles, Rodriguez-Carballeira, 2007; Almendros, Gamez-Guadix, Rodriguez-Carballeira, & Carrobles, 2010).

ICSA also worked with Paul Martin of Wellspring to conduct two weekend planning meetings on research in 1994 and 1995. These meetings produced a research agenda that kept AFF's professional network focused on achievable and useful projects. There were studies on psychological distress and therapeutic outcome (e.g., Martin et al., 1992); AFF got a prevalence question into a national telephone survey conducted by an NIMH researcher (ICR, 1993); Dr. Edward Lottick surveyed more than 1000 physicians in Pennsylvania (Lottick, 1993)^[8].

During the 1990s, AFF also put up its first Website. Initially, the Web seemed to be a convenient way of doing what the organization had always done – disseminate information. In time, however, phone calls and letters seeking help would diminish as e-mail and Web browsing became the primary means through which people contacted AFF.

Let us close this section by mentioning a landmark event that underlined the degree to which the people within the AFF network had moved away from the "cult fighting" mentality and brainwashing-deprogramming narrative that some subscribed to in the 1970s. AFF's 1999 conference at the University of Minnesota featured a program on human rights in ISKCON in which Michael Langone moderated a panel consisting of an exit counselor, Joseph Kelly, who had done ISKCON cases, a psychologist, Steve Dubrow-Eichel, and two members of ISKCON, Anuttama Dasa, ISKCON's public affairs director, and Radha-devi Dasi, a Harvard trained attorney. Langone and colleagues had been involved in a series of private discussions that led to the decision to go forward with this panel. They had become convinced that certain members of ISKCON were making a good faith attempt to reform the organization so as to rectify problems, e.g., child abuse at ISKCON's gurukulas (private schools), which IKSCON had acknowledged in its own journal (Rochford & Heinlein, 1988). Those who had been involved in the planning for this panel were not sure, however, how the audience would react, since so many were former group members and family members who had been involved in the CAM since the 1970s. Surprisingly, the audience reaction was very positive. Indeed, when the panel ended, several dozen people rushed up to get copies of Radha-devi Dasi's paper.

This panel was a turning point for the CAM in North America, for it proved that productive dialogue was possible with at least some who were generally perceived as opponents.

Attitudes Toward

Cults. The divergent paths taken by CAN and AFF in the 1990s reflected diverging attitudes toward cults.

CAN's focus on media outreach, one might argue, made it a captive of much of the media's need for simplicity and conflict and the ever-present temptation toward sensationalism. The resulting "cult fighting" attitude became entrenched once the lawsuits began. These lawsuits, which came one after the other, were traumatic to CAN's leadership and disheartening to its network of supporters. Even though objectively the vast majority of cultic groups ignored CAN, the feeling of being under siege invited overgeneralization and defensiveness.

AFF's leaders sympathized with their colleagues at CAN and shared their outrage about how a rich enemy could use the legal system to suppress criticism. CAN's travails, however, also reinforced the belief of the AFF leadership that the organization's focus should be on research, education, and helping, not on "fighting cults." AFF's goals pointed the organization toward a differentiation of the concept "cult" and away from the polarized conception of the old brainwashing-deprogramming narrative.

Deprogrammers. The lawsuit that led to CAN's demise involved an involuntary deprogramming. Even within CAN, there was anger, a sense that conducting involuntary deprogrammings in this day and age made no sense. By 1995 there had been probably well over one hundred successful exit counselings, clear proof that coercion was not necessary to get people out of cults. Moreover, as the lawsuit against CAN made clear, involuntary deprogrammings put an entire network at risk. All the good that CAN did, beginning with the support it provided to families and victims at the local level, became collateral damage of a deprogramming because that event led to the organization's closure. Furthermore, some of the leaders within CAN felt betrayed because they had believed the organization's public disavowal of deprogramming, but then discovered that some important people within the organization were not abiding by that policy. Within the North American CAM, these events were, so to speak, the nail in the coffin of deprogramming. Deprogrammings continued to occur from time to time, but their frequency and importance to the CAM diminished substantially.

Former cult members. In the 1990s the influence of former cult members within the CAM increased dramatically. Through AFF's Project Recovery they contributed books, book chapters, and journal articles and participated in workshops, conferences, and study groups. Former cult members, especially those who had exited their groups without an intervention (the majority by the time the 1990s began) also strengthened the movement toward nuance. A study by Langone and Chambers (1991), for example, asked former members to rate the degree to which they believed other former members would relate to 20 terms. Toward the bottom of the list were terms such as "cult" and "deprogramming," while at the top of the list were terms such as "psychological trauma" and "psychological abuse." The study's authors suggested that former members related to terms that reflected their experiences, whereas families related to terms

(“cult,” “brainwashing”) that helped explain the puzzling changes they had witnessed in their loved ones. Of course, those former members who had entered the CAM found some value in the concept cult. So it could be the case that this study’s results revealed what CAM-affiliated former members thought those not so affiliated would relate to and may help explain why only a small percentage of “walk-aways” entered the CAM.

AFF embraced former members, seeing them as the future of the CAM. The parent-dominated CAN, on the other hand, showed ambivalence.

In 1982, a group of former members met to discuss forming a support network for people who had experiences in controlling, totalistic groups, cults or relationships. At the time, those individuals felt former members had specific needs that were not being addressed by Citizen’s Freedom Foundation/Cult Awareness Network. Named FOCUS (Former Cult Support), it began to have separate pre-conference meetings at annual conferences. The desire of the organization was to reach out to former members and have a more active role in CAN. It was expressed at many conferences that CFF/CAN treated former members like hurt little children who really weren’t ready to make a contribution. At one time, CAN’s by-laws read “At least one member of the Board shall be an active member of FOCUS, the former cult member organization.” However, the CAN board changed those by-laws, and at one point CAN appointed a former member who was not active in FOCUS to represent FOCUS on the CAN board. In 1987 former members voted on proposed by-laws for FOCUS and elected a board of directors. In 1992, CAN advised FOCUS that they were not covered under CAN’s liability insurance and, given the lawsuits against CAN, said that it would be best for FOCUS to dissolve its by-laws and become a standing committee of CAN. FOCUS agreed to this as a temporary measure, but kept its board intact. In June, 1994 the FOCUS board, which included author Giambalvo, received a letter from the president of CAN thanking them for their service, removing them from their positions and appointing as the head of the FOCUS “committee” a person who was not even a former member. The board of FOCUS quickly attempted to reconcile with CAN but insisted upon being recognized, respected, self-determining, and autonomous. CAN’s response was that FOCUS would remain a committee of CAN. Since CAN had applied for a service mark on the name, “FOCUS,” the name could not be used by the disenfranchised board. Since FOCUS had already incorporated as a Florida non-profit corporation during the summer of 1994, the FOCUS board made its independence official by filing for a “doing business as” reFOCUS. The new organization developed its own newsletter and web site and continues to serve former members to this day.

Helping professionals. Helping professionals, mental health in particular, had become vital to the CAM, as noted, by the end of the 1980s. Their important role continued through the 1990s. However, in large part because of the pioneering research of Paul Martin, the work of CAM mental health professionals began to be supplemented and supported by empirical research.

Researchers. As CAM helping professionals began to conduct research or support academicians conducting research, respect for academicians and research increased within the CAM ranks. In part this resulted from empirical research originating within the CAM. However, it also resulted in the late 1990s from AFF’s movement toward dialogue and openness as well as the declining importance of the courtroom as an arena for fighting cults. For the first time since the early

1980s, so-called “pro-cultist” and “anti-cult” researchers and professionals began to engage in substantial communication. Eileen Barker, editor of this volume, played a vital role in initiating this dialogue, which came to fruition during the next decade.

The 21st Century

Population entering the network. The most conspicuous change in the population entering the CAM network after the turn of the millennium is the number of former group members who were born or raised in groups, what are often called second generation adults (SGAs) to distinguish them from first generation adults (those who joined when they were college age or older). Twenty years ago there were very few SGAs in the CAM network. However, in a survey completed by about 40% of the attendees at ICSA’s 2012 annual conference in Montreal, one-third of ex-members and about 12% of the total attendees were SGAs.

There is some empirical evidence (Kendall, 2006) that SGAs experience higher levels of distress on psychological measures. Clinicians who work with former cult members would certainly agree.

Overall, depending upon the data one uses (Web surveys; conference surveys) at least one-half of the ICSA network now consists of former group members. Parents, mental health professionals, and researchers each constitute about 10% - 15%; others (educators, clergy, attorneys, law enforcement, students) account for about 20%. Former members often also are mental health professionals, researchers, etc., so it is difficult, given the unrepresentativeness of available data, to provide accurate breakdowns. In any case, these population breakdowns reflect a marked shift from the 1970s and early 1980s, when probably 80% or more of the CAM network consisted of parents.

Another change regarding the population entering the network was increased international participation. This change was first noticed during AFF’s 2001 annual conference in Seattle. Approximately 25% of the 206 attendees were from outside the USA, about 20% from outside North America. At the 2012 annual conference in Montreal, 55% were from outside the USA, and 20% were from outside North America. The internationalization of ICSA has been strengthened by the fact that every other year since 2005, the annual conference has been held in Europe, where only about 25% of the attendees are from North America. Conferences typically have 180 – 250 attendees, regardless of location.

Action priorities. With the dissolution of CAN in 1997, AFF was left as the sole North American organization with a donor network of over 1000 people and an interest network of 2000 – 3000 persons. The movement toward professionalization, dialogue, and openness that became conspicuous in the 1990s accelerated after the turn of the century. AFF had found its niche: assistance, periodicals, information, Website, conferences, workshops, education, and research. The action priority was stabilization, both in terms of program and funding.

The search for stabilization became especially acute with the death of AFF’s president Herb Rosedale in November 2003. Rosedale had been such a dominating force that AFF had never had a particularly active Board of Directors. In December of 2003 two other AFF directors died,

Margaret Singer and David Halperin. A new board was elected, with the goal of making it an active, engaged board. One of the first tasks taken on by the new board was a change of name.

Several months of e-mail, phone, and face-to-face discussions among about two dozen advisors led to the decision to change the name from American Family Foundation to International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). The primary debate in these discussions was whether or not to use a “cult” term in the name. The president and executive director of the organization advocated not using “cult” in the name. They felt that the focus should be on influence and psychological manipulation. However, the majority of advisors believed that using “cult” in the name would reflect some continuity with the past.

In 2006 ICSA established a nonvoting membership category. This change was made for several reasons.

First, funding had always separated AFF/ICSA from CAN. The former historically relied on a small number of large grants, whereas the latter relied on a large number of small donations. Both organizations tended to function on budgets varying over the years from \$100,000 to \$300,000 per year. Relying on large grants is, of course, a more vulnerable position than having a large base of small donations. By striving to increase membership over time, ICSA seeks to strengthen its funding position.

Second, as the organization achieved a level of stability in its programs and could project its existence into the future, the directors and other leaders in the organization, most of whom were at or nearing retirement age, realized that they needed to prepare for personnel transition by grooming younger people to move into leadership positions. A larger membership base makes for a larger pool of potential leaders.

Third, membership gives supporters more of a psychological stake in the organization. This is important because those who most need help are least able to pay for it when they need it. Therefore, to survive financially, the organization must rely on the altruistic motives of its supporters. Being psychologically attached to the organization enhances altruism.

Attitudes Toward

Cults. During the past decade attitudes toward cults have continued to become more nuanced. Current members of groups, some in conspicuous garb (e.g., from ISKCON), have been attending ICSA conferences for years. Twenty years ago many people would have been disturbed if a current group member were present. Today, if people get disturbed it is, for the most part, about what the current member says, not that he or she is there. Openness to diverse perspectives seems to be generally accepted at conferences. Civility appears to be the norm among conference participants. Although the gross overgeneralization, “the cults,” may still be heard occasionally, members of the ICSA network seem, for the most part, to have recognized that groups are different, that different people react differently to the same group, and that ICSA’s focus is on those who are harmed by their group experience and on families concerned about a loved one.

Deprogrammers. Deprogramming has become unimportant ancient history within the North American CAM. An ironic example of the change in deprogramming's status was a session at the ICSA 2008 annual conference in Philadelphia. A speaker described how a well-known deprogrammer had sexually abused her in the 1970s. Twenty-five or thirty years ago, such a session would never have been permitted in a conference and even the claim might have provoked defenders of deprogramming to accuse the woman of lying or of still being "brainwashed." Indeed, the lady in question had remained silent for many years because of family pressure. Those of us who organized the conference thought that the session might be explosive because it was revealing dirty laundry on a person whom some had revered in the 1970s. To the contrary, although the session was well attended and well received, to most attendees it was merely another example of the abuse of power. The authors of this paper thought the session might be a landmark event, but it wasn't. It was merely one of many interesting sessions, and it demonstrated that deprogramming in North America had ended: "not with a bang but a whimper."

Former cult members. Events have proven that AFF's leaders were correct in 1989 when they initiated Project Recovery because they believed that former members were the future of the CAM. As noted earlier former members now constitute about half of the CAM, and almost all of the younger persons who may become ICSA leaders in the future are former group members. There are so many, and they are so diverse that no generalized statement can be made about the CAM's attitude toward former members. One might say that before long former group members will BE the CAM.

Helping professionals. Helping professionals continue to provide the dominant narrative for the CAM. The bullet points stated in the section on the 1980s still more or less hold, although some refinements could be added, e.g., treatment of SGAs, the role of trauma, research findings on treatment outcome, countertransference issues for former member therapists. As this chapter is being prepared, plans are forming to implement a series of steps that will lead to an edited book (and online resources) that will provide an updated articulation of the clinical state of the art in helping families and former members. Probably half or more of the authors will be former group members who became mental health professionals.

Researchers. During the past dozen years, at least several dozen former group members attending graduate school have expressed an interest in cultic studies research. Recent conferences have all had special meetings between graduate students, not all of whom are former members, and academic researchers. As more ex-members become researchers and mental health professionals, the distinctions between these three groups blur, which reduces tension among them.

Future Challenges

ICSA is unique in the way it coordinates the needs and perspectives of its four main constituencies: former group members, families, helping professionals, and researchers. This coordination is made even more complex because the needs and perspectives often change over time.

When people first enter the network, they are typically looking for help of some kind. For example: They may want help with post-group adjustment. They may want support in their desire to tell the world about guru so-and-so. They may be looking for subjects for or advice on a dissertation study. They may want to get their loved one out of a cult. They may want support to grieve the loss of a child to a cult. They may want to learn how to counsel former cult members or may want peer support for a tough clinical case. They may want to learn about a specific group or about why people join and leave groups.

Most people move on when their needs are met. Indeed, helpers feel an ethical obligation to encourage former members in particular to go on with their lives. The helpers don't want to persuade the former members to serve ICSA now that they've stopped serving their cult. Hence, when people say "thanks and goodbye," those of us who offer help are gratified on one level, i.e., we helped them, but disappointed on another level, i.e., they won't help us help others by becoming members and financially supporting the organization.

Building membership is difficult for there is an inherent dilemma that reflects the different organizational "personalities" of CAN and AFF/ICSA. When they first leave a cultic group or when family members first become alarmed about a loved one in a group, individuals will often be more angry and passionate than they will be years later when they have adjusted to the life change. Often, these people want to "fight cults." They may want the "rah rah" that ICSA lacks. But this emotionalism is incompatible with ICSA's goals of professionalism and balance. Moreover, the passion that gives birth to the "cult fighting" mentality contains the seeds of its own destruction. Like a shooting star, that passion can be bright for a while; then it is gone. ICSA's message that change can take time and that patience is required, i.e., that there are no quick fixes, can be frustrating for some.

The challenge for ICSA is to build a committed membership over time without the marketing benefits of "rah rah." Those who are committed members (a) have more or less dealt with their own cult-related issues, (b) are motivated to help others because of a quiet, enduring sense of moral obligation, rather than an emotional need or compulsion, and (c) recognize that in the long run, accuracy, balance, and openness will produce more benefits than passionate confrontation.

ICSA's membership of about 750 has been increasing steadily since membership was first initiated. Whether or not it can increase rapidly enough to become large enough to sustain the organization remains to be seen.

If it does not and ICSA passes into history, history might repeat itself. Fragments of the ICSA network are sure to survive. Newly exited, hurting former members will find like-minded people in the splintered network. Some will want to organize to "tell the world" about cults or about guru so-and-so. Others will want to organize to help people. Eventually, individuals will become involved who have the talent to organize others, rather than merely say "somebody should (fill-in-the-blank)." If the organizational efforts coincide with a major cult story, such as Jonestown, the various small groups may find it mutually beneficial to join together, much as did the organizations that united to form the Citizens Freedom Foundation in 1979. Various individuals in these groups will advocate reaching out to the media, contacting politicians to pass laws,

seeking grant money, suing cults, etc. The larger cultic groups will take actions to defend themselves against this new threat. Passions will escalate. The cult wars will start again.

The Internet, however, would probably derail this scenario before it could unfold. We already see important changes made possible by the Internet.

First of all, so much critical material is now available on the Web about the larger, more well-known cultic groups that it seems reasonable to speculate that their recruitment must be down. Prospective recruits can learn about the group's "dirty laundry" before they commit. Former members leaving these groups also learn from the Web that other people call them "cults," and they find their way into the CAM network. It may be the case, however, that these groups are declining in population because of their exposure on the Internet, and that fewer people from these well-known groups enter the CAM network.

What may be increasing in population are the small groups that the media have ignored. Dozens, quite possibly hundreds, of small Websites focus on particular groups. Most of these sites only seek to "get the word out" about "so-and-so" and to offer an opportunity for former group members to share their feelings and opinions in chat rooms or other Web communication venues. These small, focused sites are typically maintained at no cost by volunteers. They are, then, in synch with the free culture of the Web. Moreover, they do not necessarily relate to the term "cult" or to any other term that might connect them to other small-group sites. Thus, even though they represent a potentially large pool of prospective supporters of ICSA's work, converting this potential to actuality has proven to be quite difficult for ICSA.

Even if they do see value in terms such as "cult" or "psychological abuse," these volunteers may not have the time or interest to do more than focus on their own groups and their own Websites. Networking with others outside the volunteer's immediate interest area may be an unaffordable time luxury.

Furthermore, the free culture of the Web is itself an obstacle to organizations, such as ICSA, that must raise funds to survive. Web statistics in 2011 indicated that about 20,000 unique visitors a month came to icsahome.com. Of these, about 5% spent 30 minutes or more on the site -- approximately 12,000 unique visitors a year. The vast majority of these people never even contact ICSA. They simply use the free resources, as do billions of other persons grabbing no-cost information from the amazing worldwide Web.

Thus, ICSA's other challenge is to provide information on the Web (currently more than 20,000 documents available free on our site) in a way that persuades users to become members. Given the huge number of people who use the site, one would think this task would be easy. But the free culture of the Web makes it very difficult.

Hence, the other scenario if ICSA passes is not for history to repeat, but rather for the current CAM networks to atomize into a myriad of Web sites, each concerned about a specific group, leader, or topic.

If ICSA masters its challenges, and there are good reasons to believe that it will, what will change in the future, or, to put the question differently, what are ICSA's long-range goals?

There are two general long-range goals: (1) Develop a geographically dispersed network of knowledgeable helpers – mainly mental health and clergy – to whom former group members and families may turn for help. (2) Provide a large and continually updated base of accurate, balanced, credible information from which users can benefit, whether for education, assistance, or research purposes.

ICSA has made a lot of progress toward the attainment of these goals. However, much more work remains. The central challenge will be to increase membership without succumbing to the ever-present temptation to go “rah rah.”

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[2] The term some academics have used, “anti-cult movement,” is rejected in this paper because it does not accurately reflect the range of views held by individuals and organizations. “Anti-cult” attitudes characterize(d) only some members of the movement, and declined in influence as the movement focused more on assisting those who had been adversely affected by their or a family member’s involvement in a cultic group.

[3] We will use “AFF” to refer to this organization until we get to recent years, when we will switch to “ICSA.”

[4] “Moonie” was a common term at the time to refer to members of the Unification Church.

[5] The closest a conservatorship bill came to becoming law was in New York State, where the governor vetoed a bill passed overwhelmingly by both houses of the legislature (Carey Vetoes, August/September 1980). Aronin (1982) presented a model legislative proposal in a law journal. However, by the mid-1980s efforts to pass special conservatorship laws had all been abandoned.

[6] Author Langone studied the sociological literature when he first became involved in the CAM and had a number of interesting conversations with scholars, particularly Tom Robbins. Kevin Garvey also reported having had productive conversations with Robbins. See, for example, Langone, 1983, March, and Kilbourne, 1985.

[7] Galanter, 1983, for example, reported that 24% of the former Moonies in his study “sought out professional help for emotional problems after leaving; and 3% (i.e., two respondents) had been hospitalized (p. 985).

[8] Lottick also surveyed psychologists in Pennsylvania (2008).