

What to do if a family member has joined a New Religious Movement

1. Find out all the factual information you can about the movement. Try not to be panicked if you come across sensational literature or 'horror stories' by ex-members. New Religious Movements often change or evolve very quickly, so try to find out what is going on in the group or movement right now. One source of factual information is INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) at the London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London, WC1A 1AA (0207 955 7654). Inform@lse.ac.uk
2. Are you able to be in contact with your family member? If you are, are you able to talk to them about how and why they joined the group? Even if you don't like or approve of the group, has your family member made a reasoned, informed, uncoerced choice? You should remember that many people leave groups quite quickly once the novelty has worn off and even committed people often move on within four years.
3. If you are prepared to accept the choice they have made, are you prepared for how other members of the family may feel or be affected? Will it be possible for you to avoid confrontation? Some groups warn their new members to expect hostility and so confrontation often confirms what the new group has said and adds to the apparent truth of their claims. Sometimes the family member in the group may express disapproval of the family, their behaviour or their beliefs. This can be very hurtful and bewildering. It may help if everyone involved knows as much as possible about the group, tries to be tolerant and caring and tries to keep relationships as 'normal' as possible.
4. If there are children involved, what will you tell them? Does membership of the group affect how they are brought up or educated? INFORM can put you in touch with counsellors or if necessary, legal advice. The Church of England also has a network of diocesan advisers who can help with pastoral matters or family difficulties.
5. If your family member has ceased to communicate with you or stays away from home, try to keep the channels of communication open for as long as possible. If they won't talk to you, try to get friends or colleagues to phone, call, email or visit. Such communication does not have to be about the group, - just reminding the family member of interests, hobbies, mutual plans or friends can be enough to remind them that they have a life waiting for them outside the group. Some groups maintain allegiance by getting members to confine their friendships and close relationships within the group itself and disloyalty is frowned upon. If your family member is eventually to come back to you, they will need to feel that there is a welcome for them and their friendships and working relationships remain intact. Emotional rows and pleading can make it more difficult for relationships to be resumed with dignity and integrity.
6. Be very careful what actual action you take, if you feel you must act. It is very upsetting and frustrating to feel there is nothing to be done and many people want to take matters into their own hands and will attempt rescue or to ask others to help restore their family member. Be careful you don't make matters worse. People may have been told that their family will act aggressively, and so you will be playing into their hands. Also, if you force a loved one to come out of a group against their will, they may feel powerless and that you have compromised their ability to make decisions about their own lives. This can lead to depression, or to resentment and bitterness and harm your future relationship. However, if you suspect any illegal activity is taking place within the group which involves your family member, inform the police. One thing that might be worth doing is to try to contact the leadership of the group directly asking for information about the group or the place and wellbeing of the family member within it. You can do this without being overtly aggressive, but by making your presence and concern for your loved one felt. Keep copies of correspondence and notes of conversations. Many groups are wary of generating bad PR, so if you make a fuss of this kind, the group may decide your family member is not worth the trouble.

7. Be careful about money. Many groups ask their members for sizeable amounts of money as proof of allegiance or to pay for courses. Be very careful if your family member starts to ask to change their financial affairs to favour the group, or to drain the family's resources. Try and find out if they are getting into debt, as some people can be in difficulty if they decide to leave a group but owe considerable sums. If necessary get legal advice. Also be aware that some groups will relinquish a member if they think they have run out of money.
8. If your family member has a medical condition which requires treatment, try and make sure the group is aware of this. Some groups have differing views about use of medication or different attitudes to illness. On the other hand, some groups relinquish members that they feel will become a burden or need expensive care.
9. If a family member leaves the group and comes home, they may need help to deal with feelings of guilt and help with readjustment. Don't expect everything to go back to normal straight away. Things may never be the same again and the family member will need to make sense of their experience and move on. They may find their time in the group positive rather than negative and may resent the sense that you thought they'd made the wrong decision. They will need reassurance and love.
10. If you need information about any group, contact INFORM (as above). INFORM can also put you in touch with counsellors, legal advisers and support groups, such as parents' and ex-members groups. The Church of England also has a network of diocesan advisers and you can be put in touch with an adviser local to your area who can provide friendship, support and pastoral care. You can also contact Dr Anne Richards in the Mission and Public Affairs Division, Church House, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3AZ 020 7898 1444 for any enquiry to do with New Religious Movements.