

Why are some afraid of Friends of the Sabbath?

The writer is a pastor in the United Church of God.

By Melvin Rhodes

LANSING, Mich.-I recently had the privilege of attending a Friends of the Sabbath Australia (FOSA) seminar in Sydney and Melbourne, immediately before the Days of Unleavened Bread. This remarkable organization began about two years ago when the seventh-day Sabbath came under attack from the leadership of one of the Churches of God.

At a critical moment, when a sizable number of Sabbatarians, cut off from others of like mind because of a short-sighted doctrine of exclusivity, needed a reaffirmation of their fundamental beliefs, they could turn to others for encouragement and support.

The aim of Friends was not to proselytize or to amalgamate various churches. It is a series of educational seminars. Supporters came from several denominations. They had in many cases only one belief in common: observance of the seventh-day Sabbath of Scripture.

Thousands of people were amazed, incredulous even, to discover how many others also kept the Sabbath and to see God's Spirit working in them.

Why, then, is Friends so controversial in some quarters? Why the fear?

Gained from Friends

I am a pastor with the United Church of God, an International Association. My attendance at four Friends seminars (in Lansing, San Antonio, Sydney and Melbourne), one of which we played host to in my own church area, has not led me to change any of my beliefs. Nor, to my knowledge, has anybody left either of my congregations because of listening to others at one of these seminars.

Rather, we have gained a great deal. We have been encouraged to find others of like mind, stimulated by their experience in preaching the gospel and stirred to deeper study of the Scriptures to prove all things.

One group that truly stood out in Australia was the True Jesus Church. Started in China in 1917 through one man's personal study of the Scriptures (sound familiar?), the movement grew in spite of unprecedented political chaos, two civil wars, the Japanese occupation, atheistic communism and the Cultural Revolution.

There was little money to speak of, few opportunities to travel and preach, no magazine, booklets, TV or radio, not even any Bibles for most of the time. Persecution was the norm, especially during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s when Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung tried to expunge all Western influence, including (and especially) Christianity.

Most Chinese had never heard of Jesus Christ, and the Sabbath was a regular workday in a totalitarian state that denied everybody basic freedom.

Millions of members

In spite of all this, having begun only 10 years before Herbert W. Armstrong began his ministry, today the True Jesus Church has an estimated two million members.

Is it possible we could learn something from them about preaching the gospel or organizing a church?

I'm sure there are some lessons for all of us in the Church of God. If we refuse to learn, then we are doomed to continually reinvent the wheel.

If we will not learn from others, we can focus only on our own past, including problems and mistakes, and keep on repeating them.

Friends of the Sabbath brings an opportunity for an exchange of ideas and experiences beneficial to all who attend. It's like *THE JOURNAL*, only live. This paper brings together Sabbatharians of various affiliations. We can learn from each other.

That's ridiculous

Some are afraid of that, because they don't like new ideas or because they are afraid of losing control. They are also afraid of losing members and thereby financial support. I've even heard some derogatory remarks about *THE JOURNAL*, that it's yellow journalism on a par with *The National Enquirer*, *The Star* and *The Globe*.

What utter nonsense.

THE JOURNAL is a serious newspaper that honestly and thoroughly reports on issues of interest to people in the Churches of God.

It is in the finest tradition of some of our best secular newspapers.

But it's not controlled by any church, just as Friends of the Sabbath is not controlled by any one group's agenda just, I might also add, as God does not control people.

The same Mao Tse-tung who tried to wipe out the Chinese Sabbatharians once wrote in his little red book, "Let a thousand flowers bloom," an encouragement to individual initiative and free expression.

But he never allowed either.

If he had, China could have been spared decades of the darkest evil.

THE JOURNAL and Friends of the Sabbath encourage the free exchange of ideas and experiences, benefiting all involved.

Let's be thankful for this period of enlightenment in the Churches of God.