

Holyland/Reach, Inc.

By Bob Waldrep

Founder: Bishop Luke Edwards, also known as “The Bishop.”

Founding Date: Incorporated in 1977, established under other names in the early 1970s.

Organizational Structure: Edwards holds absolute authority. This is often carried out by ministers or deacons, appointed by Edwards. In this way, he is able to distance himself from the discipline of members, particularly, from the corporal punishment meted out upon children in the group; by doing this, he retains his benevolent “daddy” image.

Unique Terms: Routes/Going on the Routes

Other Names: Holyland, REACH, Inc., Apostolic Assembly Association, Christ Temple Church, Greater Christ Temple Apostolic Church, or Research, Education and Community Hope, Inc.(from which the acronym, REACH, is derived).

HISTORY

Edwards, a Black Pentecostal minister, began his preaching activities in Michigan over thirty years ago in the projects adjacent to where he lived.¹ His daughter “explained that in his obsession with power and control, her father discovered that he could not master and manipulate Michigan church go’ers like he wanted to.” She claims this is the reason he came to Alabama and began a church.²

He arrived in the South in the early 1970s and began pastoring Greater Christ Temple Apostolic Church in Meridian, Mississippi. The Church was originally affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW). According to former REACH President, Phillip Williams (who was instrumental in forming REACH, and later left the group), Edwards broke away from PAW, not over doctrinal issues, but, due to his belief the Church should separate and form its own community.

In 1976, Edwards claims to have looked out upon the poverty of his congregation and decided to do something about it. His solution—food stamps. The Church opened a grocery store in the basement of the building and began to sell groceries for the food stamps members of the congregation and community were receiving due to their economic status. The church quickly gathered enough capital to buy a defunct neighborhood grocery store in which to continue their operation.³

From this beginning REACH has continued to acquire additional property and business concerns until their holdings in 1995 included ownership of various businesses in the area (four restaurants, three motels, two meat packing plants, a machine shop, and a construction firm), and real estate holdings of over 4,000 acres of land along the Mississippi/Alabama border. This land is used for farming and raising

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livestock such as hogs, cattle and chickens.⁴ It has been estimated the net worth of REACH is in excess of twenty million dollars.⁵

All these endeavors are operated by members, both adults and children. In 1990 the State of Alabama cited REACH, Inc. for 129 violations of the Child Labor Laws.⁶ Members work without pay, receiving room and board for their labor. They are told they work for themselves as joint owners of all holdings. However, critics have accurately pointed out that if a member leaves the organization he takes none of these with him.⁷

In addition to these business enterprises, in the mid 1980s, REACH members began building "Holyland," a compound near Meridian, in Emelle, Alabama. The commune includes a clinic, nursery, a private school for children, dormitories for singles, separate single-unit housing for married couples and dormitories for children. Parents live apart from their children allowing them to be raised by other women in the organization who stay with the children in the dormitories.

In 1991 REACH filed for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy, primarily to avoid a \$650,000 judgment obtained against Edwards and REACH in a sexual battery suit filed by former member, Gloria Roberts. In 1993 Edwards claimed the bankruptcy was unrelated to the Civil Suit judgment as the suit against REACH, Inc. was "thrown out."⁸ However, his second in command, Clifton Dawson, in a 1995 interview stated, "The filing of the bankruptcy had more to do with avoiding a court judgment of \$650,000 than it did with corporate debt."⁹

A personal judgment was also rendered against Edwards, but he continues to maintain he has no money or possessions and is, therefore, judgment proof. As he puts it, "How can you get anything when there isn't anything to get."¹⁰ Even though Edwards maintains the suit and subsequent judgment were incorrect he will not appeal as no money will ever be collected. When asked during the *60 Minutes* interview about the sexual abuse charges and verdict, Edwards affirms his innocence and that this just comes with what he is doing, stating, "persecution comes with it."

Edwards attempts to diffuse criticism by using the issue of race, even with those critics who are also Black. He says they are all linked by a "racist white conspiracy to use blacks to destroy Reach."¹¹ Meridian businessman and former Meridian NAACP President, O.B. Clark, disagrees. In a Watchman Fellowship interview he stated, "If the things done to children at REACH, Inc. were being done to white children everyone would be upset. Since a black man is doing it to black children, no one seems to care."

DOCTRINE

During interviews with members and former members it is apparent that, while Edwards has added certain teachings concerning himself and Holyland, their basic doctrinal beliefs are typical of the Oneness Pentecostal churches. Oneness Pentecostals, sometimes called Apostolic or "Jesus Only" Pentecostals, are a heretical break off from traditional Pentecostal churches.

Traditional Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God hold to an orthodox view of God. "Jesus Only" Pentecostals deny the doctrine of the Trinity. They hold to "a modalistic view of God, Jesus' name baptism, and tongues as the initial evidence of the Holy Spirit."¹² PAW, the oldest of the churches holding these beliefs, is the group with which Edwards was originally associated.¹³

Trinity: Edwards' teachings regarding the Trinity are consistent with those of Oneness Pentecostal Churches, which deny the Trinity, and identify Jesus as the

Jehovah of the Old Testament. Believing the Bible distinguishes between names and titles, Edwards teaches Jesus is the name of God and that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are titles or designations for God; therefore, Jesus is the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (WF/Williams interview). “Oneness” teaches, “God’s essential name is Jesus...any sacred acts must be conducted in the name of God as he is presently being manifested, that is in the name of Jesus only.”¹⁴ God/Jesus manifests himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and “...all three manifestations are present at one and the same time.”¹⁵

Trinitarians teach that the one true God eternally exists as three distinct Persons - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “Jesus Only” doctrine, also called Modalism, teaches that the one true God is also only one Person - Jesus. Thus the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are simply different titles for God. All three are actually Jesus, operating under three different modes. This is similar to the third century heresy called Sabellianism, or Modalistic Monarchianism.¹⁶

Salvation: Salvation is legalistic or performance based. Edwards teaches a man’s salvation is dependent upon: 1) having sincere faith and repentance, 2) being baptized in water, in Jesus’ name, 3) receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and 4) continuing to live a sanctified/holy life, to “walk as He would.” If any of these are missing, a person is not saved.¹⁷

Ex-members claim they were also taught their salvation was dependent upon working for the organization. Phillip Williams states, “I have heard the Bishop say, if you are in good standing with me you are in good standing with Christ and, vice versa.”¹⁸

Legalism - Among the requirements/rules for members are: No smoking, alcohol or drugs; designated bedtimes for unmarried members; approved television allowed but no movies; movement outside the compound by those living on the property is restricted to REACH activities; no private property or spending money allowed at the compound; and parents are to live in separate housing from their children.¹⁹

Baptism - Baptism is done in the name of Jesus only, rather than according to the biblical instruction of, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Routes: Both adults and children, raise funds by going on the “route” (going on the road for weeks at a time to solicit funds). This may take them to any state in the country as there are no geographical limitations. A common day, on the route, consists of twelve hours of store front solicitation. Members are often seen outside stores, such as Walmarts, K-Marts, etc. asking customers for donations.

The most common approach is for children to solicit funds under the pretense of raising money for abused children. Concerning this, former member Williams says, “They take these small raggedy kids and hang a sign on them saying ‘help abused kids’ and they’re the ones abusing them.”²⁰

Ex-members conservatively estimate the “routes” bring in two to three million dollars per year. Pressed by *60 Minutes*, Edwards admitted the majority of funds coming into REACH comes from the routes. When asked where the abused children were for which the money was raised, Edwards responded, “all blacks are abused.” Edwards’ contention is, as the money going into the facilities helps blacks, it is for abused children.²¹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

1) The Trinity is a Biblical Doctrine, not a man made tradition. The Father is God (Philippians 2:11; 2 Peter 1:17), the Son is God (John 1:1; 10:32-38; Revelation 1:8) and the Holy Spirit is God, and is a person (Acts 5:3-4; 13:2; John 16:13-14).

2) Jesus is called the Son, not the Father, and Scripture clearly distinguishes the Son from the Father and the Holy Spirit. They are separate and distinct persons, not different manifestations of the same person (Matthew 28:19; John 3:16-17; 5:31-32, 37; 8:16-18; 11:41-42; 12:28; Galatians 4:4; John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7; Romans 8:26-27).

3) Salvation does not depend upon one's works, or lack of works, nor upon belonging to a particular church or organization (John 5:24; 14:6; Ephesians 2:4-10; Romans 4:4-5; Titus 3:5).

RECOMMENDED READING

The resources listed below do not deal with Holyland/REACH specifically. However, they each contain important information that would be helpful to those seeking to understand and witness to people who are in that or similar groups.

Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity, Gregory A. Boyd. Provides a good overview of the "Oneness Movement" which has common roots with the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, which Edwards left. It is of particular benefit in its treatment of how to respond to "Oneness" Doctrine. Appendices, endnotes, paperback, 234 pages.

Healing Spiritual Abuse, Ken Blue. With clarity and refreshing honesty Blue helps us recognize the signs of spiritual abuse, then offers hope and healing to its victims. He also shows Christian leaders how to avoid abusive patterns and instead offer Christ's gospel of grace. Endnotes, paperback, 166 pages.

Notes

¹ *Sumter County Record-Journal*, 15 July 93, 1.

² Ibid.

³ *Insight on the News*, 26 April 1992, 8.

⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, 2 January 1995, 1.

⁵ Ibid., p. 6; *Insight*, 35.

⁶ *60 Minutes*, "The Gospel According to Luke," air date 9 May 1993.

⁷ *Insight*, 10.

⁸ *Insight*, 35.

⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, 6.

¹⁰ *Insight*, 35.

¹¹ *Insight*, 36.

¹² Gregory A. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity*, 13.

¹³ J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 266.

¹⁴ George A. Mather and Larry A. Nichols, *Dictionary of Cults Sects, and American Religions*, 215.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, "Monarchianism," 727.

¹⁷ Interviews with members and former members; see also, *Dictionary of Cults*, 216.

¹⁸ WF/Williams interview.

¹⁹ *Insight*, 8; *Chicago Tribune*, 6.

²⁰ *Insight*, 11.

²¹ *60 Minutes*.



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