



## Children of God / The Family International

**Author:** Eileen Barker

**Author:** Sarah Harvey

**Published:** 15th January 2021

Eileen Barker and Sarah Harvey. 2021. "Children of God / The Family International." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from [www.cdamm.org/articles/children-of-god](http://www.cdamm.org/articles/children-of-god).

### Introduction

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The Children of God (CoG), later known as The Family International (TFI), was an evangelical organization founded in the late 1960s in California by David Brandt Berg (1919–94). It had a focus on missionary activity and reaching out to others for Christ, largely through street witnessing and its own music and literature. Following the example of the early Christians, members lived communally and held all things in common, 'forsaking all', while working full time for the movement in missionary and humanitarian projects (Luke 14:33). A strong us-vs-them dichotomy, combined with Endtime beliefs, characterized the outside world (referred to as 'the system' by the CoG) as evil (James 4:4). The movement was largely based on two key beliefs (covered in greater depth below): a belief in the imminence of the Endtime and a belief that the 'Law of Love' superseded all other Christian teachings.

The movement has undergone numerous changes over its fifty-year history, moving from a tight-knit, world-rejecting movement focused around the charismatic figure of Berg to one with differing levels of membership in the 1990s then on to a 'Reboot' in 2010, which effectively dissolved most of the movement's key practices, and more recently to a mostly virtual, online network of around 1,600 members by 2020. These changes were brought about both by external factors, including investigations of child abuse, and by internal ones, including the coming of age of a large cohort of second-generation members who were resistant to the restrictions and limitations of the belief system and wanted to see change and modernization in the movement, or wanted a different life altogether. There was also a realization that the Endtime was not happening as imminently as had been expected, resulting in an unanticipated ageing membership.

This article outlines the history, beliefs and practices of CoG/TFI before turning to a discussion of its apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs. It ends with a note on sources and further references.

### History of the Movement

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Part of the 'Jesus People Movement' that was attracting mainly young, white, middle-class hippies on the

West Coast of the United States and then throughout the West, 'Teens for Christ' was a new religious movement founded in Huntington Beach, California, around 1968 by David Berg (also known as Mo, Father David, Moses Berg, Moses David or Dad, and as Grandpa to children born into the movement). Berg was the third generation in his family to have become a preacher and he initially worked with his mother, Virginia Berg (1886–1968). On his mother's death, Berg had renewed efforts to reach out to the local countercultural youth and encouraged his (mostly teenage) followers to move in with him and his family and dedicate their lives to Christ. When a critical article referred to the movement as the 'Children of God', Berg and his followers adopted the name.

CoG quickly gained members and grew internationally. By the mid-1970s, it had between seven thousand and ten thousand full-time members in 180 'colonies' in eighty countries, 'colonies' being the term used for the large communities of members living together. There were colonies of fifty or more people in the Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, Sweden, and United States, and a 'jumbo' of up to 350 people in the Philippines (Barker 2016, 412). Smaller homes could house up to forty-five people, but most had around a dozen members. Homes and colonies were led by 'shepherds', with members of Berg's own family as directors, in an authoritarian leadership structure.

In 1978, the first of what were to be numerous internal 'revolutions' took place. Berg dissolved CoG in a move termed the 'Reorganization Nationalization Revolution'. This was partly due to allegations of misconduct and abuse against various leaders. The reorganization involved the introduction of a more centralized structure; colonies were broken up into smaller homes and shepherds were elected rather than appointed. The movement took the new name of 'The Family of Love'. In 1988 it became known simply as 'The Family' until 2004, when it adopted the name 'The Family International'.

After 1978, Berg became more reclusive, with no one knowing his whereabouts but his immediate family and a few trusted followers, who were to develop into the central leadership team, known as World Services (Shepherd and Shepherd 2010). Berg's partner, Karen Zerby (b. 1946), known as Maria (sometimes with the second name Fontaine), and Steve Kelly (b.1951), known as Peter Amsterdam, were key figures. Believed by his followers to be the Endtime Prophet, Berg was a prolific writer of 'MO Letters', so called after his adopted name of 'Moses'. Thousands of these were distributed throughout the membership as the primary means of communication from the leadership. Following Berg's death in 1994, Maria and Peter married and became joint leaders of the movement. By 2010, World Services had ceased to exist, but Maria and Peter remained in the position of TFI's Directors.

Allegations of both child abuse and sexual abuse dogged the movement in the 1980s and 1990s. State raids were carried out on community homes in Spain in 1990, the United Kingdom in 1991 and 1992, Australia in 1992, and France and Argentina in 1993. Although these were harrowing experiences for the families, no signs of sexual abuse were found among the children (Borowik 1994). Sexual relations between an adult and a child were forbidden around 1986 (Ward 1995, 112), but it was a widely publicised custody case that ran in the United Kingdom between 1993 and 1995, presided over by Judge Lord Justice Ward, that prompted The Family to change its beliefs and practices more radically. The case was brought by a woman whose adult daughter, a member of the movement, was expecting a child. The grandmother, concerned by the allegations of child abuse in the media, was seeking custody of the child. After a lengthy hearing, Ward (1995) granted custody to the child's mother on the provision that The Family stopped corporal punishment of children and improved their education. The movement was also asked to denounce

some of Berg's teachings, admitting that his writings were directly responsible for harm caused to children through sexually inappropriate behaviour. Peter accepted the conditions and apologized for the harm caused.

During the trial, The Family also clarified its membership requirements, publishing these in 1995 in what turned out to be a 463-page book called *The Love Charter* (The Family 1995–98), which laid out in detail the rights and responsibilities relating to the individual members, the homes, and the leadership, as well as procedures and 'fundamental Family rules'. The charter has undergone numerous editions since then, including *The Love Charter* (1998), *The Family Discipleship Charter* (2009), and a simplified 30-page *Charter of the Family International* in 2010, which underwent further changes in 2012 and 2017 while keeping the same name.

Further modifications and membership changes took place in 2000, when Maria circulated the letter *Shake-Up 2000*, suggesting that members not fully committed to the movement should leave (The Family International 1999). In 2002, 'The Board Structure' was introduced, increasing the number of formal organizations and members' roles in decision-making; then, in 2004, the category of 'Missionary Member' was added for those who wanted to live outside the communities (Barker 2016, 419). Full-time, communal-living members, previously known as Charter Members, were now called Family Disciples.

In 2010, Maria and Peter undertook a complete revision of the movement, the 'change journey', which became known as the 'Reboot' (see Borowik 2013; Shepherd and Shepherd 2016). The Reboot largely resulted from pressure from second-generation members who had been integrated into the leadership at all levels (the homes, the boards, and World Services) and were intent on making the movement more relevant and flexible—and less anchored to its past. Furthermore, it was becoming obvious that, the Endtime not having been as imminent as expected, the once youthful first-generation members were approaching old age. It was calculated that even a modest pension for older members would cost TFI several millions of dollars per year—money it simply did not have (Barker 2012, 10). Maria and Peter maintained that, while their Endtime theology remained unchanged, members should now make their own plans for, potentially, thirty or even fifty years into the future. In effect, the organizational structure and many of its world-rejecting practices were dissolved.

Perhaps most significantly, communal living was no longer required or even expected; sexual sharing outside marriage, although still permissible between consenting adults, was not encouraged; members could seek secular employment; and children were to have a formal education rather than home schooling. There was to be only one level of membership, open to any adult who accepted Jesus as saviour and the TFI's 'Statement of Faith' and 'Mission Statement' as set out on its website (TFI 2020). Each member and mission would be independent of the overarching organization, although some tithing was encouraged. In other words, membership now consisted almost entirely of individuals and nuclear families, who accepted personal responsibility for their own material and spiritual welfare while living within the wider society and associating with mainstream Christianity. Some ten years later, in 2020, TFI was describing itself on its website as 'an online Christian network of individuals' (TFI 2020). There remain a few members actively engaged in humanitarian work, concentrated mainly in Africa, South America, and South Asia. Gordon and Gary Shepherd (2016) have described the Reboot as a 'vaporizing' of a previously cohesive and coherent movement; a former member has described adjusting to life outside the community as akin to a bereavement (May 2013).

As is common among many new religions, CoG/TFI has always had a high turnover of membership; in its case this was partly due to the number of ‘revolutions’ or reorganizations. According to the TFI website, over 35,000 people have at some point devoted themselves to Christian service with the movement. From around the mid-1980s, children were outnumbering adults (Edwards 2018, 28) and membership (including children) peaked around the turn of the century with 10,219 Charter Members worldwide, living in 840 homes with an average occupancy of twelve, and a further 2,750 members not living under the strict rules of *The Charter* (Barker 2016, 414). In 2009, just before the Reboot, there were slightly under 7,000 adults (and 1,351 children); in 2010 there were 4,500 adult members, then the number fell by roughly 10 percent per annum to around 1,600 by 2020.

The movement has continued to believe unequivocally in ‘sharing the message of God’s love with people around the globe’ (TFI website) ‘; however, while its more radical teachings of sexuality and an imminent Endtime are no longer the central focus they once were, TFI’s members still believe that the scriptures’ foretelling of the future of the world will be fulfilled, as, they believe, many other biblical predictions have been throughout the centuries. Furthermore, TFI’s members continue to believe that we are now living in the period of time known in the Bible as the ‘Last Days’, which refers to the era preceding the return of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 3:1). His return to earth will usher in a new millennium of peace, cessation of war and violence, and justice and equity for all of humanity (Isaiah 11:9; Daniel 2:44; 12:4; Matthew 24:29–31; Revelation 11:15).

## Beliefs, Practices, and Lifestyle

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Aside from the core teachings around the Endtime and the interpretation of the ‘Law of Love’ (see below), CoG/TFI beliefs do not differ significantly from those of other evangelical Christian movements. Members affirm the inspiration and truth of the Bible, the Trinity, the Fall of man, redemption through Christ’s sacrifice, and the coming of Jesus to establish his reign. The movement is also charismatic, with prayer and [prophecy](#) being central parts of members’ lives. Bible study, together with Berg’s explanatory MO Letters, plays a major role, with worship taking place in homes rather than in special church buildings.

Until the Reboot of 2010, members lived communally and pooled resources, following the example of the early Christians as described in the Acts of the Apostles. They had what Claire Borowik (2013, 16) has described as a ‘radical anti-establishment message’, with a call to “‘forsake all” and “drop out” of the “System.”” As a result, unlike some new religious movements, CoG/TFI has never been wealthy, partly because it did not approve of outside employment. From the start, members have relied on donations from those outside the movement and have become adept at ‘provisioning’—‘soliciting funds and goods from institutions and the public’ (van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2015, 21)—everything from past-sell-by-date supermarket food to clothing, electrical equipment, and health services (Barker 2016, 411).

The primary mission of CoG/TFI has been to encourage those who are not ‘saved’ to take Jesus into their hearts, initially through the recitation of a prayer, even when only a few of the ‘saved’ have gone on to join the movement. The outreach has been through such means as music, mail ministries, the Internet, Bible study courses for new converts, radio and TV, videos, comics, and personal witnessing in public spaces, such as shopping centres. This combination of witnessing and literature distribution is termed ‘litnessing’. David van Zandt (1991, 96), who conducted covert research into CoG in 1976–77, describes how members

had quotas of how much literature they had to distribute and how much money they had to raise, a practice that ceased in 1978.

Children were educated within the movement through home-schooling programmes. This was partly for ideological reasons, in that the outside world was rejected, and partly for practical reasons, in that families would frequently move between mission fields and hence countries and even continents. There was large variation in the quality of education that children received, with the creative arts and languages favoured as these were more in line with the movement's goals, and it was not expected that children would need academic qualifications in the new heaven. For about 18 months between 1989 and 1990, some teenagers who were thought to be in need of discipline were sent to specially created 'Victor Camps' as part of the 'Victor Program'. These were 'revolutionary boot camps' for teens who were disruptive or did not seem to express sufficient commitment to The Family's beliefs and practices, in an attempt to provide the teenagers with the sense of enthusiasm that the early converts had experienced (Ward 1995, 162-71).

One of Berg's key teachings concerned love and sexuality. He taught that the Law of Love—to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:35-40)—superseded all other biblical laws. In his interpretation of this law, Berg developed some controversial teachings around sexuality, including sexual experimentation and 'sharing' among members of the movement, particularly where a woman had no partner. As opposed to traditional Christianity, which taught that sex outside marriage was sinful, Berg taught that sex is something natural and God-given and to be celebrated. In the early 1970s, some members practised 'flirty fishing' (or FFing), in which sex was used as a form of witnessing—reaching out to the 'fish' through sex. The practice was based on the belief that the 'greatest manifestation of love is the sharing of the self' (Lewis and Melton 1994, 77). It was mostly women who were encouraged to be 'Hookers for Jesus' (Berg 1976, 535; Ward 1995, 42) but some male members FFed for women. The practice was voluntary, but some felt pressurized to participate (Chancellor 2000; Williams 1998). The women engaged in this practice were still expected to fulfil the sexual needs of their husbands, and some young women who left the movement have said they felt they were expected to engage in sexual relations with older men (Jones et al 2008, xiii) . The discouragement of birth control meant that families were large, some women bearing as many as fourteen children. However, with the rise of sexually transmitted diseases in the communities in the mid-1980s, sexual permissiveness began to decline and FFing that involved intercourse officially ended in 1987 (Melton 2004, 22-26). Sexual sharing within Family homes continued, however, with new members permitted to participate after six months and a clear HIV test.

While minors were not involved in FFing, the culture of permissive sexuality meant that in some Family communities, minors were included in sexual practices. Berg (1976, 1331-416) wrote extensively about sex and encouraged sexual experimentation at a young age, and sexual relations between adults and minors did indubitably take place (Davis 1985; Jones et al 2008). This had become an excommunicable offence within the movement by 1989, and neither social services nor the police had been able to find any evidence of abuse as a result of raids (see above). Nonetheless, the extensive media coverage and a continuing flood of articles, books, and posts on websites, written mainly by children born during CoG's early days, have resulted in the movement continuing to be known for its sexual practices and for the child abuse which occurred at some places and at some times in its history.

## Millennial Beliefs and Prophecy

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CoG/TFI has been both a [prophetic](#) and a millennial movement. Berg claimed to receive revelations from Jesus and other 'spiritual beings'. These, and his other writings, were published in the movement's huge output of literature, such as the MO Letters, which were treated on a par with the Bible. After Berg's death in 1994, Maria published messages that members of her staff had channelled from Berg and Jesus, and initiated a prophetic tradition, with members, particularly those in World Services, practising a 'corporate prophecy' in which they petitioned Jesus, Berg, or other spirits for prophetic messages on particular problems or issues (The Family 1995-98, 352-54). Gordon and Gary Shepherd (2010) describe this as a democratization of prophecy in which multiple prophetic channels were used not to receive a plethora of prophecies but to reach a consensus on a prophecy. Staff members repeatedly asked God or Jesus for revelations on a particular subject until the prophecy was clear and staff members were in agreement. This process led up to, and eventually ceased with, the Reboot and the subsequent dissolution of World Services. However, individuals might still receive prophecies or revelations for personal guidance.

One of Berg's key teachings was that the Endtime and the return of Christ were imminent. In the late 1960s and 1970s, and beyond, members believed that they were living in the 'Last Days'. They came to media attention for publicly preaching this message; dressed in red sackcloth with wooden yokes round their necks and ash smeared on their foreheads, they carried long staffs and Bibles and shouted 'Woe' (Van Zandt 1991, 35; Melton 2004, 6). Berg characterized himself as the Endtime Prophet, able to discern the 'signs of the end'. He initially suggested that 1993 would be the date of the return of Christ (Berg 176,490).

Although the [prophecy](#) apparently failed in 1993, the majority of the membership remained with the movement. In 1997, over a thousand members were asked 'Do you believe that the Endtime has begun or will begin very soon?'; 81 percent said 'yes, definitely' and a further 16 percent answered 'yes, probably' (Bainbridge 2002, 60). It was emphasized that no one could know the exact time as 'the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night' (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Rather than focusing on a particular date, the movement was looking out for a sequence of events: a seven-year period of 'wars, famine, drought, plague and pestilence, earthquakes, extensive surveillance, computer chips, globalization, cloning, and the breakdown of the family' (Barker 2016, 407). The Family's own publication, *End Times News Digest*, published monthly between 1998 and 2008, recorded evidence of the 'signs' of the impending Endtime. The general expectation was that Christ would return within around twenty or thirty years—that is, before the first converts reached old age. The belief was that the generation alive to witness the signs of the end would see his return (May 2013, 157).

The Endtime chronology of CoG/TFI is not dissimilar to that of other Christian premillennial groups (such as the Plymouth Brethren and the Twelve Tribes, also known as Messianic Communities) and is based mainly on readings of the biblical books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation. Briefly, Berg's MO Letters (especially Berg 1976, 940-947; 1417-611) foretell that seven years before Jesus's return, a powerful world leader known in scripture as the 'man of sin', 'son of perdition', and the 'Antichrist' will rise to power (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). Three and a half years into his reign, he will declare that he is God, and demand the world's veneration and worship (Daniel 9:27; Revelation 13:4,7). Initially he will bring peace and security (the 'Holy Covenant'). However, after three and a half years he will break the covenant and reveal himself to be in league with Satan, but will declare himself to be God and demand to be worshipped as such. Then

the Great Tribulation will begin, a further period of three and a half years. People will take the 'mark of the Beast' (Revelation 13), possibly in the form of a barcode microchip under the skin of their right hand or forehead, and all monetary transactions will take place through these barcodes. Members sought to educate the public about this possibility and urged them not to accept the 'mark of the Beast'. It was recognized, however, that those who resisted the mark would face great persecution.

In Berg's account, Jesus will return with bright light, trumpets, and angels seven years after the appearance of the Antichrist. He will rescue his followers (including the deceased) from the earth in the Rapture. The 'Marriage Supper of the Lamb' (Revelation 19:9) will take place in heaven; the followers will be reunited with Jesus, judged, and given eternal life. Meanwhile, the 'wrath of God' will be poured upon the earth, targeting the Antichrist and his forces. The Antichrist will not be defeated, however, until Jesus and his army of followers return to Earth for the Battle of [Armageddon](#) at the valley of Megiddo in Israel. During Armageddon, the Antichrist will be cast into the 'Lake of Fire' (Revelation 20:10) and Satan into the 'bottomless pit' (Revelation 20:1-3).

Then, according to Berg, begins the Millennium, Christ's thousand-year reign, in which the earth will be restored to glory and will become again like the Garden of Eden. However, at the end of the Millennium, Satan will be released from the pit and he and his followers will rebel against Christ's rule. In the 'battle of Gog and Magog' (Revelation 20: 7-10), Satan will be defeated and the surface of the earth will be obliterated. Then judgment will take place in which all people are resurrected and judged. Finally, God's pyramid-shaped Heavenly City—the 'New Jerusalem'—will descend to a newly created earth (Revelation 21:2): God, Jesus, and their loyal followers will live there. Followers will not then ascend to heaven but rather heaven will come down to them. One's place in the Heavenly City could be secured, CoG/TFI taught, by pledging one's life to Jesus in the here and now. Salvation is through grace alone, through accepting Jesus as one's saviour, rather than through works. This was, and to some degree remains, the focus of TFI's missionary activity.

One former member, Abi May, writing a 'personal commentary' on 'living in the time of the end', describes how early members awaited Christ's return with 'joyful anticipation' (2013, 156) as the Endtime signalled not the end of the world but its eventual transformation into the 'Heavenly City on Earth'. However, she notes that 'it can indeed be quite emotionally and mentally exhausting to be living on the edge of the apocalypse' (2013, 160). She offers three reflections on living daily life with an Endtime expectation:

- There is an awareness of world events, but from a narrow perspective, focusing on those political or environmental events that seem to be 'signs' of the end, sometimes at the expense of events and issues in one's own neighbourhood.
- There is a sense of valuing the minutes but feeling everything is urgent, based on the belief that a failure to spread the Gospel 'would impede the return of Jesus' (2013, 160).
- There is a sense of making the most of yourself to help others, but not preparing for your own life ahead.

May writes that when she joined CoG as a young woman in the 1970s, she expected Jesus to return before she turned forty. Benefits of this expectation for members included a nurturing of creative talents, such as music, dance, and drama (for spreading the Gospel), and a healthy lifestyle and diet, as one would have to

be physically fit to 'flee the armies of the Antichrist' (2013, 161). However, the downsides included no provision for the future—no money set aside for the pensions of those who were not expected to grow old and no formal educational qualifications or outside employment for the second and third generations. Converts to the movement could find excitement in the belief that when Jesus returned, all believers would fight alongside Christ in the Battle of [Armageddon](#) and then help to rebuild the world; however, there are children brought up in the movement who have reported living in a state of perpetual anxiety about the upcoming battle and their role in it (Edwards 2018, 44, 68, 74).

That said, as already intimated, with the Reboot of 2010, Endtime expectations became muted. According to Gordon and Gary Shepherd (2016, 88):

*The immediacy of Jesus's apocalyptic second coming ... has officially been pushed back to a later, unknown time that allows Christian believers to focus their attention and energies on concrete, long-term planning to expand whatever evangelic and other life activities they may be engaged in. This alteration of millennial expectation is probably the most consequential of all the changes that have occurred.*

## A Note on Sources

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CoG/TFI has produced masses of its own literature over the years, including magazines (such as *Activated!*), pamphlets, tracts, posters, and videos (created by Aurora Productions). Berg was a prolific writer, especially through his MO Letters. After his death, Maria and the World Services team continued to keep in regular contact with members across the world through letters and reports. Some of the content was believed to be [prophetically](#) revealed by Jesus or as the Word of God. However, by the time of the Reboot, much of the literature published prior to 2010 had been withdrawn from circulation after various revolutions and reorganizations. Berg's writings, as well as those by World Services, were classified either as inspired teachings or as additional teachings—or simply discarded altogether, some being explicitly rejected as errors. They are not binding, but a matter of individual choice (Shepherd and Shepherd 2016, 88). Prophetic literature is emphasized as being contextual: relevant only to a certain time and place (Borowik 2013, 22).

In terms of academic literature, CoG/TFI has been one of the most high-profile new religious movements and it has been studied by many of the Western scholars specializing in the field, including Eileen Barker (2012, 2013, 2016), William Sims Bainbridge (2002), James Chancellor (2000), and James Lewis and Gordon Melton (Lewis and Melton 1994; Melton 2004). Other scholars have become leading experts on this movement in particular, most notably Gordon and Gary Shepherd, whose 2010 book *Talking with the Children of God* gives a unique in-depth account of the workings of World Services before its dissolution in the Reboot. CoG/TFI is one of the case studies used in Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist's 2015 publication *Perfect Children*, about children raised in sectarian religious movements. Members and former members of CoG/TFI have also contributed to academic publications, namely the Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religious Movements (May 2013; Borowik 2013). CoG/TFI is likely to remain an interesting case study of denominationalization due to the extent to which it has rejected some of its previously key teachings and become more 'mainstream' in its beliefs and practices.



As a result of its portrayal in the media as a 'sex cult', and the actual harm caused to some children within the movement, CoG/TFI has been the focus of many critical 'anti-cult' publications. Indeed, attempts to 'free' converts through deprogramming in the 1970s contributed to the establishment of the anti-cult movement in the United States and elsewhere around the world. In 1971, Ted Patrick, together with some concerned parents, founded FreeCoG (Free the Children of God) after his nephew was approached by the movement. Patrick (1976), who became known as 'Black Lightning', also instigated the practice of 'deprogramming': 'kidnapping children (most of whom were legally adults) and holding them against their will until they managed either to escape or to convince their captors that they had renounced their faith' (Barker 2016, 405). This illegal practice has been almost entirely abandoned in the United States and Europe, but continues in other countries, including Japan and the Republic of Korea.

Former members have published accounts and exposés of their experiences in their movement, including members of Berg's own family, such as his daughter Deborah Davis (1985). Other accounts have focused on FFIing (Williams 1998), experiences of child abuse within the movement (Jones, et al. 2008), and living with millennial expectations (Edwards 2018).

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