

**ASSESSMENT OF THE POTENTIAL IMPACT
OF THE MESSIANIC COMMUNITY
ON THE WELFARE AND BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILDREN:
... excerpt from a psychological report submitted as evidence,
stipulated to by the parties and found as fact by the court,
in a child custody case prepared for the court by
Dr. Craig Knapp, a licensed psychologist
(1994)**

Given [the mother's] stated intentions to maintain a long term ongoing relationship with the Messianic Community, it seems appropriate to comment on the potential influence which the Messianic Community might conceivably have on the children (regardless of eventual parental custody arrangements). Given issues which have arisen during the course of this evaluation, specific "risk" factors include the potential for abuse, abduction, and potential influences educationally, in terms of the children's ongoing developmental needs, nurturance, and potential influence of fostering ongoing positive relationships between the children and both parents.

In providing this assessment, I wish to qualify my conclusions by stating that an exhaustive assessment of these risk factors would require substantially more time and first hand investigation than was practical given the constraints of this evaluation. However, in order to arrive at these conclusions I have based my assessment on a review and reading of a number of articles and documents published by the Messianic Community, personal visits to the Rutland Messianic Community residence on three occasions and one visit to the Basin Farm Messianic Community residence in Bellows Falls, Vermont (totaling over nine hours), telephone interviews with two independent researchers (Dr. Susan Palmer, professor of religious studies at Dawson College, Montreal and Dr. Richard Robbins, professor of anthropology at Plattsburg State University College - totaling two hours) who have each independently conducted more extensive research on the Messianic Community, as well as a review of recent newspaper articles which appeared in the Rutland Herald, and a brief selected reading of several articles appearing in a compilation by the Cult Awareness Network. Based on these sources of investigation, my preliminary conclusion is that the Messianic Community per se does not appear to constitute a substantial risk to the welfare and best interests of the children, although I do have some concerns in this regard.

What is immediately obvious is that the fundamental teachings, policies and practices of the Messianic Community are substantially different from those that are practiced by the majority of individuals in the community at large. Based on my reading of materials published

by the Messianic Community and discussions with researchers mentioned above, it is my understanding that the Messianic Church preaches adherence to religious doctrines of Christ found in the Bible as well as civil obedience and that in order to adhere to the standards set forth in the scriptures and to attain eternal life, communal living with minimal interference from external influence is practiced. Furthermore, family oriented values, submission to legitimate authority (parental, civil, church, and divine) are practiced and that discipline (including physical discipline) is practiced in order for the parent to exercise external control while the child learns internal control in order to "hold them back from what he would do if left to his own rule".

While there are a great number of widely divergent philosophical beliefs, scientific theories, developmental models and common practices regarding the use of physical discipline and restraints, the practices as described in the teachings of the Messianic Community as outlined in descriptions of disciplinary techniques employed by Drs. Robbins and Palmer whom I spoke with and the actual disciplinary techniques that were used with the children do not, in my opinion, in and of themselves constitute physical abuse. In fact, many of the disciplinary principles as outlined in the publication entitled *Child Training, Control and Teaching* appear to be based on developmentally sound principles of discipline. In my professional opinion, it is not the use of physical discipline per se that constitutes abuse. Rather it is the manner (that is, frame of mind and behaviors of the disciplinarian), frequency, intensity, and duration of the use of physical "discipline" as well as the context in which it is used and relied upon (rather than positive means of promoting pro-social behavior) that serve to form the distinction between physical abuse on the one hand and legitimate parental practices on the other. None of the information that I have gathered based on direct investigation has indicated that the disciplinary practices promoted by the teachings of the Messianic Community have constituted abuse. In fact, the children that I met and spoke with, (based on casual conversation and notation of their attitudes, interactional styles and other behaviors) appeared to be well adjusted youths who were self-confident and did not display typical characteristics of abused children.

Obviously, nothing in my previous comments rules out the possibility that there have been specific instances of abuse that have been perpetrated by members of the Messianic Community. However, based on my experience as a professional psychologist over the past 20 years, the incidents of abusive behavior by members of the greater community outside of the Messianic Church is definitely wide spread and, of course, totally unacceptable. On this issue, my impression is that members of both the culture at large as well as the Messianic Community, itself, have committed the same fundamental error: guilt through association.

Setting aside competing educational values and personal beliefs about the value of formal "traditional" education and the value of college education, the educational curriculum of the Messianic Community has been recognized by the State Department of Education and based on my limited review of their curriculum it appears to contain an appropriate breadth and depth of educational subject matter and goals although based on my review, the educational goals of the Messianic Community are clearly intertwined with and promote the religious teachings and practices of the Messianic Community as well.

Within that context, all of the youth that I met who are members of the Messianic Community presented as intelligent, articulate, and well educated children who were able to converse on a variety of topics although their range of knowledge about life outside of the Messianic Community is obviously substantially more limited than a comparable peer group of children might be that have been raised in the American culture at large. All of the children that I met and spoke with appeared to be well nurtured and to have a positive sense of self-image, and their style of interaction with their parents, other members of the Community, and with me seemed appropriate, relaxed, and natural.

During the time that I was able to interact directly with members of the Messianic Community, I did not witness any incidents of highly oppositional behavior, disrespect or what I would view as clearly inappropriate or emotional outbursts on the part of the children, although I also did not have the opportunity to directly witness any instances of parental discipline exercised by any of the adult members of the Community. However, I did request and have the opportunity to view one of the "balloon sticks" that is used for the purposes of discipline and did ask [the mother] to administer a "discipline" procedure to me in a manner consistent with what she felt she had administered to her children (and she complied with my request).

I have been struck first by the disparity in the lifestyles, teachings, policies and practices of life as the children have known it outside of the Messianic Community and what I have read, heard about and observed first hand about life inside of the Messianic Community. In point of fact, a vast majority of the emotional, behavioral and thought disorders that I have regularly dealt with on an ongoing basis through the past 20 years in my capacity as a licensed practicing and school psychologist result from inappropriate and in many cases destructive educational, parental, environmental and cultural practices that are not only tolerated but in many cases actively endorsed in our society. Based on the objective and direct information that I have obtained, my initial impression of the Messianic Community is that through their teachings and the ongoing, daily exercise of their ideals, they attempt to promote and foster behaviors in both

the children and adult members of their community that may actually represent a viable, alternative lifestyle for children and adults who willingly choose to "trade in" many of the luxuries, technological advances and diverse cultural opportunities found in the "outside world" in order to achieve a more simple, wholesome existence within the confines of a more rigorous and restrictive communal and religious life as practiced in the Messianic Community Church.

Craig Knapp, Ph. D., P.C.
Licensed Psychologist
Rutland, Vermont