

Dysfunction in the Fellowship Family

by Ben Daniel

The Fellowship Foundation, a secretive organization of wealthy and powerful American political, religious, and business leaders, would rather that you not be aware of its existence.

The Fellowship Foundation is an organization that goes by many names, but members mostly call it “the Fellowship,” or just “the Family.” It is a loose, worldwide affiliation of mostly wealthy, mostly powerful, mostly men, using the Mafia as an organizational model. Preaching a simple gospel of “Jesus plus nothing,” and, being adverse to institutionalized forms of Christianity (even shunning the name “Christian”), the Fellowship eschews organized churches, choosing instead to build strong relationships in the community of small cell groups. Each year the Fellowship hosts the National Prayer Breakfast and hundreds of prayer breakfasts worldwide, and through the relationships developed in these cell groups and prayer breakfasts, the Fellowship quietly exerts great influence within our nation’s corridors of power. For years, the Fellowship has operated without accountability, oversight, or restraint, in ways that are cult-like in the spiritual, emotional, and personal control that is exerted over members.

Within the community of American Christianity, the Fellowship has very few critics. In part this is because the work of the Fellowship remains largely unknown. For those in the know, there is a great temptation to look the other way when confronted with the Fellowship’s moral and ethical failings. The Fellowship’s connection to power and wealth has created what Chris Hayashida Knight, an ex-member from San Francisco, describes as “a priesthood of rich white guys,” men who are admired for their faith, respected because of their wealth, and feared on account of their power. These are men no one really wants to piss off.

In fact, while soliciting interviews for this article very few people were willing to be interviewed on the record. “Don’t use my name because I’m afraid of these people,” was an oft-repeated refrain. Others expressed hesitancy to talk saying “I don’t want to break down the Body of Christ.” The frequency with which both mantras were repeated is emblematic of the kind of control exerted by the Fellowship over its members.

At the heart of the Fellowship’s life and work is a mansion in Arlington, VA called the Cedars,

where people of power, consequence, and connection are invited to pray, retreat, and find quiet solitude. Researching this article I learned of guests as diverse as Lee Atwater, Laura Bush, and Michael Jackson, along with a long list of congressmen, senators, executive branch bigwigs, and foreign dignitaries. The grounds of the Cedars also houses the Fellowship offices, the home of Doug Coe, the group's leader, and it has become the center of a neighborhood increasingly peopled by Fellowship members.

In addition to the Cedars, the Fellowship runs a retreat center in rural Maryland, a house on Capitol Hill whose residents include several members of Congress, and two houses for young recruits who pay for the privilege of deepening their devotion to Jesus while cleaning and maintaining Fellowship facilities.

Life among the young people who live in the Fellowship's homes is spiritually, emotionally, and physically regimented in ways that are cult-like in their intensity. Absolute commitment is required. In all things members are obliged to subject themselves to the will of the group, becoming empty vessels ready to be filled with Jesus and a vaguely articulated Fellowship vision. In an interview for this article, Jeffrey Sharlet, who for nearly a month lived at Ivanwald, the Fellowship house for young men, and who later wrote about his experiences in the March 2003 edition of *Harper's Magazine*, reports a constant striving for "an almost Buddhist commitment to nothingness." Mild hazing and intense scrutiny of the men's past sins and shameful habits were used to keep the men mindful of their humility.

Living at Potomac Point, the house for young women, is no less an act of self-deprecation. The young women's chief work is to keep the Cedars in a constant state of tidy efficiency, all the while inefficiently attired (a uniform of long skirts and "feminine" shoes is required). Work that does not meet strict standards can result in a worker's public humiliation.

A former resident of Potomac Point told me about her nine months there. Having been encouraged to share her every thought and to expose her secrets and sins, she found her confessions and confidences used against her when she would ask questions or resist Fellowship authority. As the Fellowship exerted control over every aspect of her life she became angry and bitter. Something broke inside her. "When I came to Potomac Point I struggled with self-esteem issues" she told me. "While I was there my low self-esteem moved from a personal to a spiritual level." When, at last, she expressed a desire to leave, she was told that, without the

teaching and company of the Fellowship, her well-being would disintegrate. She became terrified of life on the outside. She believed she would fail, and she delayed her departure for three months.

Jeffrey Sharlet told of observing a similar pressure to stay at Ivanwald. A young man, whose parents had sent him to Ivanwald to amend his fratboy ways, was feeling renewed, reformed and ready to leave. When he expressed his desire go home, a confrontation ensued. Fellowship higher-ups assured him that his confidence was misguided and that, once beyond the Fellowship's influence, his life would fall apart. When the young man stood firm in his resolve, the Fellowship notified his parents who, in turn, threatened to cut off the young man's financial and emotional support if he left. The young man stayed.

When Jeffrey Sharlet announced his own need to leave in order to attend to family business, Fellowship mentors pressed him to stay, using misguided scriptural quotation as a means of spiritual manipulation. "If anyone loves father or mother more than me he is not worthy of me; if anyone loves son or daughter more than me he is not worthy of me." (Jesus' words from Matthew 10:37) He left anyway.

When asked about allegations that the Fellowship, among its young volunteers, fosters a spiritually abusive and cult-like environment, a fellowship-employed evangelist and organizer told me, "the Fellowship is like the early Church. It is misunderstood."

Recently, reluctance to criticize the Fellowship has begun to break down. An Evangelical leader with a lifelong Fellowship affiliation told me that, while on balance he thinks the Fellowship's work is positive, he has concerns with the Fellowship's spiritual elitism, its rejection of the institutional Church, and its lack of an organizational structure that provides accountability for Doug Coe and other Fellowship leaders.

In addition, some Christian leaders are beginning to raise cautious and thoughtful questions about the Fellowship's attitude toward women. An Evangelical scholar told me of being troubled after a chapel service at the college where she works. Doug Coe's sister, a Fellowship adherent, had delivered a message promoting a spirituality that the scholar described as being "overly prescriptive of men's and women's roles and differences in function."

Such attitudes toward women often are lived out in the Fellowship with painful consequences. Despite the spoken promise that they are to be considered equal partners in the Fellowship's ministry and honored sisters in the Fellowship family, the women of Potomac Point are treated as servants and are reminded that their role, both in life and in the work of the Fellowship, is one of quiet, strong support for the work of the men.

One gets the sense that in the Fellowship's spiritual geography women are seen as roadblocks on the path to male spiritual enlightenment. One woman told me of her experience dating a man who was part of a Fellowship cell in Southern California. As her boyfriend's involvement grew, he pushed her to the margins of his life. "In my life," he told her "the guys from the Fellowship are at the center, and my wife, whoever that will be, will be somewhere off to the side." In the waning days of the relationship she was approached by the wives of older Fellowship members. "Get out while you still can," one warned. Another described her life as a Fellowship wife: "I'm always third. The Fellowship comes first in my husband's life. Then our children. Then me."

Many of the women with whom I spoke reported being treated, at the same time, as children in need of instruction and as sexual deviants worthy of reproach. Such perceptions are not unfounded. One deeply committed Fellowship member spoke of his marriage apologetically, comparing it to the marriage of the Biblical prophet Hosea, who was directed by God to marry a harlot so that the prophet might learn of the hardships God endures.

Though young women are admonished not to lead the men into temptation and the men are advised to be wary of feminine charms, there exists a strong emphasis on accountability through the absolute disclosure of real or imagined sin, which means the women's private lives are necessarily exposed. A young woman told me of how, after ending a relationship with a Fellowship member, other men in the ex-boyfriend's cell began to show up in her life, making her feel as if they, having been privy to the intimate details of the relationship, were willing and ready to experience temptation for themselves.

Questions also are being raised about the Fellowship's honesty. The Fellowship Foundation is registered as a public charity in IRS *Publication 78*. According to a September 2002 article in the Los Angeles Times, they have a large annual budget, significant real estate holdings worth millions and dozens of employees. The Fellowship also has a clear leader in the person of Doug Coe, and their records are archived at Wheaton College's Billy Graham Library. Yet publicly the

Fellowship claims not to exist as an organization. Followers insist they are a “movement,” a “vision,” a “family,” a “network of brothers,” but they tend to downplay and even deny the existence of the Fellowship as a legal entity.

Fellowship members also downplay and sometimes deny that the Fellowship’s primary goal is to evangelize wealthy and powerful men. There are frequent reminders that the Fellowship is a cross section of the Kingdom of God, that the Fellowship is for everyone, and that everyone within the Fellowship's family is equal. And while the Fellowship certainly encourages ministries of mercy and service among the poor, there remains an air of elitism, a celebration of power, and a community of insulated wealth.

A former Fellowship employee remembers being chastised for offering a drink of water to the chauffeur of a foreign ambassador who was attending a prayer meeting at the Cedars. This same employee also described organizing a prayer group for his fellow workers in maintenance and construction, since they had not been invited to regularly scheduled Fellowship gatherings. “At first our meetings were great,” he said, “but then the higher-ups found out what we were doing and they sent people to run our meetings for us. We no longer shared our lives. Instead, the leaders would talk to us about politics and current events. We were blue-collar, they were white-collar, and they didn’t even trust us to pray together without direction from above.”

Now, it must be said that not everyone with whom I spoke had bad experiences with or negative observations of the Fellowship. Most people had mixed experiences and textured observations; some experiences were entirely healthy and some observations were only good. And without a doubt, much of what the Fellowship accomplishes is positive. The *Los Angeles Times* article reported the Fellowship's vital role in brokering a recent ceasefire between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it told of the quiet ministry of healing and restoration the Fellowship works among Washington’s powerful and often very lonely leaders.

Beyond that, countless men all over the world have been given deeply meaningful experiences through prayer, Bible study, and mutual support within the Fellowship’s local cells.

And yet, in the Fellowship's eccentric ministry, people are spiritually and emotionally wounded with a regularity that should raise concerns.

To say that the Fellowship Foundation is a layered and complex organization, mixing elements that are healthy and destructive, positive and negative, is to place the Fellowship in the good company of every other human organization.

But the best organizations are those which are willing and even eager to expose themselves to critical observation, in the hope of finding and addressing any failings and weaknesses to make them stronger, healthier, and more effective. To my knowledge the Fellowship encourages no such scrutiny and allows no such criticism.

For the time being, the Fellowship Foundation remains committed to secrecy, using *the Godfather* rather than the Gospel as an organizing principle. For the time being, the Fellowship would rather you not know of its existence.