

## **Evangelical groups feeling crunch of persecution in France**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

France may not seem like a country where religious persecution is rampant, but evangelical groups in the country are feeling the crunch of legislation and hostility that have caused some groups to back off on evangelistic efforts.

“We don’t see martyrdom as in Sudan or India, but with the current rapid change of laws and disregard of human rights, France may follow suite,” reports Janey DeMeo, who along with her husband Louis has served in that European country for 20 years.

At issue is a law passed last May restricting cults. The legislation created a new crime of “mental manipulation,” punishable by a maximum fine of \$75,000 and five years in prison.

That movement followed the 1996 suicides of members of the Solar Temple cult in Switzerland and France. Of 173 groups listed as “dangerous sects,” the government including Baptists and Catholic evangelicals as well as Jehovah's Witnesses and Scientologists.

Both Protestant and Catholic leaders are concerned about the bill's consequences. “Without understanding the risks, it is dangerous to create a crime of mental manipulation—something that sooner or later will be assimilated with a crime of opinion,” said Stephan Lauzet, general secretary of the French Evangelical Alliance.

In taking their stance, French political leaders joined non-evangelicals in many parts of the world, including Latin America, in having difficult distinguishing between true sects and traditional evangelical or protestant groups. The confusion has not been helped by the habit of Catholic leaders, including Pope John Paul II of including all-Catholics under the general rubric of sects.

Louis DeMeo testified before the U.S. Congress last June and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe about the poor treatment his church and the Nimes Theological Institute that he founded have faced since being added to the list of dangerous sects.

“Only half of one percent of France is evangelical, and the French government defines evangelicals as 'representing extreme factions of the traditional reformed church,’” DeMeo says. “That is why they are putting us on the same list as apocalyptic and satanic groups.”

“With the new law, many in France think that everybody is a cult,” he adds. “Many do not know how to tell the difference between the Church of Scientology and evangelical Christians.”

DeMeo said that he has never seen such opposition in France during his 20 years of mission service there. "Much of it is a matter of cultural pride," he says. "The French like the U.S. for what they can get, but they scoff at Billy Graham and people like him as extensions of American culture."

Some evangelical organizations have experienced turmoil because of the French decision and the uncertainty of officials as to how to proceed. Several cars were set afire near DeMeo's seminary last year after he testified before a U.S. congressional committee. DeMeo says that some people related to the institution have lost jobs because of their affiliation.

DeMeo says the seminary and church have produced more Christian teachers, missionaries, and pastors than any other organization in France, except Youth With a Mission. "We're afraid they are going to take away our tax status like they did to the Assembly of God church in Besançon," says DeMeo. "They are asking a church of 150 people to pay \$600,000 in back taxes—knowing that is impossible—so that they have an excuse to shut them down."

Some missionaries and church leaders say that the legislation and prevailing anti-evangelical attitude in France has hampered their work. A crusade by well-known evangelical evangelist Luis Palau was cancelled last year, a direct result of the new legislation. DeMeo reports that one missionary who had been in the country for over 20 years encountered severe difficulty in getting his immigration papers renewed.

"Those with the Federation of Churches have not had the same problem," DeMeo says. The Federation represents the more liberal denominations and church bodies.

There is, however, openness to the Gospel throughout the country. "Many churches are packed out," DeMeo explains. Some groups are moving from pockets of opposition to other cities that are more open rather than fight the battle and open themselves to possible harm, he says.

DeMeo worries about the long-term affect of the French legislation. "France is in a position to influence other eastern European countries as they determine their position about American Christianity," he says. He pointed to Russia and other nations that have banned or deported foreign Christian workers as having taken their cue from France. The U. S. State Department has tried to encourage the French government to reconsider its position, DeMeo says.

"Unless this is resolved there are going to be a lot of unsaved people," DeMeo warns.

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