

MAGNOLIA MINDS: 'I have my own religion,' she said.

By Joe McKeever

Correspondent



McKeever

She may have been the saddest person I ever met. I was a young staff member at First Church, Jackson, and was in the neighborhood that afternoon calling on people who had visited our church. The side of the duplex I knocked on was clearly empty so I knocked next door, thinking to find where that family had moved.

A little grandmotherly woman answered my knock. She said she did not know that family or where they had moved. I said, "Ma'am, may I ask about you? Do you have a church home here in Jackson?" She hesitated and said, "I have my own religion." I said, "Oh? I don't think I've ever heard anyone say that before."

She said once again, "I'm the only person in Mississippi of my religion." I said, "You've really got me interested. Could you tell me about your religion?" She obviously was suspicious of me and said, "You don't want to know about my religion."

I assured her I did. After a moment, very reluctantly she invited me in. Sitting on the couch, I listened as she told me about her religion – the name of which I have long since

forgotten (sorry, it's been a few years). She brought out some material she used for worship, a number of pamphlets, and a long-play record album.

I scanned some of the printed material, but it seemed to be a lot of philosophical meandering. I recall not being able to make heads or tails of it.

I said to her, "Ma'am, you're telling me you've been the only person in Mississippi of this religion for thirty years?" She nodded. I said, "May I ask you about that? One of my ministries at our church is teaching people to share their faith. So, in all these years have you ever told other people about your God?"

She replied, "If my God wants anyone to know about Him, He will send them to me." She did not see the irony of that: here I sat on her couch asking questions and willing to learn.

After a bit, I tried to share the Gospel of Jesus with her, but she was uninterested and unwilling to listen to anything I had to say. I thanked her and left, determining to pray for her.

Sometime later (days or weeks, I don't recall now) I returned but she did not open the door. I left some printed material at her door. I soon moved away to pastor in another city, but I never forgot her, clearly the saddest person I ever met.

One thing that has lingered with me all these years is that the pamphlets the woman read in her worship had yellowed with age, and the record album to which she listened had warped. The metaphor is striking.

Over these nearly-sixty years of ministry, I have met people who call themselves Christians but whose relationship with Jesus was so much like that little lady's story. Thirty years ago they had an experience of some kind but nothing

since. Without daily fellowship with the Lord and absent the regular worship with God's people, their testimony – if they had one at all – had yellowed with age and warped with time.

They dried up, retreated into themselves, and were living their tiny existence never venturing out to share their faith, never growing, never daring, never giving or serving, loving or helping. Sad is hardly the word.

My seminary professor of evangelism, B. Gray Allison, used to tell us, "If you've got it, you'll tell it. Do you have it?"

We remember the leper whom Jesus heals and cautions not to tell anyone. Mark tells us, "But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere." (Mark 1:40-45). He had it.

Think of what our Lord told the man of Gadara whom He healed from the demons that had been terrorizing his life. When the man – now cleaned, clothed, and quieted – asked if he could accompany the Lord and His disciples, Jesus said to him, "Go home to your people and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:1-20). That man had it.

How about you? Has anyone heard anything from you lately that makes them want to know Jesus?

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