

Founder of The Way Dr. Wierwille Dies

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Dr. Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of the religious ministry The Way International, has died at New Knoxville, Ohio, after a brief illness.

The Way, a biblical research ministry claiming more than 100,000 followers and headquartered at New Knoxville, has been accused by some religious groups of being a cult, and other Christian groups have taken issue with its teaching that Jesus Christ was the son of God but not part of the Trinity.

Wierwille, 68, was ordained a minister of the Evangelical and Reformed Church before forming The Way. He was president of the organization from 1942 to 1982, when he was succeeded by L. Craig Martindale. He was a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, N.J. and author of 11 books.

The Way headquarters, located on the farm where Wierwille was born near New Knoxville in west-central Ohio, has a staff of 500 employees and volunteers, and recorded \$23.4 million total income in 1983, the latest year for which figures are available.

Most recent membership figures indicate more than 100,000 people — including at least 2,000 Tennesseans — have taken The Way's classes.

"What is passing is a tremendous amount of talent, love and warmth," the Rev. Foster Smith, president of The Way of Tennessee, said in Nashville yesterday.

Smith had worked closely with Wierwille for some 15 years.

Distinguishing characteristics of The Way include the practice of holding study and fellowship meetings in private homes, encouraging the speaking in tongues and a belief that deceased Christians do not go immediately to heaven or hell but "have fallen asleep" and await the second coming of Christ, Smith said.

There are eight independent home fellowships in Nashville, which meet two or three times a week and draw 10-20 people a meeting, he said. Using the King James Version of the Bible, The Way endeavors to "get back to the God-breathed word," he said.

The Way has been accused in recent years of anti-semitism, cult status and harassment of followers. However, Smith said such accusations are made "because The Way isn't a part of traditional denominations" and so some people misunderstand or misrepresent the organization.

A Bible study sponsored by The Way drew about 5,000 to Nashville last year.

The Way maintains a 41-acre college campus in Emporia, Kan.; a 200-acre campus outside Rome City, Ind.; a year-round outdoor academy near Tinnie, N.M., and a 140-acre Christian family camp near Gunnison, Colo.

Survivors include his wife Dorothea, two sons, three daughters, and 16 grandchildren.

Private services were scheduled for today on grounds of The Way at New Knoxville. A larger memorial service will be conducted during The Way's annual Rock of Ages festival there Aug. 11-17.