



## A warning *for students*

A 'chance' meeting with the friend of a friend led to months of involvement with a secretive cult for Zoe\* during her time at university in Dublin. Now Zoe and her mother Carol\* are keen to warn others of the dangers of Shincheonji and their tactics. They shared their story with **Ruth Garvey-Williams**. (\*names changed)

In summer 2019, Zoe did an internship at a Dublin university. Part of a loving Christian family and an active member of the Christian Union, Zoe is an intelligent young woman who is keen to go deeper in her faith.

"I bumped into a girl who was friendly with another close friend. When she asked to go for coffee, I was surprised but thought she was just being friendly," Zoe said.

After the coffee, the young woman suggested meeting again to study the Bible. When they met in a local park, the young woman asked if Zoe had questions about the Bible. Afterwards,

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she messaged to say she had met a man who could answer Zoe's questions.

Although initially cautious, Zoe says, "Because I knew her, I agreed to meet up with them both. [This man] seemed to know the Bible really well and the three of us began meeting several times a week. He would jump from place to place [in the Bible] and it impressed me that he was able to do that. I was amazed at his knowledge." Eventually they invited Zoe to join an intensive six-month Bible

study programme.

“They began saying we should not tell anyone and used Micah 7:5 to back it up. The other girl was sure that she would not tell her family, so I did not tell anyone either,” Zoe said. “In October, I began the lessons. There were six of us. I didn’t realise then but there was always one who was learning and one who had brought them along (a recruiter like the girl who brought me).

“Eventually, I had lessons on my own. I was told I was learning quicker than the others. The man was very respectful; it wasn’t dangerous in that sense but it was important that I was never late. I couldn’t miss a single session and they wanted to know everything I was doing. I wasn’t able to go home as much and I had to lie to my parents.”

Zoe was told that she needed to learn without interference. Soon she was told about a ‘graduation’ ceremony that would allow her to join the main meetings. This would involve travelling to London (a trip that Zoe was to keep secret from her family even though it meant missing a family event).

There was increasing pressure to attend meetings and give money to the group. “They did not want us to ask questions. I think I was brought on quicker because I didn’t question anything. In hindsight, I wish I had!” Zoe said.

Back at home, mum Carol became increasingly concerned that Zoe didn’t seem to want to visit anymore but the family still had no idea what was going on.

Zoe found herself under pressure to attend meetings even to the detriment of her studies. “They laughed when I talked about college grades. They told me I had never really understood the Bible before and that my life was so much better now that I was part of the group,” Zoe explained. “I didn’t see the people I loved and I stopped meeting with friends. They make you believe that your family will

be going to heaven because of you. That was a big motivation. I wanted the best for my family. I thought if I didn’t go my family would lose out on eternal life. I hate lying but I kept on going with it.”

The group expected Zoe to be at a meeting on Christmas Eve and told her to lie to her parents, something they described as ‘wisdom’. Carol begged Zoe not to go back to Dublin. “I told her, ‘I want you here for Christmas Eve’ but she went anyway. I could not understand it. I thought, ‘This is not Zoe.’”

### **What is alarming is the number of dedicated young Christians who have been lured into this group without the knowledge of their families.**

The meetings Zoe attended were presented from the Shincheonji ‘church’ in South Korea. “We had to wear black trousers and a white shirt and we all sat on the floor. You had to bow your head when the leader, Lee Man Hee, came on. This man thought he was the new ‘John’ that it talks about in Revelation. He also referred to himself as the ‘advocate’ – and said he was the only person who could interpret Scripture and that he alone was able to unlock the true meaning of the Bible.”

Zoe discovered that the girl who had recruited her into the group was called a ‘harvester’ – the original invitation to coffee was a deliberate attempt to draw her into the group.

“The man I was meeting in Ireland was from Austria. He had been ordered by the group to move to Ireland with only two days’ notice to become a ‘harvester’ and a teacher for Shincheonji. There



was a lot of importance placed on me becoming a harvester too – going out to find people who were potential new recruits. We would stand on Grafton Street and ask people questions. We had to figure out if people might be suitable and write a report,” she added.

The group would target young men and women in churches or Christian Union meetings, befriending them and persuading them to come along to Shincheonji meetings, in the same way Zoe had been recruited.

Everything finally came to a head in February 2020. The whole family was invited to a party but Zoe told them she could not go.

“We were out for a walk and I told her, ‘Surely you can miss one week’ but she kept making up excuses,” Carol said. “I kept pushing her until eventually she said, ‘You will think I’m crazy.’”

Zoe’s father reassured her, gently and patiently encouraging her to tell them the truth about what had been happening.

“Whenever I was trying to tell my parents, it was so hard. I felt guilty telling them because I wasn’t supposed to. Telling them was such a relief but I was so brainwashed at the time. Thankfully they stayed calm and didn’t overreact,” Zoe said.

Carol and her husband could tell something was seriously wrong. They suggested that Zoe talk to their church minister. After months of manipulation, it wasn’t easy to get through to Zoe.



Shincheonji (SCJ) originates in South Korea and has been operating in Ireland since 2018. The group recruits young Christian students through cold contact, one-to-one interviews on university campuses or by acting under the guise of

Alpha. (Since Covid they’ve also used social media.) The group refers to a method of “unlocking the secrets” of the Bible. It is controlling and secretive, requiring high levels of commitment and engagement. On Premier Christian News, Nicky Gumbel warned about the dangers of the group. ([www.premierchristian.news/en/news/article/nicky-gumbel-warns-of-potentially-dangerous-cult](http://www.premierchristian.news/en/news/article/nicky-gumbel-warns-of-potentially-dangerous-cult))

“I think the key issue was that they were telling her to lie to her parents,” the minister said.

Gradually he showed Zoe how the group were misusing Scripture and highlighted how the claims they were making were not right. “It was evident that these teachings were destructive. They manipulated the deep love she has for her family. Telling Zoe that her grandparents’ salvation depended on her obedience to the group was a complete twisting of the Word of God.”

Although there appeared to be a breakthrough, Carol was still concerned. “I was so afraid to let Zoe go back to Dublin. If she had met with the wrong person, they would have pulled her right back in.”

Together with their minister, Carol and her husband supported Zoe as she left the group. They encouraged her to reconnect with friends and began to search the internet to find out more about Shincheonji. They discovered an alarming pattern of manipulation and spiritual abuse.

“We’ve learnt about other students who’ve got involved with the cult. These were intelligent young women and men with a real desire to know God’s Word. In most cases, they came from loving

Christian homes. They were deliberately targeted. Some have not been able to get free.”

During the first lockdown, Zoe returned home for the remainder of her degree course. “Being at home was really helpful,” she said. “It was important to cut connections until they knew they would not be able to pull me back in. I got back in touch with my church and with friends from the Christian Union.”

Today Zoe feels she is fortunate to have escaped. She sees the impact on others who have been unable to break free and has realised how she was being taken away from her family.

“Like other cults Shincheonji take texts out of context,” Zoe’s minister added. “The way that they teach is controlling and manipulative and add to that all the secrecy, they are putting people into bondage.

“What is alarming is the number of dedicated young Christians who have been lured into this group without the knowledge of their families. I contacted the head of Christian Unions Ireland (CUI) to alert them to the dangers of Shincheonji and spoke to church leaders in Monaghan, Down, Antrim, Louth, Dublin and Wicklow – the pastors of people Zoe had met in the group. In

each instance, none of the families were aware of their child’s involvement with Shincheonji.

“I believe we must engage with our committed young adult Christians who have a desire to grow in grace through sound teaching and doctrine. We need to ask some serious questions of ourselves in church leadership about how we are equipping our people to face the challenges of a secular world. False teachers are preying on our most committed young Christians with enticements to teaching which distorts the gospel.”

This article was first published in *Vox* magazine.

*Ruth Garvey-Williams is the editor of Vox magazine.*



## Presbyterian perspective

As Head of Safeguarding for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, I was disturbed to hear about the existence of this cult and the methods it uses to ‘recruit’ and maintain control over young people. However, having worked in the field of exploitation for a lengthy period, I could clearly see all the hallmarks of deliberate grooming behaviour in this practice, including:

- gaining the trust of a young person by using someone (even vaguely) known to them in order to get them to meet with a ‘harvester’ for the cult;
- isolating them from their family and friends, so that they cannot be dissuaded to depart from the cult;
- fulfilling a need by purporting to be able to help them really understand the Bible properly;
- being controlling, and insisting on attendance at meetings and events, without choice, thereby maintaining control.

There is nothing healthy, in a spiritual sense or otherwise, about such tactics to control another human being.

*Dr Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin, PCI’s Head of Safeguarding*

University is an incredibly exciting and important time for our young men and women. It’s the time when they go away from the safety and security of their family and home congregation and begin to explore and encounter different ideas and ways of thinking that, perhaps, they haven’t encountered before.

That’s why it’s vitally important that all of us, particularly our university students, are fluent in the content and substance of the gospel of Jesus Christ and familiar with the fundamentals of the orthodox and historic Reformed faith from an early age.

A robust and dynamic knowledge of that which is authentic and true is the best defence against that which is counterfeit and false.

*Rev Craig Lynn  
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