

Spiritual lessons at service

Followers gather for evening of discourse by members

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The folding chairs, placed in a semi-circle, face a raised podium with a small microphone.

It is the Thursday evening service for about 40 devotees at Science of the Soul center. They exchange brief greetings as they settle into their seats. Some deposit a cash offering in the locked "seva" — or donation — box. Many close their eyes as they wait for the service, which will feature a talk by a fellow church member, to begin.

This is an evening Satsang, or discourse. It lasts 45 minutes. Members of the group take turns giving talks.

Listeners are just as likely to hear quotes from the Bible as from the Quran or lives of the saints. This evening they heard a story from writer C.S. Lewis' "Screwtape Letters."

They are reminded of their four commitments: vegetarian diet, no drugs or alcohol, leading a clean and moral life, and meditating 2½ hours a day. The group is assured that if they fall short of the goals — as long as they have faith — the guru will still welcome them.

Before the study center opened, this weekly meeting was held at Andy and Rachel Berliner's house for 24 years.

"This is nice. But I sort of miss hosting the group. My family enjoyed seeing everyone," said Andy Berliner, a principal force behind the new center.

The people in the gathering are mature, with a nearly even mix of men and women. Berliner said a wide range of professions is represented, including doctors and lawyers. There are several couples in attendance.

"Remember, you are colored the same as those you associate with," the members are told. The concept is emphasized three times, once by a speaker and twice via quotes taken from guru letters.

When the talk ends, there is minimal chitchat. The guru discourages talking after services, encouraging followers instead to focus more on quietly accepting the teachings.

SCIENCE OF THE SOUL

Founded in India 1861 as Radha Soami, an offshoot of Sikhism, a 500-year-old religion based on Hinduism. It arrived in the United States in 1911.

Membership: 2 million worldwide; 15,000 in U.S.; 5,000 in California, and about 200 in Sonoma County.

Requirements: For one year prior to initiation, followers must be vegetarians, abstain from alcohol and drugs, as well as sex outside of marriage. Daily meditation of 2½ hours required.

Guru: Gurinder Singh.

U.S. centers: Fayetteville, N.C., and Petaluma. Proposed centers for Vancouver, B.C., and Toronto.