



# Apocalypse at Diamond Head

Pastor Charles Liu remembers 14 members leaving his Diamond Head Seventh-day Adventist church in Hawaii.

by Joel Sandefur  
and Charles Liu

*Probably more members left the Diamond Head church in 1986 and 1987 to join Koresh in Waco than left from any Seventh-day Adventist congregation. Joel Sandefur, a theology major at La Sierra University, interviewed the pastor serving at that time.*

In 1986, Vernon Howell, now better known as David Koresh, went to Hawaii to preach his personal brand of apocalypticism and recruit new members to his Branch Davidian sect. The Diamond Head Seventh-day Adventist church in Honolulu bore the brunt of his attentions. A member of that church invited Koresh to the islands to talk about some visions he had been having. Over the course of one year, Koresh managed to pick up 14 new members from the Diamond Head congregation and a few others from another church in Honolulu. In 1987, after his followers were disfellowshipped from the Adventist Church, Koresh left Hawaii, taking his new converts with him back to Waco, Texas.

Charles Liu, now an associate at the Campus Hill church in Loma Linda, was pastor at Diamond Head at the time. No one could have known or predicted in 1987 what would occur just six years later at the Branch Davidian compound outside of Waco in 1993. Liu had quite a bit of contact with Koresh during his year in Hawaii. The man who is now described as Koresh's "first lieutenant," Steven Schneider,

was a deacon and a Sabbath school leader at Diamond Head, as well as a graduate student at the University of Hawaii. Liu talks quite candidly and reflectively about his experiences first trying to understand and then combat Koresh and his community.

The following interview took place on April 8, 1992, 11 days before the final inferno at the Waco compound.

**Sandefur:** Are any of the people from the Diamond Head Seventh-day Adventist church still down in the compound? Have any of them been released?

**Liu:** We know one person who was released. We know of one person in the compound and of two people who left before this all started. The remainder we are assuming are still there. We actually heard on the TV the voices of at least a couple of them. I think a radio station called up and got hold of one of them. Then the guy they call his chief lieutenant, Steven Schneider, was also a member at Diamond Head church. . . . he was one of our deacons and one of the Sabbath school leaders at the church—quite

an involved, educated young man.

**Sandefur:** What was David Koresh like? You had some contact with him.

**Liu:** Some of the things they've shown on TV are about what he was like. He was kind of schizophrenic in some ways; at times he could be very soft-spoken and quite pleasant and coherent. At other times he appeared to have a bug in his bonnet. He would start railing on some topic or another. I think he tended to put people off by his appearance with his long hair and this very intense [way of] staring you in the eye. He wavered between one personality and the other. I personally believe he really does believe in what he says. He is not manipulative as much as just deluded.

**Sandefur:** So you think it was a cult of personality that drew people to him?

**Liu:** Yes, there's no doubt about it. Some of the members who went with him really were, I considered, fairly balanced people. It seemed they were just overwhelmed by his personality. They almost couldn't help themselves.

**Sandefur:** Would you characterize what these people underwent as brainwashing?

**Liu:** Definitely. There was sleep deprivation. There were odd diets that I think got people's metabolisms out of balance.

**Sandefur:** So it was a classic cult indoctrination modus operandi?

**Liu:** Yes. I went to a couple of their meetings because our members were being drawn into it. Some of the techniques of communication he would use were to talk steadily for hours at a time and it would be without any opportunity for any kind of dialogue or questioning, all one way, and very intense.

**Sandefur:** What were those meetings like?

**Liu:** He [Koresh] had a really interesting technique. He would make personal claims for himself,

first of all as a messenger or the Lamb. There were a number of terms he used for himself. He would say this is what's going to happen, this is how it's going to be, then stop and he'd ask a question, usually a rhetorical question: "Are you going to believe this? Can you be left out?" It was all building commitments, but in a very manipulative sort of way. Or he'd ask a question like: "Do you want to burn with the rest of Babylon?" The kind of questions that you can only answer one way. He also had a technique of promising people what they needed. "If you come to me I'll make your decisions for you. You don't have to worry about burning out; we'll take care of everything for you."

**Sandefur:** To what degree was what he was saying Adventist? To what extent did it resemble traditional Adventist doctrine? Or was it so far out in left field that you couldn't even recognize it as having Adventist roots?

**Liu:** That's probably a little touchy for the Adventist Church. I believe there is a connection. There is a reason that it is an offshoot of Adventism and not of Methodism or Presbyterianism. We do have a real interest in the Apocalypse, eschatology; end times are very much a part of our teachings. I think some of our evangelistic approaches have tended to focus on the fears of people—hurry up and get ready. So I think there is that connection. However, his conclusions are way, way beyond anything that . . . a rational human being, let alone a Seventh-day Adventist Christian, would embrace. We have to make that distinction.

**Sandefur:** What kind of people were drawn to Koresh? Was there anything that all the people from your church who followed him held in common?

**Liu:** Most of them were younger—not only in terms of age, but in terms of how long they had

been Adventists. But that wasn't exclusive. There were two or three older people who followed him. But from Diamond Head, it was by and large young adults, twentysomethings. They tended to be newer in the church and I think very idealistic saying, "Here's someone who's really acting out their beliefs, not just playing church. . . . They're really serious about their religion." I think people like that seem to be drawn.

**Sandefur:** What did you do to combat Koresh and what was going on in your church?

**Liu:** There was a sense in which I felt a bit helpless because it was like fighting against motherhood and apple pie. . . . Their standard line to us every week would be: "Why are you making us close our Bibles?" Because we would say that the stuff you are bringing out of your Bibles is not appropriate, you cannot teach it from the pulpit, you cannot have Sabbath school classes, you can't talk about this stuff anywhere in the church. Their reply to us always would be—egged on by David Koresh—"This is repression. Why are you making us close our Bibles in the SDA church on Sab-

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bath morning?" And all they wanted to do was speak in public. So finally we began to take this censure discipline action. We discovered when we did that, they didn't like it. They wanted to argue. They wanted the opportunity to debate in a public setting. And when we said we're not going to talk about it anymore, you can accuse us of whatever, but we're going to take disciplinary action . . . that really did disturb them. They preferred to argue.

**Sandefur:** So you tried at first to argue theologically with them?

**Liu:** We were talking out of two different worldviews, really. We were communicating in different lan-

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*I asked him point blank in the parking lot. . . . His wife—his original wife, Rachel, was there and he had her come over and stand by me and he said: "You're asking me if I'd cheat on this woman? I'd never embarrass her." Their little child was there with them. "I'd never embarrass my child." Shortly after that, apparently, he started doing the very things that he said he wouldn't.*

guages as far as I was concerned.

**Sandefur:** Do you think something like this could happen again? Could another David Koresh type spring out of Adventism in the next 10 years, or do you think we've learned a lesson?

**Liu:** No. History tells us we go through these cycles. . . . The Shepherd's Rod movement alone has gone through six or seven evolutions that I've been able to trace . . . and I did a fairly intensive study about that because I knew they were coming from that orientation. The truth is that this may have had ties to Adventism, but really sprang more out of the Davidian offshoot of the SDA Church. It's like a third or a fourth evolution of that, which in itself was an evolution of something else that originally started with Adventism. So it just seems to me that we go through these cycles. There are always enough people within any given group who are looking for or needing something that makes them susceptible to cultic behavior.

**Sandefur:** Do you think we are dealing with a parallel world? We have the Adventist Church going along here and the Branch Davidians and the Shepherd's Rod kind of trailing along, skimming off members.

**Liu:** That has been happening since the 1930s or 1940s, I guess. . . . so yes, in a sense. To say it is a parallel universe or something may be giving it too much credence. . . . We are talking about a very small group of people.

**Sandefur:** You have been quoted heavily, and you've had lots of people knocking on your door, calling you up, especially a couple of weeks ago. How was the media coverage? Was it fair? Biased?

**Liu:** I really feel like it was quite fair. I'm thankful for the media in this thing. A couple of years ago one of the members of the Diamond Head church contacted me and said: "I'm getting some really strong indi-

cations that there is some really bizarre behavior starting to go on with some of our former members who went with Vernon Howell. . . . That includes polygamy, child-abuse, underage sex . . ." He said: "We've got to do something. What can we do?" So he started trying to rouse some interest through legal means, trying to get somebody to check on it . . . and just seemed to not get anywhere because it was private things going on on private property and no real evidence. . . . It was hard to document anything. He was really desperate; there were other people who were really desperate. One of the former cult members, Mark Breault . . . came out and began to push it and say, "I've seen it. I have evidence . . ."

Then the legal authorities began to get involved. But still a lot of people were saying, "Hey, they just have their own religion. Maybe it's different, but they're in their own place and they're practicing it so why get involved?"

But when the media started pushing it, I think the truth came to light. So I really am kind of thankful for the media, that they pushed it, investigated it. . . . This report from an Australian media group that came over and may have precipitated this and the Waco paper that published articles probably did everyone a favor by bringing this to light.

**Sandefur:** Did Koresh have these Messianic characteristics that he has taken on now when he was in Hawaii?

**Liu:** Yes, his favorite term then was *Messenger*. He also talked once or twice about being the Lamb, which has certain connotations. At the time he was the Messenger, the Seventh Angel, he could unlock the seven seals of Revelation 14 as he interpreted them. He felt that he was a special person, that he had special messages. Apparently that evolved later on into this idea of being a messiah, being Jesus Christ, being

the only person who should be married or have sex with women of his community—all of these sorts of things. It was curious, I asked him one time at church . . . he used to come to church and sit there—we told him he couldn't speak there. Afterwards in the parking lot he would do his little recruiting thing. One time, after I'd heard some rumors that there was polygamy being talked about . . . I asked him point blank in the parking lot . . . His wife—his original wife, Rachel, was there and he had her come over and stand by me and he said: "You're asking me if I'd cheat on this women? I'd never embarrass her." Their little child was there with them. "I'd never

embarrass my child." Shortly after that, apparently, he started doing the very things that he said he wouldn't. I don't trust the guy when he makes promises or says things because I've heard him with my own ears tell a lie.

**Sandefur:** Did he ever threaten you?

**Liu:** Only indirectly by referring to Ezekiel 9 and the slaughter by the Temple. . . . He would quote that often and his followers would quote that often . . . even that they would help. . . . That it would begin with the shepherds. I can draw some conclusions from that. It bothered me a bit, but nobody called me up in the middle of the night saying they were coming to get me.

**Sandefur:** Do you think there is anything the church could do if it wanted to have a policy about things like this? Is there anything it can really do to combat the David Koreshs of the world? Or is it something we're doomed to always have with us?

**Liu:** I personally feel that we are doomed to have some of these things with us. It just seems that they inevitably come up. . . . It's just part of life, I'm afraid. I think what the Adventist Church can do is to be sure and . . . teach clearly what we understand the gospel to be so that the majority of the members don't get sidetracked by . . . wondering what's going on.