

Trinity College
**Office of Spiritual
and Religious Life**

Avoiding High-Pressure Religious Groups

Everyone is capable of being persuaded to do something that we did not want to do, and that susceptibility is what high-pressure groups use to incrementally take over people's lives. High-pressure groups do not start with something dramatic like the tragedy at Jonestown but with incremental efforts to control people's thoughts and lives little by little.

New students and others experiencing major life transitions are often especially susceptible to high-pressure groups, which often seem extremely friendly, provide many opportunities for community, and seem to create stability in a time of change. For that reason, these groups often try to recruit people in times of transition. However, unlike healthy spiritual and ethical communities, these groups do not ultimately support students' intellectual freedom and academic success, physical and mental health, and positive relationships with family and friends as part of a healthy, balanced life.

Pursuant to Trinity College's Policy Statement on Discrimination, General Harassment and Abuse (see, Student Handbook), high-pressure are contrary to the College's mission and thus are not welcome at Trinity College. This information is provided to help you avoid these groups and to connect with Trinity's many healthy spiritual and other campus communities. Trinity College's policies for recognized religious and spiritual communities prohibit behaviors such as deceptiveness, proselytizing (outreach that involves pressure or exploits vulnerabilities), and harassment. Therefore, we strongly encourage students to begin their exploration for religious and spiritual communities with those listed on the Trinity College Office of Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL) website (<https://www.trincoll.edu/spiritualandreligiouslife/staff/>). For your protection and that of all members of the Trinity College community, if you believe you have encountered a high-pressure group on campus, or have questions about whether a group is a high-pressure group, please contact Trinity College OSRL at 860-297-2013. It is better to err on the side of caution. Information shared will be kept confidential.

High-pressure groups can be hard to recognize at first, and there is a spectrum in the aggressiveness of these groups' tactics. Some high-pressure groups seem to share some of the beliefs or features of mainstream religious groups—the issue is not their beliefs per se, but their emotionally abusive and destructive practices. These groups seek to create an all-or-nothing reality and a situation in which people are totally dependent on the group—spiritually, socially, romantically, financially, and in every way. In the United States today, there are an estimated 5,000 high-pressure groups.

Some Characteristics of High-Pressure Groups

1. **LACK OF FORMAL RECOGNITION:** The guidelines that govern recognized religious and spiritual communities at Trinity College are put in place to protect your wellbeing. Groups that are not connected with college structures or that refuse to comply with college policies should raise questions. Trinity's religious and spiritual communities are expected to operate in a mutually respectful and collaborative, ecumenical, and interfaith way.
2. **DECEPTIVENESS OR MISINFORMATION:** High-pressure groups generally do not provide clear, complete, or honest information about themselves. Their affiliations, practices, and expectations may not be fully transparent. They may not provide complete details about

Trinity College Chapel
300 Summit Street

Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Trinity College Office of Spiritual and Religious Life

their activities, activities may turn out differently from what was publicized, and information about leadership, resources, etc. may not be clear.

3. **OUTREACH EXCEEDS YOUR COMFORT LEVEL:** High-pressure groups generally appear very friendly, and you may feel like you are instantly friends with everyone. Their outreach may be uncomfortable in frequency, pressure, not taking “no” for an answer, or occurring in methods, times, and places that are inappropriate (e.g., residence halls). You may be asked or expected to recruit others to the group as your primary goal before you are really involved.
4. **INAPPROPRIATE ADVISING/MENTORING:** High-pressure groups usually involve “advising,” mentoring, or supervision that is intense and seeks to pressure and control rather than empower students. Advisors may have little formal training, credentials, or experience. They may make you feel like you are being watched and judged. They may pry into your personal life for private information (sexual, financial, etc.) that can later be used to control you. They may seek inappropriate influence over your life, regarding dating, romance, or sexual behavior. They may request excessive financial contributions and jeopardize your independence.
5. **ABSOLUTISM:** High-pressure groups generally discourage doubts, differences of opinion, criticism, research, and exposure. They may present only one right way to think and claim to have all the answers. They may regard disagreement as a sign of weakness or lack of commitment. They may demand rigid loyalty, present issues in terms of black-and-white thinking (e.g., saved or unsaved, pure or impure, with us or against us), and suggest catastrophic consequences for difference or disobedience (such as withdrawal of relationship, or graphic descriptions of eternal suffering).
6. **SEPARATION:** High-pressure groups may seek to separate you from your family and friends and encourage you to only be friends with and date other members of the group. They may seek a disproportionate amount of your time and attention so that you are not able to be involved in relationships or activities beyond the group. They may disparage, discredit, or promote prejudice against people who are not members of the group or minorities.
7. **MAJOR CHANGES:** High-pressure groups may pressure you to make major life changes, such as cutting off natural human relationships (family, friends, romantic, etc.), changing courses or your major, disregarding grades and exams, and dropping out of or taking time off from school. These practices are meant to destabilize your connections to your support network and make you less self-sufficient and more dependent. They may make it hard for you to leave easily.
8. **EMOTIONAL DISTRESS:** High-pressure group activities may leave you feeling lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, unworthiness, shame, fatigued, disempowered, or like you have fewer choices.
9. **DENIAL:** High-pressure groups often deny being cults even though they are widely regarded to be. They often disparage people who suggest they might be cults as demonic or the enemy.

Trinity College Chapel
300 Summit Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Trinity College Office of Spiritual and Religious Life

How to Avoid Involvement in High-Pressure Groups

1. Explore spiritual and other groups to become involved in through Trinity College OSRL and the other resources listed below.
2. Report any group on campus you think might be a high-pressure group to Trinity College OSRL.
3. Talk to people with different worldviews and maintain relationships with people of different perspectives.
4. Explore and stay involved in multiple groups and activities.
5. Educate yourself. You can research high-pressure groups at resources like: International Cult Studies Association (www.icsahome.com)

Support Resources If You Encounter a High-Pressure Group

- Trinity College Office of Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL): 860-297-2013
- Trinity College Campus Safety: 860-297-2222
- Trinity College Counseling and Psychological Services: 860-297-2415

Some Resources for Building Healthy Community at Trinity

- Community Service and Civic Engagement
Joe Barber — Phone: 860-297-4256 | Email: joseph.barber@trincoll.edu
- Trinity College Athletics
Drew Galbraith — Phone: 860-297-2000 | Email: drew.galbraith@trincoll.edu
- Queer Resource Center
Crystal Nieves — Phone: 860-297-2582 | Email: crystal.nieves@trincoll.edu
- Spiritual and Religious Life (OSRL)
The Rev. Marcus Halley — Phone: 860-297-2013 | Email: marcus.halley@trincoll.edu
Rabbi Rachel Putterman — Phone: 860-297-4195 | Email: rachel.putterman@trincoll.edu
- Student Leadership and Engagement
Trevor Beauford — Phone: 860-297-2171 | Email: trevor.beauford@trincoll.edu
- Women and Gender Resource Action Center (WGRAC)
Laura Lockwood — Phone: 860-297-2408 | Email: laura.lockwood@trincoll.edu
Kim O'Brien — Phone: 860-297-4131 | Email: kim.obrien@trincoll.edu

Trinity College Chapel
300 Summit Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06106