



Fundamentalism and freedom meet at the front door.
The untold story of Jehovah's Witnesses.

KNOCKING

By Joel P. Engardio & Tom Shepard

They are moral conservatives who stay out of politics, but they won a record number of court cases expanding freedom for everyone. They refuse blood transfusions on religious grounds, but they embrace the science behind bloodless surgery. In Nazi Germany, they could fight for Hitler or go to the concentration camps. They chose the camps. Following two families who stand firm for their controversial and misunderstood Christian faith, KNOCKING reveals how Jehovah's Witnesses have helped shape history beyond the doorstep.





FROM THE FILMMAKERS

When my mom took me door-knocking on Saturday mornings to deliver the Watchtower magazine and a Bible message to the neighborhoods of Saginaw, Michigan, I didn't realize I was a defender of America's essential freedoms: speech, religion and personal liberty. I was just a kid who would rather be home watching cartoons on television like the other kids. At that age, being raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses was an embarrassment because it meant I was different. Getting sent to the principal's office for refusing to say the Pledge of Allegiance was not a typical third-grade offense.

Now, as an adult who became a journalist but never joined the religion, I can see why it's important that Jehovah's Witnesses are different. That's why I wanted to make KNOCKING. Our essential freedoms are at war with each other—a culture war. We are divided by the very principles that defined America. But when Jehovah's Witnesses knock, they are demonstrating that the freedoms of speech, religion and personal liberty can exist in harmony. It is how a Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, an abortion clinic and a gay married couple can peacefully co-exist on the same block.

Jehovah's Witnesses are moral conservatives who only compete in the marketplace of ideas. They attempt to persuade—not impose—their beliefs at your door. If you say “no thanks,” they won't go behind your back and amend the Constitution to suit their worldview. The only world they want to control is their own congregation, which is their right, and joining it is a personal choice. Jehovah's Witnesses keep religion out of politics. Their separation of church and state is absolute: they don't vote, pledge allegiance to the flag or serve in the military. Yet as otherwise law-abiding, tax-paying citizens, they remind us that the America worth fighting for is an America that does not force people to follow a single ideology with patriotic fervor. And as a group with fundamental religious beliefs, they remind us that it is possible to stand firm in your faith without feeling threatened by those who choose a different path.

The knocking may be inconvenient, but it is a necessary annoyance in a free society. And when their own First Amendment rights were threatened, they went to the U.S. Supreme Court a record 62 times. Jehovah's Witnesses prevailed, winning 50 cases that expanded liberty for everyone—even groups they disagree with. Now we can all equally share our own message. Better we hear an idea we don't like than be forced to live by it.

Joel P. Engardio



I am drawn to documentary filmmaking as a vehicle for telling untold stories and doing so in a way that won't trivialize or sensationalize the issues and subjects who appear on screen. There are few journalistic outlets left in our fast-paced society which allow us to relax into a story, meet engaging characters and be taken on a journey that really challenges what we know and how we think about the world. KNOCKING is one of those outlets and was a privilege to co-direct.

Most people have only a vague notion of who Jehovah's Witnesses are. Before making this film, I knew very little about them—their beliefs, their history, their family life and their ways of congregating. In KNOCKING, we tried to unpack the stereotype of Jehovah's Witnesses as proselytizing zealots. By delving deeply and personally into the lives of several Witnesses, watching them struggle with life's biggest challenges, watching them celebrate deeply held convictions and watching them negotiate their faith in a world often at odds and even hostile toward them, we begin to empathize and see Jehovah's Witnesses as real human beings, not just caricatures on our doorsteps. Once this happens, our minds open to important and rarely discussed information: how Witnesses paved legal precedents regarding First Amendment rights, how they modeled resistance to totalitarian authority in Nazi Europe and how their unconventional beliefs prompted innovation in medicine that benefits all of us. Whether or not you agree with Jehovah's Witness beliefs, it is incumbent on you to know their story, to learn their history, as it is part of your own history, and to take note of all the important ways they have intersected with society. I hope KNOCKING adds to this body of knowledge and gives its viewers pause before avoiding the door next time a Witness comes knocking.

Tom Shepard



COMMUNITY



THE FILM

KNOCKING, an hour-long documentary, is a portrait of contradictions. It looks at how the rigid adherence to doctrine espoused by a fundamentalist religion like the Jehovah's Witnesses has served to protect American civil liberties and free choice.

Though Jehovah's Witnesses are best known for actively proselytizing door-to-door, they make no attempts to legislate their conservative morals at the ballot box. In the midst of America's so-called culture wars, KNOCKING asks viewers to consider whether or not Witnesses provide a model for how people who disagree can peacefully share the public square.

What makes this film particularly compelling is its focus on the personal stories of individual Jehovah's Witnesses. The story of Seth Thomas, a 23-year-old in need of a liver transplant, highlights important medical innovations sparked by religious refusal of blood transfusions.

The life of Joseph Kempler reveals the under-publicized history of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses by the Nazis. A Jewish survivor of Nazi concentration camps, Kempler was so inspired by the strong faith of his fellow prisoners who were Jehovah's Witnesses that he converted.

The personal portraits also point to controversies surrounding Jehovah's Witnesses, showing how religious differences can cause schisms within families. Mostly, the film asks compelling questions and invites viewers to reflect, making it an excellent tool for outreach.

Selected People Featured in KNOCKING

Joel P. Engardio – filmmaker and narrator

Joseph Kempler – a survivor of Nazi death camps who, after the war, converts from Judaism to become a Jehovah's Witness

Seth Thomas – a 23-year-old whose need for a liver transplant seemingly puts him at odds with Witness prohibitions on blood transfusions



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

History

The Jehovah's Witnesses began as late 19th-century followers of Charles Taze Russell's International Bible Student Association. After Russell's death in 1916, a split occurred over leadership and doctrine, with some members supporting Joseph Franklin Rutherford's Watch Tower Society. These followers named themselves the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1931. Today, the group claims approximately seven million followers worldwide.

Structure

Jehovah's Witnesses do not hire clergy because they consider all baptized Witnesses to be ordained ministers, and they expect all Witnesses to provide religious instruction to others. However, individual Witnesses are not free to interpret scripture for themselves. The Witnesses are governed by a 10-member Governing Body. The Governing Body directs the operation of Jehovah's Witnesses branches and is given the exclusive right to interpret scripture to form Witness doctrine.

On the local level, congregations are run by unpaid elders and ministerial servants (deacon-like positions). Elders are tasked with choosing congregational activities and providing religious instruction and spiritual counseling. They also serve on judicial committees that can mete out discipline, including disfellowshipping (and calling for others to shun) members who have transgressed against Jehovah's Witness doctrine.

Doctrine

The best-known Jehovah's Witness publications are The Watchtower (a journal), short Bible tracts (handed out as part of evangelical efforts) and a Witness translation of the Bible entitled the New World Translation. Witnesses believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and that Jesus was God's son, but much of their doctrine is unique. For example:

- Witnesses believe only 144,000 humans—chosen by Jehovah God—actually go to heaven to assist Jehovah and his son, Jesus. Everyone else (including nearly every Jehovah's Witness) is meant to live forever in paradise on Earth with no sickness, death, war, famine or pollution. All races will live together in peace; even the animals will be peaceful.
- Witnesses believe the Earth will be transformed into paradise after Armageddon cleanses the world of human governments and evil. The dead will be resurrected to this paradise to learn about God's new Kingdom and given a choice to live in it. In the meantime, Witnesses believe the dead are unconscious. The soul goes nowhere other than God's memory for future resurrection back on Earth.

- Witnesses do not believe in Hell. The punishment for those refusing God's Kingdom is to simply cease to exist without any consciousness.
- Witnesses believe that they owe allegiance only to God, not to human governments, so they will not pledge allegiance to any flag or country, or serve in the armed forces.
- Witnesses are moral conservatives on social issues like pre-marital sex, homosexuality, abortion and gambling, but they do not act on those beliefs politically.
- The death of Jesus is marked with a special observance, but Witnesses reject any holidays that they consider to be an expression of nationalism (e.g. Thanksgiving), or a practice of false religion. That includes Christmas, because the Bible does not command the celebration of Jesus's birth.
- Transfusions of whole blood are refused because Witnesses believe that the Book of Acts says that blood should not be shared.
- Witnesses believe that Jesus did not die on a cross but on a "torture stake" without a cross-bar, so the crucifix is not used as a symbol.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

General

- If you could ask anyone in the film a question, what would you ask, of whom, and why?
- Before viewing the film, when someone said “Jehovah’s Witness,” what images came to mind? What were the sources of those images? Did the film confirm or challenge what you thought you knew about Jehovah’s Witnesses?

Doctrinal Issues

- What adjective would you use to characterize proselytizing? How did you feel watching the door-to-door efforts in the film and/or the last time a Jehovah’s Witness approached you? Explain your feelings.
- Why do you think Dolores Rasmussen (Seth’s grandmother) thinks of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as a cult? Is she right? How would you deal with a family member whose religious beliefs prevented them from participating in traditional family gatherings or events like birthday celebrations or Christmas?

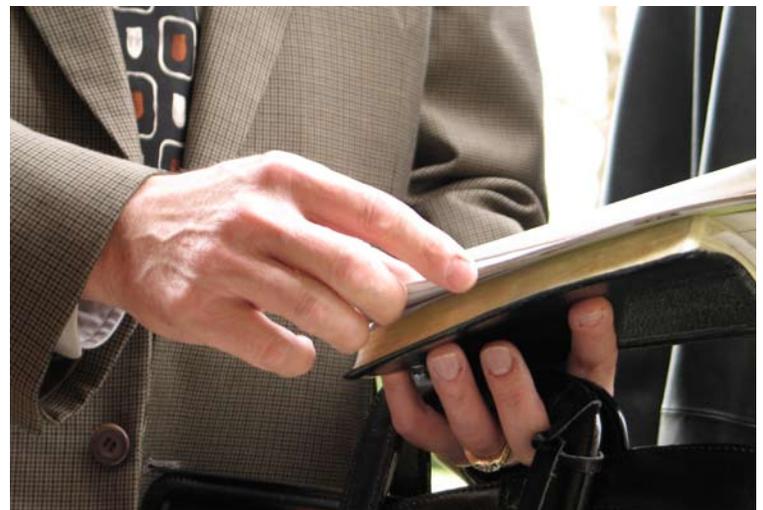
Political Issues

- Assessing the Jehovah’s Witness teaching that mixing religion with politics is unchristian, the filmmaker asks, “Is it possible for a morally conservative religion to stay out of the culture wars?” How would you answer him?
- Would you consider the resistance of Jehovah’s Witnesses to Hitler heroic? Why or why not? Do you admire the choice to stay in the camps rather than sign a paper renouncing one’s faith? Why or why not?
- In your view, does protection of freedom of religion necessitate granting citizens the right to choose obedience to religious principal over obedience to government edict or law? What about exempting citizens from civic or military involvement for religious reasons? If not, why not? If so, under what circumstances?
- Towards the end of the film, Dr. Michael Berenbaum says, “Jehovah’s Witnesses are fundamentalists who have an uncompromising faith. The largest question in our world today is whether people of uncompromising faith are going to see it is imperative to act out with violence toward the other or to act out with decency and dignity toward the other. So the question of our world may not be whether we’re going to have fundamentalism or whether fundamentalism is bad, but what type of fundamentalism we’re going to have.” What type of fundamentalism is practiced by Jehovah’s Witnesses? In your view, what are the benefits and drawbacks of that kind of fundamentalism? What kinds of lessons can Jehovah’s Witnesses offer to others in the context of today’s post-September-11 world.

- In light of American devotion to freedom of religion and freedom of speech, why do you think the Witnesses have periodically been targets of violence and arrest? What is the difference between valuing freedom and valuing pluralism?

Medical Issues

- When it looked like no one would perform a transplant without the possibility of a blood transfusion, how would you have counseled Seth if he had asked you for advice? As specifically as you can, identify the values on which you would base your opinion. Compare the values you hold most dear with the values that Seth seems to weigh the most in this situation.
- Doctors have sometimes forced Witnesses to have blood transfusions in emergency situations, believing that no religion has a right to let its members die when it is possible for doctors to save them. Do you believe that emergency room physicians should respect the wishes of people like the hockey players in the film, who do not want blood transfusions? Why or why not?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Join in community observances of the Holocaust (e.g. Jewish communal observances of Yom HaShoah). Include the history of Jehovah's Witnesses wartime experiences in the observance.
- Hold an informational workshop for medical professionals on treating Jehovah's Witnesses. Along with the film, use the American Medical Association's Principles of Medical Ethics [<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/2512.html>] to guide a discussion on the ethical aspects of treatment options.
- Hold a debate or mock trial on one or more of the key Constitutional cases brought by Jehovah's Witnesses (e.g. the right to evangelize door-to-door without a permit, the right to refuse military service, salute the flag or say the Pledge of Allegiance, etc.).
- The film ends by noting that 28 countries currently ban the Jehovah's Witnesses. Investigate which countries are on that list and discuss their reasons for the ban. Find ways to protest instances where you believe the ban is unjust.

For additional outreach ideas, visit itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit yourself to pursue one item from the brainstorm list.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY & ACTION

General

<http://www.knocking.org> - The official website of the film includes background information on production as well as selected comments from viewers.

Religious Beliefs

<http://www.watchtower.org/> - The official website of the Jehovah's Witnesses provides comprehensive information on their beliefs and work.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/witnesses/> - The BBC "Religion & Ethics" site provides basic background information as well as a timeline history of the Jehovah's Witnesses and a radio debate on ethical issues involved in treating Jehovah's Witnesses (click on the "ethics" tab and scroll to "medical ethics" section). A search of the entire BBC site (www.bbc.co.uk) will provide links to dozens of relevant news stories.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovahs_Witnesses - Although not a traditional fact-checked source, Wikipedia also provides a wide range of general information about Jehovah's Witnesses, including reports of activities outside the U.S.

http://www.pressbox.co.uk/detailed/Society/Jehovah_s_Witnesses_PBS_Film_KNOCKING_Omits_the_Facts_33760.html - A critique of the film and the religion by a former Jehovah's Witness.

History of the Holocaust

<http://www.ushmm.org/> - The website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum includes a significant collection of resources recounting the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses before and during World War II. For a complete list, search "Jehovah's Witnesses" in ALL Categories.

U.S. Constitution

http://atheism.about.com/library/decisions/indexes/bl_l_JWIndex.htm - Inexplicably hidden under the heading of Agnosticism/Atheism, the website About.com includes "Jehovah's Witness and Religious Liberty: An Index of Court Cases." The list includes summaries and background information on major cases involving freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

Medical Issues

<http://www.ajwrb.org/index.shtml> - The Associated Jehovah's Witnesses for Reform on Blood is a diverse group of Witnesses who oppose official Witness teaching on medical treatment involving blood.

<http://www.nataonline.com> - Network for the Advancement of Transfusion Alternatives. A website primarily by and for the medical community to share and discuss new treatment technology.

<http://www.noblood.org> - An independent website for both patients and physicians interested in the advancement of transfusion-free medicine and surgery.

KNOCKING WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON TUESDAY, MAY 22, 2007 AT 10 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

KNOCKING was produced in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS Community, visit www.itvs.org/outreach/.

