

# Family comes first for fast-growing Jehovah's Witnesses

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c. 2012 Religion News Service HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (RNS) When it comes time for family study hour at Chad and Charlotte Tate's home in Huntsville, Ala., Evan, 18 months, is quick to grab her Bible and climb onto her seat at the table.

As Jehovah's Witnesses, the Tates believe it's never too early to help children begin learning the Bible.

"That's one of the things we really like about Jehovah's Witnesses," said Chad Tate, smiling as he watched his son, Tucker, 12, help boost his sister onto the table's bench. "We worship together and we study together as a family."

The small size of Kingdom Hall congregations, which are kept to around 100 members, emphasis on witnessing, and lack of paid clergy have helped Jehovah's Witnesses become one of the fastest growing faiths in the world.

Jehovah's Witnesses now have more than 1.1 million U.S. members and are one of the country's fastest-growing denominations, with personal evangelism required of all members.

There are more than 150 worship centers called Kingdom Halls in Alabama, with a combined membership of more than 15,000. And no matter where Witnesses walk into a Kingdom Hall, anywhere in the world, they can know the study will be the same there as at home, since each congregation follows the same study schedule.

"It makes everyone feel close-knit, like a family," Charlotte Tate said.

Chad Tate says that, at first, he didn't see much to like about the faith when, a few years ago, his wife began re-exploring the religion she grew up in. Tucker had started asking her questions about God and life and death. He started asking why their family didn't join his maternal grandmother at services at the Kingdom Hall.

Charlotte Tate's interest worried her husband.

"At first, I wasn't crazy about it, to tell you the truth," Chad Tate said as his wife nodded a vigorous agreement. "I was just scared -- anytime someone is interested in something new, it's scary. I told her I didn't want her teaching this stuff to our son."

But the more Charlotte Tate found out about Jehovah's Witnesses, the more she knew that was one request she couldn't honor.

"I just wanted the answers for my son," she said.

And it wasn't long until Chad Tate said he saw a change in his wife.

"No matter how mean I was to her, I saw her faith," he said. "I'd never liked religion. It always seemed so fake to me. But when I'd go with her to the meetings, I could see how loving the people there are. They really care about you."

About that time, Charlotte Tate convinced him to let her "practice" a Bible study on him as she got ready to do a study with his mother.

"Things just slowly progressed," Chad Tate said. "I found myself starting to pray. But I'm a skeptical person. I've got to have stuff laid out in front of me. They had to show me from the Bible."

Eventually, he and Tucker were baptized on the same day.

Preparing to show people teachings from the Bible is a big part of why Witnesses are encouraged to plan family study time. For the Tates, that means Monday evening worship and study.

That's when one of them reads aloud from "The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived," a lively retelling of the life and teaching of Jesus, who, Witnesses believe, was the son of God, but not God himself.

Each of the short chapters, with illustrations on each page to help keep little Witnesses involved, end with a set of questions that reinforce the information in the chapter.

Tuesday evenings, the family joins others from their area Kingdom Hall for teaching and study at the hall. Thursday nights is family study time when each person studies something on their own -- a little like a family study hall. Sundays are back at the

Kingdom Hall for teaching and also for demonstrations of how to witness to others.

"I like the play the best at the convention -- and seeing my friends," Tucker said.

"And there are some really encouraging presentations. It encourages more people to get out. It's a good thing."

Tucker, as a baptized member, is considered responsible for setting and then keeping goals for hours spent witnessing each week.

"I always use spring break to get 30 hours," Tucker said.