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CHAPTER 1

Sacred Counsel: “Ambassadors for God”

“Miracle” is the defining word of the decade and a half since our attack against the darkness was launched. In Boston scarcely more than fourteen years ago, 30 would-be disciples gathered in the living room of Bob and Pat Gempel. They came together bounded by the blood of Jesus, the Spirit of our God, the Bible as the only inspired and inerrant Scriptures and a conviction that the only totally committed could be members of the Lexington Church of Christ (later renamed Boston). In the next few months the Bible doctrine from Acts 11:26 of Saved=Christian=Disciple was crystallized. The Spirit then gave us a deep conviction that only these baptized disciples comprise God’s kingdom on earth. This was and still is the true church of Jesus.

— Evangelization Proclamation,
signed by movement leaders 2/4/94

MOST ORGANIZATIONS have a creation story, a founder’s vision that drives goals and ideals. Organizations benefit from telling these stories, members like to hear them; for both they serve as a sacred ritual of legitimation (Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1966). They tell these stories frequently. In religious community, the story takes on a sacred life, made real, powerful, and often credited to divine design. These creation stories are told over and over again, in different settings, through various mediums and with creative variation. The story gives life to group symbols and worldview, their practices and beliefs articulated in the retelling of origins of faith-bound community. For some communities, group legend details the experiences and motivations of a charismatic

leader, a divinely chosen inventor. In the ICOC, Kip McKean was this voice and character, and his divinely inspired story of movement construction supported his charismatic authority and legitimized the movement.¹

The ICOC birthing story, wrapped in a myth of unmatched evangelical growth, was in the forefront of group discourse. McKean told the story himself, from pulpits and in group publications, and members and leaders recounted the birth during services, interviews, Bible studies, and more informal social events. The organization performed the story using various mediums: through music, their publishing house, Discipleship Publications International (DPI), and their video/film production company, Kingdom News Network (KNN).

In 1992, McKean recaps the history of the movement in his famous movement essay entitled “Revolution through Restoration: From Jerusalem to Rome: From Boston to Moscow” (RR). In a section entitled “Seeds of Faith,” McKean lays ground with an autobiographical sketch worthy of charismatic devotion:

I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on May 31, 1954. Like many young men of the ‘60s, I was inspired by those who refused to compromise and were willing to sacrifice everything for “the worthy cause.” This conviction was also deep in my family’s heritage as we have always been called higher by the courage of one of our ancestors, Thomas McKean. He not only signed the Declaration of Independence, but also was the President of the Congress of Confederation, the highest office in the land, when news arrived from General Washington that the British had surrendered. My father, serving as an admiral in the U.S. Navy, not only became a strong influence, but also my early role model for leadership and excellence. Always very outgoing and warm, my mother gave me a great passion for life. My heroes became John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who paid the ultimate price for their dreams. In time, my greatest hero became Jesus.

In this brief description of personal motivation and construction of self, McKean locates his passion in several powerful cultural symbols. He invokes the will and mission of the civil rights movement, the bravery of the “founding fathers,” the valor and status afforded a military officer,

and the reverence and respect of political and social figures who died for their beliefs. McKean's intent and effect is a defense of moral ground and purpose that drove ICOC vision and shaped a charismatic character.

Armed with his legacy of moral uprightness, in RR McKean recounts his educational and theological pursuits, his work with the Crossroads campus outreach program in the 1970s, and his disillusionment with what he saw as a lethargic Mainline Church of Christ community in "slow decline." McKean came to form his own vision of a "Bible church." Accepting a ministerial position in Lexington Church of Christ in Lexington, Massachusetts, in the late 1970s, he challenged his new congregation to follow his vision: "I told the people in that congregation that in order for me to come, every member must vow to be (in the terminology of that day) 'totally committed.' *On June 1, 1979, history was made as 30 would-be disciples gathered on a Friday night in the living room of Bob and Pat Gempel.* Our collective vision was a church where not only the college students were totally committed, but also the teens, singles, marrieds and senior citizens. This was a radical concept not witnessed in any other church or movement in my experience to this day." This "radical" beginning, the birthing of the movement in the Gempels' living room, was told and retold in the community, each repetition cushioned in a rhetoric of phenomenal evangelical growth and success. The strong emphasis on church growth touted alongside early vision was especially prominent in group discourse in the mid- to late 1990s at the height of the movement.

In 1994, the leaders of the movement gathered for a historic moment, the signing of their "Evangelization Proclamation." This document was printed in script lettering with the signatures of major men and women church leaders at the bottom and distributed to members through various publications over the years. The document's title and style bring to mind important U.S. historical documents like the Emancipation Proclamation and the Declaration of Independence—a visual legitimation of democratic revolution. ICOC's proclamation begins, "*On this fourth day of February, in the year of our Lord on thousand nine hundred and ninety-four, we the World Sector Leaders issue this proclamation.*" And continues, "*As God's modern-day movement, the time is now for each true disciple to go far beyond any feat of faith or deeds of daring witnessed to this hour. In this proclamation, we issue such a challenge.*" The proclamation goes on to

tell that familiar story of the thirty would-be disciples in the Gemples' living room planting a movement that had grown significantly: "God in his grace and mercy has blessed his modern-day movement of true Christians as our churches now number 146 with an attendance of over 75,000!" The document also notes significant points in the history of the church and world affairs—depictions of ICOC evangelical effort coinciding with world narratives of the conquering of "evil" political forces. For example: *"Eight years ago a miracle happened in Johannesburg, where in the church blacks and whites did not merely coexist, but for the first time hugged one another in the midst of apartheid and under the threat of extremists."* And, *"Three short years ago God melted the Iron Curtain. The Moscow Church of Christ was planted and already has over 2,000 in attendance."* The proclamation ends with a financial commitment to evangelizing the world, and a passionate appeal to church members: *"Nationals must ready themselves to return to their homelands. Of ultimate necessity for all of us is fervent prayer unseen in our day. Only zealous prayer will allow God to empower, embolden, and employ each of us to fulfill our individual destiny, and thus this global proclamation."*

Sermons and official DPI and KNN movement propaganda frequently featured charts and graphs highlighting impressive statistics and images that supported the idea of "radical," "awesome," and "mind-blowing" growth. Any accurate accounting of ICOC membership, dropout rate, and growth is beyond reach here. Critics of the movement claimed a large dropout rate, and ex-members told me that people were "heading out the back door as fast as members were baptizing new ones." The small three-hundred-member congregation where I conducted field studies through the years boasted of international movement growth in the mid- to late 1990s, but the number of local members stayed fairly constant. I saw new faces here and there, but certainly not the growth touted in formal group rhetoric. Former members from other sectors around the country voiced similar observations in my formal interviews. In addition, the "mind-blowing" numbers that supported the idea of awesome ICOC growth and were showcased in group literature and promotions were based on Sunday church attendance, which would include members and their guests. Actual membership numbers were rarely printed in DPI and KNN publications. Regardless of the lack of a true count of membership and dropout rate, it is clear that McKean and

church leaders were somewhat successful in their use of media and publications to create at least an *illusion* of exceptional growth until the fall of the unified movement in 2003–2004.

KNN produced video newsreels resembling a local news and television magazine format. These videos highlighted the growth and establishment of the ICOC movement across the nation and the world, and were shown during weekly services and in the privacy of members' homes to potential converts and members. I saw several of these videos, and each stressed the exceptional growth of the movement across the globe, telling the legend of McKean and his thirty would-be disciples.

I sat in the living room of a City COC leader during my first month in the field and watched one of these KNN news programs. In this video, the makers stressed church growth, noting that MTV had called them the “fastest growing alternative religion in the country today.” Leadership couples from around the nation and world were interviewed about their “awesome” experiences in the church. A shot of the famous Gempe living room where McKean, his wife, and the other disciples met to discuss the “plan” held our attention for a moment. All images presented a passionate and active ICOC evangelical mission, each member depicted as a team player on the winning side. The team was one that would change the world: a KNN newscaster announced that the Johannesburg church was planted in South Africa *before* (my emphasis) the end of segregation. They showed a picture of a South African church with blacks and whites worshipping together, hugging each other—an image reinforcing formal group rhetoric that promoted the ICOC community as extraordinarily racially diverse (Jenkins 2003). The video message seemed to be that the ICOC's planting a church in South Africa was in some way related to the end of apartheid. With similar intent, the video stressed that the church was planted in Berlin “one month” before the fall of the Berlin Wall. We saw photos of the Berlin ICOC church and then people chopping away at the wall victoriously. The message throughout the newsreel was clear: the ICOC movement was part of some divine plan to save the world from a host of evils. The video ended with clips of members all over the world being baptized in pools, oceans, and rivers.

Each DPI and KNN print and video representation of the creation of the movement, its exceptional multiracial/cultural character, and its

evangelical success fueled the divinely inspired authority of McKean's discipling movement and his corps of charismatic evangelists. In KNN's *Jubilee 2000*, a printed brochure, a prominent movement leader, Roger Lamb, promotes the ICOC memoir of exceptional growth with evangelical fervor:

When God laid on the heart of Kip McKean to challenge the 30 would-be disciples in the Gempels living room in Boston to be totally committed to God and to be evangelistic, who would have dreamed that we would see 403 churches of disciples in 171 nations of the world today? Who would have dreamed that the Cold War, apartheid, the Bamboo Curtain and the wall between North and South Korea would all be removed so that God's Kingdom could forcefully advance the message of salvation and discipleship to people forbidden from hearing the Scriptures? The middle of a miracle may be where people appreciate it the least. . . . Let us see how uniquely and powerfully God has moved in only 21 years and how he continues the miracle in his modern-day movement. Let us see and "be utterly amazed."

ICOC leaders consistently stressed the exclusive nature of racial/ethnic diversity in their church. Gordon Ferguson, a longtime white leader and church author, writes: "I've never before experienced relationships like these [discipling relationships among diverse members], nor have I seen them. Politics has not produced them; education has not; sports has not; and the arts have not. Divisions in our society are as dramatic as ever. Only Jesus in the heart of disciples, who share his love for God and for the lost, can cultivate such love for one another" (Ferguson 1997, 85). McKean describes his movement as unique: "In the L.A. Church, we have 17% Asian, 18% Black, 41% Caucasian, 23% Latin and 1% Native American. . . . Most denominational congregations are predominantly one skin color or one nationality or one economic group. . . . Other 'churches' often only pay lip service to the multiracial, international communion of believers" (1994). In fact, most Christian congregations in the United States are composed of individuals from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds (Chaves 1998; Emerson and Smith 2000). The City COC (and ICOC movement) were clearly multiracial/ethnic. My visual estimate of the racial and ethnic makeup of the City COC congregation

was 55 percent white, 25 percent black, 17 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent Asian and Native American. McKean and other leaders used this multiracial/ethnic quality to argue that their movement was divinely inspired and “radical.”

An important chapter in the movement’s creation story was the genesis of McKean’s version of Christian discipleship, ICOC’s “radical,” as he and members called it, Christian counseling and evangelical system. McKean’s interpretation of Christian discipleship was a group feature that set the movement apart from the Mainline Churches of Christ and other evangelical Christian movements. It was an institutional structure that members and leaders credited as providing both exceptional relational counseling for church members and producing church growth. In RR, McKean recounts the generation of his ICOC discipling structure:

In the Crossroads movement, one another Christianity was expressed in a buddy system called “prayer partners,” where each person chose their own “buddy.” . . . Building on this concept, I came up with “discipleship partners.” In these relationships, the evangelists, elders and women’s counselors after discussion and prayer, arranged for an older, stronger Christian to give direction to each of the younger, weaker ones. They were to meet weekly, but have daily contact (Hebrews 3:12, 13). (Obviously, the younger discipleship partner also gives input and advice to the stronger disciple, as in any healthy relationship.) We also saw in Scripture that Jesus primarily trained men through groups—the apostles and the 72 (Luke 10:1–24). Therefore, we began discipleship groups for every Christian. (This group would usually meet at the midweek service.)

McKean argues that these discipling relationships would build healthy selves, healthy families, and church community, but that they would also serve to fashion a prodigious evangelical team. Discipling was the most efficient way to achieve the movement’s stated goal: “to evangelize the world in one generation.” McKean proclaims, “Through this approach, each Christian could naturally build relationships with other Christians in addition to their discipleship partner,” and that “Studies were done by several church growth experts that proved the greater the number of relationships in the church a new Christian possesses is directly propor-

tional to his likelihood of remaining faithful to God” (McKean RR). McKean further legitimates ICOC discipling growth and sacred status by invoking the status of an outside church growth and missiological expert: “Dr. Donald McGavran (considered the father of church growth by the denominational world) told me many years ago, ‘You are the only church with a plan to plant churches in every nation of the world in one generation.’ Once more, I believe this marks us as God’s true and only modern movement” (McKean RR II).

McKean constructs his thriving discipling movement using language like “revolutionary” and “radical.” To emphasize the revolutionary zeal of the movement he presents himself as a descendant of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, he identifies with leaders of the civil rights movement, and he draws on images of the movement as divinely placed to witness and take advantage of the end of apartheid and other significant worldly events. Members, too, constantly used the words “radical” and “revolutionary” to describe their movement. Formal live performances of this revolutionary character were made through music and theatrical presentations.

I attended a large outdoor regional gathering early in my field studies. Approximately two thousand members had gathered for services and to see the Radicals, the movement’s own Christian rock band, film their new music video. Video cameras on scaffolding swung in and out of view, and a large blue stage backdrop with a map of the world read, in large red letters, “Radical Love, it’s a love that’s heard around the world.” The theme song was titled “It’s a Radical Love.” The song began with images of evangelical revolution and the birth of Christ. Instead of a little town in Bethlehem, it began “in a little town called Lexington, in 1985.” “It’s a Radical Love” then told a story of phenomenal ICOC movement growth ending with the lyric “Now fifteen years have come and gone and see what God has done.” In the middle of the song, Kip McKean’s nephew (the son of Randy McKean, another charismatic ICOC lead evangelist), who appeared to be approximately twelve, took a position downstage left. He was dressed in an American revolutionary soldier’s costume, a drum was strapped around his shoulder, and a bloodied bandage was pasted across his forehead. He played a marching beat as the song continued, “It’s a radical love that we share, a love that’s heard around the world, shows how much God cares.” The crowd cheered,

teenagers sang along in front waving arms high in the air. All joined in singing. A revolutionary fervor filled the large outdoor concert stadium, the energy documented in a music video that could be distributed throughout the “Kingdom of God.”

The ICOC movement used various contemporary media venues to convey growth and sacralize McKean’s vision.² Religion and media are closely interrelated in our contemporary setting; people find and express religion through technology daily. Brenda Brasher (2001, 6), for example, reports that she found “more than one million on-line religion websites in operation.” The ICOC had an active website as well that highlighted church growth and movement goals. ICOC twenty-first-century technological productions of church birth and growth are not surprising; many religious groups make much use of these powerful evangelical and commitment tools. Video, film, on-line sites, music, and print have enormous potential for reaching great numbers of individuals. Successful media mobilization—the use of video, on-line promotion, and so on—is no doubt a key factor to the success of any social movement in our contemporary world.

Almost all religious communities and organizations use various forms of media in group rituals and presentations of beliefs and practices. They do so because print, film, video, television, and web images have the cultural power to legitimate religious worldview and beliefs, just as they have the power to convince people that a certain product is the best on the market, or that our cities and towns are dangerous places. As one of my major research participants told me, the ICOC switched from written newsletter publication form to the video KNN news program because the video was “more real.” Contemporary media forms (video, computer web, burgeoning evangelical publishing industry, music) are late twentieth-, early twenty-first-century evangelical tools of conversion and commitment that have incredible potential for the social production of reality. These contemporary forms are not just a new way of religious expression; they have “profound” meaning. As Jesús Martín-Barbero (1997, 109) argues, “Some churches have been able to transform radio and television into a new, fundamental ‘mediation’ for the religious experience. That is, the medium is not simply a physical amplification of the voice, but rather adds a quite new dimension to religious contact, religious celebration, and personal religious experience.” As we will see

throughout this ethnography, use of media served a crucial function in ICOC individual experience, religious identification, community solidarity, the promotion of the movement as exceptional and unique, and ultimately, in its downfall.

McKean and other movement leaders, as charismatic speakers and media-savvy evangelists, employed a wealth of cultural values, beliefs, ideals, and practices as they communicated their legend of unprecedented evangelical success. They framed organizational success through widely recognized narratives of victorious and justified revolution and social change. They told their story with vague, yet powerful, symbolic reference to familiar cultural stories of regimes falling, wars and walls crumbling: the persecution and persistence of first-century Christians, the American Revolution symbolizing freedom from British oppression in the eighteenth century, and twentieth-century victories over communism and racism worldwide. Their story was familiar. It was a story of good versus evil, of righteous resistance and revolution. The validity of their Christian revolution was supported with an organizational “discourse repertoire” that provided an ideological “frame,” an interpretive schematic that leaders and members drew from as they constructed discipling as sacred (Gamson 1992; Goffman 1974; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). The repertoire included, among many other values and practices detailed throughout this ethnography: a strong emphasis on biblical purpose, evangelical productivity, submission to church authority, family and heterosexual marriage as the building blocks of a good society, a therapeutic ethos as a driving force of healthy selves and relationships, and Christian free will and salvation.

THE GRAND MCKEAN evangelical mission, told through ICOC’s birth story and myth of exceptional success, was an essential and frequent organizational performance. Complementing this magnificent global vision of a church changing the world, and perhaps even more important to understanding conversion and group commitment, was the day-to-day depiction of the discipling movement as an intimate church family. Most members presented themselves and their fellow church members as friends, counselors, and family members. To be a member of the “Family of God,” meeting disciples’ needs in intimate and therapeutic ways, was paramount in members’ articulation of group experience. What did

it mean to live as members of this family that believed so strongly in McKean's vision, his creation story, his commitment to exceptional evangelical growth, and his unique system for healing and constructing family and obtaining salvation and grace? What exactly did local members see and experience in discipling's promises? What cultural problems and moral solutions drove McKean's vision and made sense to thousands of individuals dedicated to improving their selves and intimate relationships? To answer these questions, it is first important to confront the ideological breadth of the movement's discourse repertoire, and the resulting contradictions that built and ultimately helped break apart the unified movement.

DISCIPLING: COMMITMENT,
ACCOUNTABILITY, AND AUTHORITY

Early on I developed a series consisting of nine Bible studies on the "first principles" (Hebrews 6:1–3). The members of the church were called to memorize these studies and then teach others to become Christians. The most impacting was called "Discipleship" where, from my study of the Scripture, I taught was clear in Acts 11:26: *SAVED=CHRISTIAN=DISCIPLE*, simply meaning that you cannot be saved and you cannot be a true Christian without being a disciple also. I purposely developed this study to draw a sharp biblical distinction between the Lexington (later renamed Boston) Church of Christ and all other groups.

—Kip McKean, RR

ICOC group presentations of discipling resonated clearly with members' cultural "tool kits": the "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views" that they understood as significant for actions aimed at improving family relationships in our society (Swidler 1986, 273). Discipling's stress on enduring and extensive family commitment, accountability, and submission to discipline and authority made sense as essential components of intimate church kin relationships. To become part of this growing and highly committed church "family," an individual had to pledge to be a faithful disciple, adhering without reservation to the ideas and practices supporting McKean's discipling system.

The first step on the road to ICOC commitment was to complete an intensive Bible study series called the First Principles study. McKean and group leaders were clear on this order of conversion: "I taught that to be

baptized, you must first make a decision to be a disciple and then be baptized” (McKean RR). Potential converts engaged in this Bible study in primarily two-on-one sessions (two current members with one potential convert). I attempted the First Principles study twice during my time in the field. I was forthright about my interest in studying the Bible. I told members I wanted to learn about how they studied with people and why the Bible study series was so integral to becoming a disciple. We acknowledged that this would not be an easy task; they would proceed with the purpose of conversion, and I would participate with the aim of learning and a clear intent not to convert.³

My initial attempt was with Natalie, a married white woman in her late twenties with one child. Natalie’s husband took care of the congregation’s financial affairs and had the church office in his basement. I met Natalie during my first ICOC service where she introduced me to the group leaders who gave me permission to conduct field studies in their congregation. I spent a great deal of my participant observation time during my first year and half at services and events with Natalie by my side. When she moved to an ICOC region far away, I then came to know Pat, a married white woman with three children, who invited me to attend church events with her and volunteered to help with my research. My First Principles study with Natalie did not go very well. We had completed only a few of the studies when she voiced that it was too difficult for her to study the Bible with me if she knew my intent was only to learn more about how the study proceeds. Natalie felt that she could only continue if I had serious motivation to convert. I did not and felt uncomfortable as well. I found Natalie’s teaching approach harsh, my answers regarding my vision of God and sacred life created tension, not open debate and conversation.

My experience with Pat, on the other hand, was almost completely different. Our Bible studies were primarily an open exchange of ideas and beliefs. Pat’s approach to studying the Bible was much less rigid: she did not always follow the scripted study and was willing to engage in honest debate about images of God and the meaning of religious practice and faith. She was willing to listen to how I combined my background as a Presbyterian, a conservative Jew by choice, and a sociologist of religion. My meetings with Pat and Jill, another white married woman with two small children and the other member present to help Pat teach me, were

also part coffee klatch and child care (we all had our children with us, and they played together while we studied). Other members would drop by now and then to join in; on occasion, the study became an informal counseling (discipling) session for Jill.

My sessions with Pat and Jill, rather than ending purposefully as with Natalie, slowly faded without much acknowledgment. The moment at which my studies languished, however, is significant: the point in the First Principles study when I was asked to compose and share what ex-members have called a “sin list.” This was supposed to be a list of acts, instances in my life that I was most ashamed of, my biggest “sins.” Unlike Pat, Jill, and many of the other members with whom I spent time, I was not willing to reveal what I would consider my major life sins; to do so would have made me feel too vulnerable. I considered my most unfortunate life choices and circumstances private. Given the relaxed and conversational nature of our Bible studies, and probably the fact that she knew my ultimate purpose was to write a book about her church, Pat did not pressure me to detail my deepest regrets or “sins.” Some ex-members have argued that this ICOC “sin list” was “dangerous.” These lists of personal sins, they reported, would float around the top leadership in ICOC congregations and be used to make members feel guilty, essentially an invasive mechanism of social control. Social theorists have called attention to the ways in which confession has served as a powerful form of social control in various social institutions. One of the most prominent social theorists of the later half of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault (1978, 98), in his major work on the history of sexuality, draws attention to the production of power in “local centers” through the one-on-one relationships of “penitents,” and “confessors,” and their “directors of conscience.” Some former members reported that the leadership was “stuck on sin,” that even as disciples made progress in relationships and life problems, leaders persisted in demanding that members admit sinful thoughts and actions.

If you made it through the First Principles Bible study series, which highlighted a number of biblical scriptures presented as proof for McKean’s version of discipleship—for example, Matthew 28:19–20, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (NIV)—you would then be baptized in front of other members. Baptisms were generally

performed by your discipler, the member you had studied the Bible with, in a baptismal during services, in a river, a pool, or, as I heard from some, in a leader's Jacuzzi. Once you became a disciple you were then held accountable to living as an ICOC discipler and responsible for, among other things, bringing potential converts to church services with you and always "studying the Bible" with at least one potential convert. Thus, the verb phrase "to disciple" entailed proselytizing—the key, as clearly emphasized by McKean and other top leaders, to the movement's "awesome" growth.

Commitment to discipling had a rudimentary daily expectation in addition to proselytizing: the mandatory, formal interaction of members with their elder "prayer partners" or disciplers. Many members presented this mandatory nature of discipling as unique, echoing Jeremy's sentiment: "In normal life, I don't know of any kind of regular system in place where there is an expectation as to getting counseling." Discipling partners were of the same sex, came from similar life situations, and were assigned by leaders. As a participant observer (and potential convert), I suspect that leaders thought Pat, who was from a similar class, life course position, race, and gender, was a good match for me. Disciplers gave daily advice regarding relationship and life issues; such acts of counseling and advising were called discipling; thus discipling relationships were composed of both the disciplined and a discipler. Disciples were told to "confess all" to their disciplers, and leaders stressed often that confession was a key part of these counseling sessions. A clear commitment to voicing all concerns and sins to your discipler was presented as a necessary and nonnegotiable part of being a disciple. Members and leaders offered biblical legitimation for this mandatory confession in verses such as James 5:16: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Disciples were also directly committed to smaller discipleship groups (D-groups) composed of approximately three to four people. Members would meet regularly in these small groups and also weekly in their discipleship family groups (in the City COC congregation, approximately eleven members) of like individuals (e.g., members with children, singles, and young married adults). Married couples were also assigned formal "marriage disciplers," husband and wife teams who routinely counseled

and intervened in marriages (the subject of chapter 2 here). ICOC discipleship, to reiterate, having a discipler, being in a discipleship group (a D-group), and participating in a discipleship family group were not optional.

Discipling clearly supported hierarchies of position and knowledge, constantly reinforcing a church “family” with clearly defined distinctions between parental leaders and childlike followers (new converts were named “baby Christians”). “Older Christians,” those who had been members for several years, took on the role of spiritual parents responsible for “disciplining” and “guiding” younger members. Each congregation was led by a married evangelist couple and had several paid ministerial leadership positions (such as in the family ministry and singles ministry). The wife of the lead evangelist couple was the head of the congregation’s “women’s ministry,” a formal structure set up by McKean and other core leaders in the early years. Congregations also had nonpaid ministerial leadership positions such as those in charge of the teen and youth ministries, and a number of “shepherding couples,” married couples who did a great deal of the congregation’s family and marriage counseling. Members and official church publications insisted that all leaders were disciplined by “older Christians” (meaning number of years as an ICOC disciple). Even Kip McKean and other top leaders in the organization talked about being disciplined by one another.

Formal group presentations and individual member and ex-member narratives made clear that submission and accountability to the authority of disciplers and church leaders was key if you were to reap the benefits of discipling as a healing system. Gordon Ferguson, longtime ICOC author and charismatic evangelist, in his DPI text, *Discipling: God’s Plan to Train and Transform His People*, draws from cultural values and ideals of relationship in family, work, and school to legitimate this authority: “There is really nothing here [in discipling] that is surprising. Can you imagine any business in the world without some form of accountability? Can you imagine any school without it, or any family? In areas outside of religion, accountability is absolutely expected” (Ferguson 1997, 102). Here, Ferguson presents commitment and accountability to the discipling system as no different from any other core social institution where you should maintain loyalty and accountability; submission to authority is just the way things are. Ferguson adds that authority is a necessary

ground for social life on biblical grounds: “God placed leadership in the church in order to lead his people to maturity and productivity (Ephesians 4:11–16)” (Ferguson 1997, 189). Furthermore, he notes that “God has designated authority in several areas, including the church. The broad list would be: 1. Government (Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17; 2. Masters (Employers)—Colossians 3:22–24; 1 Peter 2:18–20; 3. Husbands—Ephesians 5:22–25; 1 Peter 3:1–6; 4. Parents—Ephesians 6:1–3; 5. Church leaders—1 Thessalonians 5:12–13” (1997, 190).

Ferguson further describes the breakdown of disciplers’ authority and power in ways that resonated with members’ cultural tool kits—an understanding of the inevitability and necessity of authoritative relationships in various institutional worlds: “Relational authority occurs when a family member or trusted friend has some influence on our decisions. Knowledge authority is present when we allow people with training and experience to exercise the influence of their expertise. Positional authority is that exerted by a designated official, such as an officer in the military or a manager in the workplace” (Ferguson 1997, 189). In each of these social realms, submission is presented as a natural part of our social world, as a real and necessary part of family and other primary institutional relationships.

One way that a strong commitment to one’s discipler, D-group, and the discipling family group was routinely performed was in the frequent interaction and absorption of members in each other’s daily lives. Kip McKean and other church leaders explicitly called for members to be in “daily contact” (physical or phone) with formal discipling partners and to interact frequently with D-groups and discipling family groups (weekly Bible studies, prayer groups, and dinners). They were also held accountable to attending group worship services on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings with their entire church family. My observations also show that this frequent interaction took place on an informal basis as well; disciples in the family group and larger congregational network dropped by without notice several times while I was in members’ homes. Members were constantly on the phone with one another, and cared for each other’s children as needs arose. Members talked about this frequent informal church family network as a good thing; someone was always there to help out with household projects or help with a child care crisis.

Members and leaders named this frequent interaction and network construction as something that was missing in outside society and as a clear sign of commitment to the ICOC family of God. This extraordinary commitment to being present in one another's lives had strong cultural resonance for members in a society where loss of community, high geographic mobility, and families separated by great distances have been promoted by many social researchers, local governments, and media as threatening American democracy, family, and civic engagement (Fischer 1991; Putnam 2000). Despite the empirical reality of loss of community, social mobility, and family, the idea that community is an endangered species, and the world of cyberspace and television taking the place of much face-to-face interaction, is perceived by many as a very real social problem.⁴ ICOC's discipling community presented a contrary image, a vision of close church kin interacting and forming a reliable community of disciples that was no doubt very appealing.

Lisa's description of a typical week in her life was indicative of how almost all members and ex-members described their day-to-day experiences as members of the church community, a schedule that left limited time for non-church-related activities.⁵ Lisa emphasized that she had a "very busy" schedule and suggested that, to save time, we conduct our first interview at the bakery across from her office. She had to leave soon after we began because she and her husband needed to travel to a city one hour away to meet with ICOC youth counselors across their region to discuss how the teen ministries were going and "come up with new ideas for teens." Before Lisa rushed away, we scheduled another meeting at her home, and she answered one last question: "What's a typical week like in your life?" "Well," she took a deep breath and sighed, "it's full." She then went on to describe a week structured by her 8:30 to 4:30 job and her late afternoon, evening, and weekend church responsibilities and activities. Monday evenings were the one night that she and her husband either "sat down with their weekly calendars" or went out on a date or, quite frequently, met with their church marriage counselors. Tuesday after work she held a "study group" at the local library for several young women she disciplined in the teen ministries. Wednesday night she, along with three hundred other church members, attended midweek services held in either a high school auditorium or a local hotel conference room. Every other Thursday night she traveled to a city an hour away with her

husband and four other local youth counselors to attend the ICOC regional teen ministry leader meeting. On Thursday evenings that she was not out of town, she held an “extra study night” for her teen girls. Friday night she called “teen night,” when she, her husband, the other youth counselor couples, and a “big group of teens” did something “fun” like “bowling or a movie.” Saturday during the day she and her husband visited either her family, who were also ICOC members, or her husband’s family, whom Lisa described as strict Catholics who were “resistant” to their son and daughter-in-law’s active ICOC membership. Saturday evening Lisa and her husband went on “double” or “triple” dates with the teens and taught them “how to date” and “talk to each other.” On Sunday morning she and her husband then went to church services, which lasted for at least a couple of hours. Sunday evening, Lisa and her husband had a meeting with other “church team (ministry) leader groups.”

Ex-members validated the busy schedules and church responsibilities of an ICOC member. One ex-member writes in an apostate newsletter:

After church, I was expected to fellowship extensively, study the Bible, and attend the leadership meetings which very often last for 2–4 hours. . . . Monday, I was expected to spend time with the men in my bible study. . . . Tuesday, I had my Bible talk meetings, Wednesday, mid-week service, Thursday, I tried to disciple [church counseling] my own men as well as receive my own discipling. Friday, I was expected to go to Campus Devotional and on Saturday, I dated. Where in this schedule does one see enough time for me to be a full-time student, work 30 hours per week, study for school, study the Bible with people, and “share my faith” adequately? (*Right Side Up!* 3)

Ex-members also reported that time demands were especially heavy for local nonpaid female ministry staff, those with huge numbers of church families to oversee, paying jobs, and their own household and children to care for. Three such couples, two current City COC member couples and another former ICOC couple, reported the hefty time and emotional demands they felt as the unpaid congregation, what they called “mom and pop.”

The high contact/frequent interaction and group commitment was also validated in my field research by members’ need to label “free time.”

Members and ex-members recounted schedules that had only one or two (on rare occasions) days of what they called free time. Yet, even free time was somewhat monitored by the group. Leaders would recast members' free time as their "prayer quiet time with God" or a time to sit at a coffee shop and reach out to potential converts. Free time was certainly not talked about by leadership as time to cultivate friendships outside of the church or spend with family of origin (unless an evangelical aim was there). Free time was, most clearly, best used as time to display commitment to the church, to God, and to the evangelical mission of the ICOC.

Although members talked of their church community as "free counseling all the time," such mandatory group commitment rendered therapeutic assistance expensive. Membership came with high time demands as well as extensive monetary commitment (members and ex-members reported donating anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of their yearly income). Monthly church offerings and routine "special donations" were collected at services—not in a plate passed through the pew as is the case in many congregations, but gathered in D-groups that met after the service so that D-group leaders could keep track of offerings. I sat in on a couple of these D-group offering circles, feeling slightly guilty that everyone else was giving their monthly check and I gave nothing (although I did donate a small amount to the "benevolent" wing of the church, HOPE International, on a couple of occasions). The social control this monitored monthly church contribution interaction created was palpable; to not write a check would require explanation in front of others in your D-group.

Congregational leadership meetings were closed, and a careful accounting of church funds was not made available to members. While the group did publish "reports" (for example, of HOPE International's activities), they did not appear to give a detailed financial accounting of donations. Therefore, the fate of high member contributions was often the subject of in-group dissension and ex-member fodder. Some ex-members who had been local leaders told me that less than half the money that they were told was to go to missions did, and that they saw most of the funds go to the salaries of McKean and other top leaders in California. During one ex-member support group meeting, a former member argued that his congregations' donations went to support a local leader's art collection.

Reciprocity in therapeutic effort, serious submission to the authority of disciplers and church leaders, constant evangelical outreach, and monetary giving were not negotiable. To fail on any of these points, members and former members noted, meant the possibility of serious social sanctions: being “marked” and kicked out of the community, shunned by members, gossiped about, and/or being harshly “disciplined” by your discipler. But these costs of membership somehow made sense to many members; they seemed reasonable because they were cast in familiar discourses of institutional authority, therapeutic ethos, family commitment, biblical story, and community building—all beliefs and points of social legitimacy that signaled the development of moral selves and community. Still, the high level of commitment and accountability to fellow disciples and the ICOC movement could (and did for many) translate into the loss of individual choice and will. For many, the ICOC became a community where group members relied too much on each other, an undemocratic church body where ultimate power lay in the hands of lead evangelists and Kip McKean, who made unrealistic evangelical demands. Leaders and members had to work hard to keep this negative vision at bay.

As much as community accountability, commitment, submission to authority, and major monetary giving was a large part of ICOC’s discourse repertoire, so was a language of love, mutuality, expressivity, relationality, healthy interdependence, and utilitarian individualism. Such formal and informal presentations worked hard to push back dangerous “cult” labels hurled at the group by ex-members, psychologists, the media, and other church critics. Group discourse stressed the caring, loving, therapeutic side of discipling, a community where individual members were able to better themselves and relationships, and a church where individuals *chose* to engage in relationships of mutual healing and respect. Despite the mandatory and authoritative nature of discipling, members argued, in the words of one disciple, that “the church gives you freedom, security to be who you are and it also gives you incentive to want to change.”

HEALTHY SACRED SELVES: DISCIPLING AS A THERAPEUTIC CHOICE

Members named their discipling relationships and community as a superior, sacred, therapeutic choice that enabled positive change in self and relationships. Therapeutic discourse was pervasive in group, as was

the likening of church leaders and disciplers to medical and psychological “experts.” We live in a society where involvement in therapeutic relationships, turning to therapeutic experts to guide and heal intimate relationships, is seen as a positive and necessary step on the road to healing self and family. Engaging seriously in religio-therapeutic relationships resonated deeply then with members’ understanding of bettering themselves in a culture of the self (Bellah et al. 1985; Nolan 1998; Rieff 1966). Therapeutic language, practices, and beliefs were prominent in ICOC’s discourse repertoire. To understand such a religious commitment to therapeutic ethos, it is necessary first to explore the historical relationship between religion, medicine, and therapeutic culture.

American Protestantism provided seeds for our concentration on bettering the self. In particular, the brand of Christianity brought to Massachusetts in the seventeenth century by the Puritans supported a more individualistic form of Christianity than the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox institutions at the time in Europe. Grounded in Calvinist Reformation theology and influenced by Enlightenment emphasis on individualism, these early Puritans saw the elaborate ritual of the church as getting in the way of their relationship with God, and stressed a more intimate, individual experience of grace as most important. ICOC church members, like those early Puritans, were preoccupied with personal salvation and betterment, as well as the success of their own twentieth-century City on a Hill.

Expressions of individual sin and what to do about it are historically specific. In Puritan minister John Winthrop’s seventeenth-century world, association with the “devil” might result in harsh punishments like banishment, the loss of an ear, or even death. In the ICOC, those suffering from contemporary social relational ills like “marriage cancers” were assigned church counselors who proposed religio-therapeutic treatment. ICOC members’ and leaders’ frequent use of medical and therapeutic metaphor is predictable; religion has historically shaped and been shaped by medical and therapeutic approaches to morality, just as medical and therapeutic endeavors have shaped and been shaped by religious approaches to salvation and moral accountability.⁶ For example, a major prescription of modern-day therapeutic mental health intervention, *expressivity*, a practice whereby individuals are to express emotions, feelings, and thoughts in social relationships, can be seen as religious in origin.

The belief that emoting is a major step in healing has been a primary focus of much religious endeavor, seen clearly, for example, in the emotionality of the great evangelical awakenings in this country and the worship style of the Shakers. When hundreds of thousands of individuals in this country today sit in counselors' offices recalling, reflecting, and emoting, or sit in church basements and conference rooms in self-help and twelve-step meetings sharing their histories, hopes, and fears, they are, essentially, engaged in a practice that is not so different from age-old expressive religious healing rituals.

Both physical and emotional expression were encouraged in the ICOC discipling community. Expressivity was a major part of individual and group performance during ICOC events large and small: tearful confessions, physical expressions of love and caring like hugging and kissing. As a participant observer, I had to get used to this norm of physical expression in everyday worship and social interaction. Members I had met only a couple of times would greet me with a hug or kiss, or place an arm around my shoulder or waist as we sang in services. Members talked about discipling and its regular demand for expression of all feelings and issues as a method for bringing about wellness: from healing depression, to improving intimate relationships, to weight management. A major ICOC regional leader, Gordon Ferguson (1997, 37), in arguing the importance of the confession of feeling and emotions in discipling relationships, states that "confession and prayer brings healing. It may well improve physical health, for our spiritual condition definitely affects our bodies. . . . [D]on't wait until an illness and the presence of church leaders motivates you. Be in the habit of doing it, for surely confession is good for the soul."

Over the years, many religious leaders have incorporated medical scientific language and symbol as they work to legitimize their prescriptions for personal salvation. Late nineteenth-century metaphysical groups like Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science directly challenged the fast-rising authority of scientific medicine with assertions that doctors combat sickness in vain with "material remedies," and that a true path to healing sin and illness through God far surpassed regular doctors' efforts (Eddy 1875, viii). Today's priests, from mainstream denominational leaders to Scientology's L. Ron Hubbard to ICOC top leaders, all adapt religious conceptions of sin, illness, and health to medical paradigms and therapeutic language in

specific ways. For example, L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology borrows heavily from psychology and mental health frames, *Dianetics* hailed as the "modern science of mental health" (Hubbard 1950). Like the ICOC, Scientology promises individual betterment through intense one-on-one counseling with a Scientology "auditor," and proposes a "purification program" to right the wrongs of medicine and its coconspirators, a program that claims to literally push toxins from the body, sweating them out from pores so that individuals can experience sound mental and spiritual health (Hubbard 1990). The following message delivered by ICOC leaders exemplifies the medical model at work:⁷ "It's not society messing you up, it's that you have sin. . . . [I]f you deal with it, you'll be fine . . . but if you hide it . . . sin will *always come oozing out of your pores, it will be known* [my emphasis]." Like a viral infection ready to surface in an unwelcome bloom of pox, leaders underscored the danger of sin ignored. The cure? Members must throw themselves completely into McKean's disciplining system.

The ICOC was born in a social climate where the lines distinguishing "new priests" from "old priests" had blurred. ICOC leaders worked to legitimate disciplining as a valid therapeutic choice. Just as other religions must, they had to acknowledge the taken-for-granted status and power of medical and therapeutic professionals, those "new priests" who have risen to power in the past century (Rieff 1966; Zola 1972). Christopher Lasch (1977, 97) emphasizes the implicitly religious character of medical psychology as it rose to prominence in the twentieth century:

Having attained the status of a full-fledged social science, as the bolder members of the profession now insisted, psychiatry simultaneously claimed, as the modern successor to religion, to represent a comprehensive worldview—in the words of John Money, a scientific "philosophy of life" that replaced discredited beliefs, superstitions, "absolutist" orthodoxies, "ready-made philosophies." Psychiatrists now proposed not merely to treat patients but to change "cultural patterns" as Money put it—to spread the gospel of relativism, tolerance, personal growth, and psychic maturity.

A redefining of religion as a kind of psychotherapy resulted from this "rapprochement between religion and psychiatry." Those who supported

“existential and humanistic therapies,” notes Lasch (1977, 98), argued that theologians and religious thinkers such as “Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich, had redefined religion as a form of psychotherapy.” As the century progressed and the line between religion and psychotherapy blurred, sociologists introduced a number of conceptual categories to account for this confounding: for example, “spiritual groups,” “New Age,” “healing groups,” “human potential movements,” and “quasi-religions”—all representations of religio-therapeutic organizations, groups that incorporate both religious and therapeutic symbols and practices.

The ICOC gained momentum during the later decades of the twentieth century, a time when our society experienced a proliferation of mental health and psychological approaches to healing self and relationships, followed by a decline in financial support for such clinical relationships. The numbers of individuals involved in family and individual therapy grew significantly in the 1970s and early 1980s, as did the authority of therapeutic professionals and the number of doctorates in psychology (Herman 1995; Irvine 1999, 37). However, insurance cutbacks and the policies of HMOs at end of century have brought about a decline in clinical psychology and the advancement of support for pharmaceutical alternatives and limited clinical treatment periods. Participation in self-help groups, health and wellness movement alternatives, and quasi-religious healing groups have risen in number to fill the void (Irvine 1999; Philipson 1993; Wuthnow 1994).

ICOC leaders appropriated the discourse and status of psychiatric clergy, our cultural emphasis on health and wellness, and the acceptability of drug therapy for treating depression. The movement had some members who had been trained as medical and psychiatric professionals, who then combined this training with ICOC’s own brand of Christian counseling (as is true in many contemporary religious organizations).⁸ Disciples and church leaders spoke of sending disciples who they thought had “serious” problems to these individuals for “extra help.” City COC members talked of members who needed medications and were sent to a nearby city to see an ICOC “psychiatric nurse,” who they claimed was certified to write prescriptions for depression medication. One woman I came to know in the City COC community had some previous training in a clinical psychology program and saw her work in

the church with depressed women as a divinely sanctioned use for her professional counseling skills and knowledge. A few members and ex-members who served as disciplers and local ICOC marriage and family counselors reported, to what they said was the dismay of lead evangelists and top church leadership, that they sent members to professionals outside the church if they felt they had “severe problems.”

The ability of ICOC discipling to heal and create healthy sacred selves was legitimated through the rhetorical and practical employment of a pervasive interpersonal ideal of interaction in our therapeutic culture, relationality. Relationality is essentially a belief that individuals will express their needs, emotions, concerns, and issues to another individual or group of individuals who are then responsible for listening and taking into consideration others’ feelings, ideas, concerns, and needs as legitimate. The idea that the ICOC discipling family embodied this relational skill was used to signify that relationships within the church were therapeutically productive. This was a community portrayed by members and leaders as responsible for working things out and listening to one another, no “giving up.” Relationality was a core group ethic and practice.

Like widespread cultural assumptions about what family should be, disciples were depicted as church family who persisted in relationality. As one member told me, “If we don’t work it out, there’s a problem. It’s not, I don’t like it, I’m outta here. So, it’s a healthy environment. We listen to each other.” Another related this stick-to-itiveness to cultural assumptions of family: “I think what we have is a family. I think what the church is is a family. We go through bumps, we stick together, we believe in each other.” Ann Swidler (2001, 77) names this form of loving relationality as a late twentieth-, early twenty-first-century cultural expectation, a “new social skill and style” of social interaction, “accepting oneself and non-judgementally loving others.” The capacity to perform relationality has become deeply engrained as a cultural good.

In descriptions and performances of ICOC discipling, members and leaders worked hard to emulate this social skill and interactional style. Sherie delivered a half hour defense during one informal family group function, making sure I understood that discipling was based foremost in mutuality; it is a “give and take” relationship,” she insisted. Having an “open heart,” she claimed, was being able to tell your discipler if you disagreed with him or her and knowing that your discipler would “listen

faithfully” to your concerns. Longtime City COC member Ronny noted, “It is a privilege to have relationships where you don’t pay for counseling. I get it for free. I get to give it for free.” Discipling was presented by members as firmly grounded in an ethic of relationality. This relationality, as communicated to me by members, appeared to somewhat successfully mute the mandatory, authoritative demands that members, and especially formal movement discourse, stressed were important for discipling to function well. Relationality, as a rising and highly valued social skill and expectation, had the cultural weight to soften authority and submission.

Our present expectations of relationality are ubiquitous. Relationality, as a concept, has grown similar to diversity and multiculturalism, in that we expect individuals and organizations will, at least rhetorically, commit to it. In a very real sense, relationality then has become a widespread social value, an ethic of reciprocal expression and listening with respect that permeates places of business, religious institutions, educational institutions, and our judicial system (Nolan 1998). Perhaps most convincing that an expressive relationality has become a pervasive U.S. social value is the location of such discourse in political rhetoric, language that aims to persuade and impress a broad range of citizens. An example can be found in President Bush’s statement to reporters about the possibility of a war with Iraq: “Some very intelligent people are expressing their opinions about Saddam Hussein. . . . I listen very carefully to what they have to say. . . . [I]t’s a healthy debate for people to express their opinion” (Bumiller 2002). Former president Bill Clinton’s much referenced phrase “I feel your pain” and his touting of the “town meeting” approach to hearing citizens’ concerns are representative of this political approach. Present-day politicians, like new religious priests at the turn of the twenty-first century, understand very well that a commitment to relationality will resonate with their constituency.

Ann (the woman who, in the introduction, told the story of her young City COC sister dying) exemplifies this commitment to relationality and an expectation of interdependence in her understanding of how one is meant to progress, grow, and develop a healthy moral self through discipling relationships:

I think it’s [discipling] a combination of learning tools. You know, actually having the tools and then being very sensitive and allowing

other people to—it's more of a learning how to be interdependent. You know, working hard to develop yourself at the same time knowing that the people around you also influence how you do it. Develop yourself and utilizing what you know. As someone who is in the leadership role, it's a very hard thing because you constantly have to be looked at a certain level. Though what I've realized is I think people have helped me as much as I've helped myself in this sense.

Ann, in her paid church position with her husband as family ministry leaders, held herself to an ethic of relationality that necessitated interdependence, even though, at the same time, she routinely told members that they must submit to “older Christians” and follow disciplers' prescriptions.

The institution of family is an icon of relationality. Social scientists, medical and psychological professionals, government officials and politicians, and religious leaders have often held family up as a model of interdependence. They have promoted family as a primary social relationship where members are disciplined and socialized, where they persevere together through the good and the bad, and most especially, in the later half of the twentieth century, where they are to listen, express emotions, and be willing to seek counseling. Pat's husband, Tom, told me, “My image of family today is what I see in the church, where I have relationships where I am completely vulnerable with other people and they are completely vulnerable to me. To me, that's family—true friends who know each other totally.” Presenting the discipling community and practice as embodying relationality resonated with members' interpretation of cultural standards, what family should be and do for one another.

When ICOC potential converts presented themselves to members as coming from a “dysfunctional” or “broken home,” leaders and members responded by legitimating their claim to family victim status and promised that their church community would help them “express their pain,” and liberate their true Christian loving and forgiving selves. When members and potential converts who struggled in their marriages were told by ICOC leaders that trained church counselors could heal failing “cancerous” unions by encouraging good “listening” and “communication” in marriage, this made an impact. When ICOC leaders told potential converts that they must “tell all their feelings” to “older and wiser” Christians

in the church, the objectified goodness of the emotive act rang true. When ICOC leaders told potential converts not only that they must express their deepest feelings, but also that those listening were held accountable to taking their feelings, concerns, and issues as genuine and significant in their own right, a strong belief born of the emotive in our therapeutic culture, relationality, resonated with members' moral understandings of ultimate virtue. An understanding of the individual as ultimately responsible for bettering the self through relationality was at work as well.

Our therapeutic culture supports a curious dialectic: submission to therapeutic experts and interdependence alongside a model of individual power and choice. The idea that through therapeutic practice all individuals are capable of making "good" choices and constructing morally sound selves, relationships, and healthy bodies is at the forefront of discourse in many of our medical, state, educational, and religious rehabilitative institutional efforts. Such voluntarism, "the assumption that individuals create social ties by their free choices, has long been considered a central feature of American culture" (Swidler 2001, 136). Individual choice, motivation, and will has been a driving force and a core U.S. value for centuries, most specifically, a belief in utilitarian individualism, the expectation that all individuals, if they try hard enough, can pull themselves up and succeed. Freewill individualism is a strong and prevalent value in the contemporary U.S. evangelical subculture (Emerson and Smith 2000; Smith et al. 1998).

A Christian model of free will supports utilitarian individualism and group dependence. God gave humans the free will to choose good from evil, to make the most of their own lives, and to determine success and failure. On the other hand, the Christian tradition, and especially the evangelical tradition, supports the idea that individual change and personal salvation take place within a community of believers. When ICOC members and leaders stressed individual choice and free will as driving the success of the discipling system, they were tapping a wealth of Christian and widespread cultural beliefs and expectations, as well as speaking to individuals who had been deeply socialized to value individualism alongside collective achievement in various social institutions. Being a disciple and participating in the discipling system was presented as an individual religious and therapeutic group choice in a number of ways.

First, members and local leaders talked of making a *choice* to be healers. As Pat told me, “It’s rewarding to watch people change. God has used you as a vessel. We are ambassadors of God.” Making a decision to be a vessel for God and willfully bring about healing in others’ lives was a major topic for most of the City COC members I spoke with. Members and leaders also talked a great deal about accepting discipling as a well-thought-out therapeutic choice. In a society where therapy is often a fee for service endeavor, disciples were making a wise consumer choice among the abundance of self-help and wellness products and services in the religious and secular marketplace. Second, members also talked about enacting choice and individual will through discipling by pushing for change in their discipling partner and group assignments. Even though leadership claimed to have final say over who disciplined whom, members frequently told stories of successful assertive attempts to switch discipling partners and groups. Third, leadership promoted discipling as an individualized healing process, crafted to cater to the particular needs of each disciple. Gordon Ferguson (1997, 179) advised: “Our expectations in discipling should be . . . individualized. We are all born with different capacities and we have had different influences in our lives shaping those capacities. We have different needs and respond differently to events in our lives, to failures and corrections. Disciplers have to learn what each person he disciplines needs and figure out what motivates him best.” Ferguson (1997, 181) names this practice “situational discipling,” which allows “life situations to determine when we deal more heavily with character issues.” Members told stories of tailored discipling techniques, depictions of an individualized approach that worked to balance and justify membership in an authoritative, heavily dependent group as a valid therapeutic choice.

McKean, top movement leaders, local evangelists, group leaders, and individual disciples understood the power of therapeutic cultural values and skills like relationality, interdependence, and individual choice and will to resonate with members’ understandings of how they should proceed on journeys to better self and relationships. The resulting paradox of which they sought to make sense, gaining individual control through submission to authority, was a magnified version of a long-standing Christian and secular practice. Given the mandatory and extreme authoritative demands of McKean’s discipling system, leaders and members

had to engage in a constant balancing of an authoritative ethic with individual choice and relationality—and, as we shall see throughout this ethnography, many other familiar, magnified, and new contradictory approaches aimed at improving self and intimate relationships. In order to successfully legitimate discipling then, the organization and individual members had to work hard to create some measure of coherence in high cultural opposition.

CREATING COHESION IN CONTRADICTION

Creating an appearance of a uniform ICOC approach to family life and relationships in the face of multiple contradictions was constant organizational and individual work. How was discipling, in member and leader presentations, able to both embody and resolve contradictions? Part of the answer lies in the presentation of the discipling system as the ultimate way to control and manage ambiguities that already touched individuals' lives in profound ways—familiar cultural paradox cast as more manageable within the community.

Most members were socialized in a U.S. society that sustained various confusing cultural assumptions and expectations through a variety of institutional relationships. This is a culture where we talk of choosing to enter into our most intimate relationships, of freely creating marriage unions and family ties while at the same time believing deeply that we are powerless in the face of “love at first sight” and biological family links. This is a culture where utilitarian individualism, the idea that people can make the most of their resources, can pull themselves up and achieve high ends, exists alongside an ethic of relational interdependence, the reality of poverty, and vast social stratification. This is a culture where we are to submit to various forms of institutional authority and rule, yet never give up our individual voice and will. This is a country where we believe in the First Amendment's separation of church and state, yet where we sustain images of God and a Christian nation in many government rituals, language, and symbol. This is a culture where women are seen by many as strong, independent, capable of achieving any ends, yet a society where women are oft portrayed as highly emotional, unpredictable, natural caretakers of small children, and inherently domestic. This is a culture where men are thought of as breadwinners, responsible for taking care of families, where they are seen by many as

emotionally distant, driven by logic, and yet where they are held to an ideal of involved fatherhood and emotional connection with their children. Cultural paradox is relentless.

That culture sustains contradictory ideals is not a new anthropological or sociological puzzle. Classical social theorists saw individuals as living among contradictory social forces that produced ambivalent relationships between the individual and society. Max Weber, for example, illustrated how individuals in modern society are driven by rational systems that produce irrational consequences.⁹ Kai Erikson (1976, 249–250), expresses the force of contradictory cultural beliefs and orientation succinctly: “Any culture . . . can be visualized as a kind of gravitational field in which people are sometimes made more alike by the values they share in common but are sometimes set apart, differentiated, by contrary pulls built into the texture of that field. Every culture, then, is characterized by a number of continua, or ‘axes of variation.’” Erikson further suggests that we “can learn something about the cultural history of a people by watching the way they cope with the ambiguities built into their cultural terrain and by tracing the way they move along the axes thus formed.” He applies this to his investigation of the mountain culture and ethos of the people of Appalachia, where he locates a familiar cultural ambiguity “characterized by continuing tensions between a longing for individual freedom and a longing for conventional forms of authority, between a sense of assertion and a sense of resignation . . . above all, between a need for independence and a need for dependency” (250). ICOC discipling was, in so many ways, an exaggerated representation of this long-standing cultural tension.

Classical theorists, like Emile Durkheim (1893), suggested that the modern world, born from Enlightenment ideals and industrialization, was inevitably less coherent than more “traditional” societies—traditional in the sense that of a society where conceptions of family, gender, and labor relations are long established, primarily unchallenged, and religious power and authority provides most explanations for relationships in the natural and social world. Enlightenment ideals, scientific authority, and vast changes in the nature of work challenged traditional understandings and led to major shifts and changes in social relationships as industrialization took hold. Charles Lemert (1999, 26) notes ambiguity and contradiction as a condition of modernity: “Life in the modern world is a

split life. Modern persons are torn—by their conflicting passions, by the contradictory messages of the culture, by the improbable divorce between what is promised and what is actually given.” Some suggest that a “postmodern” self in U.S. society, individuals at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, are faced with an unprecedented number of cultural ambiguities, tensions, and continual change (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991): a unique condition resulting from the processes of a new world order, globalization, media, rising numbers of new immigrant populations, religious pluralism, and ever-changing competing morality and worldview. In this social environment, we draw from various social worlds to construct ourselves, to tell stories to ourselves and others that make sense (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991). The extent to which this historical period presents more ambiguity and cultural variation than any other remains an interesting and debatable sociological question (Hewitt 1989). Clearly premodern societies experienced upheaval and ambiguity that may have seemed, to those at the time, just as uncertain and confusing. What we can say with confidence is that we confront the “axes of variation” in our cultural terrain in historically particular ways. Our responses and approaches to cultural contradiction are shaped by particular social problems, contemporary religious and moral dilemmas, and the rising influence of powerful social institutions like the media, medicine, and our therapeutic culture.

Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) offers useful concepts to help us think about how, in a contemporary world that sustains multiple contradictory ideals, beliefs, and practices, individuals manage to make sense of and use culture. Culture, she stresses, does not necessarily push us to set and achieve particular goals; rather, use of culture has a much more dependent relationship on the “strategies of action” that social institutions make available and plausible to individuals in particular circumstances. In contemporary U.S. society, individuals are not faced with one complete and “settled” worldview. They are, as Geertz (1973, 94–98) suggested, involved in the production of “symbolic formations” that “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations”; but the life of the ordered existence produced by ritual and symbolic formulation is limited. Culture is always shifting, changing, used by individuals and organizations in particular ways to achieve certain goals.

Creating ordered lives can be confusing and chaotic as individuals

are faced with multiple methods of approach and contradictory goals. Social institutions like marriage, religion, and education provide institutional ideological frames and concrete practices that are capable of embracing and making sense of contradictions. For example, Swidler (2001) notes that through the institution of marriage we are both independent beings and deeply dependent on one another; we choose our mates freely, yet are prisoners to mythic romance and love at first sight. For some reason, we accept these contradictions and use cultural tools available to us (provided by institutions and related social structures) to make sense of the resulting ambiguities. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) articulated, institutional worlds provide “legitimations,” stories offered to represent why we pursue specific ends and behavior in particular ways, the reasons we are given over and over again when a paradox or deep contradiction presents. We are told that a marriage based on love is stronger if we maintain our individuality. We read and see films where characters perform scenarios of individuality through all-consuming romantic love. The news media offer a daily assortment of stories to help us make sense of puzzling current events and social relationships. We accept contradictions because they are cast in familiar stories. In fact, contradictory ideals can and do coexist all around us in ways that make sense, very simply because our most deeply felt social institutions provide legitimating stories and explanations that make these inconsistencies appear normal.

Those studying religious and spiritual therapeutic groups and individual journeys therein have found Swidler’s tool kit analogy and attention to culture in action extremely helpful (Bartkowski 2004; Emerson and Smith 2000; Gallagher 2003; Irvine 1999). Their use of her concepts for making sense of a religious landscape that, at a glance, seems fractured and complex is understandable. I turn here to Swidler’s work on culture in my analysis of the ICOC as well. Her concepts are extremely useful when looking at individuals who join groups that claim to help members make sense of disruptions and inconsistencies in their lives.

Swidler (2001) distinguishes between “settled” and “unsettled” lives: there are times in a person’s life when culture makes sense and seems to work. For example, cultural beliefs about what it means to be a woman or man, husband or wife, come together in a seemingly ordered and sound approach for many as they live their day-to-day lives. In settled lives, internalized cultural norms, beliefs, and practices make sense as

enacted in one's intimate relationships and wider social interaction. There are "unsettled" periods as well, periods when one's internalized beliefs and strategies of action seem unable to tackle the problems and inconsistencies that arise through social relationships: perhaps after divorce, as a career unfolds, when family members suffer illness, violence, or substance abuse, when a husband and wife both work long hours and yet still long for funds to be able to afford food and health insurance, and crave time with their children.

There is much evidence that people who join new religious and spiritual therapeutic movements are looking for ways to settle what they feel is an unsettled existence. For whatever reason, any previous therapeutic, religious, or other institutional structures have either failed them or not provided enough of the tools and approaches needed to bring the desired order to their lives. Wade Roof (1999, 9–10) argues that many of the changes in cultural norms and a rise in religious/spiritual therapeutic culture have created a "quest culture" post-World War II, "a search for certainty, but also the hope for a more authentic, intrinsically satisfying life." The conceptual religious marketplace of Berger's (1967) *Sacred Canopy* develops in Roof's contemporary study into a "spiritual marketplace," where individuals choose from a variety of organizational and ideological quest choices: religious, spiritual, self-help, environmentalist, New Age, feminist, men's liberationist. We are a nation where many are involved in an active search, searching from positions of disturbing life experiences. Irvine (1999, 88) notes in her study of the codependent self-help movement, Codependents Anonymous (CoDA), that members "come to CoDA during unsettled periods, when much of the structure has gone out of their lives." Lynn Davidman (1991) found that many of the women who came to the Jewish Orthodox Lubavitch community were in unsettled periods. R. Marie Griffith (1997) in her study of narratives of women in Aglow, an interdenominational evangelical women's prayer group, found a heavy emphasis in narratives on a desire to heal and make sense of family "dysfunction" and abuses. Robert Wuthnow's (1994) edited volume, *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion*, also provides evidence of the unsettled character of religio-therapeutic community participants' lives. He argues that part of the contribution of the rising number and popularity of small self-help-like groups in religious communities (1994, 353) is that they

provide spaces, relationships, and approaches for individuals who wish to enact life and relational change, to use faith and culture to “put their faith into practice.” For example, “Some groups encourage members to be better mothers or fathers, to have the patience, for example, to read a story to their son or daughter at bedtime, or the courage to set a better example. For others, putting faith into practice means staying sober . . . groups nurture practical applications by discussing them, by praying about them, by communicating information about needs and opportunities.” Indeed, many of the narratives and descriptions I collected during my time in the field were from folks who seemed intent on making sense of lives that did not seem ordered or fair—stories of lives trampled by family dissolution, estrangement, separation, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, divorce conflict, trying to balance work/family, loss of job, inability to make ends meet, and illness. Their ICOC success stories represented a wide variety of situations that were likely to provoke “unsettled” lives.

High boundary religious groups offer a distinct case in our spiritual/religious marketplace as they are extremely active in constructing and rendering absolute worldview and practices meant to order cultural chaos and produce settled lives (Berger 1967; Davidman 1991; Kanter 1972). I use the descriptive term “high boundary” here to represent a group with high levels of social and ideological encapsulation (Greil and Rudy 1984), groups where, as Kanter (1972, 52) suggests, members “have a clear sense of their own boundaries” and construct a “strong distinction between the inside and the outside.” The ICOC, as one such high boundary religious organization, worked hard to erect social and ideological walls, and to distinguish itself from secular society and other Christian churches while supporting cultural values, beliefs, and practices that these outside institutions embraced. They were actively committed to developing and presenting a novel Christian approach to making sense of life’s contradictions, rabid assemblers of culture for evangelical and therapeutic purpose.

Swidler (2001, 89) notes that “in unsettled lives . . . culture is more visible—indeed, because there appears to be ‘more’ culture—because people actively use culture to learn new ways of being.” Aggressive appropriation and use of culture in high boundary new religious movements render the complexities of culture even more visible. In the ICOC, disciplers and church leaders were presented as “ideological specialists”

(Swidler 2001, 65), institutional experts applying, prescribing, and sifting through various moral approaches, relational skills, and cultural beliefs as those they disciplined confronted various social experiences and relational challenges. The ICOC was an example of highly “intensified use of culture” to construct and make sense of lives (Swidler 2001, 90). They provided, or tried to provide, an institutional structure meant to make much use of culture and ideological specialists adept at balancing contradictions for members. These ideological specialists, in Pat’s words, were able to teach appropriate moral and relational skills because they were divinely inspired—they were “ambassadors of God.” Disciplers’ abilities to reconcile contradiction and embrace ambiguity were rendered sacred through individual member and formal church narratives as well as observations of disciplers at work in members’ daily lives.

Part of the perceived power of disciplers’ ability to resolve cultural ambiguity was in the observation of discipling itself. Individuals witnessed, as I did on several occasions, discipling relational trauma counseling. In the City COC congregation, the act of discipling was not bound by formal daily or weekly sessions with one’s discipler; discipling often happened informally, and sometimes among those who were not official discipling partners. Because the congregation was composed of a community of informal disciplers, if you were in emotional crisis you did not have to wait for your formal discipler to receive intervention. Members often spoke of this as an in-group therapeutic advantage. In action, disciplers were often present at the moment of crisis, holding hands, on the phone, present in some way to apply cultural meaning and action to a particular relational crisis. My field log observations of on-the-spot discipling are significant here:

A member breaks down during a late night Bible study because a child has left home and left the church. She is in tears and cannot continue with Bible study. One of the shepherding couples is present to take her away for a private counseling session. We watch from a distance as she is held, comforted, and counseled. Shepherding couple spends at least an hour with the woman.

During one Bible study a woman admits that she is consumed with feeling selfish in her marriage. Members join in to disciple her on the spot, helping her decide when she is being harmfully selfish and

when she is being a strong Christian woman and how she can tell the difference . . . when she should be submissive and when she should speak her mind.

A woman breaks down after viewing a KNN film about father/daughter relationships. She is having a difficult time resolving her relationship with her own father. Her discipler is present and embraces her as she sobs. We watch her leave with her discipler to go to a coffee shop for a discipling session.

Even though in two of these examples we were not privy to the exact advice given, those present did witness a clear performance of on-the-spot discipling. Members and ex-members report that this was certainly not always the case, that providing such constant help in figuring out how to approach a difficult moral/relational problem was a very difficult task and taxing on members and nonpaid staff leadership. No doubt this is true; however, the power was in the *performance*, the image that the community was able to create, if only for a limited number of years, of at-your-fingertips counseling and management of life's problems. Those who showed extreme emotion and vulnerability during church gatherings were not alone; they seemed to receive quick attention and in-depth therapeutic assistance. Members and ex-members also told many stories of on-the-spot discipling intervention, calling disciplers at all hours of the night and receiving help, which also fueled the group image of disciplers as always there to help members tackle difficult situations, to serve as ideological specialists.

Unlike many Christians, who may turn to a pastor or religious authority as an ideological specialist, ICOC members saw that they were susceptible to serious social sanctions if they did not confront their life situations using the individualized cultural prescriptions disciplers and leaders routinely and promptly assembled for them. In fact, they knew of members who were asked to leave the community and "marked," members who were shunned, gossiped about, and received harsh words from disciplers and leaders if they did not welcome and follow advice. Balancing these harsh mechanisms of social control with individual choice and will was a constant chore for members and leaders, but a necessary one if they were to construct discipling as a sound and extraordinarily successful therapeutic instrument for making sense of a number of cultural

contradictions. Relationality was the rhetorical ground that members returned to as they told stories of balancing authority, individual choice, and therapeutic ideals.

A great deal of this balancing work in the presentation and method of discipling took place through metaphors of the heart. This symbolic tool in the organizational repertoire provided a powerful cultural symbol that legitimated ambiguity. To benefit from discipling, members and leaders talked about having to have an “open heart,” a heart willing to shift from one moral stance to the next and see the goodness in disciplers’ prescriptions, a heart with the capacity to embody and make use of multiple ideals and practices. “Soft hearts,” “teachable hearts,” “open hearts,” “expressive hearts,” and “totally honest hearts” were featured in group discourse as safely giving in to and trusting in the authority of discipling relationships because these relationships were mediated through hearts (of fellow disciplers) that were committed to mutuality and relationality. During my time in the field, disciples referred many times to Jeremiah 29:11–13 as they told me of sitting down to study the Bible for the first time and having the Word (the Christian Bible) cut like a “knife” into their hearts.

Heart is a long-standing powerful cultural and biblical symbol, a long-standing rhetorical trademark of evangelical “born-again” Christians who speak of Christ changing their hearts upon conversion. Contemporary author John Eldredge’s (2003, 150) book, *Waking the Dead: The Glory of a Heart Fully Alive*, is just one example of the evangelical emphasis on heart as the site of a battle for soul: “We are at war. The war is against your heart, your glory. . . . Our hearts—they are the treasures hidden by darkness . . . held away in secret places like a hostage held for ransom. Prisoners of war.” For those members who came to the ICOC from the evangelical subculture, the heart as a symbol of contestation was familiar.

Harper’s Bible Dictionary (Achte-meier 1985, 377) names “heart” as “probably the most important anthropological word in the Hebrew scriptures, referring almost exclusively to the human heart (814 times; cf. ‘the heart of God,’ 26 times).” Biblically, the heart is seen as both the center of emotions and the “source of thought and reflection. . . . Isa. 6:10; Mark 7:21–13.” Furthermore, the “heart understands (Deut. 8:5; Isa. 42:25), provides wisdom to rule justly and wisely (1 Kings 3:12; 10:24),

and discerns good and evil (1 Kings 2:49).¹⁰ Biblically, the heart sustains a familiar cultural contradiction; the location of submission to God's authority and individual will. The heart is where True emotions are hidden and thus a point of revelation and salvation in Christianity.

If a member came to the ICOC from a primarily secular background, the heart was still a meaningful symbol. We hear, through various social institutions (e.g., media, family) that our hearts fall in love, our hearts drive hard choices, and that home is where the heart is. We may be asked when faced with an important decision, "What does your heart say?" We may be told to follow our hearts and to give our hearts to others, and that those we have loved and have died live on in our hearts. As a cultural symbol, hearts are malleable and capable of sustaining great joy and pain, the ultimate bed of life's most painful contradictions.

In painting self-portraits of autonomy and individuality in discipling relationships, members told me stories of having felt unable to follow their individual disciplers' advice for a particular reason, and so having an "open heart" meant that they needed to express their reservations truthfully. These recountings seemed proudly stated, performances that their individual moral compasses, their "hearts," were ultimately in charge. Pat and other members I interviewed stressed over and over again that it was "important and biblically right for Christians to question disciplers and do what they feel is right in their hearts." "I, for instance," she insisted, "as Kay's discipler, would never want Kay to do something that bothered Kay." Another member insisted that he took what disciplers told him and "went off" and figured out for himself, in his own "heart," what he should do.

To balance authoritative edicts with individual choice and relationality, leaders worked hard rhetorically to soften discipling's mandatory submissive quality. For example, Kip McKean (1992, 8), lightens "positional" authority (to use Gordon Ferguson's term) of disciplers by qualifying the discipling relationship as mutual, as each disciple "listening" and helping the other: "Obviously, the younger discipleship partner also gives input and advice to the stronger disciple, as in any healthy relationship." Ferguson (1997, 191) tells disciples that "obey" really means to "be persuaded," which implies that an individual who goes along with a discipler's advice is not doing what she/he is told, but rather making a "decision" (a personal *choice*) to follow advice: "The word

‘authority’ in the NIV (New International Version) is not in the Greek, so the literal translation would be ‘obey and submit to them’ (as leaders). The word ‘obey’ is from the Greek *peitho*, and the literal meaning is ‘be persuaded.’”

Another rhetorical method for balancing contradictions when the scales tipped too dangerously on the side of submission to authority and loss of personal freedom was formal apologetic gesture. Leaders “apologized” as a display of relationality, a performance of listening well to fellow disciples and taking member criticisms and concerns seriously. Al Baird, a longtime powerful ICOC church leader, voiced regret in an attempt to soften images of the ICOC as an authoritative organization:

I wrote a series of articles published in the Boston Bulletin (from September 6 through October 18, 1987) about authority and submission. In retrospect I wish that I had taken more time in prayer and consideration on the subject because the wrong emphasis was given for discipling relationships. There was too much emphasis put on authority and too little emphasis on motivating out of love for God and persuasion from a “What would Jesus do?” approach. This allowed some insecure leaders to say, “Do it because I tell you to, and don’t question me about it.” The Bible teaches that authority is from God and therefore is good, but it can be abused and misused. When a person has to appeal to the use of his authority to accomplish God’s purposes, he has usually lost the battle.” (www.icoc.org, “A Look at Authority,” posted 9/20/1999)

Baird’s depiction of his own wrongheaded advice did little to undermine the healing power of discipling; if authority were practiced properly, he argues, disciplers would not abuse it. But his willingness to admit wrong in placing undue emphasis on authority fueled the idea that ICOC leaders and disciplers were able and ready to admit fault, thus giving the impression that ICOC’s top leadership were not bullies, but a group of leaders with “open hearts” willing to own mistakes and apologize. Apologizing, as a social skill, is a cultural expectation, a familiar salve in our therapeutic nation; politicians, clergy, and government officials have apologized for slavery, unethical medical testing of racial minorities and national service folks, lies and sex in the Oval Office, priestly pedophilia . . . the list could go on. In each case the expectation

has been that the apology represented some genuine regret on the part of those who had abused power.

Anti-group rhetoric posed a particular balancing challenge. Ex-members presented the mandatory nature of counseling as infringing on individual rights, questioned the ability of the organization to provide such “awesome” counselors given the lack of formal training for disciples and church leaders, and, along with other outside critics, many labeled the group a dangerous “cult.” Leaders frequently confronted readily accessible ex-member web-based rhetoric, what they called “spiritual pornography.” They argued on-line, in the pulpit, and in DPI publications that discipling did not take away individuals’ free will but promoted relationality by engaging cult discourse head-on. In Ferguson’s discipling book, leader Thomas A. Jones writes: “People [in the ICOC] are specifically taught . . . that no one should ever do anything they are told to do if (1) it violates the word of God, or (2) it violates one’s conscience that is being trained by the word of God. This is a message you will not hear from the dangerous cults of our day and age” (Ferguson 1997, 246). Furthermore, he writes, “No true disciple wants to have any control over the person he is discipling . . . any efforts to weaken a person emotionally or physically are totally rejected. Being a disciple is all about making a clear minded and completely voluntary decision to follow Jesus Christ. Biblical discipleship is either completely from the heart or it is not real at all” (Ferguson 1997, 245–246).

Church leaders confronted ex-member and critic cult accusations head-on in services as well. During one local City COC Sunday morning service, a leader read from the book of Acts in the New Testament:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47, New International Version)

“In our society,” he told us, “this reads as how to spot a cult.” People in cults, he laughs, “help one another. We get our needs met, we are devoted to one another.” He qualified that God was not asking them to sell all their possessions, but to be there for each other, to be willing to sacrifice when others needed it. We don’t need to give up everything, he told us, but we need to “use our influence to help meet people’s needs.” Do what this passage says, he argued. “They were radical,” he told us, “they like being around each other and supporting each other, and if that’s what a cult is, then so be it!” His words brought applause from the congregation. He confronted the disputed value and character of discipling with a strong emphasis on relationality, using scriptural justification to soften the cult label in a bed of family commitment and therapeutic ethos. His direct use of “cult” accusations to legitimate the movement was common in formal group discourse.

“IT COVERS EVERY PART OF MY LIFE”

The City COC members I met and the ICOC members whose testimonies and narratives I read on-line and in movement publications came from a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds. They self-identified as former Catholics, Evangelicals, Baptists, Presbyterians, Muslims, and as members of other religious traditions; some identified as pre-movement secular humanists, atheists, and feminists. Regardless of their particular religious/spiritual/political experiences and efforts in our spiritual marketplace before identification as an ICOC disciple, they were all, already, deeply committed to a therapeutic ethos. They were primarily U.S. citizens grounded in democratic values and individualism, and surrounded by a therapeutic consumer culture that stressed individual choice and the primacy of bettering the self. Therefore, successfully balancing ICOC’s authoritative qualities and high time and monetary commitment with individual choice, will, and therapeutic ethos was essential to movement viability. The movement would likely not sustain membership if the scales tipped too heavily on the authority/commitment side.

Sustaining equilibrium was an essential and difficult organizational chore. Some sociologists argue that such high boundary groups, churches they name as “strict,” have the potential to elicit high member devotion, but are likely to lose membership if they demand too much

from members (Iannaccone 1994). This appears to be true for both ideological and practical demands. As I explore in the final chapter, failure to maintain a cohesive balance between individual will and submission to authority no doubt ultimately contributed to the downfall of the movement. For over twenty years, though, to a significant number of people, the balance held strong, and ICOC discipling was rendered a sound and exceptionally sacred therapeutic option. Many members believed that discipling would help them approach and conquer personal dilemmas and reach goals: discipling would help them understand when submission to authority was appropriate, to whom they should submit, when they should speak up, how to stand strong in individual choice, how to learn better communication skills, how to listen and express honestly, how to be a woman/man, when to discipline children, how to balance work and family, how to fulfill obligations to biological/family of origin, how to be a Christian in a world driven by science, medical knowledge, and expertise, and how to find time in busy lives to proselytize and turn “hearts” to God.

Ann, the woman in the introduction here who offered the story about her young church sister’s death and the community support surrounding the event, told me: “The church gives me security. It covers every part of my life, my marriage, my children. It trains me to be happy, gives values. It creates a real family bond. It makes me complete.” How were disciplers depicted as embodying and teaching such a thorough and cohesive approach to gender and family life? How did they become convincing ideological specialists who aided members in sifting through the inconsistencies of U.S. culture at the turn of the twenty-first century? What function did the telling of individual stories and collective group rituals of “awesome family” have in the life and death of the unified movement?

Through my observations and analysis of narratives of discipling’s healing power, disciplers emerge as successfully navigating messy cultural waters of gender and family ambiguity, holding members’ hands as they point them in one moral direction and then another, naming relational sins, and teaching and enacting relationality. In the next few chapters, I focus on how disciplers were talked about by members and leaders as managing and providing ideological coherence and relational skills for different aspects of members’ lives: marriage, biological/family of origin,

children, community, and church family relationships. Disciplers emerge in individual and group presentations as “covering every part of life,” of making members feel “complete” and settled through a performance of secure ideological and practical approach. At the same time, their stories, and the narratives of former members, make clear that full participation in ICOC’s discipling system introduced new relational dilemmas and ideological confusion.