Awesome Families

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Imagine a church, a community of Christians who claim they are able to help people establish “awesome” families, who make up a fellowship where married couples share their most intimate fears and desires and develop fantastic sexual relationships, where children respect and enthusiastically follow the Christian life path set by their parents, and where sons and daughters are reunited with estranged parents and siblings. Within this church, interracial/ethnic marriages and biracial/ethnic children are fully embraced and members from disparate backgrounds become “real family,” learning to love and care for each other in extraordinary ways. This is the picture of exceptional family that members of the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) claim to have and present to potential new members.

Member stories revolve around the restorative power of the church community to heal marriages on the brink of disaster. As one husband in the church relates: “There are many couples just here in our church of three hundred that have had their marriages saved because of the church. And there are countless testimonials that you can hear, worldwide.” He credits successful marriages to the church’s mandatory marriage counseling and community support, the DPI (ICOC’s publishing house, Discipleship Publications International) marriage guidebook, *Friends and Lovers: Marriage as God Designed It*, and yearly ICOC marriage boosters like “Marriage Enrichment Day.” In fact, before he and his wife joined the church, he claims they had one foot on the path to divorce. Other marriages healed in the church, he suggests, have been virtually resurrected:

I know of one couple in our church who were actually at the point of signing divorce papers. They were separated for a long time,
months, and I think the daughter got into the church and said, “You’ve got to see this,” and it just went from there. And today they are one of the, as a couple, they are one of the elders, one of the leaders in our church, they are called shepherding couples. . . . They were on their way out and there was no reconciliation planned and it all came back together—so that was an eleventh hour save [my emphasis] and that’s not that uncommon for that to happen.

Stories of members bringing biological families into the church and of all experiencing intense healing in their relationships with one another are also prevalent. Movies and videos produced by the church depict biological families reunited after destructive and dysfunctional family histories: families coming together in loving, caring ways as church members help them deal with past abuses resulting from alcoholism, conflicted divorce battles, and drug addiction. Turning biological kin into church kin seems a very real and desired ideal for most who have dedicated their lives to the ICOC’s Kingdom of God. Christa, a twenty-two-year-old Guatemalan immigrant, notes: “God was there for me. Six months after I became a disciple God put me in the path of my sister and she became a member. It’s awesome.” Even those who do not manage to convert biological family express that they will keep on trying and that the church can help them, in therapeutic ways, to better understand why their mothers, fathers, siblings, and children cannot “open their hearts to the church.” Members constantly praise and credit the church’s Christian counseling structure for helping them to learn to forgive biological family members and to develop their own “awesome families” in the church community.

Imagine now, this very same healing community that most members describe as an awesome family portrayed as a “dangerous cult.” Who makes such claims about this healing group? Ex-members, former leaders, anti-cult groups, and many university officials who have banned the group from campuses because of their “deceptive recruiting techniques” and authoritarian structure (Barnett 1989; Bauer 1994; Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996; Paulson 2001; Rodgers-Melnick 1996). Robert Watts Thornburg at Boston University charges that the International Church of Christ “discourages new prospects from associating with nonmem-
College-age ex-members tell of being deprived of food and drink during all-night Bible studies, of being deceived into attending Bible study conversion sessions, of being “love bombed” and then psychologically “dumped,” and of being cut off from their families of origin. A concerned parent of a member writes: “It is puzzling to me that my daughter no longer shows any signs of emotion. She has no laughter, no tears, and no anger. . . . Before her recruitment Karen was very open and honest, but now she seems to have many secrets and hidden thoughts” (Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996, 179–180).

Ex-members frequently tell stories of betrayal by church family members and of the dissolution of loving relationships within church boundaries. Accounts of marriages threatened and undermined by ICOC members are the subject of many ex-member narratives. One ex-member writes of her experiences in the church:

Communication between Tom [husband] and me ceased. . . . In my eyes I was striving to rid my character of such things as deceit, prejudices, and unkindness, when in fact without my realizing it I had become arrogant and manipulative. . . . I was led to believe that the more difficult the trial, the more faithful and spiritual I was before God. . . . Many others [members] consistently tried to convince me that my husband was dangerous and had uncontrollable problems with his temper, and that the difficulties we were having would have occurred whether or not I had gotten involved with the church. (Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996, 97–98)

Another ex-member relates that upon joining the church in the early 1990s, she was counseled by members to break up with her boyfriend of two years because he did not want to become a disciple in the movement: “I left him. And I loved him. It was so heartless [her breaking up with him]. I mean without feeling. Just, no problem, I don’t care if I never see you again.”

Throwing away meaningful biological family relationships is also a frequent story of ex-members: many relate being coached by church members to “keep a distance” from fathers, mothers, and siblings, people whom “Satan” may be using as a medium to lure members from the
church community. Narratives from mothers and fathers of members communicate biological family separation: “For five months, from March until August, we didn’t see Karen [their daughter] . . . . She lived with a family who had been asked to help out in the San Francisco Church of Christ. . . . Karen slept on the sofa in the living room of the couple’s rented home” (Giambalvo and Rosedale 1996, 177).

These examples of the church destroying intimate and loving relationships are only two of thousands of ex-member stories shared on websites, in anti-ICOC literature, and within ex-member support groups. These stories echo anti-cult movement rhetoric; they depict a radical religious group tearing families apart, of psychological victimization and loss of self, the very antithesis of the powerful therapeutic church family most members describe.

How do we understand the true nature of experience and attraction to a religious group that some claim is constructing awesome families and others charge is destroying loving and intimate relationships? Eight years ago, I was presented with this question as one of my step-siblings became a member of the International Churches of Christ. My family expressed great loss as my brother became more and more involved in the church community and they learned of ICOC cult charges from anti-cult organizations, university chaplains, and the news media. At the same time, my brother told me he was finally happy, fulfilled, that he and his girlfriend (now wife) had learned how to appreciate, love, and respect one another. Indeed, my brother seemed to be a changed person, but not in the zombielike way anti-cult rhetoric portrayed. Rather, he had tackled and overcome many personal issues that previously kept him from excelling in school, career, and relationships. As his life became filled with church activities and he grew closer and closer to his religious family, my parents feared for him and tried to find out as much information as they could about the ICOC. As a family member, I wanted to find a way for my brother and my parents to come to understand one another. As a sociologist of religion and family, my sociological imagination was stirred.

The puzzle ICOC members and ex-members presented—this picture of an ideal family community versus a dangerous and destructive one—is a sociological puzzle faced many times. How do we come to understand why individuals join religious groups that seem a direct affront
to deeply held social values? How do we make sense of those who followed John Humphrey Noyes to the Oneida socialist Christian commune of the nineteenth century? How did Noyes’s followers come to renounce monogamous heterosexual marriage and embrace a communal marriage arrangement that forbade romantic love? How do we understand the experience of hundreds of individuals who joined Jim Jones’s People’s Temple, giving up all their possessions to the community and ultimately participating in a mass suicide in Guyana in 1978? How do we understand the experience of those who joined the Family, or Children of God, in the 1960s, a movement widely criticized for its “sexual ministry” and sex sharing among adult members? Members of each of these groups described relational and spiritual experiences with their religious communities as deeply fulfilling; at the same time, others vilified group leaders and chastised members for deviant actions, beliefs, and submission to charismatic leaders and hierarchical, authoritative structures.

As sociologists have puzzled about how individuals come to join “extreme” religious groups, they have argued that part of the answer lies in the failure of dominant institutions, such as the family, to provide clear direction and answer individuals’ needs. Solutions to this dilemma of understanding extreme religious experience are inevitably shaped then by social structure viewed in historical context. For example, the radical shifting of gender and family ideology ushered in by industrialization in the late nineteenth century gave Oneida group members reason to follow Noyes, just as the particular challenges to gender and sexual norms that rose from the countercultural movement of the 1960s shaped those who joined the Family. Those who followed Jim Jones were largely a group of socially disadvantaged individuals who had suffered years of extreme financial and relational consequences from living in a racialized society. The answer to the ICOC puzzle lies as well in dominant social institutions, paradoxes of gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic conditions. To understand why so many were attracted to the ICOC, we must look at the historically particular ways social institutions like the family, medicine, media, sports, religion, and therapeutic culture have come together at the turn of the twenty-first century. Their points of convergence hold the answer to the ICOC “cult” versus “awesome family” paradox.

This book is the story of the attraction of ICOC’s therapeutic promise to heal, fortify, and construct kin in today’s religious and spiritual
marketplace: an ethnographic account of how a historically particular mixture of therapeutic ethos and practice, religious doctrine, and marriage and family ideology appealed to the over one hundred thousand individuals worldwide baptized into the ICOC since its formal founding in 1979 in Lexington, Massachusetts. It is also about the movement’s high dropout rate and demise, exploring why this fast-growing international movement lost so many members along the way and ultimately fell apart in 2003–2004. In particular, “awesome families” is the vision of church community I heard while conducting fieldwork over several years (1995–2000), in a three-hundred-member New England congregation of the ICOC, the City Church of Christ (City COC).

When I first became interested in exploring the paradox of ICOC membership, I knew that to get any truthful picture of the movement and to confront the puzzle of destructive cult versus awesome family, I would need to collect data from a wide range of sources. I needed to listen carefully to the experiences and voices of members, former members, and outside critics (Beckford 1985; Richardson, Balch, and Melton 1993). I showed up one Sunday morning for the City COC services and asked leaders if I could spend time in their church observing and talking to members. I told them that I wanted to learn more about people’s experiences in their church. They agreed. I attended over sixty City COC and ICOC regional group events and numerous in-home family group gatherings. During one year, I spent at least one day every other week attending a one-on-one, sometimes two-on-one, Bible study series in a member’s home. I also interviewed formally and informally over fifty City COC members and several ICOC members from congregations across the country. These interviews took approximately ninety minutes, although many were greatly enhanced through informal conversation as I talked at length with some members over the years during City COC functions. To obtain a more balanced qualitative picture, I formally interviewed nine former members of the movement and attended an ex-member support group. I routinely monitored member and ex-member websites and analyzed more than forty ex-member testimonies from websites and ex-member and anti-cult literature. I also analyzed texts published by Discipleship Publications International (DPI), the movement’s publishing house, and during my time in the field watched six Kingdom News Network (KNN) productions, ICOC’s video/film
company. In addition, I transcribed and analyzed fifteen audiotaped sermons and testimonies from leaders across the country. As the movement began to fall apart in 2003–2004, I continued to pay careful attention to the on-line ICOC-related websites, spoke several times with a City COC member whom I had grown close to, and conducted two formal and three informal interviews with members from different congregations across the United States.

My ethnographic story and analysis is based on careful and repeated review of each of these data sources for common themes, which informed coding categories that I then used to analyze data systematically (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Without exception, family rose to the forefront as a most prominent theme: healing families, destroying families, creating families, and dismantling families were the focus of numerous individual narratives, group rhetoric, and day-to-day social interaction.

A Portrait of “Awesome Families”

Ann, a thirty-five-year-old biracial woman (mother black, father white) and mother of four, and her husband Bob, a thirty-four-year-old African American former computer programmer, were paid church leaders in charge of City COC’s Families Ministries. Sitting in Ann’s living room, my eight-month-old daughter asleep in a car seat beside me and her seven-month-old daughter wide awake and smiling in Ann’s arms, I asked her what was the first thing that came to mind when I said the word “family.” Ann paused for a brief moment, took a deep breath, and then related a tragic loss the City COC community had recently experienced; a teenager had just died from an advanced stage of cancer only months after diagnosis. Ann’s description of the events surrounding her young “church sister’s” death exemplifies the way most members talked about their church relationships:

Without God, there’s no real family. Her family [biological] wasn’t enough . . . to get her through that time. What really moved her family [biological] was the family [church family] that she had around her. On her casket, at the end of the casket . . . have you ever seen at the end of the casket they put a bouquet of flowers? Well, she had a living grandmother and grandfather and if the mom doesn’t put the flowers there then the grandparents would, or you know,
a godparent or aunts or uncles or whatever. So her mom decided, “I just want to give her a rose,” and “I want it to be in her hand.” So then the space [for the flowers on the casket] was left open and the shepherding couple in the church are very close to the family and have become like a substitute grandparent couple, and so they asked if “you [biological grandparents] would mind if we put the flowers at the end of the casket.” And the grandparents were like, yeah, because you were the grandparents. You were there. You filled that spot in her life where they weren’t able to. . . . She was so needy of that . . . so needy of a mom and a dad figure that were together because her mom was a single mom and just to see that role fulfilled. That’s what God’s family does. . . .

It’s hard, in breathing and dying and all of that . . . through the ups and downs in the hospital. . . . She really turned that hospital upside down. . . . I don’t know if you heard about it but they are changing the policy at the hospital because of her and the way she died, the choices she made. All the people [church members] that were in her room, who sang to her when she died, and we sang to her all day long and then we took a break and then at the very end we sang again all of her favorite songs. She had told the doctors that morning, “I’m doing it [dying] my way. I’m doing it my way. This is the way I know God wants me to do it and I know it’s an important hospital policy but I have to do it my way because this is what God wants me to do.” That’s an eighteen-year-old girl.

You know, where so many people have come from broken homes, I mean who do we know that doesn’t come from a broken home? And God’s family fills that all in. You know, the pieces that are empty single parents, where there’s a need for grandparents or in a marriage . . . that’s what the family [church] does and it’s like the real [her emphasis] family. Because I know family, everybody says I come from a family, but it’s different to have a real [her emphasis] family, you know.

Ann’s story of her young church sister’s hospital experience presents an image of her church family as both soothing and challenging the medicalization of death: in her narrative, a heroic City COC family stepped
in, broke prevailing institutional rules and regulations, and succeeded in returning a lonely and frightening medical experience into a family affair. Her “real” family soothed and healed in the face of death in a way that medical professionals and biological families could not.

Jeremy, a thirty-five-year-old white married electrician, told a similar story of community comfort in mourning. We sat in his wooded backyard at a picnic table while his wife, Alicia, cleaned the kitchen, waving to us periodically through the window over her kitchen sink. Jeremy confessed he was nervous about the interview. An hour passed and he said, “This isn’t so bad.” Soon after, this self-described “Mr. Spock” personality (a reference to the emotionless Vulcan character in the *Star Trek* television series) was in tears remembering a dear church “brother” who had recently died:

> We had a brother of ours die very suddenly around Christmastime. Boy, it was . . . *(he cries)* . . . he just turned forty a week prior. And he and I were discipling partners for a while, he and his wife. He has two kids. He came to our house, he and his family came to our house for dinner the night before it happened. So we were very grateful that we had the opportunity to really be with one another. Whenever I talk about it, I get a little choked up. But afterwards, he had a big family, a huge [biological] family, and one of his sisters volunteered her house as the reception place, and of course we had a lot of people to feed at that point so there was no problem. . . . The turnout, the support for that [from City COC members] was enormous. It was mind-boggling. I mean it boggled my mind and I’m sure it boggled the minds of the family members of John [the deceased] who were not disciples [church members] because, well just getting everything accomplished. . . . And the support doesn’t stop there, we are still in her [the wife of the deceased] life.

Jeremy, like Ann, presented the involvement of his church family as extraordinary for a religious community today; he was taken aback by the closeness and caring that he understood as being absent in other congregations.

All members told stories of how church brothers and sisters filled “missing spaces,” expanses created by what they bemoaned as the decay of truly intimate and caring familial relationships in outside society, physical
and emotional distance resulting from geographic separation, widespread
divorce, and a general dysfunction in secular family life. Jeremy said that
before they joined the church he and his wife did not communicate well,
that he often withdrew in silence when she confronted him with her
concerns in what they both described as a verbally abusive manner. As his
wife Alicia, a thirty-year-old white elementary school teacher, described
it, their marriage was “stinkin’ big time” before they became church
family members.

Members also spoke frequently of how the church had helped heal
biological/family of origin relationships and how they hoped to, with
the help of their church community, create and sustain extraordinary
relationships with their children. They spoke of raising children who
would reach “awesome” life goals and remain faithful Christians in the
ICOC movement. Their confidence echoed that of the movement’s
leader and founder, Kip McKean, who held his children up as examples
of how influential church family counselors could be. In “Revolution
through Restoration II,” printed in a mid-1990s ICOC movement
newsletter, McKean, who lived in Los Angeles, offered a description of
his own family, an example of what God and the church could do:

It seems incredible, but I am now the father of a teenager, Olivia,
who turned 13 in May. My sons, Sean and Eric are 11 and 9
respectively. . . . I coached Eric’s basketball team and the Lord
blessed us with the championship and a 14–0 season. Eric averaged
18 points per game in the season and 25 points per game in the play-
offs as he led the league in scoring. Sean played point guard and was
selected in his league for the all-star basketball team the only fifth-
grader among sixth-graders. Also, he was just elected president of his
elementary school student council for next year. Olivia, student
council president of her elementary school last year, went on to
break the mile record at her junior high and tied the record for the
440-yard run. She also recently qualified for the national Miss Pre-
Teen Pageant. All three have made straight A’s this year and have
been active in a tennis academy where they have reached out to and
baptized their coach.

McKean presented his children as embodying a number of dearly held
gendered values: his boys not only played sports but also were competitive
and won; his daughter also excelled in sports, but at the same time she was considered beautiful enough to qualify for a national beauty pageant; all three achieved the highest marks in school—“straight A’s.” Several years later, I heard Elena McKean speak at a regional ICOC conference in New England to a crowd of over two thousand women. Dressed in a bright red business suit, she pointed out her daughter, Olivia, who continued to embody success as a young woman: she was a first semester freshman at Harvard University and a “nationally ranked tennis player,” her mother boasted. Even though this Ivy League attendance meant that her daughter lived four thousand miles away from Los Angeles, Elena said she felt Olivia was safe with “brothers and sisters” in the “Kingdom” in New England.

Kip and Elena McKean are an interethnic married couple. Elena is a light-skinned Latina born in Cuba. Kip is white, born in Indianapolis in 1954. The McKeans presented the church family that they and a small group of Christians gave birth to in the late 1970s as a “multiracial, international community of believers” (McKean 1994). City COC inter-racial/ethnic married couples spoke of their church community as providing them with tangible emotional supports—a kind of built-in biracial, interracial, and interethnic support group. Church members described family healing experiences as possible because they had access to “free counseling all the time.” Their counseling stories were of redemption from both sin and illness—of turning sinful, sick families into saved, healthy ones. The church family healing methods they spoke of were both religious and therapeutic—an alluring late twentieth-century combination of sacred family community, divine power, and therapeutic methods. Members painted portraits of families that could not be found anywhere else, families that could overcome the very worst of contemporary relational pitfalls.

Church Family Dysfunction—Another Portrait

Despite the general message of church family dysfunction that permeated most ex-member narratives, individual interviews I conducted with former members and my attendance at ex-member support groups revealed that many ex-members were ambivalent about the church. Most expressed that they felt they would always miss their “church brothers
and sisters.” One ex-member, a young white man, had tears in his eyes when speaking of a “black brother” whom he missed tremendously and who would not return his calls. Although these ex-members’ narratives were about disengaging from the group and frequently included descriptions of uncomfortable and contentious breakups with church members, when I asked former members during formal interviews what they missed most about being a member of the ICOC, they expressed regret at the loss of intimate relationships, church friends, the “brothers and sisters” that they had grown so close to and had come to trust with their deepest hopes, dreams, and intimate relationships. They seemed in mourning, grieving the loss of a family dream left unfulfilled. The same feeling of loss and sorrow filled many members’ reflections as the unified movement fell apart in 2003–2004.

In 2002, an ironic and significant incident of in-group family dysfunction developed. The group’s founder and charismatic leader, Kip McKean, amid rumors of top leadership quarrels, admitted that his “leadership in recent years” had damaged both the ICOC and his own nuclear family household (ICOC official website: 12/2002): “My most significant sin is arrogance—thinking I am always right, not listening to the counsel of my brothers, and not seeking discipling [church counseling] for my life, ministry and family.” He continued, “I have failed to build strong, mutually helpful relationships,” and he listed his character sins as “anger,” “arrogance,” and “lack of respect” for other church leaders. These character sins, he confessed, have surfaced in his “family as well.” So, he told the ICOC international community, “I have decided to resign.” His daughter, Olivia, the supposedly perfect ICOC “Kingdom Kid,” had discovered a life outside the church at Harvard and left the movement—a move that reflected badly on McKean, who had said more than once that if a child leaves the church, something is wrong with the parents. In the months after McKean’s resignation and admission of family and character flaws, various ICOC congregations across the globe expressed doubt about whether or not the particular mandatory religio-therapeutic system McKean and other top leaders gave birth to, discipling, was potentially detrimental to their development of awesome families. Several leaders of congregations across the world posted resignation letters on-line, naming the ICOC’s healing promise as failing and its practices as abusive. Leaders and members also came to seriously
question the organization’s exclusive claims: that to be saved one must be a practicing disciple in ICOC’s Kingdom of God. Some leaders came to post serious and damning criticisms on ICOC-related websites. As I write in 2004, the unified movement has essentially fallen.

In 2004, the members that I came to know well in the City COC congregation are working hard to preserve the character of real family that they so deeply treasured as they try to understand how they could have believed so deeply in a church community based on submission to hierarchy and authority. They are in the process of shaping a democratic and autonomous church body, as are many of the church family communities to which the ICOC movement gave birth. This book captures a point in time, a time when these individuals were powerfully drawn to the ICOC’s vision of Christian salvation and its quixotic promise of family and relational healing.

**Religion and Medical Therapeutic Culture**

Many have argued that our most dominant social institutions such as the family and religion, as well as our political, judicial, and educational systems, support and legitimate a therapeutic ethos (Rieff 1966; Bellah et al. 1985; Conrad and Schneider 1992; Nolan 1998; Lasch-Quinn 2001). How do we fix a dysfunctional family? We go to family counseling. How do we mend a troubled intimate sexual relationship or marriage? We go to couples’ counseling. How do we heal our addictions and illnesses? We pledge allegiance to twelve-step programs, we go to psychologists’ or psychiatrists’ offices, we log on to web-based self-help communities, and we watch therapeutic television programs like the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Dr. Phil*. How do we make sure that our places of work or volunteer organizations are healthy environments for workers? We conduct surveys so that employees and members can express their feelings, we hold encounter groups so that employees, managers, and group members can be heard “honestly” and “truthfully.” How do we deal with a young student who fidgets and cannot concentrate? We send the child to therapeutic “experts,” who perhaps then suggest medication, psychiatric drugs like Ritalin and Adderall. We even see our animals and pets through a therapeutic lens: we certify select dogs with a therapeutic stamp of healing proficiency, “therapy dogs” ready to comfort the bereaved and emotion-
ally disturbed. Expectations and legitimations of a therapeutic approach to self-improvement are everywhere today; so when ICOC members heard their church leaders promise to fix their “dysfunctional” families and heal their relational “cancers” by using various religio-therapeutic methods and practices, they were drawn to a familiar language and powerful cultural ethos that already pervaded their lives in late twentieth-century U.S. society.

Most valuable in ICOC’s presentation of a sacred healing community was how the movement would help members address particular social relational ills at the turn of the twenty-first century. Managing gendered selves was a prominent group theme: shaping ideal Christian fathers and husbands, mothers and wives, and church sisters and brothers. Family and gender disease inside members was sometimes presented as the residue of parents who, confused by feminism and fluctuating gender expectations, failed to communicate well with their children and teach them how to be a fulfilled woman or man in today’s society. Sometimes the sins ICOC therapists pledged to purge were family of origin acts of domestic violence—physical, sexual, and mental abuses perpetrated by parents that “ate away” at members and potential converts, inhibiting their ability to love others and themselves. The sins of parents and members that surfaced as illness and disease in ICOC discourse were specific to this historical period, an array of contemporary family problems and dilemmas that echoed conservative religious voices of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: “dysfunctional” families, “broken homes,” divorce, homosexuality, teen pregnancy, drug use, rising numbers of mothers entering the workforce, single motherhood, and “absent” fathers.

The ICOC, like other conservative Christian groups, strove to clarify gender in marriage and family, but their ideology was far from clear. Yet members were drawn to the extraordinary character of mandatory church marriage counseling that offered daily assistance and constant intervention in navigating complicated gender relationships. The ICOC promised resolution and management of several deeply felt cultural contradictions regarding families and kin through their “awesome” group family healing system. Ironically, as I come to argue in this ethnography, ICOC’s promise to clarify contradictions often resulted in a higher state of confusion—a dizzying condition resulting from explicitly authoritative
group practices and pressures to be extremely productive in bringing new converts to the Kingdom.

“Awesome Families”

One of the greatest benefits of doing ethnographic research in a tightly bound primary group like the City COC congregation is that it allows us to see particular kinds of micro-social relationships that would otherwise be difficult to capture. We hear and observe firsthand how members talk about and enact meaningful group experiences within potentially authoritarian structures. As other sociologists of religion have suggested (Beckford 1985), “deviant” religious groups like the ICOC, as they work to articulate radical new structures and ideas, bring into focus taken-for-granted routines and beliefs deeply embedded in our social structure—assumptions that may be otherwise difficult to see. The micro-social life I observed and recorded in this controversial movement indeed reveals a great deal about widespread social values and cultural practices at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. This ethnography demonstrates the pervasive power of therapeutic beliefs and practices, the dilemmas of contemporary family life, and the limits of organizations that attempt to offer a structural panacea for building intimate relationships.

Chapter 1, “Sacred Counsel: ‘Ambassadors for God,’” outlines ICOC’s creation story and formal movement presentation of group purpose, history, and healing effectiveness. I describe here the architecture of the movement’s controversial religio-therapeutic healing system. I explore the movement’s extreme focus on “building the Kingdom” and its attempts to maintain a community where members were called to enact both submission to authority and individual choice. The ICOC structure was explicitly authoritative, members were called to submit daily to leaders and assigned counselors, yet they claimed their system was exceptionally committed to maintaining individuality. This chapter explores how a therapeutic group discourse and language managed to sustain such extreme systematic contradictions. I use Ann Swidler’s (2001) work on “culture in action” to think about the creative ways that individual leaders and members pulled from family, religious, and therapeutic discourses to present and legitimate the ICOC system as an ideal and productive approach, despite such highly contradictory ideals and practices.
One of members’ most vocalized fears was of living in a contemporary divorce culture where they perceived heterosexual marriage as a dying social institution. Chapter 2, “An Unsinkable Raft in a Foreboding Divorce Culture,” illustrates members’ presentation of discipling as the most foolproof marriage counseling system available. Members expressed a strong belief that marriage discipling, being assigned a mandatory husband/wife counseling team, would produce marriages that lasted forever, great sex, romance, and better marital communication skills. I show how individual narratives of heroic “marriage saves,” shaped by ICOC’s formal rhetoric and script, came to legitimize the movement’s marriage counseling system. I also pay particular attention to the constant, inescapable social processes of gender construction, the particular challenges that contemporary society poses to these processes, and how ICOC disciplers were depicted as managing these constructions.

Chapter 3, “Collective Performances of Healing,” demonstrates how members’ stories of family healing were affirmed and made sacred through large regional ICOC events. This chapter takes us into the world of this movement’s high-energy ritual performances and, drawing from classical and contemporary social theory, analyzes the power and meaning of such large-scale theatrical religious events and the use of media in contemporary religions.

Chapter 4, “In with the Old and the New,” explores the various ways that discipling was talked about as a cure for “dysfunctional” families of origin. The idea that each member should be unwavering in his or her long-term commitment to evangelizing family members was prevalent. Underlying our culture’s most basic understandings of the concept of family and kin is the notion that a family is supposed to be able to take care of its members. Members were exceptionally attached to the idea that one day their biological family/family of origin would join them as new family members, brothers and sisters in the ICOC Kingdom of God. Implicit in this goal was the effort of members to heal relational wounds with their family and kin. I show how many members tried to reconcile their faith in ICOC’s healing power with the reality of continued estrangement and how widespread therapeutic practices and ideals fueled their presentation of selves as loyal biological/family of origin members.

Chapter 5, “Awesome Kids,” illustrates how the ICOC presented its discipling community as exceptionally able to help members raise their
children. Group stories presented the discipling community as able to keep children close to their parents and safe from a dangerous outside culture of “sex,” “drugs,” “suicide,” and “consumerism.” The ICOC community argued that as members of God’s modern-day movement, children would shed consumer identities, abstain from sex and drugs, engage in peacemaking among their peers, and develop lifelong positive and communicative relationships with their parents. I discuss how ICOC congregations maintained therapeutic (each teen was assigned a church counselor) teen and preteen youth groups, as well as a “Kingdom Kids” ministry (ICOC Sunday School/child ministries program). ICOC’s therapeutic model did a great deal to alleviate parental concerns. Like other evangelical parents today, ICOC parents talked about how the church enabled them to discipline and raise their children without outside intervention or appeals to secular “therapeutic experts.” Ironically, by pledging submission to an authoritative church counseling system intimately involved in their children’s lives, they potentially gave up a great deal of parental control and involvement.

Chapter 6, “Brothers and Sisters for the Kingdom of God,” illustrates the constant construction of church family as real family. Members, in narratives and through social interaction, shaped their relationships with other church members as family. Naming community members as “brothers and sisters,” as it has in many religious groups throughout history, established ties of reciprocity and duties to movement goals. I explore here the highly complex gendered nature of church roles as brothers and sisters. To be a true brother in the church was to be engaged in a constant effort to become a physically and spiritually strong and sensitive Kingdom worker, winning converts for the Kingdom of God and counseling other church brothers. Sisters in the Kingdom were called to be physically fit and spiritually strong evangelical workers as well. Like Christians involved in early twentieth-century organizations like the YMCA, YWCA, and the Christian Endeavor Society, ICOC family members were, both men and women, called to be church “warriors,” winning souls for Christ. I explore how the pressures of living as warrior-like evangelical sisters and brothers intensified the contradictions members felt in their loyalties and gendered roles in church and nuclear family relationships.

In the final chapter, “A Kingdom That Promised Too Much,” I offer an explanation for the growth and downfall of the ICOC movement.
I point to several individual and organizational forces at work in both the construction and dissolution of the unified ICOC churches. Most important, I stress how many members were pushed to a point where they were trying to balance too many contradictory cultural ideas and practices; in their search for relational clarity, they too often felt torn between conflicting notions of gender, family, and Christian purpose. They were constantly balancing, in narrative presentation and everyday interactions, leaderships’ demands for submission to church authority and group ideals of individualism and personal choice. Church brothers and sisters also became seriously overburdened in their efforts to provide family and marriage therapy, live up to leaders’ unrealistic expectations for converting large numbers of new members, and maintain their own wage work and nuclear family responsibilities. These heightened contradictions and responsibilities left the movement ripe for dissension and dissolution.