Awesome Families
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Chapter 2

An Unsinkable Raft in a Foreboding Divorce Culture

Best friends. Exciting lovers. Rarely has the heart and soul of marriage been summed up any better. Friendship and romantic love are the two essential ingredients of a great marriage, the qualities that will make it grow ever richer, deeper and more fulfilling. Although this should be the norm, few of us grew up seeing such marriages, and perhaps even fewer of us believed that we could experience such a relationship ourselves. Many have seen marriage as a drain rather than a fountainhead, a battleground instead of a refuge, and a pit stop rather than a permanent home.

—Sam and Geri Laing, Friends and Lovers (1996, 21)

Longtime ICOC leaders Sam and Geri Laing’s formal pronouncement is familiar. From Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority born in the 1970s, to the 1996 federal Defense of Marriage Act and recent attempts to constitutionalize heterosexual marriage, hundreds of private, religious, and government-backed movements have and are actively promoting and working to revitalize heterosexual marriage as an enduring and necessary institution. Conservative mainstream and religious efforts to reinforce heterosexual marriage in what is presented as a “traditional” family model clearly clashes with contemporary values of gender egalitarianism and the day-to-day realities of an economy where both mothers and fathers must work to try and make ends meet. Even though momentum has waxed and waned over the years, conservative religious and political concerns over the condition of the American family remain strong. Even seemingly liberal voices have legitimated the fear
that families in this country are in a state of disaster and that the solution
to child safety and social betterment is to raise children in two-parent
heterosexual households (Stacey 1994). The notion (and what at times
may even seem like a moral panic) that family in the United States is in
serious trouble is deeply entrenched in our cultural discourse and indi-
vidual consciousness.

It is amid this culturally perceived social problem of the decline of
the American family that religio-therapeutic “experts” claim to heal and
strengthen intimate relationships through therapeutic, spiritual, and di-
vine mechanisms. There are various contemporary religious approaches
to fixing family: one-on-one clinical religious marriage counseling, small
group self-help religious meetings and marriage renewal retreats, the
large church-based interdenominational Marriage Encounter movement,
and interdenominational groups like Promise Keepers and Women’s
Aglow (Bartkowski 2004; Griffith 1997; Swidler 2001, 18). The ICOC’s
efforts to heal marriages must be understood in this wider context. The
ICOC was offering a similar religio-therapeutic good; however, support
and guidance in most other secular and religious fee-for-service counsel-
ing does not necessitate individuals’ explicit submission to an authoritative
system of healing. Just as individual ICOC members were required to
submit to regular discipling, married members were expected to engage
in weekly marriage discipling sessions with another “older” married
couple, a mandatory ICOC practice instituted in the early 1990s. Through
mandatory submission, leaders promised extraordinary marriage thera-
petic techniques to the point where, as one ICOC evangelist put it, “in
God’s modern-day movement [meaning ICOC movement] there are no
divorces.”

The ICOC members I spent the majority of my time with in the
field presented themselves as individuals awash in a dangerous social cli-
mate, living in a contemporary world where their marriages and those
around them were seriously at risk. They understood heterosexual mar-
riage as a threatened institution. It is no wonder that they felt this way;
they heard the misleading statistical warning frequently from church
leaders and the mainstream media: “50 percent of marriages end in di-
vorce,” a figure that often compares the number of marriages yearly to
number of divorces, a statistic that reveals little about an individual’s
chances for divorce. Member expressions of marital anxiety were further
fed by media reports of rising numbers of single parents (both women and men), increasing visibility of gay and lesbian couples, cohabitation, and census reports that marriage rates are dropping. These transformations in marriage and family have fueled fears nationwide that a large proportion of young women and men are abandoning the institution of marriage. It is this contingent nature of marriage in our culture today that the ICOC and other conservative groups try to belie.

Sociologist Karla Hackstaff (1999, 2) argues that we form intimate relationships in our society today in the “midst of contesting ideologies,” yet another point of—to use Erikson’s (1976, 249) term for cultural tensions and contrary forces—“axes of variation.” On the one hand, we live in a divorce culture that promotes the idea that we do not have to stay in a marriage if we are not happy, a culture that sees divorce as an often necessary gateway to the self-fulfillment we all deserve. On the other hand, we are deeply grounded in a “marriage culture,” composed of a “cluster of beliefs, symbols and practices, framed by material conditions, that reinforce marriage and deter divorce.” Marriage culture is grounded in a belief that the union is meant to last forever and that spouses should be held to a strong marriage “work ethic.” Marriage culture promotes the idea that marriage, while based on sex and romance, has important functional elements as well, and requires great effort. Hackstaff’s work highlights an important institutional paradox: even though divorce is seen by many in our society as a legitimate and often necessary action, a model of heterosexual marriage remains a desirable ideal. ICOC members were very much caught in the middle of these contesting ideologies and told of how marriage discipling would help them navigate and master this postmodern cultural cleavage.

The stories members told me during formal private interviews and extended informal conversations, and the stories they told in formal witnessing to the congregation, were performances of married selves who had found a divine therapeutic method for promoting what they named “awesome” companionship, romance, and sex in marriage relationships. Member stories detailed how their church family repaired, constructed, and rejuvenated marriages even as the possibility of divorce loomed. These stories and the beliefs they represented brought members a kind of relational confidence. Spouses were held accountable by other church members to attending weekly counseling sessions (marriage discipling).
Divorce remained a distant option, permitted in group only in the case of adultery or physical abuse, or if a spouse decided to leave and speak against the church (thus the claim by leaders that there were no divorces in the Kingdom). Like covenant marriages, ICOC married couples were told by leaders that they were bound and held accountable to working out problems and not to even consider divorce. Therefore, members came to understand that if they, and their spouses, remained faithful disciplers in the church and allowed marriage disciplers to guide their unions, their marriages would be for a lifetime.

Most secular, spiritual, and religious therapeutic approaches to healing and assisting marriage and intimate relationships lack this mandatory quality of ICOC marriage discipling; members understood this difference and spoke of the compulsory nature of marriage discipling as reassuring. In a society where multiple models of relational marital ethics coexist, members were presented with and talked about what seemed a clear-cut marriage management system—one that allowed them to embody a marital “work ethic” where mutuality and egalitarianism prevailed, but one that also embraced cultural values embedded in divorce culture, like the expectation of self-respect and self-fulfillment.

Individual and organizational performances of this forever-after certainty were indeed attractive. Single members talked of their dream of being married “in the Kingdom,” a dream that outside the church would be fraught with doubt. Members whose spouses were not disciplers reported feeling intense pressure and labels of group deviance. They feared that their non-Christian spouses would leave them—fall prey to the temptations and depravity of secular culture. No one ever explicitly told me my marriage may be headed for disaster. They may have thought that such an affront could taint my presentation of the church. The closest I came to an explicit denouncing of my marriage was at the end of my interview with Jeremy, whose story of marriage in the church is detailed later in this chapter. Jeremy asked to meet my husband, and when I told him my husband would not attend City COC functions with me, he let me know that my making new “friends” in the church without my husband meeting these friends was too “dangerous.” My position bore similarities to those female City COC members who were labeled as “Sarah’s Daughters” or in some congregations “Esthers” or “Bravehearts,” labels of difference bestowed on women married to men who
were not in the church, women whose unions were cast by leaders and other members as precarious. 3

Member narratives of ICOC marriage saves are a powerful source for understanding individual attraction to and experience in the movement. They do not provide concrete variables for measurement, and they are retrospective understandings of experience, yet they reveal a great deal about members’ construction of religious identity and how they found meaning in church relationships (Ammerman 2003; Roof 1993, 1999; Yamane 2000). Member narratives provide important clues toward understanding how members resolved participation in authoritative discipling relationships driven by an ethic of relationality, individual choice, and freedom, and how they came to accept discipling as an essential tool navigating the construction of moral selves in a world of cultural ambiguity. Anthony Giddens (1991, 54) stresses that “a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—in the reaction of others—but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self.” The telling and retelling of journeys from a dangerous, morally bereft divorce culture to “amazing” and secure marriage in the ICOC community was essential in many members’ understandings of self as morally sound. They presented themselves as actively pursuing growth in intimate relationships through daily interaction in a discipling community that demanded submission and allegiance. ICOC’s community of “ideological specialists,” sacred counselors armed with an abundance of cultural tools, were major characters in member narratives of marital healing—stories of marriage work, self-fulfillment, and submission to a sacred religio-therapeutic authority.

City COC member marriage stories, like the following from Ronny, Julie, Alicia, and Jeremy, were symbolic, concise, and oft-repeated recountsings of miraculous marriage saves, stories that continually objectified discipling and their construction of marriage as morally sound and sacred. These patterned performances, while endowed with particular meaning and qualitative detail that represented each couple’s life history and current relationships, all echoed the formal ICOC marriage save script. Individual performances of heroic discipler interventions followed
this organizational pattern: descriptions of pre-church marriages that were dull, lacked communication, and threatened by divorce turned into fulfilling unions, or performances by members who were afraid to marry and then developed confident and extraordinary marriages in the church. These feats were accomplished by: (1) disciplers teaching couples how to balance ambiguous gender roles and ideals; (2) constant and mandatory counseling and submission to disciplers’ prescriptions and interventions; (3) round-the-clock discipler availability and on-the-spot intervention; and (4) matching couples with marriage disciplers who had been through similar relationship issues.

Members seemed at ease telling stories of marriage discipling saves, stressing the mandatory and authoritative interactions as well as the more relational and intimate encounters. Some of the information they offered and that I detail below—for example, discussions of sexual expression and experience—I, and others, may perceive as private. Yet, in a culture where media showcase the sex lives of the rich and famous, where television talk shows tackle sexuality explicitly and with regularity, where expression of sexuality in self-help groups and counselors’ offices fulfills a respected therapeutic practice, expressivity, such disclosure by these supporters of Christian “traditional” family is not surprising. This expectation of open discussion regarding sexuality and other intimate details of marriage relationships was uncomfortable for me as an ethnographer. As I developed close relationships in the field and interviewed members, I maintained my own culturally received ideas about the private nature of my sexual relationship with my husband. While many of these women talked with me about being “led” in bed by husbands and taught how to have orgasms by disciplers, I did not share my sexual preferences and experience. I was, to some extent, breaking the ethic of relationality they demonstrated in their openness.

Telling stories of successful marriage discipling to me and during group services and events no doubt served individual members by constantly reminding them of how their marriages were in safe and secure hands: they were reassuring stories in a culture with multiple ideals of marriage and intimate relationships. Repeating these stories served the ICOC organization as well. Each time a member told a story (to me or during a formal service or event), he or she strengthened the collective belief that the discipling community had exceptional therapeutic healing
powers, and that disciplers had new approaches for them in navigating a divorce/marriage culture. The more members performed these abbreviated scenarios, the more they came to believe that their marriages would be exceptional, and the more ICOC’s organizational portrait of skilled and successful marriage counselors as hard disciplinarians and thoughtful, engaged listeners was legitimated and secured.

**Heroic Interventions: Individual Performances and Formal Scripts**

*Ronny and Julie*

I spoke with Julie and Ronny on several occasions during my time with the City COC congregation. Ronny was a twenty-five-year-old black man from Trinidad who had been a member of the church for nine years. He and his wife, Julie, a twenty-two-year-old black graduate student from Nigeria, were married in the church. Like most members, they faithfully attended services Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. They were also present at several of the Bible study and home social events I attended. As longtime church members, their stories of church healing and relationships were also present in the narratives of other members in this closely knit congregation; I had heard Ronny and Julie’s story of marital healing in some detail from others. During formal interviews, Ronny and Julie told me a story of heightened romance, healing, and exceptional marriage, and how they had helped save member marriages through discipling. Both described a dangerous world of divorce and family dysfunction outside the church that had led them to, until encountering married ICOC couples, give up on the possibility of ever being happily married. They told a story of choosing to submit to disciplers’ advice, of hearts made soft (submissive) and strong (individual will and effort) at the same time.

Julie, a member of the City COC for six years, proclaimed that before she became a disciple she “never wanted to be married. Never! I was like, be married, no one stays married! Everyone gets a divorce, three, four years, not even. And my whole family, I can’t even think of one person who is still married . . . so it [marriage] just turned me off.” When she observed couples in the church actually staying together and “in love,” she said it “blew her away.” “I wouldn’t even be married if it weren’t for watching these people, if I didn’t see how they were living.
By going to their homes and seeing that,” Julie stressed that she was most impressed with the way couples she spent time with in the City COC seemed to “work out” their marriage and family problems rather than “running away.” She had told herself pre-ICOC membership: “If I do get married some day, which I don’t want to, but if I do, then I’ll be in control of my life.” “In control” was how she interpreted the married lives of her new extended church family that she had come to know intimately over several years. Divorce culture was out of control and the ICOC marriage work ethic, combined with constant access to skilled and experienced Christian marriage counselors, she felt, offered her great control. “I feel like now that I’m married I have trusted friends that I can talk to. . . . When I talk to her [her marriage discipler] she is so understanding. She has been through similar situations. She is honest about her marriage. She is honest about what her weaknesses are. She is honest about her strengths.”

Ronny was from a divorced family as well. His parents separated in Trinidad right before he moved to the United States with his father and stepmother. He had a falling out with his father as a young teenager and moved in with his maternal grandmother as a young teen. He met ICOC disciplers soon after at the age of sixteen. Ronny described a similar fear of marriage pre–church membership: “If I wasn’t part of the church and learning how to trust and how to be trustworthy then I don’t think I’d be married because my family, my entire family, there is not a successful marriage in my family. It starts out, the first few years, you know functional, deteriorates, then divorce.” Ronny went on to include his entire network of friends and family as representative of divorce culture and dysfunctional family: “I don’t think I’d be a husband because of all the things that I saw. There wasn’t a good example of a good male role model first of all in my family and people that I knew. There are a lot of, everybody had broken homes and messed up families as far as I could tell. I never really had a friend that goes, oh, mom and dad are doing great. It was weird stuff going on all over the place, so.” His story so clearly communicated a total lack of positive marriage examples outside the church. He even described his mother’s second marriage as “nothing you’d be, oh, I want that! Give me some of that stuff, mmm—no.” However, like his wife, Ronny described experiencing long-term exposure to an entirely different kind of marriage and family relationship in the City COC.
The congregation: “I’ve seen marriages when they were dating, when they get married and I’ve seen those apply the Bible a lot. They apply those principles and you see the result, you get to see the result.” He offered examples of the kind of care, attention, Christian love, and discipline that he and Julie had received from pre-marriage disciplers as young singles dating in the Kingdom.

Ronny has had to deal with health problems over the years due to a serious back injury; he is tired a great deal of the time and cannot always engage in physical activity. When I interviewed Ronny he was feeling well and working full-time, but for months during his courtship with Julie, he had not been able to work: “I lost my health. I was a young, strong, healthy looking guy collecting welfare, can’t work. I was very frustrated.” But, he stressed, Julie stuck with him through these unhealthy times, she cared for him and believed in him. Her care and unselfishness “was a convincing time for me that if God made me able to marry this woman, that’s the person I want to be with.” Disciplers and premarital counselors helped mold their relationship. He described disciplers as helping them to learn to care for one another and counselors who intervened time and again in their relationship; for example, disciplers had helped them balance emotionality and build communication techniques.

Ronny presented himself to me as emotional and high-strung and described Julie as “very patient . . . and peaceful.” “She doesn’t react the way I would react to a situation. I am very emotional, very high-strung and ah, she would not respond to a situation the way I would and, in my mind, how can you keep yourself so calm?” Ronny also identified as the more affectionate spouse and cast his wife as more practical: “She’s very laid back and pragmatic, so . . . but I’m very much hugs, kiss, touch. Love all that stuff . . . . I love to hug and there are times where I feel like, could she initiate some of the hugs?” Julie’s descriptions of disciplers’ efforts in their marriage centered around her struggle to eradicate what she called the “sin of selfishness” and learn to be more open and expressive: “What I would talk with my discipler about is just making sure that I’m not being selfish. By nature, I’m a very selfish person. I want to be able to do my own thing and when I want to do my own thing . . . sometimes I’m just so rude to him.”

“What do you mean by selfish?” I asked. She explained that “there
have been situations where, you know, intimacy, at times I’m just, you
know, tired, and I don’t want to give of myself and she’s [discipler] helped
me to be, you know . . . if God didn’t make you for that purpose, then
what is the purpose of being able to give yourself to each other?” Once
Julie was able to deal with this “selfishness” and “give herself” to her
husband even if she was tired, she said their sexual relationship improved.
A lesson in learning submission in marriage through submission to dis-{
cipler intervention.

Ronny offered another example of how marriage disciplers helped
negotiate marital conflict: “I’m extremely paranoid by nature,” he told
me. “I am suspicious of everybody, so I am extremely animated in my
mind and I will blow things way out of proportion. . . . So I’m insecure.
I’m working on my insecurity.” Ron’s health concerns would arise from
time to time to “test” his faith and efforts to deal with insecurity, and dis-
ciplers were there to guide him. He explained:

Julie came home one day when I was sick and I’d been thinking I re-
ally wanted to go out to church with her, to be with my family, but
my health . . . and so she came home telling me about church ser-
vice and in my mind I’m thinking, you think I’m not committed
don’t you? So I said all those things to her, you think I’m sick blah,
blah, blah. I just dumped on her [Julie] all this stuff and she started
crying. I was hollering, and so, when I find myself getting that way,
actually at that moment [my emphasis] when I go that way I called
him [marriage discipler] and I said, “She’s crying right now as we
speak,” and he said I was a jerk. He asked if she had ever said any-
thing, if she had ever done anything that would make me think that.
“No,” I said, “she’s never said anything.” “So what would make you
think that?” he said.

Ronny apologized, and then he and Julie were able to calm down and
talk. He said that marriage disciplers “have been crucial at times like
that.”

Ronny, like so many other members recounting ICOC marriage
saves, ended with descriptions of romance. “She was always there for
me . . . as we dated we just grew to like each other, wrote each other
tons of poetry and cards and . . . all over the place.” Ronny pointed to
the shelves to our right in his living room.
“You have them framed up there,” I said.

“Yeah um, you know, long-term plans, short-term plans. I like that one in particular.” He took down the frame and continued, “It’s from our two-year anniversary of dating and then we got married that next year. It spells out Julie’s name and after each letter I say something about her starting with that letter. I was looking for a word that I could use to describe her.”

He showed the framed poem to me. “I’m looking and I’m trying to spell her name so I’m looking up in the dictionary and I’m like God, come on, show me a word, show me a word. And I, the word I spelled,” he said smiling and pointing.

“Ineffable,” I read aloud.

“Yeah, and I never knew what that word meant. Definitely, beyond the ability to communicate and I said, that’s it! I found the word! She was just, a piece of God really. He was just giving me a piece of himself.”

Alicia and Jeremy

I saw Alicia and Jeremy a couple of times during services and conducted formal interviews separately in their home. Like Ronny and Julie, I had heard stories of their marriage from other church leaders before the interview. Alicia, a college-educated thirty-year-old white married woman with two children, began her story of church marital healing by telling me that “the marriage was stinking big time!” Like most other member stories of marriage saves, she presented her pre-ICOC life as existing in an alienating and “heartless” divorce culture. As we sipped tea at her dining room table, she told me of a divorced friend in the Congregationalist church she attended before becoming a disciple. She said that having such a divorced friend made her feel that divorce was an acceptable option. Lost and feeling helpless in her marriage, she had searched for comfort and guidance in her Congregational church but had found “no help” there. Alicia described her five-year marriage to Jeremy, a thirty-five-year-old white male insurance salesman, in those pre-ICOC membership years as lacking “communication and honesty.” She emphasized that they were on an inevitable path toward divorce: “We were growing apart. I went to visit my family one summer and I decided while I was there that I was probably going to leave Jeremy.” Jeremy confirmed during his interview that they were on a clear path to divorce at that
time. The threat of divorce had left Alicia “very scared” and feeling “alone with no one to talk to”; she felt no one truly cared about her problems and that only bad advice surrounded her efforts to heal her wounded relationship.

Alicia’s voice then lifted as she told me of the miraculous relationships she developed with City COC disciples, relationships that saved her marriage that was “stinkin’ big time” (a phrase she used several times). She had anxiously studied the Bible with an ICOC woman, a family group leader, even though Jeremy had no desire to become involved with the church. Alicia recalled that his resistance to studying the Bible led her to feel even more like she “wanted to split up,” that she wanted to pretend her marriage had never happened. Divorcing him would have “killed him and it would have killed me and destroyed our son.” Luckily, City COC disciples, she emphasized, would not let her “give up.” It did not matter, she said, that Jeremy was not yet a disciple, City COC marriage disciplers still “worked hard” to help her fix her marriage. “These disciplers,” she stressed, “were trying to teach me to love him again. They were teaching me submission. They were a shoulder when I had a problem. They were like, tell us what you are feeling in your heart. I could call them with anything.” And she did, from on-the-spot crisis intervention when an argument got out of hand, to advice on which spouse should be the sexual “leader” on a particular evening. Alicia described marriage disciplers as on call, round the clock, ready and eager to wipe out her relational sins. Her story turned course as she made a definite choice to submit to these effective church counselors.

In describing how he and his wife learned to better communicate and listen to one another openly, Jeremy presented his pre-discipled self as guided by an essentialist masculinity that drove him to be “silent” and “distant.” I’m not as prone [as his wife] to expressing my emotions.” He depicted his wife, Alicia, using an essentialist vision of females as more “emotional,” but at the same time, blamed their pre-disciple suffering marriage on Alicia’s anger and her inability to live up to a feminine ideal of “openness” and “warmth.” He cast his male silence and distance as sinful: “By nature, we [men] grow up to be very self-centered.” This self-centeredness, Jeremy emphasized, was partly from the “social thing” where “men are the ones to make all the decisions.”
Alicia, however, cast her pre-discipled self as emotionally disconnected from Jeremy. She identified as an extremely emotional person whose angry outbursts were the sinful force behind their marital "bumps": "I’m the more emotional one, even though we both have our faults, mine show up more because I tend to be emotional and very verbal and he tends to pull away. . . . I’m very emotional. If it’s there it’s got to come out. I can’t always control it. Sometimes I’ll say it in front of the kids. I get disciplined on that all the time.” Both Jeremy and Alicia described disciplers as helping them learn to find the right degree of expressivity and emotionality. For Alicia, disciplers taught her how to “tone down” her emotions, to integrate a more logical practice by “thinking through” complaints and issues before "throwing" them in anger on Jeremy. For Jeremy, disciplers brought him out of his silent, “Spock-like shell.” At the end of our interview Jeremy offered proof of ease with his newfound expressive masculinity; he cried while recounting the death and funeral of a close church brother.

Alicia and Jeremy decided to have a second wedding ceremony because before joining the church they “almost didn’t make it.” They rented a small clubhouse event room at an apartment complex and invited everyone in the congregation. “About 150 people showed up, we renewed our vows, and we taped something that we read to each other.” They also made an audiotape for each other that Alicia wanted me to hear. She searched the house for the tape and grew upset when she could not find it. “I’ll probably find it as soon as you walk out the door!” She had to settle for a description: “It [what he said about her on tape] was just so awesome and I shared about him, too, on a tape. It was almost as if everything that could be said was said, it was so perfect. . . . Both of our hearts had to be that we wanted to change to be better for our spouse and that was our heart, we did it.”

In the end, as with most stories of heroic marriage discipling, Alicia and Jeremy stressed that they had made a choice to learn how to better communicate, how to balance emotional release with logical thinking, how to have a romantic marriage and, as they put it so many times, an “awesome marriage.” “I was in shock,” Alicia told me, “in shock because we were both babies growing up together in the faith. We still made mistakes, but we were getting help from disciplers. There were people in our marriage helping us to learn to express ourselves.”
Ronny, Julie, Alicia, Jeremy, and many other members I interviewed and heard testify stressed the power of making a choice to open their hearts to marriage disciplers and praised the ability of marriage disciplers to clinically confront and resolve marriage issues. In their narratives, disciplers embodied relationality and applied on-the-spot marital counseling. In Alicia’s words, “They were a shoulder when I had a problem.” Money, communication, sex, and romance were frequent targets of marriage discipling interventions. Therapeutic concentration in these areas is not unique. ICOC’s discourse of relational hot spots reflected those promoted by outside marriage “experts” in clinical counseling, self-help marriage texts, and grocery store magazine racks. Disciplers and leaders naming these issues as important points of therapy resonated then with members’ cultural understanding of what marital topics should take center focus.

Performances of heroic marriage interventions were always framed in romantic language and gesture. Ronny searched for a word to complete his love poem. Alicia wanted me to hear a romantic tape. Another wife read me a list that her husband had composed for her that noted everything he loved about her: “love,” “strength,” and “patience,” followed by “your little red nighty” and “the way you kiss.” Most married members who told me their stories of relational healing closed with cards, poems, and romantic stories and/or gestures—images of ICOC-healed marriages as exceptionally romantic and fulfilling. This should not be surprising; our therapeutic culture is full of venues for helping individuals secure romantic marriage: sex counselors, couples’ therapists, and bookshelves of marriage and romance advice self-help guides. These efforts and products construct and reaffirm long-standing cultural beliefs about what romance is: a list of idealized notions that include love at first sight, altruism, forever after, expensive gifts, companionship, great sex, and interdependence. Romance is a moral ideal; marriage and intimate relationships are perceived as morally sound when they are represented through romantic discourse and language. Images of what romance is confront individuals frequently in various media forms—in magazines, on television, in movies and literature, and through fashion. The ICOC is not alone in its Christian approach and outreach through promotion of romance in love and marriage; ‘Christian romances’ and sex manuals are part of a booming religious publishing industry (Ferré 1990).
Even though member stories of romance and successful discipling were grounded in an individual’s own experiences—for example, Ronny’s poems on his shelves were his poems, written to reflect how he felt about Julie and describe their life together—individual stories of saved marriages were shaped by formal organizational discourse. DPI’s marriage advice text, *Friends and Lovers: Marriage as God Designed It*, was a book prominently displayed on bookshelves and left out on countertops in many of the City COC homes I visited. I noticed that some members carried this text and other DPI guidebooks with their Bible to services and group events. DPI texts such as *Friends and Lovers* were, in many ways, crucial elements of ICOC boundary making—they were books that members could keep in their homes, and carry with them and refer to as they ventured out into the diseased secular relational world. These books were symbols of ICOC therapeutic power, constant reminders of the ICOC community as a sacred healing place. Greil and Rudy (1984), in their essay on structural components of identity transforming institutions (ITOs), break down the idea of social encapsulation into three types: physical, social, and ideological. They suggest that some ITOs create a kind of “ideological encapsulation,” meaning a kind of “space capsule” that enables members to “venture beyond the boundaries of the group for short periods of time without damage to their ‘identity support systems.’” These space capsules are composed of learned symbolic physical behaviors, rituals, and/or memorization of ideological precepts—such as when Alcoholics Anonymous members memorize the “‘Twelve Steps’ which codify the AA outlook and program” (267–268). The walls of these capsules are further strengthened when members have material group symbols to carry with them: for example, a sheet of paper with the twelve steps on it, a piece of jewelry in the shape of a group sacred object, an item of clothing that distinguishes, or a book that represents the ideals and beliefs of the religious community. *Friends and Lovers*, like other DPI texts, were tangible reminders that the ICOC movement had extraordinary powers to heal marriage relationships and that in order to access that power, couples must be fully committed to a marriage discipling relationship. They were also literary guideposts for individual performances of marital healing.

*Friends and Lovers* encourages framing ICOC marriage success narra-
tives in romantic language and gesture. Authors Sam and Geri Laing (Laing and Laing 1996, 45–46) suggest: “Write down your feelings of love, thanksgiving and affection in cards and notes. . . . Surprise him or her with a note scrawled on a scrap of paper and left taped on the mirror, tucked under the pillow, or stashed away in a briefcase or purse. These are small, thoughtful expressions that make marriage a joy and can rekindle a dying love.” In preparation for one yearly marriage retreat, City COC leaders distributed a flyer to the congregation requesting church couples to “write a story describing the time they got engaged.” City COC leaders were to choose and honor winning stories “in categories such as most romantic, most elaborate, least expected, largest audience and ‘It’s about time! I’ve been waiting for years!’ ” The romantic stories submitted would legitimate ICOC marriage in future publications and performances.

In *Friends and Lovers*, Sam and Geri Laing also offer examples of “real people” whom they have “worked with” in their ministries, models of heroic discipler interventions. Like Jeremy and Alicia’s story, the Laings began with a description of a marriage in imminent relational danger: “When we came to know John and Michelle, they both had a vacant, dead look in their eyes. They were discouraged, depressed and weary. It seemed they had everything to be happy about: healthy children, a beautiful home and a solid position in the full-time ministry [ICOC]” (Laing and Laing 1996, 157–158). The Laings tell us that John experienced the death of his father and failure at work, feeling that he was “ineffective in leading others because he knew he was not close to his wife and was failing in leading his own family.” His wife, Michelle, possessed “a positive and outgoing personality” but was “unhappy with herself, her marriage and her children.” John would reach out to her “through his longings for sexual affection,” but felt “unloved and alone . . . dying slowly from within.” Michelle was unresponsive sexually partly because she “knew she was many pounds overweight (as was John).” Being overweight “embarrassed her and made her sexually indifferent.” The Laings intervened as marriage disciplers.

“Talking to John and Michelle separately and then comparing notes,” the Laings wrote, “was quite an experience.” They seemed to have a very different “recounting” of the “simplest situations.” The Laings’ diagnosis: “We realized . . . both of them were so completely
self-focused that they could not begin to comprehend the other’s point of view.” Their prescription: relationality, mutual compassion, and expressivity: “They could learn to resolve conflict only if they began to make serious efforts to understand and empathize with each other.” Through making each of them “face up to their individual deficiencies,” and learn to “speak openly to each other,” the Laings managed to help them save their marriage. “Today,” the Laings professed, “John and Michelle are happily in love . . . communication has radically improved, as has their romantic life. All of this has taken much work, patience and self-examination, but they are now much more aware of what they need to do to meet one another’s needs.”

Sexual satisfaction in marriage is a widespread cultural good. When it comes to heterosexual marital sex and romance, ICOC leaders, and conservative Christians in general, have been quite explicit about how to perform romance and achieve sexual satisfaction. This approach reflects a society where sex therapy and guidebooks that offer explicit understanding of biology and sexual stimulation are not deviant but considered appropriate methods of improving selves. ICOC leaders promoted consultation of the mainstream Christian text *The Gift of Sex*, written by Clifford and Joyce Penner (1981), a couple raised as Mennonites who have practiced Christianity in Baptist, Presbyterian, and Congregational church communities. *The Gift of Sex* is a good example of the clinical prescriptive nature of such righteous romance pedagogy. Penner and Penner’s (1981, 72–73) chapter entitled “Discovering and Sharing Our Bodies” guides readers through an “I’ll show you mine, if you’ll show me yours’ kind of sharing time.” City COC members described marriage disciplers as intimately invested in whether or not those they discipled were content with their sex lives and as applying an individualized and detailed approach to sex counseling. One church member said her discipler gave her a chart that showed erotic points and exercises to do with her husband so that they could come to understand each other’s bodies. Another church member, who was having difficulty becoming aroused with her husband, talked about her discipler showing her a diagram of her vagina and talking through how to achieve an orgasm step-by-step. This practice, she claimed, helped her learn to “finally have orgasms.” These intimate and explicit attempts to help individuals achieve sexual satisfaction made sense to members; they seemed a sound therapeutic
Almost all member narratives of exceptional marriage through discipling described sex inside the church as the best they had ever had. Here again, this emphasis in individual narratives is seen at work in formal literature and group discourse. The Laings write, in *Friends and Lovers* (Laing and Laing 1996, 80–84), “It seems everyone is hungry for sex, yet few are satisfied. . . . *God has a plan.* It is not just a good plan. It is the best plan, and it works without fail. We can understand it, and we can follow it. We can check out of the striptease scene and get into the real action!” How can members get this “real action”? Well, “The best sex is married sex. The most exciting, fulfilling and thrilling sex takes place in the marriage bed, not the bed of illicit sex.” “Married sex,” the Laings note, “gets better as the years go by. It becomes increasingly intimate, pleasurable and satisfying. . . . As we know each other longer and better, we become more comfortable in our lovemaking.” With the predictable humor of ICOC leaders Sam Laing adds, “Honeymoons are wasted on amateurs. . . . They [older marriages] not only still have the fire—it burns brighter and hotter!” Implicit in Laing’s message is the understanding that to get this kind of hot sex one needs to seek the advice and counsel of married couples in the church: *God’s plan*, in the ICOC, is the marriage discipling relationship.

Members’ stories, in addition to stressing sex and romance, included the discipling community and disciplers as helping them improve physical health and body, thus improving marital sex lives. (Recall Michelle and John’s sexual relationship was described by the Laings as threatened by unwanted pounds.) During one Wednesday night ICOC service, the prayer theme was losing weight, and “church sisters” witnessed to others of how God had helped them shed pounds and improve relationships with their husbands. Weight loss was salvation not just for women; it was prescribed for men too. Sam Laing, during an all-male regional event, told a group of men: “I don’t want to hear about metabolism. I don’t want to hear about genetics. I want you to go with an infallible weight loss program. You can lose weight. I know some of you need medical help, but some of us, as men, have allowed our bodies to degenerate. We are prematurely old.” He related this sinful state of being overweight to the weakening of intimate relationships, suggesting that an unhealthy
lifestyle is a sin that can potentially destroy marriages: “And you wonder why your sex life is nowhere? Well, your wife’s not really fired up looking at you with your shirt off anymore!” In the ICOC, and many other contemporary religious movements, the promise of “looking good,” an end goal of many health and wellness practices, is a significant and alluring organizational commodity. As Griffith (1997, 141–150) notes, weight loss under a Christian rubric, as in secular practices, often involves submission and discipline alongside individual will. Health and wellness discourses support the idea that individuals must take responsibility for being “good,” consuming medically labeled “healthy” foods and exercising while staying away from “bad” food and behaviors such as munching on candy bars and chips while lounging on the couch (couch potato sin). The “infallible weight loss program” promoted above is the discipling relationship—disciplers are there to help you, monitor your progress, and scowl if you were “bad,” like routine weigh-ins at Weight Watchers or any number of other monitored weight loss pay-for-service programs. Such monitored health and wellness practices and relationships made sense to members as a sound and culturally acceptable method for improving self, body, and intimate relationships. The ICOC formal message was clear: “thin” and “in shape” spouses had healthy marriages; “overweight,” “obese,” or “flabby” spouses risked unhealthy marriages.

In addition to divorce and extramarital affairs, domestic violence was another worldly relational disease, a more recently publicized social problem that ICOC formal narratives showcased as threatening couples in the secular world. The story of disciplers changing abusers’ hearts was a powerful moral narrative. During one Sunday morning regional event, a white married couple in their early thirties offered a formal testimony to approximately three hundred members that showcased how the church had saved their marriage from its violent existence. Even though this couple was from another ICOC congregation, during my time in the field I heard the wife tell this marriage save story twice. The couple’s story followed an awesome marriage formal script: their marriage was seriously threatened and subsequently saved by choosing to submit to ICOC marriage disciplers and their therapeutic skills.

The wife spoke first. Tearfully, she related how her husband, when first married, had hit her and even thrown her body across rooms into
walls. She related how his abuse and her empty forgiveness became a pattern, and how her silence and inability to communicate her true feelings often instigated his attacks. When the husband spoke to the congregation, he confirmed his sinful actions as a non-Christian. She told us that she never would have believed that her husband could have changed into the “loving, caring, and awesome man he is today.” But he did change, she insisted, when he met church “brothers” and began studying the Bible and becoming open with his discipler. She changed too, she insisted, and stopped “provoking” his anger by learning how to better communicate. As they both studied the Bible and opened their “hearts” to disciplers, their marriage became stronger and the physical abuse ended. Like Alicia and Ronny’s heroic saves that concluded with displays of poetic romantic gesture, this couple read us a loving and romantic anniversary card that he had recently given to her—a symbol of how their relationship had been changed from a violent nightmare to a fulfilling and caring marriage. This couple, in both admitting fault, had taken the first step encouraged by disciplers on the road to successful Christian marriage counseling.

In all narratives of heroic marriage saves, disciplers and other members, “older Christians” with congregational status, named and identified sin in other couples. In this way, among others, the organization had some hand in crafting the relational “problems” that were addressed in marriages and thus the marriage save stories told by members. I was informed several times by members and congregational leaders that if they saw or heard a problem going on in a marriage, whether it was the tone that one spouse took with another, the husband or wife spending too much money, or a spouse dissatisfied with sex, it was the responsibility of disciplers to report this to leaders and/or intervene themselves depending on their status in the leadership/discipling hierarchy. Similarly, couples were asked by leaders to be open to marital counseling on any issue brought to the attention of disciplers. Ronny told me that he really “loved this about the church” and that “there is nothing that is not on the table.” Members described marriage disciplers as applying constant pressure and checking to make sure that spouses followed through with the practical advice given. One wife stated of her marriage disciplers, “They keep us on top of things.” Evette told me that she advised a woman who was learning to be a marriage discipler that “you made a decision for God to work in their hearts. She said, ‘I’ll call. I’ll call.’ I said,
‘No, you go over and be on, keep pushing yourself, keep giving yourself [as a marriage discipler] until they tell you I don’t want it. You really have to go for it!’

Premarital counseling was also talked about in ICOC formal and informal discourse as a unique and mandatory group asset. In many other churches and in secular society, couples’ marriage and premarriage counseling is an individual choice; generally both partners must agree to go in order to reap the benefits. A major narrative point in stories of heroic and productive marriage discipling was that spouses and future spouses could not opt out. Had I been a single woman conducting field studies in the ICOC, chapter 2 here may have highlighted narratives of church singles as family, dating in the Kingdom, and stories of “awesome” monitored and mandatory dating and premarital counseling.

This mandatory counseling expectation, the inescapable relationship with another church couple who would name marital problems and help you build practical and productive skills for avoiding and facing conflict, was presented by members and leaders as comforting and reassuring. Like other Christian marriage counseling approaches, ICOC members stressed the individual Godly marriage triangle. As one member said to me: “Marriage is a three-way relationship—your relationship with God and your relationship with each other. And without those strands on a cord, twined together to make a strong rope, it’s not near as strong, you need those three together to make it work.” But they also made clear that you needed an adhesive to hold those ropes together: to complete and reinforce the triangle you needed to be in a discipling relationship with another ICOC couple. Discipling (marriage and one-on-one) was, in so many ways, represented as a kind of intermediary, mediating relationship with God and each other. This was a large part of the appeal, and in the end, as the unified movement failed, a large force in downfall and disillusionment. But for at least two decades, member narratives, guided by experience and formal group discourse, were able to present a somewhat convincing portrait of disciplers as exceptionally able to mediate and navigate the cultural paradoxes of gender.

Disciplers Navigate the Gender Maze

During separate interviews I asked Ronny and Julie to tell me about the couples that they felt they had helped the most as marriage disciplers. They both spoke of Adam and Mindy. Ronny described this couple as
coming from families where “the woman ran the show,” and having to teach Adam how to be “assertive.” Julie described Mindy as “very outgoing and a take-charge person,” who took advantage of her “laid-back” husband and did things like “go out and spend eighty dollars on a bottle of shampoo.” They understood their efforts to help this couple as constant and demanding. Ronny said he would “challenge him on really taking responsibility for the household.” Julie related that at one point they both told Adam, “We’re going to buy you a pink dress, put it on you, and give her the blue jeans!” Adam and Mindy finally had the “hearts to change,” but not after a great deal of intervention and counseling from Ronny, Julie, and other church members. This representation of marriage discipling signifies the constant, inescapable cultural processes of gender construction and negotiation, the particular challenges that contemporary society poses to these processes, and the presentation of management of these processes by ICOC marriage disciplers.

The rich body of literature on gender and religion produced by sociologists over the past twenty years explores the negotiated and complex character of gender and family roles and ideology in conservative Christian movements (Ammerman 1987; Bartkowski 2004, 2001; Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Griffith 1997; Ingersoll 2003; Lockhart 2000; Rose 1987; Stacey and Gerard 1990). Julie Ingersoll (2003, 16) notes that “gender is a central organizing principle and a core symbolic system” in the U.S. Christian evangelical subculture and that the “interpretation and control of that symbol is not fixed and permanent, but...the result of an ongoing process of construction (production), which entails a tremendous degree of negotiation.” Religious institutions are historically well-known for actively negotiating, challenging, and constructing gender boundaries, even if it is only in the last few decades of the twentieth century that gender as a category of analysis in the discipline of sociology has received rigorous attention. A close look at the Oneida community, for example, a mid-nineteenth-century socialist Christian movement in New York State, offers an interesting case for the process of both challenging and upholding current cultural assumptions of gender and sexuality in religious communities.

Under a radical system of group heterosexual marriage, Oneida members were forbidden to fall prey to romantic love but were encouraged to have sexual relationships with various commune members (sex-
ual relationships had to be approved by leader John Humphrey Noyes). Women were not expected to have babies and required permission from the community if they wanted children. Noyes taught “male continence,” withdrawal before ejaculation, as a “necessary condition for the inauguration of complex marriage” (Klaw 1993, 58). Noyes’s belief in “complex marriage” and his monitoring of the practice of male continence allowed Oneida women choices in sexuality and reproduction not available to them outside the community. Furthermore, if a woman had a child, she was not responsible for domestic duties for about a year after, and at a certain point was required to turn the child “over to the foster mothers in the Children’s House.” In a clear challenge to then current ideals of female caretaking and motherhood, one Oneida community writer noted, “We do not believe that motherhood is the chief end of a woman’s life; that she was made for the children she can bear. She was made for God and for herself” (Klaw 1993, 132). Women’s lives within the Oneida community also departed from then normative white Protestant assumptions of womanhood as isolated domesticity as they lived “in close association with other women,” and “found long-lasting friendships with other women” in an extended domestic community (Klaw 1993, 132–133).

Spencer Klaw, in his detailed historical look at the Oneida community, *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community*, notes the complexity of women’s position to both challenge and adhere to cultural gender expectations: “While Oneidans agreed with such militant feminists as Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin that women in America were cruelly exploited by men, they differed with these and other leaders of the women’s rights movement on a fundamental point...they ridiculed the feminist claim that women were, or should be, the equals of men.” The Oneida community provides a vivid example of the inevitable tensions and complexities in religious communities as they work to negotiate and construct gender roles and responsibilities that will appeal and make sense to their members. Religious groups, and especially high boundary religious groups, are active social sites for appropriating, rejecting, and constructing gender ideals.

Many would argue that Ingersoll’s point about the centrality of gender as an organizing principle in the evangelical subculture is true for all people in all cultures. Gender, the assigning of profound cultural mean-
ing to body and sex, is a universal social process. As Judith Lorber (1994, 13) notes,

Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water. Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up. Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly “doing gender.” (West and Zimmerman 1987)

Doing gender today, one could argue, is no more difficult than doing gender was in the mid-nineteenth century when Oneida men and women pledged commitment to Noyes’s system of complex marriage in a dominant Protestant society. This was a point in history where the forces of an industrializing nation ushered in new idealized gender relationships and social spaces that saw women as Godly caretakers of home and children and men as venturing away from home into a harsh world of wage labor. Clearly, negotiating and constructing gendered selves and communities today could be no more difficult a task than it was to black men and women throughout U.S. history—individuals who have consistently developed distinct gender ideals while being held accountable by whites to dominant notions of masculinity and femininity. Yet, negotiating and constructing gendered selves at the turn of the twenty-first century does present a historically particular complex social gender and family landscape to master. Connell (1995, 73) reminds us that “gender is an internally complex structure, where a number of different logics are superimposed.” The logical organization of gender is based in social structure and is continually challenged by individuals and institutions, thus “masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption.” The gender dilemmas, beliefs, and practices that arise in members’ narratives of ICOC marriage saves demonstrate a range of historically particular structural gender beliefs about men, women, and the institution of marriage.

In stressing gender confusion and ambiguity as rampant in our soci-
ety, ICOC leaders and members echoed conservative Christian and antifeminist gender discourse. For example, James C. Dobson, founder and president of the conservative organization Focus on the Family, writes: “Traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity have been battered and ridiculed for more than 20 years, creating confusion for both men and women. . . . Should a man stand when a woman enters the room? Will he please her by opening the door for her? Should he give her his seat on a crowded bus or subway? Have all the rules changed? Is there anything predictable and certain in the new order?” (Dobson 2003)

ICOC members and leaders used sentences like “Men don’t know whether to wear a pink dress or pants,” like Ronny and Julie earlier, many times during services, small Bible studies, and interviews. This description hit a very real core of member day-to-day life experience. Many were young families, dual-earner households juggling work, family, and church responsibilities. They were also men and women who had been raised in a culture where competing notions of gender abounded: for example, promotion of egalitarian marriage and professional careers for both husbands and wives alongside images of women as the natural caretakers of children and domestic specialists; and images of fathers as engaged in child rearing and emotionally present alongside male breadwinner ideals and persistent essentialist notions of men as more logical and lacking in emotionality. These late twentieth-, early twenty-first-century ideas and expectations coincided with precarious economic conditions: the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, a rise in the contingent workforce, and the growing inevitability that for a family to survive, most parents must work for wages outside of the home. In these contemporary work and family social conditions, gender responsibilities and ideals were negotiated and contested daily: Who pays the bills? Who does the grocery shopping? Who plans family meals? Who initiates sex? Who is responsible for watching the kids when both have a major project due at work that week? Who stays home if the kids are sick? Who supervises homework? Who takes the kids to ball games? Who takes them to dance lessons? ICOC’s organizational gender repertoire provided various answers and methods of reconciliation to these and other spousal dilemmas.

Most important, ICOC’s gender repertoire, reflective of secular culture and the evangelical subculture, seemed endless—descriptions of
marriage discipling prescriptions and naming of marital problems drew from various cultural beliefs and essentialist notions about what women and men should do. My field notes, interview transcripts, and group formal literature reflected a multitude of contradictory ideas: men were to be good providers/breadwinners for their wives and family, women were to be caretakers and domestics, God outlined specific and clear-cut traditional gender roles in the Bible, Jesus called for gender equality and egalitarianism in marriage, women were to pursue an education and be respected for professional and church leadership careers, men were to be caretakers and connected emotionally to their wives and children, men were to participate in domestic chores, women were to be “strong-minded;” women were to be strong leaders in the church, men were to be strong leaders in the church, men were to “lead” the family, women were to “shape the family,” men were to be aggressive in bed, women were to let men lead in bed, women were to instigate and plan sexual encounters with their husbands, men were to respect their wives’ sexual needs, men were to express their emotions, women were too emotional and talkative and needed to listen more, women should express their emotions and make their feelings known, men should not be too emotional, and anger was both a masculine and feminine characteristic to be controlled.

At first, I found the variety of these deeply asserted beliefs about gender in member and leader narratives of marriage discipling an overwhelming analytical challenge. I suppose I expected, given that I knew they promoted conservative gender ideals and a return to the “traditional’ family,” that they would offer a more cohesive ideology. But their discourse seemed a magnified mishmash of gender dos, don’ts, and inevitabilities, no more clear than any individual or organizational approach outside the group—a reflection of the gendered waters we all swim in. At times, as I reflected in my field journal, they seemed even more confusing because leaders and disciplers expected members to enact each gendered stance, position, and performance with such heightened passion and commitment. Was there a clear ICOC gender ideology, a set of beliefs about how men and women should interact in marriage relationships, a set of beliefs that articulated family roles that members and potential converts were drawn to? Was this ICOC set of ideas about gender more “traditional” than not? Why did their beliefs and statements
about relationships between the sexes shift and change from narrative to narrative? How could that uncertainty and variation prove attractive to members and potential converts? Recent social theory and empirical research in conservative religious groups provided clues to these questions.

Conservative and evangelical Christians’ ideas about how men and women should behave are widely misunderstood, often cast by liberal Christians and secular folks as solely an antifeminist return to traditional patriarchal family and church arrangements. This assessment is understandable; to listen to the rhetoric of Dobson, Phyllis Schlafly, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and other highly visible conservative Christians, one could easily develop a picture of women in the home, stripped of professional career choice and raising the kids, and men out in the workforce as breadwinners “leading” their families. Yet, if one pries the door open to look more closely at this conservative family model, we find that it is not so simple, nor does it represent a reclaiming of a normative nuclear family. Empirical findings to date suggest that conservative religious groups and individuals are indeed involved in a project of balancing and making sense of various contradictory gender ideals and practices. Furthermore, research suggests that conservative religious folks are navigating our cultural gender maze using therapeutic tools and practical approaches that are really not so different from those of many liberal religious and secular heterosexual married couples.

The Promise Keepers, a well-known controversial interdenominational Christian men’s movement that received a great deal of media attention for its reported “antifeminist” conservative gender ideology, offers a model contemporary case. First, Promise Keeper ideas about masculinity and femininity are not of a single “traditional” stance, but reflect various ideas and practices (Bartkowski 2004; Lockhart 2000), the particulars of which are worked out in smaller Promise Keeper cell groups of men who meet throughout the country. These formal Promise Keeper ideologies, Lockhart (2000, 78) argues, are indicative of those prescribed in much conservative Christian Protestant literature. Biblical “traditionalists,” he notes, “argue that gender differences and roles were created by God” and that “God desires a hierarchy of order in society.” These roles and hierarchy of order are to be found in the Holy Scriptures and “those placed in authority by God are husbands, parents, and pastors.” In the most recent works of the traditionalists, the “authoritarian
perspective is balanced by a strong stress on loving and serving one’s family.’ This traditionalist gender approach was a prominent gender stance in the ICOC. For example, Sam Laing preached to a large group of ICOC men at a regional event: “God wanted men to be men and be strong and firm and lead the household... You need to repent and become masculine.” In the ICOC and other conservative religious movements, traditionalist approaches are often legitimated through an essentialist gender discourse: the idea that women and men behave, as a group, in particular ways because of some inherent, biological, or natural cause.

Essentialist gender discourse made sense to ICOC members and individuals in other conservative groups because it resonated with popular presentations of the importance of nature in the ways women and men behave. For example, members and leaders often referred to John Gray’s popular book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships,* as they attempted to make sense of communication and sex in marriage relationships. Jeremy described men as naturally more pragmatic and logical, and who should therefore be leaders in marriage and family. He and many other ICOC men talked of having to learn to communicate and express their feelings, constantly fighting that “male” tendency to go into a “cave.” Leaders reinforced essentialist discourse. Sam Laing argues in *Friends and Lovers* (28–29), “Let’s face it: It is usually men who hold back in communication. For the most part, wives need to talk, want to talk and try to talk. Most women would give anything if their husbands would stop and listen to them. But men so often do not hear.” Laing casts such gendered behavior as sinful: “They [men] do not talk. They sit in silence and superficiality. Let me call this masculine trait by several names it so richly deserves: *Arrogant. Hard-headed. Ignorant. Foolish.*”

Laing’s focus on the importance of male expressivity reflects a now competing model of masculinity that took shape as medical therapeutic models came to dominate in mid-twentieth-century U.S. society. During this time, social scientists and medical professionals began to argue that an instrumental male role model was potentially physically dangerous and argued that men needed to adopt expressivity and cease working long hours in an anxiety-provoking world of work. Barbara Ehrenreich (1983, 70) captures the genesis of this moral panic surrounding middle-
to upper-middle-class manhood in her book *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*: “In the 1950s, medical opinion began to shift from genetic to psychosocial explanations of men’s biological frailty: There was something wrong with the way men lived, and the diagnosis of what was wrong came increasingly to resemble the popular (at least among some men) belief that men ‘died in the harness,’ destroyed by the burden of responsibility. The disease which most clearly indicted the breadwinning role, and which became emblematic of men’s vulnerability in the face of bureaucratic capitalist society, was coronary heart disease.” Male expressivity as representative of freedom from the bonds of deadly breadwinning took shape in the mid-1970s through Men’s liberation books like Warren Farrell’s *The Liberated Man* and Jack Nichols’s *Men’s Liberation*; these writers “argued that the male sex role was oppressive and ought to be changed or abandoned,” that to be healthy a man must be able to release and express himself (Connell 1995, 23–24). Expressivity as a relational skill is now ingrained in our therapeutic culture; yet, it still exists alongside the notion that men are breadwinners, naturally more logical, and have to work harder to learn emotive habits and better communication skills. ICOC leader Gordon Ferguson (1997, 110) states: “Men in our culture have what appears to be a natural aversion to this level of communication. However, women are much more comfortable with it, and most wives deeply desire to experience this kind of communication with their husbands.” Both mainstream and religio-therapeutic prescriptive approaches suggest that men develop skills of relationality to combat this inherent gender disease. In the ICOC, relationality was presented by members and leaders as the discipler’s scalpel, an ideological instrument that “Dr. Gordon,” Sam Laing, Kip McKean, and other skilled local and regional ICOC Christian counselors would use to cut deep into the “hearts” of Kingdom “brothers” to remove natural male attitudes that stood in the way of mutuality.

Tackling and conquering the negative manifestations of gender essentialism filled descriptions of disciplers’ marriage interventions and advice for how to achieve a healthy married sex life: Sam Laing suggests: “A man needs no emotional reinforcement at all to become aroused. The mere sight of his wife’s body can quickly move him. . . women, on the other hand, need a stronger emotional connection with their husbands” (Laing and Laing 1996, 97–98). “Women,” he notes, “do not
have to have an orgasm during every session of lovemaking to experience contentment while a man must.” Laing tells us: “Men...[y]ou become frustrated and impatient, wondering why your cold frigid wife does not start to heavy-breathe when you try to pull her blouse off, or when she beholds you in all your unclothed masculine splendor. Wives, you wonder how this sex-beast could go from the depths of hardly speaking to you all day to the heights of passion in under ten seconds!” Laing’s answer to these essential differences involve mutuality: “If husbands and wives practice the law of love and are more eager to please than to be pleased, the issue of frequency can be solved.” The bottom line, “How much sex is enough? The answer is really quite simple: You are having enough sex when both people are completely satisfied. If either partner is not content, then increase your frequency until both the husband’s and wife’s needs are met” (Laing and Laing 1996, 86). Furthermore, with regard to quality and kind, “the goal should be to allow your wife to enjoy orgasms as often as she is capable, but without a sense of preoccupation or performance. . . . Focus instead on a loving, mutually satisfying relationship, and you will feel content and connected” (Laing and Laing 1996, 98). To feel connected, Laing stresses, couples must express themselves and listen well: “TALK! Don’t make your partner be a mind reader. Develop your own special ‘love language’ ”(Laing and Laing 1996, 100). City COC narratives of marriage discipling were full of references to disciplers teaching spouses how to talk openly about sex.

In stories of disciplers’ interventions, removing selfishness from hearts leveled essentialist gender difference and promoted “open hearts” and egalitarian marriage practices and habits. “Selfish hearts” surfaced frequently in member and leader stories of marriage discipling efforts as a metaphor for undesirable essentialized gendered characteristics and cultural stereotypes. “The aggressive feminist,” “the physically and/or verbally abusive husband/father,” “the overbearing, talkative wife,” all made an appearance in ICOC’s production of relational conditions cured by disciplers teaching mutuality.

Christian movements like the ICOC and Promise Keepers, groups that promote traditional and essentialist gender notions, have to contend with another strong ideological current in secular culture and Christian subcultures: gender egalitarianism. This, which Lockhart (2000, 80)
names a “Biblical feminist” perspective, “focuses on the unity of humanity” and encourages that “God created both men and women, and declared them very good.” This viewpoint sees the solution to marital ills as empowering all: “God empowering the man to change his life, the husband empowering his wife as a co-leader, the father empowering his children to become equals.” Biblical feminism surfaced in the ICOC as what Judith Stacey (1991) has called a kind of “postfeminism”: an attachment to core tenets of first and second wave feminisms (like egalitarianism and concern for the empowerment of women) while at the same time naming feminism dangerous. One way that Christian groups resolve the contradictory stance of sustaining both traditional, essentialist ideology and biblical feminism has been through stressing, as a grounding principle, core tenets of therapeutic culture like relationality and mutuality.

Lockhart (2000, 80) argues that evangelical and conservative religious groups heavily support a third distinct approach to gender negotiation, the “Why Can’t We All Get Along: The Pragmatic Counseling Approach.” He notes that this is the “most prevalent” perspective in conservative Christian literature, a “more pragmatic or therapeutic” approach that concentrates on “healing hurts and finding practical solutions.” Lockhart stresses that these “pragmatic counselors are not as concerned as others about the details of where masculinity and femininity come from or what gender roles are supposed to be. Instead, their concern is what best can be done in each situation to help people get along and do what needs to be done” (Lockhart 2000, 81). This Why Can’t We All Get Along approach was dominant in ICOC discourse as well. I later use here a well-documented enigmatic conservative Christian doctrine, female submission, to illustrate the construction and negotiation of gender traditionalism and biblical feminism through a pragmatic counseling approach—three contemporary religious approaches to facing gender issues in conservative Christian groups.

The traditionalist perspective in conservative Christianity legitimates female submission by drawing from the book of Ephesians 5:22–24, which reads, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (NIV). How-
ever, as I, and most other ethnographers studying female submission in conservative Christian groups have found, wives are quick to follow Ephesians 5:22–24 with 5:25–31 when they talk of submission: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”

It is not hard to see how verses 5:25–31 can work to support the biblical feminist position. Enacting this contradictory stance, where women are to “submit to husbands” in “everything” and the husband is the “head of the wife,” while husbands are called to give themselves up for their wives, as we can imagine, can be confusing in everyday application. In fact, in the City COC, stories of marriage discipling saving couples’ relationships frequently referred to female submission as a “confusing” and “funny” kind of thing. Amy, a black woman in her late thirties, told me, “When I’m marrying, I’m marrying my brother. We are sister and brother first before anything else. I’ll submit to God, but there’s no man made me. I won’t submit to another man.” She continued, “People think of submission as you have to submit, well my husband washes the dishes, my husband cleans the bathroom, and I do the same!” Amy insisted that female submission was misunderstood by most, and when actualized within the ICOC movement, under the guidance of skilled disciplers, it was a great source of relational power.

Women titled their stories as about female submission (traditionalist), their tone and defense was communicated with seemingly biblical feminist intent (as Amy’s assertion above suggests), but narratives were mostly about learning to enact mutual submission and relationality (in line with Lockhart’s Why Can’t We All Get Along approach). I only heard a few practical descriptions of wives learning to submit to their husbands’ wishes that did not entail mutuality, and these were primarily around financial issues. Several women told me that they were counseled by their marriage disciplers that they should not spend any money without first “talking it over” with their husbands. Two women told me stories of disciplers helping them “fight a selfish heart” because they wanted to buy an item that their husband felt they could not afford. These stories were
performances of femininity that adhered to cultural assumptions of men as the financial heads of households. But most stories of marriage disciplers helping with communication and sex issues were primarily about learning mutual respect.

Janet, a white woman in her early twenties, began her story of female submission with a biblical feminist voice. She told me that it was extremely difficult for her to “learn submission” after having been a leader in the City COC’s singles ministry for several years. She was opposed to the idea of submitting to her husband and had gained a great deal of informal organizational power and respect from her position as a singles ministry leader. She said that disciplers had to teach her how “powerful female submission” could be for a woman once she opened her heart to it. She offered as an example the following discipling session that occurred late one evening after Janet and her husband put in an emergency phone call to their marriage disciplers:

The wife of her marriage discipling couple asked both her and her husband to read First Corinthians 13:4–7 out loud. “Everywhere it says love,” her discipler instructed, “you put your name in.” Janet read: “Janet is patient, Janet is kind. Janet does not envy, she does not boast, she is not proud. Janet is not rude, Janet is not self-seeking, Janet is not easily angered, Janet keeps no record of wrongs. Janet does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Janet always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” The discipler then asked Janet if she had been all those things to her husband. Janet admitted that she had not lived up to these standards of love. Her husband then read the passage aloud, substituting his name. The wife of the discipling couple then asked him if he had been all those things to Janet. He admitted not living up to these standards of love. Reading this passage aloud, Janet claimed, made them realize how silly they were being and brought her closer to her husband. They took this lesson as a tool and applied it frequently, their biblical marriage mantra given to them by marriage disciplers.

Janet’s story (and those of other City COC women) of learning that female submission is really about mutual submission is not surprising. Gallagher and Smith (1999) argue that female submission, in the dis-
course of evangelical Christian women, manifests as a “rhetorical” submission and “practical” egalitarianism. Gallagher (2003), Brasher (1998), and Griffith (1997) offer works that suggest female submission for contemporary evangelical and fundamentalist Christian women can be an empowering stance, and that women often find power in the creation of their own social spaces and practices born of institutional religious gender segregation and hierarchy. However, the discursive attachment to the language and concept of “female submission” is also indicative of the limitations of institutions and individuals to fully embrace egalitarianism and mutuality; the insistence on adhering to female submission as part of a threefold conservative gender ideological position leaves much room for individual interpretation and power abuses.

Bartkowski (2001, 2004), Gallagher (2003), and Ingersoll (2003) offer evidence that the empirical reality of female submission is far more complex than previous research suggests. My ethnographic story here confirms their assertions. Most conservative religious efforts to perform gender in family are far from clear-cut, typically reflect individual circumstances, and depend a great deal on organizational practices that accompany a submissive female ideal. And too, as Ingersoll (2003, 1–7) makes clear, those telling us stories of female submission, especially if the research participant is still invested in the religious worldview, are likely to frame their stories in empowerment, mutuality, and egalitarianism. Research participants are aware that cultural ideals of mutuality and egalitarianism in intimate relationship are pervasive and that if they were to tell a story that centered on wives giving in to their husbands’ wishes, they would be crossing normative assumptions of contemporary egalitarian marriage. So they present selves that adhere to secular gender and relationship norms. The voices of former ICOC members reflect this complexity of experience.10

Former ICOC female members told different stories of female submission. Some talked of being silenced and disempowered by female submission. Others spoke of female submission as empowering, a marital ethic they carried with them as they found a new home in another evangelical church. As the unified ICOC movement fell apart and female members voiced concerns on-line about the effects of submission, their stories varied as well: some saw ICOC female submission as a dangerous teaching, others found it brought them power and influence. All of these
data support the assertion that female submission was a “puzzling,” confusing teaching in the ICOC, and that resulting power dynamics in marriage and church relationships were highly dependent on individual circumstances. Still, the idea that “female submission” would bring mutual respect and strong marriages remained a distinguishing piece of the movement’s gender discourse repertoire. Female submission in the ICOC appealed to members because they were told stories framed in biblical feminist principles, stories of mutual submission and egalitarianism; and they were promised sacred marriage disciplers, personal ideological specialists who would figure out the appropriate submissive position for each marital interaction or disagreement.

Someone to Tattle To

Egalitarianism and relationality emerged as most prominent in City COC women’s presentation of self. Alicia told me, “It’s great because we are not alone in marriage. We have free counseling, someone to tattle to.” Indeed, several women told me stories of “tattling” to their marriage disciplers, of using their marriage disciplers to get what they wanted. I heard more of these stories from women than men, most likely because I was limited in my interactions with male social groups. However, movement leaders encouraged spouses to “tell on” each other, and gave the impression that tattling went on in the marriages of top evangelists. At a large men-only event, Sam Laing used his marriage as an example: “There have been times when I’ve come home, ticked off, ready to give up on the Kingdom and become a Baptist. . . . Geri says, ‘What are you doing? You sinner. You go and fix this up.’ . . . I even give her permission, you can call anybody, call Steven Johnson, call Kip, call Randy, just tell on me. She will do that. . . . I will do the same for her and have many times.”

City COC women’s stories of “tattling” showcased mutual submission and relationality as the core ethic at work in their efforts; but implicit in their presentations was the idea that if the desire for something was very deep, they were able to get it through employment of disciplers. Alicia told a detailed account of using a marriage discipler to fulfill a longtime dream: a family dog. Laura told a story of how marriage disciplers helped her in a long-fought marital issue: her desire for her husband to initiate sex more often. These women had different end goals, but
both stories illustrate disciplers as being used by members with status to fulfill individual and relational goals.

Recall, at the beginning of this chapter, that Alicia told a marriage discipling story stressing communication, learning to control her emotions, and developing a romantic and sexually satisfying marriage relationship with Jeremy. She also insisted that church women had taught her how to be a submissive wife. During our formal interview, Alicia told me about how much she admired the husband who had been (along with his wife) counseling (marriage discipling) Alicia and Jeremy for years: “He is one of the most kind people in the world. He is very focused. Every time we get together he asks how things are going and he helped me get my dog.” “How so?” I asked.

Well, Jeremy was like, we don’t live in a barn we cannot get a dog! So I sat at the table and cried. I said Mike [the marriage discipler], I always had a dog growing up, always. And now you mean to tell me that I have to put my dream of having a dog away for the rest of my life. I’m like, I want my kids to know that feeling of man’s best friend. I want that. And I was so convicted about it and Carrie [Mike’s wife] was like, well she didn’t like pets either, so she wasn’t helping at all. She could have cared less if I got a dog or not and she told me that. And so I just looked at Mike and said, “Help me.” And he said, “You know what, brother [to Jeremy], whatever makes your family run smoothly is what you should want for your family.” He was like, “What is the harm in having a little dog?” And Jeremy, at that point, he wasn’t really ready so he said he’d think about it.

“And so you got the dog?” I asked.

“Yeah, a little black dog. He’s a mixture.” She pointed to the dog sleeping in a corner. Laura, a thirty-five-year-old white woman married to a computer engineer, Charlie, a white man in his mid-thirties as well, told a story of how her marriage disciplers helped her husband initiate sex more often. Laura, who had given up a career as an accountant to stay home and raise their two children, complained to the wife of their marriage discipling team that Charlie was not initiating sex enough, and that she was always the aggressor. Her discipler advised her to “submit” and “let him lead.” At the same time, Laura’s husband was disciplined by their marriage discipling couple on initiating sex more often. Laura explained,
See, I was intimidating Charlie by the way I was acting [asking too often for sex]. After we got help it felt so good to be led in bed. I can be submissive then. Women crave that. Women get turned on when men lead.”

Laura suggested that their disciplers had enabled her to enact a more normative and desirable female sexuality: woman as receiver of sexual advances. Disciplers’ solutions were described as preached in a language of essentialized femininity and masculinity, but, as Laura’s description of her utilization of marriage disciplers suggests, she was taking charge of her sex life, leading (in bed) if you will, by involving marriage disciplers in the dispute. Similarly, Charlie could now feel as if he was “leading” because his behavior had been labeled such by disciplers and Laura, when, in fact, his advances were shaped by a marriage discipling process driven by his wife’s concerns that he become more of a sexual leader and aggressor. Had Laura submitted, or did Charlie submit to her wishes? The answer is subjective, but clearly, the story she told achieved a purpose: marriage discipling was presented as an intimate therapeutic process able to help couples negotiate sensitive issues and to enact mutuality.

Several women suggested that the “men, the brothers,” can get through to their husbands—“The guys can get through to him where if I said the same thing it would be like I’m bugging him. If they talk to him, he can see it clearer.” In their stories, marriage disciplers were presented as helping couples listen to each other—to see a spouse’s position more clearly while sifting through various cultural assumptions of gender and sexuality.

Stories of successful marriage discipling interventions regarding marital sex consistently wavered back and forth from a language of female submission and male leadership and featured practical lessons of mutual submission and pleasure. Laura and Alicia described an essentialized sexuality, suggesting that women naturally “desire” men to “lead in bed,” and at the same time offered lists of ways that women could seduce their husbands and “take charge.” Alicia laughed as she recalled, “Jeremy takes charge and I tell him, that turns me on, I love that when you do that, even when you look at me and tell me, ‘You need to be quiet.’ . . . I’m like . . . it kind of makes me mad but women love that, women love to be led.” Her description of another sexual encounter (encouraged by advice from her marriage discipler) involved her submitting to her husband by playing the role of servant and aggressor: dressing up in a sexy
gown, disrobing her husband, and feeding him fruits and chocolates. In many ways this contradictory position of submissive sexual partner and female aggressor made sense to these women; they lived in a society that supported similar contrary positions regarding female sexuality.12

Members’ descriptions of heroic marriage disciplers depicted these counselors teaching mutuality as easily accessible; day or night, couples claimed that they were given almost immediate attention. By entering the marital conflict “on the spot,” as Pat suggested, marriage disciplers enter “real-life conflict” and can “work miracles.” Laura, for example, had to phone her marriage discipler on several occasions to help control her tendency to “lead” in sexual encounters. Members suggested that they felt “confident” they could work through any problem that came up in a marriage because “disciplers are always right there.” One woman described calling her marriage disciplers late one night and the counselors sitting on their couch for therapy within an hour of their request. Alicia also spoke of marriage disciplers at her fingertips in the midst of marital conflict: “I could call on them anytime with anything. . . . Once I was on the phone with this sister [her discipler] and I was crying and I was like, I need to stop crying in front of Jeremy and she was, ‘No, you don’t. He needs to see the real you . . . he needs to see it. When you get off the phone explain to him why you were crying.’”

Descriptions of intimate, at-your-fingertips marriage therapy intensified the sacred power of the discipling community by suggesting that a member would never be without an advisor and/or marriage counselor who would enforce mutuality. Julie told me that “even after you get married there are tons of other married people in the Kingdom that you can get different interpretations from.” Assigned marriage disciplers were not always presented as having the answers—but the discipling network was talked about by members as able to compensate for this inevitability by bringing in other couples when necessary. One member related: “It hasn’t always been easy, you know we have had, with the discipling, just isn’t getting anywhere, other couples do come in . . . and it’s always worked out . . . a third party comes in and it comes together!” Members and leaders stressed this extended network as a unique backup system—contributing to the idea that the marriage discipling system was almost foolproof.

Member descriptions of marriage disciplers emphasized that they
frequently came from similar life situations. Like self-help groups, then, marriage discipling gained legitimacy and power through like-minded individuals coming together to listen to each other’s stories and learn from each other’s mistakes and advances. Members talked of being “matched” to marriage disciplers from similar life situations, of being given marital therapists with specialties in areas where marriages were weak (sex, communication, disagreements on child rearing). Members raved that marriage disciplers were able to offer sound advice largely because they had firsthand experience with negotiating sex, managing money, and/or breaking through “dysfunctional” communication habits. Ronny stated, “If you are not getting along in any area, be it financial bumps or I’m feeling stressed about the bills and I don’t know if we can, just go and get some input from somebody who has been down that road.” Jeremy said, “There’s a couple we’re discipling now, she has a real high emotional quotient, and he has a very low one. So in a lot of ways there are things in their lives that they are facing that we faced years ago. And so we are able to share with them how to go about getting through it and how to transform.” Discipling relationships (marriage discipling and one-on-one) were presented by members and leaders as driven by relationality and grounded in authority and submission.

A Secure, Though not Invincible, Raft

Discipling was presented by members and leaders as a safety network of sacred counselors, ideological specialists equipped for survival in a pressing contemporary divorce culture. Marriage disciplers did not provide couples with a concrete and simple repertoire of gender beliefs, practices, and approaches to married life; they presented a number of proper ways to enact femininity and masculinity, various ways to be husbands and wives. The received repertoire could have been confusing, but stories about improving spousal communication and sex life showed disciplers reconciling traditionalist and essentialist gender notions with more egalitarian ideals of family and intimate relationships and grounding their efforts in therapeutic process and ideals—thereby producing a more coherent picture.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 delve more into disciplers’ gender prescriptions and interventions as they tried to make sense of gender roles in relationships with family of origin, in parenting, and as brothers and sisters in the
ICOC Kingdom. In a world where cultural presumptions and values of motherhood, fatherhood, husbandhood, and wifehood are so fraught with contradiction and ambiguity, it is virtually impossible for any religious movement to propose one clear, coherent set of gender ideals and practices. Research in conservative religious movements over the last twenty years offers strong confirmation of this inability, and the inevitability of organizational accommodation, appropriation, and challenging of various cultural gender beliefs and practices. The ICOC, however, was somewhat different in their approach to providing clarity of action and ideology. Unlike many other religious movements, they assigned mandatory, individual sacred counselors to help each member and each married couple discriminate between contradictory practices and beliefs as they arose through particular spousal issues. In our therapeutic culture, this assignment resonated deeply with members’ cultural tool kits—an expert guide they should show deference to, available to help with approach and resolution of any number of personal and relational problems.

Individual member anecdotes of using the discipling network to achieve personal goals in marriage relationships, as with Alicia’s dog story and Laura’s sex initiation account, told with emphasis on relationality and mutual submission, may give the impression that women were, in some real sense, empowered by their experiences of “traditional” ideology and female submission in the ICOC. I want to make it clear that my analysis here is not meant to argue an empowerment or disempowerment position on female submission, or that female submission may be purely rhetorical in the ICOC. Heroic discipling stories and Alicia’s and Laura’s descriptions were, as noted, performances of successful discipling framed in cultural values that they knew I, and others, would respect. We went on our journeys of improving the self using the same cultural tools. I was socialized, as most of my research participants were, through media, schools, religious groups, and families that taught me to respect therapeutic values. Given the obvious performance of moral selves and relationships I was audience to as a researcher in the ICOC, my analysis calls attention to a more complicated sociological phenomenon: the existence of multiple ways of managing cultural ambiguity, and the idiosyncratic outcomes of balancing contradictory positions. Personal history, social location, and where and among whom one attempts to assemble cultural
cohesion greatly determine empowerment and disempowerment outcomes.

Alicia and Laura offered a presentation of self and relationship meant to impress. If their accounts are accurate, it is likely that their position in the congregation as longtime members gave them social resources and local knowledge that enhanced their ability to manipulate marriage disciplers. They were also respected disciplers in the congregation, members who had long-established commitments to the group through proselytizing, monetary giving, and extensive family group counseling efforts. When they brought a concern to their disciplers or lead evangelists on a local level, leaders listened; they were well-respected “older Christians” (time in church). Narratives of marital healing from “younger” City COC Christians did not contain this kind of direct presentation of discipler manipulation. Younger disciplers’ stories were more of how disciplers actively named their problems and helped them achieve respect and mutual submission in marriage. It is also significant that Alicia and Laura were educated women who had well negotiated bureaucratic institutions and developed social skills and habits that enabled them to succeed in career and achieve a seemingly secure middle-class lifestyle. They knew how to follow rules, defer to authority, and thus achieve and maintain respect within the ICOC system. The experience of marriage discipling, and especially any statement of power relations among spouses, was clearly dependent on group status and, I would argue, on individual background, education, and socioeconomic status.

Because members I spoke with had a high investment in presenting themselves as flourishing under discipling, it is necessary to think seriously about ex-member experiences and contrary accounts in light of group status and socioeconomic position. For example, members boasted of the absence of domestic violence in group: how could domestic violence continue, Pat insisted, if we are “in each other’s lives” and “not afraid to name” problems? Pat and others insisted that if a woman was being physically or verbally abused, they were going to know about it and the husband would be “harshly disciplined” by the “brothers.” Given the frequent and extensive involvement I witnessed in the City COC discipling community, this assertion seems logical. Yet one former member told me of how he saw women silenced through marriage disciplers’ teachings of female submission. He also argued that some women were
encouraged to stay in physically abusive relationships. This ex-member, who had been part of a local nonpaid leadership staff in a southwestern state, suggested that leaders decided who should be pushed and who should not be pushed. His account again speaks to the importance of group position: a husband or wife with high group status who was integral to congregational and movement success may not be pressed as deeply in marriage discipling. Other ex-members have suggested that disciples who were doctors, lawyers, and individuals with high degrees or celebrity status were not discipled as harshly because their membership was seen by leaders as legitimating for the movement.

Furthermore, Alicia and Laura were women who knew whom to approach with a particular problem. Alicia, for example, knew that Mike was more likely to be sympathetic of her desire for a family dog. Carrie (Mike’s wife), she made clear, could have “cared less” whether or not she got her pet. Alicia’s decision to approach Mike likely has something to do then with her church tenure: knowing whom to “tattle to” is acquired, insider knowledge. Furthermore, Carrie’s and Mike’s personalities and individual circumstances no doubt had much to do with how they approached marriage discipling. With no formal training, marriage disciplers pieced together relational skills and therapeutic techniques from a number of different sources: previous life knowledge, possibly professional training, pop psychology, Christian marriage self-help literature, and a cursory lesson of therapeutic techniques given by ICOC disciplers and leaders. It is no surprise, then, that marriage discipling method and therapeutic approach would have varied greatly across the nation. All of the above—group status, church tenure, socioeconomic status, education, life position, and lack of official training for ICOC marriage disciplers—suggest that experiences of marriage discipling were highly dependent on individual circumstance.

The varied experience of marriage discipling in group speaks to the power of ICOC’s organizational performance. The organization was, to an extent and for a limited time, able to keep a picture alive of extraordinary healing in a tight-knit community where couples experienced varying levels of discipling effectiveness. How did the organization do this? For one, they developed a discourse repertoire with excessive ideological breadth that resonated deeply with members’ and potential converts’ understandings of moral ideals and approach. Second, the organization
developed somewhat effective ways to confront negative labels headon—they were able to keep damaging stories at bay by naming them as forbidden “spiritual pornography,” the authors as having “closed hearts,” and discrediting intent and accounts. Finally, they were able to keep powerful group hegemonic tales alive through the frequent telling of narratives and creative use of contemporary media like DPI texts, KNN video, film, and the ICOC website. Members understood these narratives of healing self and relationships as grounded in their real, day-to-day experiences of relationship within the discipling community. In each of these efforts, members and the organization worked to construct boundaries that cast all outside as lost and all inside as saved; outside as not-Christian, inside as Christian; outside as lacking divine power, inside as bursting with Godly healing energy.

Unresolved marriage disputes, breakups, and serious marriage discipling failures were curiously absent from member and leader presentations. When divorce and separation were spoke of they were used as examples of disciples who had “selfish” and “closed hearts.” I had to push hard in the field to hear anything of marriage discipling failure. When life events in leaders’ stories of marriage healing did not make sense to me, I would ask for clarification of circumstances, and on a few occasions I learned of members whose spouses had affairs in group and unfaithful couples who had left the ICOC community. Still, leaders argued, this did not negate their claim to no divorces in the Kingdom because those who divorced left the movement. So the movement did not have divorced couples, but they did have members who had divorced, their stories of divorce in group shadowed by their testimonies of remarriage in the Kingdom or fulfilling life as a single ICOC disciple.

The movement was successful, for a limited number of years and to a limited number of people, in presenting an ideal picture of marriage discipling as a secure raft in a foreboding divorce culture driven by gender confusion; but it was clearly not an invincible raft. Marriage discipling was, to many over twenty years, a great way to manage cultural confusion, to navigate messy gendered and relational waters, to turn all the uncertainty of intimate relationships into what they perceived as romantic, communicative, “awesome” marriages. Even as the unified movement crumbled, and former members from across the country debated discipling, the One True Church doctrine, and top leadership’s
intent, some still held firm to their marriage discipling success stories. Clearly, a large number of marriages were “saved” in the movement, perhaps those lucky enough to have marriage disciplers who had effective therapeutic relational skills, or those who stayed in the movement long enough to take advantage of the benefits of long-term Christian therapy. Perhaps some of those success stories were couples who may have been at a point in their relationships when they were ready and eager to change. It is possible too that many marriages were threatened and/or destroyed by the movement. In the flood of conversations between former members on-line in 2003–2004, there were many stories of marriage disciplers weakening and destroying relationships. As in secular society and any other religio-therapeutic approach, therapeutic outcomes depend largely on individual circumstances. The ICOC well performed a Kingdom full of exceptionally able Christian marriage counselors, but they could not always deliver.

Narratives and performances of heroic marriage discipling were only one venue for ICOC’s powerful organizational performance of awesome marriage. The movement also succeeded in sustaining an image of excellent and unique sacred power through grand charismatic and theatrical collective performances of awesome family, group rituals that reaffirmed the therapeutic effectiveness of the discipling community.