Awesome Families

Kathleen E. Jenkins

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Chapter 3

Collective Performances of Healing

This ethnographic story I tell of “awesome family” is biased in particular ways. Had I been under thirty and single, I would probably have been matched with a church informant who was young and single. I would also have been invited to regional singles retreats where I would have worshiped and met other available ICOC Christian singles. Had I been a single mother, I would have been introduced to another single mother and invited to single parent group meetings where I would likely have felt accepted and understood. Because I was a woman studying a group that separated frequently by gender, I inevitably spent more time with women in the church. In addition, the City COC congregation was composed mainly of married families with children, and so there was an abundance of these targeted events to attend. Field studies in another ICOC congregation may have presented more opportunities for events aimed at singles and college students. Had I been that under-thirty single sociologist, I would probably not have been so eagerly invited to participate in the large yearly regional event extravaganza, Marriage Enrichment. With each invitation, I politely declined for my husband, telling Pat and other leaders that I preferred to keep my research separate from my marriage. Yet I was still encouraged and welcomed at these retreats, where I sat on two occasions, along with a handful of other lone women, surrounded by church married couples and potential converts anxious to learn how to spark romance and heal marriages.

Talk of “Marriage Enrichment 1999” began weeks before the retreat was to take place. “Go out there,” City COC’s lead evangelist said during the Sunday morning service, and find the people who are “having
problems” in their marriages. Bring them in so they can “get the cancer out” of their failing unions. Leaders encouraged members to describe to friends, family, and acquaintances a church that had the power and game plan to intervene intimately in lackluster marriages and transform them into “awesome” unions. Members were given an exciting Marriage Enrichment itinerary to entice friends: a night alone with your spouse in a nice hotel room, inspiring speakers, a massage workshop, an “Evening in Paris” dance and reception on Saturday night in the hotel ballroom, and, as church rumor had it before the 1999 marriage retreat, a sermon for the men that included a serious look at Clifford and Joyce Penner’s 1981 mainstream Christian prescriptive text, *The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment*. Retreat attendees paid a twenty-five-dollar fee and the cost of a room if couples desired an overnight romantic stay in the hotel.

The lobby outside the large hotel ballroom at the start of the retreat was full of activity and excitement. A book sale area was set up where members and their guests could purchase ICOC books, videos, and tapes. Members from around the region welcomed one another with hugs. Travel bags on trolleys were piled in a corner as people arriving minutes before the event tried to check in. There was a small band (composed of City COC members) in the corner playing the wedding march. A registration table was set up outside the ballroom doors. After finding my name on the preregistration list, a young single church member (the “singles” helped run the event so that the “marrieds” could concentrate on the retreat) handed me my retreat envelope. The package contained information on restaurants and downtown attractions and the “You’re Still the One Marriage Enrichment Retreat” weekend schedule:

### You’re Still the One Marriage Enrichment Retreat

**Saturday** (date)

10:00 a.m. Registration and Check In

1:00 p.m. Singing and Welcome (name of CCOC hosts)

- **Ballroom—First Floor**
  - From This Moment
  - Randy McKean
  - You’re Still the One
  - Randy and Kay McKean

3:45 p.m. The Spice of Life . . .

- **Men: Ballroom—Third Floor**
- **Women: Ballroom—First Floor**
Communicate (male speaker) (female speaker)
Your Love
Dating in Marriage “ “
Massage “ “
Variety “ “

6:00 p.m. Dinner Break
8:00 p.m. Dance and Reception—“An Evening in Paris”
          Ballroom—First Floor
11:00 p.m. Worship Service
          Communion
          Personal Sharing—“Always and Forever”
          Ballroom—First Floor

The retreat schedule was printed in a booklet with extra space for note taking. Taking notes during sermons and events was an informal group norm, which rendered my constant note taking not out of the ordinary. My Marriage Enrichment package also included a personalized invitation to the Evening in Paris Dance and Reception that read: “It pleases us to invite our friends Mark Lerman and Kathleen Jenkins, to a Dance and Reception at the special Evening in Paris.” Other handouts for the retreat included an 8½ × 11 inch pink paper that read: “Massage Class 101—This class entitles you to think like you’re a doctor—Enjoy your new role in life!” The paper offered diagrams of massage points for “headaches/neck stiffness,” “sinus congestion/headaches,” “mid back tightness,” and “low back pain/menstrual cramps.” We also received another sheet, “Variety Is the Spice of Life,” that listed fifty suggestions for how to make our marriages exciting and fun:

Variety Is The Spice Of Life
Ideas To Keep Your Relationship Special

This list was developed with the hope that each couple will add or subtract from it as they strive to keep their relationship as fun and exciting as it can be. We hope you’ll find some of these ideas helpful in stretching your imagination:

- Go on a date once every week.
- Write the story of how you met. Get it printed and bound.
- List your spouse’s best qualities in alphabetical order.
- Tour a museum or an art gallery.
- Notice the little changes your spouse makes in his/her appearance.
- Float on a raft together.
- Take a stroll around the block—and hold hands as you walk.
- Stock the cupboards with food your spouse loves to eat (but only if he or she isn’t on a diet).
- Give your spouse a back rub.
- Rent a classic love-story video and watch it while cuddling.²

At that point, there was no question in my mind that constructing romance and reinvigorating couples’ sex lives would be a key component of the retreat. The clinical therapeutic tone and intimate nature of ICOC marriage intervention was clear.

As I walked away from the check-in station and searched for Pat in the crowded, bustling lobby, the young woman at the registration table called back to me, “Wait, you forgot your gift!” I returned to the table and she handed me a bag with a personalized candle that read Mark Lerman and Kathleen Jenkins, Marriage Enrichment Day 1999, a bottle of massage and bath oil, and body lotion. I read through my retreat packet and thought about how my engraved candle would look on the bookshelf in my home office beside other church event favors: the potted plant printed with “How Does Your Garden Grow” that I received on Women’s Day and the chocolate mints with the saying “I will get there [heaven and the event]” printed on the wrapper. These event favors were part of ICOC material culture, religious objects that reinforced the event’s message. The Marriage Enrichment Day candle, lit in the privacy of one’s home or hotel room, signified that the discipling community was the only Christian church where you could be assured of having a romantic, fulfilling, and long-lasting marriage.

Pat finally found me in the crowd. She was excited about the retreat and told me again that my husband really should have come, “just for a fun time.” She and Tom had arranged for baby-sitting with a younger church member and were going to spend a night in the hotel. We walked together into the ballroom of the upscale hotel. In the front of the room
there was a raised stage decorated with plants and twinkle lights, two huge speakers, and to the left of the stage a large movie screen. There were rows of folding chairs (enough to hold approximately eight hundred people) that took up most of the large room. Pat had saved a seat for me a few rows from the front and introduced me to Janice, a white woman about thirty-five from a nearby congregation. I said hello and, as I did with almost everyone I met in the ICOC, mentioned that I was there because I was a sociologist interested in writing about the movement. Janice and her husband sat to my right and Pat and Tom to my left. By the start of the service approximately four hundred married church couples from across the New England region had gathered in the ballroom.

We began the service singing hymns from the movement's songbook, our arms around each other’s waists and shoulders. Most ICOC services and events began this way, although the majority of members did not bring their songbooks, as they knew the songs by heart. This clearly designated me as an outsider at first; over time, I too began to sing along comfortably now and then. Following the opening songs on Marriage Enrichment 1999 we listened to a group of five men (three white, two black), dressed in black and wearing sunglasses, perform an Elvis/Motown musical comedy skit, followed by another white female member in evening attire singing a pop rock love song. After the musical introduction, the lights dimmed and all attention focused on a large screen for a slide show that featured many of the ICOC couples present at the retreat: wedding photos followed by more recent photographs. Smiling couples flashed in front of us, communicating the idea that the community was a church family composed of happy and healthy marriage relationships. The wide-screen ICOC family wedding album closed and the lights came up. The first speaker stood at the podium. I grew uneasy as I came to understand what this local male evangelist had in mind. He was going to begin his portion of the retreat with a strategy for couple closeness I had experienced for the first time during Marriage Enrichment 1995.

In 1995, the guest speaker, longtime member and church author Gordon Ferguson, was introduced to us by the City COC lead evangelist as a “doctor.” “Dr. Gordon does not have an MBA, an MA, or a PhD, but he is a doctor nonetheless, and he is going to get the cancer out of your marriages.” Ferguson was presented to us in 1995 as a kind of sacred surgeon, armed with the power of God and the power of therapeutic be-
lie and practice. Church leaders frequently used the word “cancer” to describe marital disease and illness. Relational cancer was a powerful metaphor (Sontag 1979); cancer has been stigmatized and associated with imminent death, and in some cases individuals were blamed for being susceptible to cancer (through what they eat, or whether or not they keep a “healthy” lifestyle). More recently, some cancers (prostate for example), due to advanced medical screening and treatments, are thought of by many as more of a living disease. Individuals with cancer today are increasingly expected to continually appeal to doctors and medical “experts” for treatment and “surveillance” (Clark et al. 2003). Such a pursuit signals a faithful attempt at wellness and healing for physical, emotional, and relational health. ICOC’s formal discourse of relational “cancers” and disciplers as sacred surgeons drew from cultural standards that a genuine pursuit of healing involves seeking the very latest therapeutic medical prevention, intervention, and treatment.

In 1995 “Dr. Gordon” asked the eight hundred or so attendees gathered in an old, beautiful, majestic theater to stand and face their spouses. I stayed seated while almost everyone in the theater stood and turned to look at their partners. Gordon told us that some of the couples had probably had a relationship “bump” earlier in the day or week but not to worry, he was going to show us how to fix that. He asked that the husbands say to their wives, “Honey, I’m wrong. I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” The husbands repeated his words, and many in the audience giggled and laughed. The laughter seemed to be instigated by the unfamiliar and awkward public nature of the scene: hundreds of couples staring into each other’s eyes, embarrassed perhaps at enacting what might typically be a private moment of social interaction. Gordon then asked that the women say the same to their husbands. They did. Gordon noted that some of the couples were kissing and quickly named this open display of affection a good thing. He wanted more, though. He told them that it shouldn’t be like a kiss for a friend, it should be a “real kiss!” They seemed, in 1995, to eagerly follow his instructions. And I felt, my head lowered, as if I had intruded on an intimate yet clearly social moment of spousal affection.

There I was again in 1999, taken by surprise that the service was to begin with the same ritual performance that highlighted and reaffirmed members’ faith in ICOC romantic marriage. I found myself suddenly
wishing that I had sat alone in the back row. Like “Dr. Gordon,” this leader was not satisfied with the first kiss and so asked that couples kiss again. Using Gordon Ferguson’s 1995 approach, he voiced disapproval at the first passionless kiss, and members laughed and giggled at the prospect of kissing again. We were told that the next kiss needed to be a “long, hot kiss” and that it should last for ten seconds. Pat leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Poor Kay.”

“That’s OK. I’m all right,” I assured her.

At that moment her husband, Tom, reached his arm around to hold Pat and offer her that “long, hot kiss.” As he did so he accidentally bumped my shoulder. We pretended it did not happen. And then I stood, for ten very long seconds, with hundreds of church members kissing around me.

One kiss was not enough, two kisses were not enough, even three explicitly passionate kisses were not enough to achieve the kind of heightened passionate energy leaders wanted to fill the atmosphere of the large hotel convention room where “awesome” ICOC love stories would be performed throughout the Marriage Enrichment production. So, as if in a school pep rally, this leader set the stage further by calling out congregations, region by region, and assigning them “lover” names. As he spoke, each group stood, applauding, some laughing, some repeating phrases like, “Yeah, go brother!”—all responses indicated that they were pleased with their regional romantic nicknames.

Here are the red hot lovers from the —— region!

And we have the passionate lovers from the —— region!

Then we have the wild and crazy lovers from the —— region!

And then we have the anything goes lovers from the CCOC region!

With each assignment of a nickname, and the loud, energetic congregational responses that followed, Marriage Enrichment’s formal production pumped up an image of church couples as engaged in uncommonly erotic and sexually satisfying sacred unions.

The tone and nature of ICOC’s explicit brand of Christian couples therapy was further set by the Marriage Enrichment guest speaker. The Marriage Enrichment 1999 featured speakers were Randy and Kay McKean, the brother and sister-in-law of the group’s founder, Kip McK-
can. During most regional ICOC events a speaker, usually high-status well-known ministry leaders in the movement like the 1995 Marriage Enrichment guest “Dr. Gordon,” delivered a lengthy message (sometimes over an hour), followed by several shorter ten- to fifteen-minute testimonies by regional members. Guest speakers’ performances were filled with humor. McKean’s talk that day was no exception.

At the start of his message on Marriage Enrichment 1999, Randy began with sexual humor. He stressed the oneness of the marriage union, giving much emphasis to couples being “joined.” He said he was “fired up that God also made women” and that he “likes women.” Great laughter followed other heterosexist jokes like, “God created marriage with Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” In the ICOC, like most other conservative Christian movements, “homosexuality” is considered a sin. Randy continued with his comedic script: “ Revenge of the church ladies,” he reads from a magazine article, “a survey about church ladies and the men who sleep with them.” “They have,” he went on, “more sexual freedom and are happier.” These church ladies benefit, he told us, from having husbands who believe that God created sex and who tells us in Proverbs 5:18–19 (NIV), “May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.” “Christian husbands,” he stressed, “are taking this passage quite literally!” The congregation laughed loudly. Some members around me in the audience had tears in their eyes from laughter.

During Marriage Enrichment 1999, McKean, visibly sweating, worked the Marriage Enrichment audience into a heightened sacred state with his sermon packed with humor and his personal romantic marriage story. He moved his arms as if conducting an orchestra, directing the palpable collective energy he and the local leader who first took the podium had worked so hard to create. As he lifted his arms in front of him he said,

Marriage is the total commitment of the total person for the total life.

It’s like two rivers joining.

When they meet they become turbulent.
His arms then became two rivers joining, hitting, and mixing:

But if you look downstream, it is bigger, better, and deeper. . .

Marriage must be centered on Jesus Christ.

His arms settled calmly before him.

Marriage needs a delicate touch and patience.

McKean then asked that the husbands and wives stand and face one another and take off their wedding rings. My heart beat rapidly as I stood again, fearing another kissing couple episode. All the couples in the convention room stood and faced one another. Couples were touching each other lovingly on the hands, the face, the shoulders. I lowered my head to avoid trespassing romantic glances. Then McKean slowly read passages from the Song of Songs, a poetic Hebrew Bible book that contains many love poems. He had the men repeat vows and biblical love poetry and women repeat vows and poetry, and then had the couples exchange wedding bands and give them to their spouses again. The room felt charged with passion. Pat again acknowledged the awkwardness of my sitting alone through these interactions. “Poor Kay, here you are again,” she offered.

“It’s OK. Really, I’m fine.”

Marriage Enrichment’s strong and detailed emphasis on sexual fulfillment as an ideal expectation in marriage is reflective of contemporary society. The availability of reliable birth control, the separation of sex from reproduction in the early twentieth century, the sexual freedom of the countercultural revolution, and the medicalization of sexuality have produced a culture that expects that individuals will work to have “healthy” sex lives. Try to imagine preindustrial family spouses traveling to the then moral authority (ministers) for a meeting intended to teach them how to ensure that they are both sexually satisfied. The minister shows them diagrams of male and female genitalia, talks of how to find the clitoris, talks of how to make sure that both couples are getting enough sex, and encourages them to go on romantic dates and write each other poems and love notes. Kay McKean stood at the pulpit in the afternoon on Marriage Enrichment Day in 1999 and told the group of
ICOC women: “I’m going to get kind of down and graphic here now. . . . There is one piece of the human anatomy, of males and females together, only one piece whose only function is pleasure and that is the clitoris—did I say that right? Oh, now I’m embarrassed.” Her emphasis is a reflection of contemporary notions of sexuality, feminism, and our therapeutic focus on the importance of self-fulfillment.

To potential converts and ICOC members, the groups’ heavy emphasis on sexual satisfaction, the bottle of massage oil, the engraved candle, the hotel room, diagrams, and exercises that taught them how to please themselves and their partners seemed not radical or out of place, but crucial for a healthy Christian marriage. The methods and discourse were familiar from both mainstream secular counselors and popular psychology and Christian marriage counselors (recall Clifford and Joyce Penner’s [1981] book *The Gift of Sex*). Furthermore, orchestrated physical interactions during Marriage Enrichment Day (couples kissing, and advising couples to recite biblical love poetry) were powerful performances—a kind of religio-therapy that appeared to bring immediate results. McKean’s and Ferguson’s Marriage Enrichment performances illustrated the kind of intimate and hands-on marital coaching and advice that members and potential converts could expect to receive from mandatory ICOC marriage disciplers: disciplers who would shape unsatisfying, boring, stuck-in-a-rut marriages into heightened romantic ecstasy, who would help you understand when to submit and when to stand strong in opposition. In secular culture, couples may shop around for that perfect professional, the one who is able to provide a combination of listening, inspiration, and practical advice. The ICOC, through formal events like Marriage Enrichment, made the discipling movement seem the “right” therapeutic choice.

**The Effectiveness of Collective Ritual**

The life circumstances of an ethnographer influence how she perceives and experiences individuals and cultures; the stories she tells and her interpretations of events are seen through her own life concerns, race, socioeconomic status, religious upbringing, and gender. Perhaps no one understands the relevancy of life history and social location more than church disciplers, who customized their evangelical approaches and performances of awesome church family to impact potential converts in meaningful ways. Pat, my major informant, was white, like me, and was
college educated. I spent the most intimate of my participant observation
with female disciples who were married, had small children, and were
from similar educated middle-class backgrounds. During my final year of
field observation Pat and I each gave birth to our third child and so
shared complaints of pregnancy and the exhilaration of new life. We were
similar people in very many ways.

Pat’s reaching out to me after my first informant moved to another
ICOC zone in a distant state may well have been purposeful; ex-
members and members confirmed that church leaders tried to “match”
potential converts with like disciples. In fact, shepherding couples and
ministry leaders met weekly to discuss how to “help” potential converts
and church members and assign appropriate disciplers. I asked several
times to attend one of these meetings, but my requests were denied. When
I inquired about what exactly went on at a particular weekly meeting,
Pat told me that one of the things they had talked about was how she
might work with me in Bible studies to make sure I understood why
being a disciple was so powerful for her. Many of the group perfor-
mances I observed were ones that ICOC leaders felt would resound
with my own needs, and reflect kindly on the church. Such researcher
choreography on the part of leaders in new religious movements
(NRMs) that have been named deviant by anti-cult groups and media
are not uncommon (Rubin 2001).

In the end, my position as a researcher in the movement was prima-
arily that of an audience member: what I saw was mostly front-stage action,
the scenes they wanted me to see (Goffman 1959). But this front-stage
action is incredibly important: they are the main-stage productions that
played a large role in drawing so many people to the ICOC. These per-
formances, combined with my attempts at pulling up the backdrop here
and there—hearing ex-member narratives, speaking with members from
various race/ethnic and socioeconomic status backgrounds, asking for
tapes of men-only events where I would not have been welcomed, in-
terviewing members much younger than me, and observing snippets of
informal interactions in members’ homes—confirmed that whether sin-
gle or married, young or old, building an awesome family was a domi-
nant group theme.

The church held large regional events like Marriage Enrichment
several times a year, occasions where hundreds of members gathered in
one place to address a particular point of family healing, where theatrical
performances of self and organization reaffirmed discipling’s unusual therapeutic powers. Individual members’ stories of marriage discipling as powerful were affirmed as they came together with hundreds of other church couples and leaders to celebrate, worship, and be inspired by stories of miraculous marriage healing. Single members had their own elaborate worship events like the Valentine’s Dance and Singles’ Retreats where regional members and church leaders came together and told stories of how dating in the ICOC was safe, loving, and fulfilling; how disciplers guided the church dating process, monitoring dates and demanding respect, love, and sexual abstinence. Men across the region gathered yearly for a Men’s Day where they told stories of becoming better husbands, fathers, and brothers in the “Kingdom of God.” Women gathered at annual regional Women’s Days, where they celebrated the divine power present in discipling relationships that had helped them be “awesome” wives, mothers, and sisters.

Humor was a popular and frequent method of raising the performance energy during these events and services. Religious communities often use jokes and humor as a mechanism to focus a group and “stimulate or sustain a gathering” (Heilman 1973, 194). Early on in my fieldwork I observed Randy McKean raise group energy at another regional event by telling a joke meant to emphasize the necessity of keeping relationships alive in God’s Kingdom (the ICOC). He began: “A group of men go ice fishing. They cut a hole in the ice and try to fish but catch nothing. A small boy sets up beside them, he cuts a hole in the ice and starts pulling out massive amounts of fish.” At that point members sitting around me responded loudly, “Ahh,” and “Where are you going with this one, brother?” He continued over audience responses, “The men ask him how he does this. The boy mumbles something inaudible. They ask again, and again the boy mumbles something inaudible. They ask a third time.” Randy then wiped his nose and his mouth, making a slurping sound, and said, “You’ve got to keep the worms warm.” Most members found the underlying sexual innuendo funny and laughed. Several chose not to laugh but instead responded, “Gross!” or “Oh, no.” During Marriage Enrichment 1999, after the men and women separated, Kay McKean began her message to church “sisters” with humor. She offered passages from an old “cookbook” entitled How to Cook a Husband. “They don’t like to be pickled,” she read. The women laughed as she continued,
“They take awhile to roast but are very tender and good when cooked properly. Don’t prick them with a sharp instrument to see if they are done, and if he sputters and spurts and fizzes till he’s done, it’s OK.” The women around me laughed so hard it took awhile for them to settle down. Kay then asked us, “How can we keep our marriages hot? There are lots of ways.” She continued, “I’m not talking about meeting your husband at the door wrapped in Saran Wrap with a glass of wine in your hand. I’ve never tried that.” All laughed, and one retreat attendee called out from the crowd, “They have colors now!” “Yes, that’s right,” Kay confirmed, “red or blue, but no, I’ve never tried that. Maybe I will.” We all laughed again.

Jokes were often repeated from one service to the next; yet told in the collective social body where charismatic leaders had created a heightened sense of time and place, members laughed at the same stories and recollections. Perhaps many found the stories funny time and again, for others laughing may have been more of a group norm; like the joke that Dad or Grandma told every Sunday at dinner and family members laughed out of respect or habit, even when the humor and irony had long ago been spent. Ex-members claimed that their smiling during services while singing and laughing at leaders’ jokes was explicitly orchestrated by the leadership, a backstage ICOC direction. One ex-member told me, “Leaders told us to smile and laugh a lot.” In general, guest speakers and performers were often very entertaining, charismatic, funny, and skilled at raising the energy in an audience. During one Women’s Day regional event, entitled “I Will Get There,” an ICOC “comedian,” Jennifer Salberg, opened the event. Hundreds of women were at this particular event, held in a large convention center in Boston, and so Jennifer’s image appeared on either side of the stage on wide screens. She bemoaned and made fun of the number of illnesses women suffer from today: “PMS [premenstrual syndrome],” “IBS [irritable bowel syndrome],” and “CFS [chronic fatigue syndrome].” How, she asked, are women supposed to live in the “fast lane,” “eat everything and not be tired,” and at the same time have great bowel movements? The women in the audience laughed throughout her presentation. Regional and local events also frequently staged humorous theatrical skits; for example, one local Women’s Day began with a comedic script that poked fun of Martha Stewart, and another regional Women’s Day event began with a skit
based on a popular television game show. As a participant observer, I found myself laughing at jokes and comedic performances quite frequently. Sometimes I found leaders’ stories genuinely funny, other times benign, on occasion offensive; yet each time I laughed. Humor is both subjective and infectious, an incredibly powerful mechanism for bringing a group of people together and charging a ritual event.

Interestingly, humor was also one of the performance mechanisms leaders used to diffuse accusations from ex-members and anti-cult organizations. During formal group performances, main-stage events like weekly Sunday services, and large regional Marriage Enrichment retreats, leaders addressed the “cult” question by casting ex-member and critics’ concerns as ridiculously funny. For example, a leader during one morning service said, “Can you believe it, we care about each other too much. We spend a lot of time together. We think Jesus meant for us to live together as disciples! We are too much like those first-century Christians!” Members of the congregation laughed at his obvious sarcasm.

Every large regional event I attended featured talented (some professional) musicians and vocalists. Most of these musical performances were orchestrated to represent the quality of intimate relationships that members experienced through discipling. During one large regional event held in a concert stadium, ICOC’s pop rock group, the Radicals, sang a song celebrating the “radical” kind of church family love that disciples shared: “Now fifteen years have come and gone and see what God has done. . . . It’s a radical love that we share. A love that’s heard around the world, shows how much God cares.” ICOC music, like the Discipleship Publications International (DPI) books, tapes, and videos for sale during church events, were mechanisms of ideological encapsulation (Greil and Rudy 1984, 267–268) that encouraged members to bring the sacred healing power of discipling with them when they were outside the physical and social boundaries of the church. During that concert, the church pop rock–style song “Radical Love” was followed by a centuries-old popular and moving hymn, “Amazing Grace.” On Marriage Enrichment Day 1999, we began together with our arms around each other singing old hymns and contemporary Christian songs; we then listened to pop rock and Motown. Variety in worship can be an attractive feature of contemporary congregations, eclectic music and worship style a quality that may help congregations draw members from various age and
racial/ethnic groups. While the ICOC seemed to be primarily composed of couples and singles age fifty-five and younger, they were exceptionally diverse with regard to race and ethnicity in a country where, as many have lamented, Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week. The ICOC’s worship style, especially in these large regional performances, contributed to its image of exceptional ICOC family diversity through “ritual inclusion,” welcoming diversity in music, language, and ritual practice (Becker 1998, 452).

Slide shows and video presentations, many produced by ICOC’s own video production company based in Los Angeles, Kingdom News Network (KNN), were a frequent form of event entertainment. These productions were powerful venues for highlighting the necessity of being engaged in active ICOC discipling relationships if one wished to be saved and experience family healing. One KNN video shown during a Wednesday evening women’s service offered the story of a young bride and groom who, through the constant efforts of disciplers, had learned to care deeply for each other and respect and love one another. During one large regional Women’s Day, we were shown a movie that presented a married couple who were having difficulty communicating, were anxious and depressed. In the video, after disciplers entered their lives, the husband and wife were presented as happier and better able to parent.

Another routine congregational mechanism that contributed to the collective performance energy was the frequency of standing ovations in response to individual speakers and members’ testifying, singing, dancing, and performing. A standing ovation from an audience generally symbolizes that audience members have been extraordinarily affected by a performance. During regional events and local services, standing ovations were frequent and at times seemed excessive; at the end of one service during my initial year in the field my first major informant, Leslie, told me, “We get stuck in the standing.” Marriage Enrichment 1999 was no exception. We stood for the McKeans, we stood for the local leader, we stood for the singers, the slide show, and for individual testimonies.

Standing ovations, applause, theatrical skits, dance, humor, high-tech movies, computerized slide shows, and charismatic jocular Christian preaching to large church audiences in what feels like a tightly choreographed and packaged performance are characteristics of what some
sociologists have named a “megachurch” worship style and organization. Researchers have called attention to the rising number of megachurches in the U.S. religious marketplace (Eiesland 1997; Vaughan 1993). ICOC events like Marriage Enrichment succeeded, as megachurches do, in bringing together great numbers of people for scripted religious performances. Such ICOC “big-theater liturgy” (Eiesland 1997, 193) events like Marriage Enrichment Day were very important group rites, public rituals that continually reaffirmed, through a heightened collective emotional state, the sacred healing power of the ICOC. Bringing large numbers of members together in the same ritual space also affirmed the evangelical success and power of the movement. With hundreds of members as convincing evidence, leaders at these regional events often compared their growing movement to the “empty pews” and “dead churches” of other religious movements.

Marriage Enrichment’s controlled erotic displays of spousal affection, musical performance, slide shows, humor, applause, standing ovations, and charismatic speaking were performance mechanisms that renewed church healing potential and produced a palpable collective power. Leaders and members talked of this power as instigated by a divine external force. Sociologists recognize this kind of ritually induced presence as very real social force: a sweeping collective emotion with the power to lift up the beliefs of participants. In Emile Durkheim’s (1912, 216–230) conceptual framework, this represents a kind of collective effervescence. Both members and ex-members have talked about how they were moved by the high level of energy and emotion experienced during ICOC services. One ex-member recalled this group energy as seductive and intoxicating: “Members took me to highly energetic and emotional functions and to put it mildly, that energy got me hooked” (REVEAL; www.reveal.org 1998). Stories of family healing through discipling relationships told and retold in these energetic ritual performances stressed that marriages and families outside the movement were seriously threatened and unhappy.

**A Time and Setting for Marital Healing**

Regional performances like Marriage Enrichment Day, through a ritually produced sense of collective effervescence, set the church’s approach to marriage and family apart from other religious groups.
and secular society. They were organizational attempts to create high boundaries around the world of ICOC disciples, to achieve a high level of social and ideological encapsulation (Greil and Rudy 1984). The ICOC appeared a religious community where, as Kanter (1972, 52) suggests, members “have a clear sense of their own boundaries” and construct a “strong distinction between the inside and the outside.” This was a large part of the ritual work of Marriage Enrichment Days, Women’s Days, Men’s Days, and Singles’ Retreats: setting apart, making the discipling community distinct and sacred, and casting relationships inside the group as safe and superior.

Painting divorce as an ever-present evil was a large part of individual performances of heroic discipling, as seen in chapter 2. Formal group rhetoric and large regional performances of exceptional in-group healing shaped and reaffirmed members’ stories of escaping divorce. During Marriage Enrichment 1999, Randy McKean slowed down his peripatetic sermon, ending his performance with a slow-paced reading of lyrics to a well-known song:

What’s the glory in living?
Doesn’t anybody ever stay together anymore?
And if love never,
lasts forever,
tell me,
what’s forever for?

The audience voiced a soft but audible “Mmm,” as if we had all heard these lyrics before from our car radios, reminding us of lost romances, and understood exactly that fear and pessimism that McKean was emphasizing. With charismatic steam and theatrical skill, he repeated the lyrics, moaning the loss of forever after in a culture of divorce:

What’s the glory in living?
Doesn’t anybody ever stay together anymore?
And if love never,
lasts forever,
tell me,
what’s forever for?

He then challenged members and guests: “From this moment on . . . what will your marriage be?” His dim mood then lightened as he
contrasted what marriages in the Kingdom could be: the “hottest, most romantic, most sensitive, greatest marriage!”

Church leaders’ presentations of dating and intimate relationships outside the church were of empty and dehumanizing experiences. During one local special event for women, a female speaker from another congregation stressed that we lived in a “wild, desperate time.” She held up the shooting at Columbine as evidence and repeated a section from “something” she had read recently that addressed the question of what people say they are willing to do for $10 million. She read, “abortions, killing a stranger, giving up your kids, lying, prostitution for a week.”

The women attending this special brunch responded verbally, with “ahs” and “oh nos,” a chorus of disbelief as backdrop. She continued by criticizing our computerized world, emphasizing how dating on-line had become a dangerous and often disappointing method for finding a life partner. She told a story of a woman who had a relationship on e-mail with a man in England and that this woman traveled overseas to meet him and had sex with him. Soon after, she told us, he told her to leave because sex was all he had wanted. Like many leaders’ media anecdotes told in regional performances, the source of the story was not always completely clear. “I read in a magazine” or “heard on the news” was a common beginning to many tales of disturbing and abusive relationships in secular society. This leader ended, however, with an example of our “wild, desperate time” from her own observations of emptiness, human disconnectedness, and family tragedy in society at the end of the century:

She told a story of moving to a new neighborhood several years earlier: they tried to meet their new neighbors but this proved a difficult project. They would invite families over but no one ever came. In the end, they did have the couple behind them over for dinner, but only after a tragic experience. She was washing her dishes one day and looked out her kitchen window to see the teenage son of the couple that lived behind them hanging by a rope in his backyard. She told us that she hoped we would never have to see such a sight, how “sad” and “sobering” this experience had been.

During special church events and large regional gatherings, individual members also related their stories of discipling as sacred and the
world outside as dangerous and uncaring. Individual members frequently told stories or “testified,” a common performance in many religious communities and identity transformation organizations (like Alcoholics Anonymous). Their testimonies related individual experiences of the healing power found in ICOC discipling relationships. Members’ stories told to me and during regional events painted dating and marriage outside the group as frightening, disappointing, and traumatic. During one local special event for women, a woman told the following story:

When she was just out of high school she met and fell madly in love with a man named “Mohamed.” She spent a lot of time with him, had sex with him, talked with him about everything in her life and “gave everything over to him.” One day, she called Mohamed’s house and a woman answered the phone. “Hello, may I speak with Mohamed?” she asked. The woman challenged her, “Who is this?” “This is Mohamed’s girlfriend,” she replied. The woman on the other end of the phone stated, “This is Mohamed’s wife.”

The woman testifying began to cry and had a hard time getting through her story, which ended with her conversion to the ICOC and how disciples had helped her heal. As she cried, the women around me offered her soft verbal encouragement, a soothing background of “Mmm sister,” “You’re OK, sister,” and “Tell it, sister” that consoled her tale of deception and heartbreak and constructed life within the discipling community as incapable of such desolation.

Choosing a spouse without the help of church disciples was presented as a risky business. During one large regional event for men entitled “Real God/Real Men,” movement author and speaker Sam Laing told an all-male audience:

The Kingdom is trying to help you to put together a really Godly and spiritual relationship. Amen?! I mean because we don’t want you to go through the mess we had to go through because we got married maybe before we were discipling and the scars are so deep. . . . So, you have a chance, single brothers, to put it together, but instead you [might] say no. I really want to marry this girl, you people are slowing me down. . . . We don’t listen and we end up doing something, having sex or run off to get married or we make a decision to
buy a house or move in the middle of Podunk somewhere where there are no other disciples. And really [we think] this is gonna work, it’s gonna be great and we end up paying a horrible price. You need to learn to make good decisions, to listen to God’s word and to listen to the people God’s put in your life. (audiotape of all-male event)

Not listening to disciplers’ advice about who and when to marry, where to live, and what type of house a married couple should live in were portrayed by Laing as dangerous.

Members and leaders acknowledged that other churches tried to counsel individuals before marriage, but stressed that the ICOC’s discipling method was more foolproof. Like many other tight-knit religious communities, members and leaders presented the discipling community as a “safe dating haven” in a society where dating had become evil, dangerous, and misguided (Kanter 1972; Davidman 1991). Group performances included many presentations of disciples meeting “awesome” spouses in the church: the woman who whispered to me on Marriage Enrichment 1999, “I met my husband here,” the leaders who included ICOC dating in their sermons, and members like Ronny and Julie (chapter 2) who praised ICOC dating and premarriage discipling. They presented their potential mating pool as exceptional, better than what you might find in another church or in the secular dating world—better because disciplers were teaching “respect.” Some members and ex-members even suggested that the ICOC dating pool was exceptional because there were lots of physically “beautiful” and “handsome” brothers and sisters to choose from in the movement. In the words of one young City COC male member, the Kingdom was full of “awesome, powerful, and beautiful women of God.”

Sam Laing and his wife, Geri, coauthors of DPI’s marriage advice text, *Friends and Lovers*, and highly respected ICOC marriage experts and regional speakers, described secular society as full of ill-fated marriages: “The headlines are full of marriages that began with high promise and ended in disaster. From the storybook marriages of royalty to the glamour of Hollywood to the neighbors next door, more couples are not making it to the finish” (Laing and Laing 1996, 145). In the introduction to their marriage book they offer an ICOC alternative:

Even if we have the most serious of problems, we still do not have reason to quit! *Even in the case of adultery, divorce is permitted, but not*
necessarily required or encouraged. I have seen many marriages salvaged gloriously [in the ICOC] from the wreckage of adultery.

Therefore, I would urge you to ban all talk of divorce. Even in moments of frustration and anger, never utter the word. Always assume and believe you are going to stay together and work things out. Marriage is for life!

In general, marriages outside the group were depicted as contingent and lacking the exciting romance and friendship in ICOC unions: “Friendship and romantic love are the two essential ingredients of a great marriage. . . . 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” (Laing and Laing 1996, 21).

All church leaders depicted outside relationships in a culture of divorce as lacking communication, openness, mutual spousal submission, love, and forgiveness—missing characteristics that threatened to “kill a marriage.” During many Sunday morning services leaders quoted the popular misleading U.S. divorce statistic “50 percent of marriages end in divorce.” One Sunday morning a leader added, “If you find your wife here, you have a 99 percent chance of your marriage lasting forever!” This is a figure with great appeal, yet one that grossly misrepresented the possibility of spousal defection from such a high-boundary, controversial new religious movement. During another large event years earlier, I heard Randy McKean tell approximately eight thousand members from around the region: “The divorce rate is high and experts say it’s hard to stay in love but we [church members] will never leave that commitment of marriage.” In fact, during the course of my fieldwork I heard whispered accounts (literally) of high-ranking leaders having an extramarital affair and leaving a woman leader alone in the church. The rumor had an “awesome” ending, of course, as the wife left behind found a more suitable and dedicated husband “in the Kingdom.” Kip McKean, in his 1992 newsletter to the Kingdom, criticized not just secular marriage, but any marriage outside the boundaries of his movement—pointing a finger directly at the Mainline Church of Christ and naming its “spiritual condition” as ranging from “lukewarm to disgusting.” He stated, “After almost 200 years since the inception of the Churches of Christ movement in the United States . . . the divorce rate was around 33%” (McKean 1992). ICOC’s aggressive missionary teams were characterized in group
literature as bringing the power of ICOC marriage disciplers to diseased marriage relationships across the globe. The 1995 New England Mission Report church letter given to us during one large regional event read: “On a continent (Milan church) where marriage has long been a dying institution with the family crumbling around it, the light of the Laing family (as ICOC missionaries) was a beacon.” ICOC formal discourse was replete with images of doomed and unhappy marriages outside the group. One longtime white male leader stated during a Sunday morning sermon that “you may know people out there who look like they have a good marriage, but if you put a microscope up to it, you’re going to see problems.” ICOC marriage discipling, leaders and members insisted, was the only answer.

**Kingdom News Network Productions of ICOC Healing**

Large regional events held across the country often featured Kingdom News Network (KNN) films. KNN worked hard to set the ICOC community apart as safe and powerfully charged, as a family oasis in a “wild, desperate time.” For example, on New England Women’s Day 1999, after we were entertained by comedian Jennifer Salberg, eclectic music, and a series of testimonies, our attention was directed to the two large movie screens on either side of the stage. The KNN film that day, The Prodigal Daughter, was based on Jesus’ parable (Luke 15:11–32) of a younger son who squanders his inheritance. He is forgiven by his father, while his obeisant older brother challenges the father’s actions. In KNN’s version of the story, the son is a daughter, a young woman from a white upper-middle-class family who wastes her college fund on a number of societal ills: drugs, abortion, and living with a boyfriend who physically and mentally abused her. She, like the prodigal son, was reunited in the end with her parent(s). In this modern-day Los Angeles KNN version, the family was reunited specifically because they learned to love and communicate with one another as disciples in the ICOC family of God:

Two young girls are on pottery wheel making a mug together for their mother’s birthday. We watch the girls give the mug to their mother. Film then cuts to several years later when the girls are teenagers. The older daughter is having an argument with her parents.
We watch this prodigal daughter as she berates her mother and father and finally leaves her parents’ home. She is dressed in black with heavy makeup, and her boyfriend is at her side. Before she leaves, the mother gives her the money that they had saved for her college education. The daughter and boyfriend walk away from the family home on a beautiful California beach. The “good” sister dutifully attends college, staying at home in the family beach house with her parents who are depressed about the younger daughter’s behavior and unhappy in their marriage.

The film follows the prodigal daughter’s destructive ways. She gets pregnant by her abusive boyfriend and has an abortion. The boyfriend is enraged when he finds out about the abortion and threatens to kill her if she does not leave immediately. In a subsequent graphic scene she is with a “friend” from the drug and prostitution world who is shooting up.

The women sitting in the audience around me gasped as a needle pierced skin and the prodigal daughter’s friend vomited and then died of an overdose. Through graphic visual imagery, KNN succeeded in painting the outside world as dangerous and deadly. A dramatic script and skilled actors illustrated how a multiracial ICOC family of disciplers could radically heal wounded families.

The prodigal daughter becomes increasingly more lost and distraught. At the same time we watch her mother transform from depressed over the loss of her daughter and a stressful marriage, to contented as she develops an intimate relationship with a young black ICOC woman who responds to an advertisement the mother puts in the paper for pottery students. The mother teaches the young woman to throw pottery and the young woman, an ICOC Christian, studies the Bible with the mother. The young woman and the mother work together on a project for a local soup kitchen: they make a series of mugs (that resemble the mug her two daughters made as young children for her birthday). The prodigal daughter, hungry and confused, finds a broken mug in the alley behind the soup kitchen. She is startled by how close in likeness it is to the one she and her sister crafted years ago. She wanders into the soup
kitchen and talks to the young ICOC woman who had been studying the Bible with her mother. The ICOC disciple, recognizing that this is the woman’s daughter, tells her how much her mother misses her.

The film cuts back to the family in the beach house. The mother, after studying the Bible for a considerable time, has changed demeanor; she is now smiling, laughing, and happy with her husband. The husband too begins to study the Bible. The now happily married couple rejoice as they see their prodigal daughter (having been influenced by the young ICOC discipler in the soup kitchen) walking toward them on the beach.

The women around me clapped as the mother, father, and prodigal daughter were baptized into the movement in the ocean waters in front of their home. Their baptisms depicted on the large screens in front of us, and the standing and clapping throughout the convention center, lifted the energy in the large convention hall. A feeling of collective relief that this film family had survived the evils of the outside world through the intervention of ICOC disciples filled the room. When the lights came up, I saw that several women were crying, pulling tissues from their pocketbooks and hugging the women who sat next to them. I wanted to cry too, but I did not. I thought that perhaps the women crying around me were remembering (as the film had caused me to do) difficult relationships—husbands with whom they could not communicate, daughters or sons who were involved in drugs or estranged from parents. I thought of my oldest child, my son, and how our relationship had suffered through high-conflict divorce. I felt, for a brief moment, the hope that there existed such a sacred therapeutic cure for family conflict and trauma. The moment quickly passed as ethnographic objectivity and my interviews with ex-members reminded me of the numerous failed discipler attempts at healing family relationships.

KNN films were not home videos; they were professionally crafted theatrical projects. In a culture where many individuals are entertained daily by television and film, KNN’s Hollywood medium produced effective performances of awesome ICOC family pushing away the trauma of dating, divorce, and drugs and resolving a number of family ills. The ICOC, like other religious groups today, employed various contemporary
media venues like film, publishing, music, and video to a high degree. From the early nineteenth-century printing presses to late twentieth-century construction of religious websites, evangelical Protestants have been quick to employ media in the expression of sacred symbols, images, and worldview. As David Morgan (2002, 37) notes, from the beginnings of modern mass culture, two hundred years ago, “evangelical Protestants . . . were in no doubt about the rhetorical effectiveness of images.” Furthermore, he argues, “American Protestants manifest a persistent inclination to experience media as an untrammeled representation of ‘the truth.’ ” We should not be surprised then at the financial success of Mel Gibson’s recent celluloid Passion play, nor the many audience members who left theaters weeping and proclaiming a renewal of faith. Jesús Martín-Barbero (1997), has suggested that media in collective, religious identity making is a kind of “re-enchantment” of our “rationalized” (Weber) world. In the ICOC, KNN films were dramatic, magical depictions of disciples in the ICOC successfully healing family wounds and resolving cultural contradictions for members.

Regional events as a whole were carefully crafted ritual productions that reinforced discipling relationships as exceptional: counseling others and submitting to disciplers’ advice and intervention as a shield against family dysfunction and the most effective salve for relational injuries. These carefully orchestrated productions served the organization well, reinforcing members’ commitment and providing a powerful forum for evangelical outreach. For individual members, such well-attended “big-liturgy theater” confirmed that the costs of ICOC membership, the daily work of discipling, submission to disciplers, and the constant pursuit of converts, was a sound family investment in a dangerous society. Events like Marriage Enrichment also gave members a language and stories through which they could construct and reaffirm their own presentations of awesome church family healing.

*The Prodigal Daughter* set the stage that day for members’ evangelical outreach to their biological families and/or families of origin as they experienced, through the power of film, a hopeful, happy ICOC ending to strained and contentious family relationships. Regional performances and formal group rhetoric created a strong desire on the part of members to convert their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, and
grandparents. Formal performances of domino conversion—the idea that if you were to convert just one kin, this could potentially result in multiple conversions of extended family—was a prominent and persistent theme in formal group discourse. These formal constructions of domino family conversion ignited much hope and disappointment, revealed through the stories individual members told of trying to save family members from the outside dangerous, diseased, and deadly world—stories of mostly failed attempts to turn fathers and mothers into Kingdom brothers and sisters.