Awesome Families
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Chapter 5

Awesome Kids

We should pray for our children daily. Beyond all of the wisdom, expertise, methods and words, God must move! Before my children were born (or conceived!), I prayed that they would one day give their lives to Jesus. I still pray for them now, and I will continue to do so until I die. Their names will always be held in my prayers before the throne of God wherever they are and whatever their spiritual condition.

—Laing and Laing (1994, 216)

I have a photo of my youngest child sitting next to Pat’s youngest on her living room couch. Pat sends me a Christmas card every holiday season with a picture of her children. I had conversations with Pat and other City COC parents about the demands and joys of child rearing. It was clear in the moral world of the City COC, even though no one ever told me directly, that I was not doing all that I could to protect my children from the evil influences of secular society. Nor was I was making a serious effort to ensure my children would live on Earth and forever after in the Kingdom of God. The pressure to offer children the Kingdom of God (ICOC) was strong in group. I too live in a society where, as a parent, I am expected to do everything I possibly can to endow my children with a proper education and keep them safe from harm. I could feel the social control in their tacit judgment, even though I did not believe in their assessment or methods. With a look of calm and genuine relief, all parents I spoke with emphatically stated that they were sure that they would stay “close” with their children and that their children would be Christians throughout their lives. Pat and other members strongly believed that they had, in the discipling community, the best insurance policy available for keeping their children safe and on
a Christian (ICOC) life path. This understanding was communicated against a backdrop of contemporary fears and cultural expectations of parenthood and child rearing.

As members of God’s modern-day movement, members believed that their children would shed consumer identities, abstain from sex and drugs, engage in peacemaking among their peers, and develop lifelong positive and communicative relationships with their parents. ICOC youth ministry leaders talked a great deal about how children and teens in the “outside” world were bombarded with “sex talk,” “drugs,” “violence,” and “consumerism,” and that kids today don’t communicate with their parents on a regular basis. Like parents in many other new religious movements, ICOC leaders and members understood their biblically grounded ideas and practices of child development and religious education as extremely important for the moral development of their children and as protecting them from dangerous outside social ills. They saw their methods as crucial for the continuance of their new religious tradition. However, like other parents in high boundary religious movements over the decades, the demands of their new church community threatened group promises of maintaining “awesome” relationships with their children.¹

**Danger**

Narratives of raising children in a dangerous social climate were prominent in formal discourse and private interviews. Horror stories, like the one told by the guest speaker on Women’s Day of washing her dishes one day and looking out her kitchen window to see the teenage son of the couple that lived behind them hanging by a rope in his backyard, confirmed parents’ worst fears. DPI literature painted an equally dismal picture bolstered by media reports of rising rates of teen suicide and childhood depression—assertions that render our world a potentially frightening and disastrous place to raise children.

The foreword of Sam and Geri Laing’s DPI parental guidebook, *Raising Awesome Kids in Troubled Times*, is written by their daughter, Elizabeth Laing. Elizabeth, age seventeen, speaking from the trenches of evangelical high school battles, writes:

> God has given me so many incredible gifts that I could never name them all! I have salvation and a perpetually clean slate before God, a
close, spiritual family, numerous “best friends” scattered across the country, and an overall fun, fulfilling life! I realize with absolute clarity that every one of these blessings can be attributed solely to the fact that I have Christian parents.

This year more than ever I have come to understand just how crucial it is for teens to know God. Only four months ago, three students from my school committed suicide within two weeks of one another. I felt as if God himself was sending me a wake-up call. For years, I had naively entertained the belief that teens are not too bad off spiritually and that most of them will not even think about or comprehend spiritual subjects for a few more years. I could not have been further from the truth. (Laing and Laing 1994, 10)

Young Laing makes it clear that the ICOC Kingdom is responsible for why she is protected from, and other teens susceptible to, disastrous ends: “My friends at school urgently need the guidance of parents who are disciples—not just good parents or even great parents but disciple parents. All the students who committed suicide came from well-to-do families that appeared to have it all together. However, for all the love, material things, and even worldly wisdom they provided their children, they could not give them the purpose and ultimate peace they so desperately desired” (Laing and Laing 1994, 11). Sam and Geri Laing write that they do not “presume to be perfect parents or to have a perfect family,” nor do they long to put their children “on a pedestal.” However, despite the Laings’ stated intent, much formal ICOC discourse did put Kingdom kids on a pedestal, and some members’ informal stories about their children implied that their children, indeed, were more likely to succeed and had developed a higher moral sensitivity than other kids.

Achievement and Excellence

Kip and Elena McKean’s children, and those of other prominent leaders, were held up as models of excellence: good grades, athletic ability and achievement, and evangelical successes. They were “beautiful” and “healthy” children in the forefront of group discourse. Formal discourse painted a Kingdom of healthy, well-adjusted, and high-achieving kids. Recall Kip McKean’s proclamation of excellence in my introduction to this ethnography: “Eric . . . led the league in scoring. Sean played
point guard and was selected in his league for the all-star basketball team the only fifth-grader among sixth-graders. Also, he was just elected president of his elementary school student council for next year. Olivia, student council president of her elementary school last year, went on to break the mile record at her junior high and tied the record for the 440-yard run. She also recently qualified for the national Miss Pre-Teen Pageant. All three have made straight A’s this year” (McKean RR). A local leader told us one Sunday morning that Randy and Kay McKean’s children had been signed by a modeling agency. Members and other leaders echoed the McKeans’ presentation of awesome Kingdom Kids by testifying during regional and local events about children’s successes, kind actions, and the uncommonly close relationships children and parents in the Kingdom were able to sustain.

During formal and informal interviews and social gatherings, some City COC members talked with me about how their children were different from other children. They described them as having advanced moral centers and security in their relationship with God. During one interview, a white woman ministry leader in her late thirties encouraged her two-year-old son to perform for me: “Where’s your boo boo? Where did it go?” The child showed me the Band-Aid on his arm and softly murmured, “God took it away.” His mother proudly stated, “Yes, that’s right. God healed you.” She looked at me, “You see what I’m telling you, I’ve got a two-year-old who is conscious that God is going to help him.” Alicia proudly stated during her interview, “I just love how my daughter’s life is going to be completely different. . . . She [a nine-year-old] has a mature perspective on life. . . . I’m confident that she will convert. Because the Bible says that if you train your child the way it says, they will not depart from it and I just hold on to that and I don’t have to wonder and hope . . . oh, maybe, maybe it will, but I just know it’s going to, just a faith, a confidence.” Formal and informal performances of superior child rearing were efforts to convince me, and themselves, that living as a disciple in the ICOC worldwide community was the very best child-rearing environment available to them.

**Kids Kingdom and Teen Ministries**

City COC’s emphasis on children, teen, and preteen ministries seemed to grow over the four years as I conducted field studies. This
emphasis is not surprising; when the congregation was established in the 1980s, membership was composed primarily of “young marrieds” and college-age disciples. These members had married in the church, had children, and were now concerned about how their church membership would help them raise Godly children. This shift over the years meant that a congregation made up of mostly singles and young “marrieds” transformed into a congregation with approximately 75 percent of households with children. Like most religious congregations, the City COC had to adapt and evolve in specific ways to address these changing demographics (Ammerman 1997). It is likely that similar changes in family structure took place across the unified movement as formal discourse and publications, in the mid-1990s, began to emphasize that part of the evangelical mission was ensuring that biological and adopted children stayed in the Kingdom—an organizational evangelical goal that well matched rising parental concerns.

That members turned to a religious community in efforts to instill children with moral confidence is not uncommon in U.S. society. In addition to providing for and meeting a child’s physical and emotional needs, cultural expectations dictate that parents should foster a child’s moral compass. Historically, religious communities have been active participants in the moral education of children. This continues today as we see many parents, even when they themselves have not been an active member of a religious community as young adults, begin taking their school-age children to Sunday schools and attending services again themselves. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman (1997, 368) reminds us that “the tie between congregational membership and family formation remains strong in US culture,” and that “those who sow wild oats as young adults often return to the fold when their children reach school age.” Furthermore, “many adults see religious training for their children as part of their obligation to the world. They would not be doing good or making the world a better place if their children were denied the training provided by the church.” City COC parents were no different from many other parents in our society then, those who return to childhood religions or secure new religious affiliations in an effort to fulfill their “obligation” of raising morally sound citizens. However, like some other high boundary new religious movements, the ICOC presented their worldwide community as the only religious environment with the
skill, knowledge, and sacred power to keep children faithful and living Godly lives.

City COC members, like most parents who identify with a particular faith institution, understood that a religious upbringing within a strong religious community could be a powerful predictor of personal success and a shield against social ills. Social researchers have suggested a similar relationship. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians may build their own Christian schools or homeschool in order to avoid having their children interact with those who are not of like Christian mind, who are of other faiths—or worse, secular humanists or atheists. But this was not a viable option for an evangelical movement with such zealous conversion goals as the ICOC, a group that needed teens out there actively working to convert young folks. Therefore, the discipling system, in particular the teen ministries, was the proposed answer for countering outside influences by creating tight in-group bonds and peer groups. These close ICOC bonds enabled children and teens to interact with peers in secular society without becoming of secular society. Leaders like Sam Laing preached that parents need to make sure their kids were committed to the Kingdom teen ministries so that they would be protected from “worldly stuff”: “A lot of you guys have made decisions that are hurting your children. You want them to be real close to the world, you think they can handle this and so you let your kids get involved in worldly stuff and amen . . . kids need to be out there in the world, but we can’t let them be of the world and we can’t let them be surrounded by worldly people and become sucked down into the world’s mess. . . . You’ve got to keep them in the Kingdom of God in a strong teen ministry.”

ICOC congregations also had “Kingdom Kids” ministries for small children, which included Sunday school programs and child social activities. Youths in the movement were baptized (became official church members and disciplenes) at approximately age twelve or thirteen. At that time each teen was assigned a discipler and teen youth group. While pre-teens and teens did interact with nondisciples in public and private schools and other secular activities (oftentimes in explicitly evangelical efforts), members described the majority of children’s day-to-day lives as spent in discipling relationships with older members, family group activities, and events geared exclusively for children their age. Leaders made clear to members that children must remain in discipling relationships
and be active in “teen ministries” to counteract outside influences. The church youth group, while optional in many other Christian denominations, was mandatory in the ICOC. If parents did not keep their teens involved in teen ministries, they were often informally sanctioned by disciplers and church leaders. Parents’ presentation of their children as exceptional evangelists further strengthened the idea that the discipling community was uncommonly able to keep children faithful—they painted portraits of teens as active Christians out in the world working to “change hearts” for the Kingdom.

Parents talked with pride about children who had converted (baptized) and gone on to be “productive disciples in the Kingdom.” One mother stood at the lectern on Women’s Day and stated, “God, you gave me the desire of my heart—for my children to want to go and study the Bible with their friends.” Geri Laing brags in her child-rearing text of her daughter’s skill at bringing teen friends into the church family: “Another of her [daughter’s] New Jersey pals . . . began to study to become a disciple, but became prideful and stubborn and backed away. . . . She got him on the phone and laid out what he was doing wrong and where he was going to end up if he did not change. By the end of the phone conversation, he was shedding tears of repentance and soon afterwards made his decision to become a disciple. Such is the power of teen friendship!” (Laing and Laing 1994, 214). Teens also heard other teens boasting of evangelizing efforts. During City COC services, I heard several testimonials and prayers from teens who recounted successful conversion attempts with high school friends. These teens boasted of suffering persecution from school friends for their “radical” commitment to Jesus. During testimonies, the congregation verbally cheered them on with “go sister,” “go brother,” and “praise God.”

Members talked about their children’s conversion as different from youths who pledged a Christian lifestyle in other denominations. Such efforts worked again to set the movement apart as exceptional and unique. Other Christian denominational conversions were described by members as profane, perfunctory, and meaningless. For example, the classes that Catholic youths attended and their first communion ceremonies were presented as “rituals” with little meaning, occasions mostly for wearing a pretty dress or handsome suit and having a party. In contrast, members who discipled teens in the City COC preteen (age
twelve) and teen (thirteen and up) ministries described ICOC young people’s conversion as a genuine “life commitment to disciple.” Furthermore, members and leaders promoted the idea that a child’s conversion in the ICOC was so powerful that it often instigated a restorative process for the entire nuclear family—narratives reminiscent of the domino family healing script outlined in chapter 4. City COC teen conversions were sometimes framed as a therapeutic family process that led to strengthening communication between parents and children and reaffirming the entire family’s commitment to the ICOC mission. One female leader told me:

When the teens are becoming Christians it converts the family all over again. A lot of these families, they became Christians as young marrieds and their children grew up in the church and now for their children to become Christians it’s so great. Some automatically want to . . . most do and then some don’t and it reveals a lot about what is going on behind closed doors [in the family]. They need help and the teens need help to know that it’s OK to communicate what they are feeling. And the parents need to be willing to come on in and talk, so it’s like a second conversion for a parent. It’s not just the teen.

Once teens converted and pledged discipleship, they were talked about as spending a great deal of time with their teen group. As the numbers of children reaching the teenage years increased in the City COC congregation, leaders had to bring on “new teen workers” and spend extra time themselves working with the teens. One discipleship group leader told me, “We want to make sure that we are doing everything possible to make it [conversion of children] happen because so many of these families have given their lives [to the church]. They have been volunteers to help other people’s kids. It would greatly discourage them and their faith if their children didn’t become disciples.” Parental adherence to the discipling structure was talked about in ICOC formal discourse as allowing your brothers and sisters in the Kingdom to disciple and train your children. Ferguson (1997, 238–239) states: “As good as things may be at home, there is still great value in these relationships in the teen ministry. Trust me here: Teen ministry leaders will often see things you as a parent are overlooking. Furthermore, even if your teen seems to be quite open
with you, discussing some things, like sexual temptations, is much easier with peers or teen leaders.” Adults discipling in the teen ministry presented themselves as spending considerable time and energy on these efforts.

I went to Lisa’s house to conduct a follow-up formal interview. During this time together, she provided much detail about her leadership in the teen ministry. She and her husband had been in charge of the City COC teen ministry for a year. As she poured me a cup of coffee and I set out the pastries I brought, I heard two young women laughing and giggling in another room of the house. Lisa told me that what I heard were two of “my teens” who had “slept over.” The young women came out of the back room, still giggling, and timidly announced, “We were dancing.” Lisa introduced me to the young women and then sent them on a long prayer walk into the woods behind her house. She told them to go to the “prayer spot” that she and her husband frequented and that they should have their daily time alone with God. Lisa went on to describe her “volunteer ministry position” as taking care of, and offering parental guidance and assistance to, members’ children. She told me that she and her husband “oversee about thirty to fifty kids and have eight adults helping” as disciplers. She described her interactions with the teenage girls, like the two who had slept over, as close, as intimate and time-consuming: “I take them to do activities together. I study at the library one night a week with a couple of the girls. . . . We have a teen night once a week.” She continued, “They look to us as role models. The parents like it that way. They want to know that their kids will do well.”

Drawing from group discourse that presents discipling relationships as facilitating greater communication skills among family members, Lisa painted an image of herself as helping parents and children become more expressive and communicative. Her discipling these teens involved teaching communication skills so that children and parents could have better relationships: “I see a great turnover in my job. Teens grow up, they come and go. . . . I’m their advocate while they’re here. I help with their parents and can get the teens to represent their feelings in a way that their parents will listen to and understand.” Lisa described her role as alleviating parental responsibilities, taking care of others’ children, and teaching family communication.
Having no children of her own “yet,” Lisa said that she had the additional time to help the teens in ways that the parents, who worked full-time and were “super busy,” did not. Note that Lisa was not paid for her leadership in the teen ministries and that her own weekly schedule (detailed in chapter 1 here) was jam-packed with church- and work-related responsibilities. Still, she saw her day-to-day life as less demanding than that of many parents in the City COC congregation. Lisa presented her church community as a place where these super busy working mothers and fathers need not worry about their children receiving adequate care, discipline, and guidance, a church community that made balancing work and family much easier. Descriptions of such intense and committed involvement in the future of other members’ children fueled the image of the ICOC community worldwide as one big caring family that took exceptionally good care of its youth. Church youth programs did appear to provide answers to the cultural dilemmas facing mothers and fathers today; however, a commitment to the discipling community introduced new parental challenges as well.

Cultural Dilemmas

In our society, we often place unrealistic expectations of motherhood and fatherhood on parents who must make ends meet in an economic climate that forces many households to have two wage earners, demands long work hours, and offers inadequate child care options (Garey 1999; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Schor 1981; Townsend 2002). How are women to fulfill their roles as caretakers and domestics, being present for school field trips, doctor’s visits, and after-school snacks while working full- or part-time? How are men to embody the new, engaged father, supervising and attending sports and other after-school activities and nurturing infants and toddlers while working full- or part-time? The difficulty of meeting these gendered parental responsibilities is often magnified for divorced and single parents. Teen ministries, Kingdom Kids programs, and the extended community network offered in the discipling structure appeared, at first look, to work toward alleviating many of the dilemmas faced by parents today. The discipling network provided child care options and after-school activities, monitored peer group pressure, and produced a network of church kin ready to help when a crisis arose.
Recent studies of masculinity in marriage and family clearly demonstrate that most men in our society are caught in competing ideals of fatherhood. Nicholas Townsend (2002, 78–80) argues that there are “four facets of fatherhood,” cultural expectations of fatherhood that dominate in the United States: fatherhood, marriage, employment, and home ownership. Within each of these facets are powerful elements of culture that connect and often collide with one another. These elements of the “package deal” of fatherhood have to be constantly negotiated. “The continuing cultural primacy of providing for children,” Townsend notes, “means that men’s time and energy are devoted to, and consumed by, their paid work” (Townsend 2002, 78). They are consumed by paid work yet feel pressure to be emotionally present for their children. The resulting contradiction is one that, essentially, results from a clash of traditional breadwinner normative ideology and the “new father” ideals that have gained prominence over the past twenty-five years or so. Joseph Pleck (1987, 83–97) notes that the new father image departs from older pictures of fatherhood: the father is present at his child’s birth, continues throughout the child’s life to be involved, and does not just play with children but helps in caretaking. This new father is also engaged in a similar way with daughters and sons. Encouraging fathers to be affectionate and emotionally present has been a rising focus of the contemporary evangelical subculture as well (Bartkowski 1995; Wilcox 1998). This new father ideal, a gentle and loving participant in family life, was strong in the ICOC, as was the call for men to financially support their families.

The ideal of the breadwinner father exists today alongside a serious critique of this normative role as “distant,” lacking in emotion, unable to fulfill therapeutic ideals of expressivity. The critique is a powerful one, and the “new father” has clearly taken root in social and individual interpretations of good fathering. Townsend’s (2002, 30) ethnography paints a powerful picture of cultural circumstances where “to be a father is to reconcile competing ideals, demands, and responsibilities: time spent with children against money earned, the kind of house you live in against the length of your commute, your responsibility as a husband against your responsibility as a father.” Furthermore, he argues, “None of the sources of tension are fully resolved by the cultural work men perform” (Townsend 2002, 80). Clearly the tensions that Townsend illustrates are almost inescapable in our culture; economic and social
conditions, for men from varying socioeconomic positions, frame and sustain gendered expectations in marriage and family that cannot always be met. The ICOC, through its marriage and family discipling system, presented members and potential converts with a tangible and supposedly lifelong working solution: counselors who were available almost all the time and who would help guide men through the tensions that inevitably resulted when trying to perform the “four facets of fatherhood,” and a network of disciplers who would serve as mediators, guiding, caring for, and endowing children with a belief system and relational skills. They would be there when you could not; in your absence, the “brothers” in the Kingdom would serve as father figures to your children. Group discourse was full of references to the Kingdom of God as composed of a family of brothers ready to serve as father figures—an image of a Kingdom full of fathers that was especially appealing to ICOC single mothers.

Brothers and sisters in the “Kingdom family” were talked about as offering a complete family structure (normative nuclear) for single parent members. The City COC congregation was composed mainly of married folks with children, but there were a small number of single moms and dads spread among the “married” family groups, so that single parents were frequently in contact with nuclear family units. Within the church, “single sisters” and “single brothers” with children described a family of disciplers that welcomed single parenthood, even as the movement clearly held a nuclear family model as superior. Some single parents told stories of meeting new spouses within the church family, but others praised their new “real” church family for making them finally feel “whole” and “complete,” and for providing gender role models for their children.

One longtime white single sister with high church status in her mid-thirties was helped by the movement to adopt a baby girl from China. The ICOC’s adoption ministry was not out of the ordinary for conservative Christian groups; however, helping a single working mother adopt a two-year-old child was. During the adoption ceremony I asked Natalie if the husband of the woman standing alone on stage could not attend that day. “No,” she explained, “she’s doing it by herself.” I listened further as one of the regional lead evangelists stated, “Although she is adopting without a father, she has all the brothers in the Kingdom to set
a male example.” Two months later, with her arms extended wide to thank her entire “Kingdom family,” she proclaimed: “God has allowed me to take a little girl and give her a great start. She doesn’t have a physical father right now, but she does have God as a father and all the brothers in the Kingdom.” The discipling community was presented as there to guide and assist women through whatever individual set of cultural tensions and contradictions of parenthood challenged them.

Women in contemporary U.S. culture are faced with a historically particular set of contradictory expectations surrounding motherhood that produces its own set of tensions and challenges. Normative and nascent ideals of motherhood and womanhood coexist: women are supposed to be the caretakers of children, women are supposed to be mothers, mothers are supposed to always “be there” for their children, women are supposed to embrace and perform domesticity, women are supposed to pursue a career or profession or provide “additional income” for their families, women are supposed to keep up with family celebrations, birthdays, holiday events, and gifts, women are supposed to feed their families, keep clean homes, and dress their children in clean clothes.

One of the most profound and demanding conditions in which married women find themselves is what Arlie Hochshield (1989) named the “second shift.” When both women and men work, domestic chores remain gendered female and women end up, after a long shift at paid work, coming home to do most of the cooking, cleaning, and domestic chores—a second shift. More recently, Scott Coltrane and Michelle Adams (2001, 72), in looking at the particular child-rearing and domestic behaviors of fathers and mothers in a national sample, suggest that “most Americans now assume that mothers need to be employed to help support their families,” but that we are “less certain about how much family work men should do.”

Research shows that while more men, from various class and racial/ethnic positions, do become involved in domestic labor and child care than years ago, women (even when employed) still do the majority of child care, and housework remains gendered (Coltrane and Adams 2001; Demos and Acock 1993). For example, taking out the trash, mowing the lawn, and repairing and washing the car remain primarily male activities, while cleaning the bathroom, doing the laundry, shopping, planning, and cooking for meals (activities that have to be completed on
a more daily basis) are primarily female activities. More men are becoming involved in “child-centered” activities like “helping with homework, driving to activities and having private talks,” and thus may take on more of the housework. However, “adult-centered” child care activities, like “playing together, watching television together, spending leisure time away from home,” and “community-centered” child care activities like “attending school activities, attending community youth groups,” and “coaching a child’s sports team,” remain more acceptable for males (Coltrane and Adams 2001). These parental activities are more public, and the domestic work and child care of most mothers tends to be less visible and consume more time and effort with less public and family recognition.

Furthermore, as Townsend (2002) emphasizes, despite the public attention given to the rising number of fathers involved in primary child care, men continue to see such involvement as a “choice,” a choice that helps them perform the new father ideal, but a choice nonetheless. Most women do not see primary child care, especially in those early years of child development, as an option; the image of the biological mother/child bond is a powerful social force and the choice to not mother or be there during those early years a deviant one. The persistence of a gendered division of labor in households, combined with economic necessity and a desire on the part of many women to pursue professional careers and be mothers, leaves many women caught in a state of sheer exhaustion, tension, and guilt (Ehrensaft 2001). The difficulty of juggling work and family, of living up to cultural expectations of motherhood, womanhood, and good citizenry (i.e., one who works for a living), for single mothers, can be even more grave. Many single mothers parent alone and, as a group, they are disadvantaged in the labor market and so find it even more difficult to locate and afford adequate child care. The discipling network was attractive to women because it appeared to give them particular strategies for resolving the demands of single and married motherhood.

Although the church extolled women’s domestic and child care efforts, leaders and members understood that dual-earning families were on the rise and that many wives and mothers wanted to pursue professional careers. Church leaders also understood that many of the parents in their religious community worked over forty hours a week and experienced...
serious work/family conflicts. Formal group discourse tried to address these familial concerns with the promise of therapeutic counseling, community networks, and a host of DPI self-help advice literature. Like the wider evangelical subculture, where a recognition of the necessity of dual-wage-earning couples shapes prescriptive advice, the ICOC organization worked to “redefine the appropriate conditions for women’s employment and its implications for family life” (Gallagher 2003, 130). As Gallagher (2003, 127–151) notes in her study of evangelicals, gender, and family life in the United States, the question of women’s employment in our contemporary setting becomes not “whether” women should work but “why” and in what conditions should they seek employment. We hear a similar focus in the DPI text, *Life and Godliness for Everywoman: A Handbook for Joyful Living* (Jones 2000), which has two entries by prominent members under the category “Mom” dedicated to resolving work and family: “Deciding Whether to Work Full Time,” by Sheila Jones, and “Business at Home,” by Loretta Berndt. Jones describes the difficulties when mothers of small children decide to work and encourages women to make well-thought-out choices about why they are working. She advises against working solely for the pursuit of wealth, or to live up to that image in the “popular media” of women who “go after it all... The typical stereotype features a well-dressed woman with a briefcase, calling home on a cellular phone to check on her independent, yet happy, children” (Jones 2000, 71). Jones also makes it clear that some women simply have to work: “Certainly single moms have no choice in the matter,” she tells us. Jones tries to ease the fears of professional women who fear they will “lose step in the workplace” if they are out of the workforce for a period of time and the feeling that staying at home to raise children is accomplishing very little. Loretta Berndt (in Jones 2000, 78) follows up with a chapter full of advice about working from the home, how to get started, for example, in direct sales or telecommuting: “If it is your dream to work from home, then picture yourself doing something you enjoy while earning an income. Picture yourself being flexible and available for your family. (As I write today, my fifteen-year-old has strep throat. I am so thankful to be home and meet her needs.)”

ICOC leaders were acutely aware of the challenges and contradictory positions of mothers in contemporary society; they fully acknowledged the contradictions and presented the discipling community and
disciplers as exceptionally able to help members make sure the work/family bind did not get in the way of raising “awesome kids.” Mothers and fathers in the ICOC found sympathy and were promised assistance for the contradictory demands of parenthood.

Leaders and members rhetorically took pressure off fathers and mothers by acknowledging that they could not be expected to be parents alone. They quoted the popular phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” as they suggested the discipling community was even better than a normative nuclear home. In many ways, the community was involved in group parenting—especially through the routine intervention of disciplers in the family life of members (even as they promoted nuclear family autonomy). The church community also seemed to serve, at times, as an informal and formal child care network; several of the homes where I interviewed members and spent time seemed to have an open home feel: women dropped by from time to time utilizing what appeared as an informal baby-sitting co-op. Some women in the local church held professional jobs, some described themselves as stay-at-home moms, a few were in paid ministry positions with the church, some worked part-time, and others managed in-home day cares that allowed them to follow Loretta Berndt’s lead and “do motherhood” (Garey 1999) even as they earned a significant portion of the family income. In this way, working mothers were leaving their children with church family members, an adoptive kin caregiving choice where they had intimate knowledge about the caregiver, her values, and child-rearing mores. This is not to say that there were never discrepancies, but members talked about child care as another social relationship that was monitored by the discipling structure to ensure that differences would be resolved. Alicia told a story about her anger when a church sister who was baby-sitting spanked her daughter; spanking, Alicia stated sternly, was reserved for parents and not the day care worker. The sister who had spanked the child insisted that since they were all members of the same family of God, parenting together, the punishment was appropriate. Alicia’s position, she argued, was later supported by church leadership and most other disciples, and so the church sister had to eventually apologize for the action.

Most of the members I spoke with talked about their church community as free from prejudice, a place where multiracialism was accepted, encouraged, and nurtured in a most sacred institution, marriage, and
where biracial children would be welcomed and loved. Members saw the multiracial character of the international ICOC movement as resolving their desire to be involved in racially and ethnically diverse social relationships in a society where individuals tend to separate by race/ethnicity, especially in religious congregations. As a member of the ICOC, they believed they were actively teaching their children to embrace pervasive U.S. social ideals of multiracialism and multiculturalism.

Members with biracial children understood the City COC and international ICOC community as “color-blind” and “not prejudiced.” Social researchers have called attention to the ways in which minority parents are concerned for the “racial safety” of children in a society where educational institutions are sometimes overtly prejudiced and implicitly biased toward white culture (McAdoo 2002; Uttal 1996). For example, choosing a child care environment or school for minority parents often includes an added concern about how their children will be treated, the level of racial sensitivity teachers and child care workers possess, and the extent to which race/ethnic, cultural beliefs, and history of minority groups are embraced. The validation of racial/ethnic diversity in close, intimate family relationships in the ICOC was likely appealing to members from a growing U.S. population of biracial/ethnic individuals and interracial/ethnic couples and families. Many of these individuals came to believe that ICOC’s therapeutic discipling networks would provide them with tangible emotional supports—a built-in biracial, interracial, and interethnic support group. One black woman told me: “Jim is white and I’m black. My discipler, her father is white and her mother is black. . . . She [the discipler] was helpful for us. . . . We want our kids to be very comfortable with who they are going to be in a society that does have issues [with biracial children]. . . . So they [the discipling couple] were very encouraging and helpful and said if we are doing it God’s way [as CCOC members] things will turn out right.” Minority church members and members with biracial children saw the ICOC community as resolving various cultural issues that involved their children and social attitudes and practices regarding race/ethnicity.

The ICOC movement, in attempting to attract converts and satisfy the needs of its maturing and diverse congregations, entered our long-historical cultural dilemma and debate over discipline in child rearing. Over the last century, our society has been host to a number of
pediatricians, psychologists, religious, and secular authorities who claim to have the answers to raising children. From early twentieth-century G. Stanley Hall to later twentieth-century “experts” like Benjamin Spock, Berry Brazelton, Penelope Leach, and conservative Christian James Dobson, we have experienced a barrage of child-rearing publications and approaches. These voices run on a continuum of parental authority and corporeal punishment, versus child rights and spanking as abuse. The ICOC mirrored most closely the approach of James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, a man with a background in psychology, and author of the popular 1970 evangelical child-rearing text, Dare to Discipline, and 2000 text, Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide.

Dobson and others, like Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council, in the last few decades of the twentieth century placed child rearing in a “culture wars” (Hunter 1991) discursive frame. On one side we have those (conservatives) interested in giving back the family to the parents, protecting them from dangerous secular forces (e.g., media, consumerism, sexual promiscuity) and instilling a traditionalist interpretation of child discipline. On the other side are those liberal anti-spanking crusade organizations and secular humanists who are “soft” on discipline at home and prefer to place ultimate charge in the hands of the state and medical therapeutic experts. To enhance the image of parents losing their children to liberalism and secular sin, Dobson, in his 1970 best-seller, Dare to Discipline, begins the text with an effort to alarm: “We have ignored the turmoil that is spreading systematically through the younger generations of Americans. We have passively accepted a slowly deteriorating ‘youth scene’ without offering a croak of protest. Suppose the parents of yesterday could make a brief visit to our world to observe the conditions that prevail among our children; certainly, they would be dismayed and appalled by the juvenile problems which have been permitted to become widespread (and are spreading wider) in urban America.” Dobson, over several pages, then details some of these urban dangers: “Narcotic and drug usage by America’s juveniles is an indescribable shame. . . . Many young people are now playing another dangerous game, packaged neatly under the title of sexual freedom. . . . Another symptom of the adolescent unrest is seen in the frequent display of aggression and hostility. Young people today are more violent today than at any period in American history. . . . There are many related phenomena. . . . Emotional
maladjustment, gang warfare, teenage suicide, school failure, shoplifting, and grand larceny are symptoms of a deeper illness that plague vast numbers of America’s young” (Dobson 1970, 6–8). Dobson was writing in the wake of great attention by psychologists and social scientists to “juvenile delinquency” as a pervasive social problem. ICOC formal discourse on child rearing set up an equally grim background with a late twentieth-century emphasis on the dangers of a media-driven society.

DPI’s *Life and Godliness for Everywoman* painted outside society as full of confusion (Jones 2000, 54): “What can we, as disciples, do to teach our children to respect authority in their lives? How can we withstand the onslaught of strongwilled children who are determined to have their own way? How can we teach respect in a society that no longer demands or even expects it from their children?” In our society, ICOC leaders stressed that media influences were strong and were at work to reverse the child/parent relationship: “Commercials and sitcoms do their part to demean the role of parents and to exalt the role of the child. In this computer age, this age of entitlement, children feel they are the parent of their parents. And they will continue to think that until they are proven wrong by loving but firm parents who respect God and who call their children to respect them” (Jones 2000, 57).

One clear threat that James Dobson, ICOC leaders, and other evangelicals bemoaned, especially in the last few decades of the twentieth century, was that psychological experts and the state were usurping parental roles and responsibilities. Some secular child-rearing experts also promoted this seemingly “traditionalist” perspective that works to give power back to parents; for example John Rosemond (1981, 1989), family therapist and author of *Parent Power!* and *John Rosemond’s Six-Point Plan for Raising Happy, Healthy Children*. One of the ways that this taking back of *Dare to Discipline* is manifested is through the assertion that reasonable corporeal punishment is for the parents to decide and use if they see fit. This practical advice of Dobson and other evangelical child-raising experts in many ways echoed late nineteenth-century medical and religious approaches aimed at molding a child’s will. But conservative religious folks of the later twentieth century who maintain that spanking or swatting a child is integral to instilling obedience highlight as well the loving, caring, and relational side of such discipline—in this
way they creatively marry our culture’s therapeutic expectations with physical punishment.

Researchers who have studied child rearing in the conservative Protestant subculture have noted that it is indeed “characterized by both strict discipline and an unusually warm and expressive style of parent child interaction” (Wilcox 1998, 796). In many ways, ICOC leaders and members were already adept at walking this discursive line: the discipling system itself had to be constantly reaffirmed as both a loving, caring, and relational structure in the midst of discipline, control, and authority.

“Awesome” ICOC parenting was modeled on disciplship. In fact, leaders explicitly called for ICOC parents to engage in “discipling relationships” with their younger children on a regular basis. Gordon Ferguson (1997, 236–238), in his DPI discipling text, states:

Ideally, each parent should have a weekly discipling time with each child. . . . [A]s much as nightly prayer times and weekly discipling times with the children are vital, let me add that spiritual relationships are a twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week affair. You cannot regulate spirituality to a schedule, as important as those scheduled times are. . . . [I]f you value the disciplship times with your children, and show it by protecting your schedule with them as diligently as with others, then they will absolutely relish disciplship.

Presenting discipling as a practice that guarantees children will want to spend close and intimate time with their parents was no doubt appealing to many parents. In a society where fathers and mothers are expected to spend “quality time” with children, presenting discipling as a practice that ensured parents and children would have extended and consistent intimate and enjoyable interactions further legitimated parent/child relationships within ICOC boundaries as healthy. The practice of discipling was also cast by leaders as an assurance of parents’ ability to successfully instill a conscience in their children. If you followed Ferguson’s previous advice and demonstrated to your children that you were committed to a regularly scheduled discipling practice, “what you do and what you value will be transferred to your children’s value system. Such attitudes and values are ‘caught’ as much as ‘taught.’ ”
When I talked with members about how they disciplined their children, several hesitated before speaking and said, “You’re not going to like what I say,” an indication that they were aware of much mainstream disapproval for any kind of corporeal punishment. They would tell me stories about when and how one should spank a child. Their justifications and descriptions of circumstance mirrored almost exactly advice rendered in DPI’s book, *Raising Awesome Kids in Troubled Times*. Obedience and respect for authority through loving discipline was presented as a must for raising children. Here again, the outside world, reflected in popular child-rearing debates, had for the most part gotten it wrong: “When it comes to discipline many parents fall into one of two extremes. They either practice something much more akin to child abuse, or they go to the opposite end and neglect discipline altogether” (Laing and Laing 1994, 118). To help moms and dads find a balance, Laing suggests they “reread this section [“Winning Obedience from Children”] several times and study carefully the scriptures that have been referenced.” Laing outlines the different approaches parents may take in disciplining their children, beginning with the “simplest and most common of all corrective disciplines,” the “verbal correction or reprimand,” followed by time-outs, loss of privileges, and spanking. The biblical message is clear, Laing argues: “Spanking is a valid, recommended and healthy form of discipline”:

What does the Bible say? Is it right or wrong? Consider these verses:

He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him. (Proverbs 13:24)

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him (Proverbs 22:15)

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death. (Proverbs 23:13–14) (Laing 1994, 114)

But there are conditions: spanking is “valid” and “healthy” only “when employed with wisdom and love,” when it “works powerfully.” Laing gives guidelines on pages 115–117 for spanking that ICOC parents were expected to study and learn well:
1. A Spanking should be an event. We should draw children aside
to a private location before spanking them. A spanking is not a
“pop” or “whop” out of the blue as we pass by a child we see
doing something wrong. . . .
2. Explain beforehand the reason for the spanking. . . . How can
something be effective when the reasons are unstated or un-
clear? . . .
3. Cool off before spanking a child. When we are overly emotional
or in a rage, we must wait until we have complete self control be-
fore administering a spanking. . . . Screaming, cursing and ter-
rorizing a child is sinful!
4. Use a designated paddle or some flat object as the “rod.” The
“rod” gives the whole event a judicial air rather than a feeling of
personal attack. It is best to decide in advance what to use . . .
some people believe it must be a flexible “switch,” others feel
the term is not so specific. (Geri and I use a small, flat paddle.)
The primary issue is that whatever you use must be weighty
enough to get the job done and light enough to inflict no dam-
age or injury. We should never use our hand to spank with the
exception of the light slap on the wrist given to the very young
children in the earliest days of discipline. The hand is ineffective
with older children and too personal.
5. Spank on the “safe” backside or thigh. Spankings delivered to
these places sting, but do not injure. A spanking should be firm
enough to bring tears, but not so hard as to cause bruises or
welts. Never strike a child on the face—this is simply too de-
grading and humiliating. Never strike them on any part of the
body where they could be injured. Never should we strike a
child with our fists or kick them, push them, slam them into a
wall, or throw them to the ground. This is abuse, not discipline.
Jerking a child around by the hand or arm is disrespectful and
dangerous.
6. Spankings must result in a changed, contrite heart. . . . Spank-
ings must be strong enough, and applied wisely enough, to
change the attitude.
7. Bring things to a resolution. . . . The air should be clear and our
relationship completely restored when everything is over.
8. Do not spank for every offense.

9. Start as soon as a child begins to understand the word “No.” At approximately 14 months or so, our little ones begin to understand us. As soon as they do, they begin to assert their wills against ours!

The potency of the ICOC child-rearing message was strengthened by a convincing depiction of discipling as balancing and promoting both relationality in parent/child relationships and a respect for parental authority and position. Elizabeth Laing’s foreword to her parents’ DPI child-rearing manual concludes: “The things I most appreciate always will be their [her parents’] unashamed effort to put God first in our family, their firm discipline, their complete, ungrudging forgiveness, and their compassion and understanding” (Laing and Laing 1994, 11).

Parents were to decide their discipline plan of action together, and both were equally responsible for punishing and loving children. At the same time, ICOC formal discourse supported the notion, reminiscent of earlier patriarchal family discipline models, that men, as fathers, were responsible for keeping children (and wives) obedient and ultimately responsible for family discipling. Sally Gallagher (2003, 123–126) reports similar gender dynamics for evangelical families nationwide. Sam Laing, during a regional all-male ICOC event argued, “I don’t care how strong she is . . . she may be dominating this guy because he’s a vacuum, he’s too weak . . . the woman is begging for family devos [devotionals], please disciple the children . . . wimp, wimp, you cowardly dog, you need to repent and become masculine.” During formal interviews, mothers supported this position on masculinity, praising their husbands’ character for disciplining the children and leading the family in discipleship; however, as the parent who spent the most time with their children, they, as “good” Christian mothers, were called to discipline their children as well.

Formal DPI literature and group discourse with regard to sustaining a balance between authority, love, and caring in child reprimands were in line with much advice available in the conservative Protestant evangelical Christian literature. However, the ICOC’s approach and strategies differed in the level of fellow Christians’ involvement in the raising of your children. When the circumstances surrounding discipline did not
seem clear-cut, members and leaders talked about turning to disciplers and other leaders in the community to get immediate and hands-on counseling. Pat’s husband, Tom, noted that “day-to-day counseling” from church members and attending church parenting seminars had helped to build his parenting confidence and skill. With the help of the church, he felt sure he would “be best friends and completely vulnerable and open” with his daughters when they were grown. Parents were not only formally instructed to have regular and consistent discipling times with their children, but to let other members disciple their children as they turned to their disciplers regularly for child-rearing help and advice. Sam and Geri Laing (1994, 213) advise: “The best approach is to look at our children’s conversions as a team effort. Our parental insight and influence is absolutely essential. We must not take a passive, detached role. But the involvement of others is critical [my emphasis] also. As parents we may be too hard or too soft, overly suspicious or completely naive. Involving a team of people ensures that our children get the benefit of the best counsel and help we can provide them during this all-important time.”

Sam Laing reinforced this view at a local event: “You must have a unified approach in raising your children. If you’re continually arguing about how to raise kids, the kids will pick up on it and it’s going to ruin them. . . . You better get good, strong discipling from wiser people than both of you because if you continue in a divided household, you will destroy your family and destroy your children.” The idea that ICOC parents must go to disciplers for advice advanced the image of the church as a family (in that all members cared about and were involved in raising “Kingdom Kids”), but more important, it contributed to the idea that raising awesome kids was dependent on full and loyal participation in the discipling structure.

Evangelical Handicap

I heard only a few stories and brief mentions of failures to get children to commit to the teen ministries and participate in serious discipling relationships. The absence of stories about children who turned away from discipling is partly because most of the City COC members I interviewed had children who were under twelve. And too, as was true with the rest of my data collection, as a researcher, I was an audience
member hearing primarily the narratives they wanted me to hear. On two occasions I asked to interview members who were having troubles with their teenage children, but was told by Pat and other leaders that they were going through a hard time and that it might be upsetting for me to interview them. What I heard in group were mostly stories filtered through the organization, narratives that stressed how families who were having difficulty with teenagers needed to get more discipling as a family—that the parents needed to find out what was wrong with them and what they had done to lead their children astray. Regardless of whether members’ children were committed disciples, active in teen ministries, and discipled regularly by an “older” ICOC discipler, the stories parents told of trying to keep their children in the Kingdom and of the inevitable success they would have in converting children (if they fully followed ICOC advice) accomplished a great deal. Telling these stories of working toward child conversion was part of an important process of self-identification as a parent hard at work, on-task with biblical mandates and therapeutic culture. Through telling these stories they constructed selves as actively pursuing a sound approach to saving and training their children. The ICOC organization provided them with a language, a narrative frame, and a discourse repertoire that made such stories of self in action possible. In truth, there were many ICOC organizational forces at work against the utopian picture of raising “awesome kids” in a troubled social world.

The ICOC movement, as in other areas of family life, through formal proclamation, narrative, and members’ recounting of family discipling, gave the impression that the Kingdom was able to offer a great deal of clarity, but a strong commitment to the ICOC discipling system undermined parental ideals and bred confusion. The message in the ICOC was clear: leave the therapeutic system of discipling and you will endanger the loving and forgiving relationships you had learned to manage inside the community—to leave the group would put relationships between mothers, fathers, and children at serious risk. Yet, to stay within the discipling community meant that parents had to counsel other parents; and, if you were an “older” Christian parent with some leadership and missionary status, you were responsible for the care and upbringing of many children in your “village.” There were no real group mechanisms for ensuring reciprocity in child care assistance and counseling. For many
who worked full- or part-time jobs and were also trying to “do motherhood” and “do fatherhood” in culturally acceptable ways, the added responsibility of managing others’ family child crises took away precious few hours and energy they had for their own children. One way parents tried to resolve these responsibilities was to talk about church activities and evangelical outreach during social gatherings as quality time with their children. To the dismay of leadership that wanted the ICOC to continue to show awesome growth, some parents began to count the hours spent discipling their children as points toward their ICOC evangelical efforts.

How well reciprocity in child-rearing efforts and family counseling worked for individual members was idiosyncratic. While group status seemed to benefit members’ ability to work the discipling structure to their advantage (as discussed in chapter 2 re: marriage discipling), group status often presented a negative effect with regard to child rearing. The organization demanded intense time and effort from leaders and long-time members and so, for these members, family counseling and discipling imperatives often encroached on time spent with children.

ICOC guidance and intervention made it seem as if the ICOC had the most efficient and productive method of child care. DPI guidebooks, parent workshops, and a community ready with family counselors who would intervene and help you determine how to discipline in a particular situation, teach your teenagers how to communicate, and help manage feelings of anger or guilt in parenting promoted this image of exceptional therapeutic ability. Leaders preached a similar conservative evangelical Dobson, *Focus on the Family* message: give power back to the parents, keep the state and therapeutic “experts” out of the home. However, commitment to the discipling structure introduced an equally, if not more intrusive, moral authority over parents. Parents were presented with a familiar, yet magnified ambiguous position: you have authority over your child, but the discipling community has authority over how you parent. Resolving this contradiction resulted in constant discursive movement from group control to ultimate parental autonomy, a discursive dance not unfamiliar to members who were forced to constantly balance individualism with an authoritative system.

It is not surprising that members saw the availability of a committed church “village” to help raise their children as a major benefit of ICOC
membership. They understood that having positive role models, parents with strong marriages, providing peer groups for their teen and preteens, and parenting with a firm, yet gentle hand, was crucial if their children were to stay Christians and succeed in this world and the next. They had heard media reports of correlations between positive home environments and child success. Members truly believed that their religious community would bring them better relationships with their children and that children would admire the communication and “awesome” relationships they witnessed in their family of origin so much that they would surely stay in the movement as adults. But all was not harmonious in disciples’ nuclear families—many members were under great evangelical pressure.

It is true that in the ICOC, teenagers had intimate social networks and peer groups, but membership in these groups and networks demanded that the youths themselves evangelize, aggressively. Whether or not we agree with placing such evangelical responsibility on children’s shoulders, it is clear from the voices of former members and those teens I heard testify that they were pushed to proselytize to a point where they received serious informal sanctions (positive and negative) from classmates and peers. They were treated like evangelical heroes by members and leaders when they converted others and reprimanded if they did not put much effort into proselytizing. As the unified movement fell, it became clear that the evangelical and counseling pressures both parents and teens felt from the ICOC organization drained the perceived positive benefits of the Kingdom approach to Raising Awesome Kids in Troubled Times. The movement claimed to offer strategies and a discipling approach that would allow you to give your child the very best, that put children first; but the organizational family demands on “brothers” and “sisters” in the Kingdom were also promoted, in formal discourse, as the number one concern of parents and teens.