Chapter 6

Brothers and Sisters for the Kingdom of God

I think more of the church than I do my own family. Not that my family, when I say my family I’m talking about my brothers and sisters, not my own kids and we are part of the church so we are family. The people who are in our lives at the church, that’s our family. My siblings and their families, we have a good relationship, but it doesn’t compare to the depth of involvement we have with one another [in the church].

—Jeremy

To say, “I am a Protestant, Jew, Muslim, Catholic, etc.,” can mean that you are a member of a particular church or congregation you attend once a week, once a month, only during religious holidays, or perhaps not at all. In this respect, individual identification as a Protestant is probably one among other significant social groups in which a person claims membership. But when religious affiliation involves adoption of new kin, the religious community takes on a different character, possibly becoming an individual’s primary group. Religious/spiritual organizations like the ICOC, groups that resemble what some researchers have named “identity transformation organizations,” organizations that teach members to rethink everyday behavior through seemingly clearly defined social roles, values, and new images of self, often present a more consuming primary social transformation of kin. Some researchers have called such processes “radical conversion” (Bankston, Forsyth, and Floyd 1981) and “self-role transformation” (Sarbin and Adler 1970; Sarbin and Nucci 1973). When ICOC members took on new roles and images of self as sisters and brothers in the ICOC, they
came under great pressure in their new roles as powerful warrior sisters and brothers to develop self, body, and relationships that would lead to great personal and ICOC evangelical ends.

The ICOC community worked hard to become each member’s primary group, setting relationships in the church apart from relationships in outside society by constantly renaming church family as “real family.” As we have seen, this “real family,” in all its therapeutic potency, was often compared to members’ family of origin. As Tom told me: “When things were going bad, especially with my family [biological], I was like, let go of all that. . . . God gave you this family [City COC family].” Religious communities that involve radical identity transformation often use familial language, metaphor, and symbol to invigorate group commitment; new spiritual family bonds are constructed to represent a higher kinship status than members’ families of origin (Bromley and Oliver 1982).

To identify as part of a family is a long social and psychological process: day after day, year after year of naming, interacting, and negotiating who and what our family is and does, and who we are and what we do in relation to them. To join a new family is a weighted task, an intensive secondary socialization process where the newcomer assumes fresh familial roles and a new identity. Such symbolic naming reinforces the preeminent status of the new religious community in an individual’s life.

There are many historical and contemporary examples of high boundary religious communities that have engaged in such naming and kin construction. The Oneida community, the Shakers, the Bruderhof “Society of Brothers,” “sisters” in Catholic convents, and new religious movements founded during the countercultural revolution like the Family, Hare Krishna, and the People’s Temple offer just a few examples from hundreds of religious groups where members were constructed as “real” family. Religious leaders, in these groups and others, often asserted parental status: for example, “Mother” Ann Lee, founder of the nineteenth-century New England Shaker community and “Father” Humphrey Noyes, nineteenth-century founder of the Oneida community in upstate New York; also “Father” Moon of the Unification Church and Sri Mataji, who was referred to as the “Mother” of child followers in the 1970s London-born group Sahaja Yoga. In the ICOC, some leaders and longtime members were named “spiritual parents,” others
“moms and pops” of congregations. Use of such family language and symbols strengthens intergroup boundaries and commitments.

Constructing and naming family relationships in newly acquired social groups is a cultural strategy that we see all around us; it is perceived by many individuals as a noble and effective action in the development of intimate social bonds. In addition to religious communities, many other social groups and organizations use family language and metaphor to represent group ties, roles, and responsibilities. In the military, for example, small groups of soldiers may develop intense familial-like bonds whose importance rises above military goals (Dunphy 1972). Michael Messner (1992, 86–89), in his study of sports and masculinity, demonstrates the contradictions of experiencing intimate relationships and naming of family through sports teams in a competitive environment that often pits players against one another. Businesses and corporations often speak of their employees as a family.1 “Quasi-religious corporations,” like Amway and other direct sales organizations, are especially active in creating in-group fictive kin (Bromley 1998). Naming and constructing new family in tightly bound primary groups is a common, familiar, and respected social process. In naming City COC Kingdom family as “real family,” members were involved in a culturally acceptable action for constructing and sustaining valuable social relationships.

As Christians, ICOC members and leaders also drew from a longstanding tradition of finding biblical legitimation for naming church as family. ICOC members and leaders frequently quoted Ephesians 2:19 to legitimate church as family: “You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” ICOC members also drew from Luke 8:20, where Jesus calls to his “brothers” who hear the word of God, and Matthew 12:50, where Jesus’ followers are called “brother, sister and mother.”

Talking about church members as family was not just part of the formal institutional discourse; members were constantly naming church family in informal interactions and daily experience. They often addressed each other during services, Bible studies, and other social events as “sister” and “brother.” Bill, a longtime member, described one church relationship as brotherly and fatherly: “I’ve been close to him for fifteen years, extremely. He’s been like a father figure and a big brother figure
and so, when I think brothers, that’s who I think of [church members].” Most of the young women (early twenties) I spoke with who had at some time lived with a City COC married couple referred to the couple as “like a father and mother.” Jackie stated that one woman whom she frequently discipled in the church was “like my baby.” When I interviewed Jackie, a church “sister,” Linda, dropped by. This is my “sister” I was told, while Linda opened the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of orange juice as if she were at home. Linda sat at the kitchen table and joined in answering questions and offering comments. Speaking of her relationship with Jackie she argued: “I don’t mean like church sisters, I mean we are sisters in the Lord but we are like real sisters. Best friends like sisters.”

The construction of all church members as “brothers” and “sisters” implied equal community status, but assigning family names often worked to establish and clarify hierarchy and status in the City COC church family and discipling structure. To say she is “my baby in the faith,” implied a discipler’s position as a parent and the new convert’s as the child. This was true of the title “younger sister” or “younger brother,” which was given to members who had been in the ICOC for a short period of time. Beth described the man who baptized her as her “big brother in the faith.” To call a church member one’s “spiritual parent” meant that the “parent” had been in the ICOC for a number of years and that the speaker was most likely either a “baby Christian” or a “young sister or brother.” For the most part, when members gave parental status to others by naming them as a “spiritual parent,” it was because that person had, at some point, served as the member’s official “discipler,” or tended to them in some informal discipling fashion. Generally those named as spiritual parents were “older disciples” (not in age but in church tenure), and had held some position of authority (as discipler or church leader) over the member. Some seasoned disciples were identified as the “moms and pops” of their congregations. One leader said he felt like he was the “daddy” of the congregation. The meaning of in-group family naming became clear to me over time. When Lisa, the teen ministries leader, said to me, “This is my mother, she’s a baby Christian,” I knew that by “mother” she meant family of origin, and that by “baby Christian” she meant new disciple. While attending one Bible study in a member’s home, I met an eighty-eight-year-old woman whose discipling family group members (children and adults) called her “Gramma
Kara.” Gramma Kara pulled me aside and whispered in my ear, “All the children call me that. They are all my little grandchildren.” As she spoke, I imaged how, just a few years earlier, Gramma Kara was herself a “baby Christian.”

Formal and informal assigning of family names to church members constructed power and status in the discipling community, but it also balanced this authority by suggesting a more relational therapeutic ethic: all church family members talked about learning from one another. Talking about Kingdom family members as “brothers” and “sisters” was a primary form of naming that worked to level power and authority. Even if one was a “spiritual parent” and discipler to a member, he or she was also that member’s brother or sister, and so owed them equal respect and the obligation to offer advice if they felt it necessary. In many ways, this dual status as both sibling and parent supported the ethic of relationality that was rhetorically dominant in my interviews with City COC members. Still, even as brothers and sisters, the titles of discipler and spiritual parent carried much weight in group status and hierarchy. ICOC leader Gordon Ferguson describes the discipling counseling structure as a family where older relatives carry great responsibility: “In a physical family, the older brothers and sisters teach the younger ones many valuable things. God never intended for the parents to be the sole trainers of the children. Older siblings and extended family members were all to have a part in the task. . . . God is the one with the greatest expertise, but we can and must learn much from others in the kingdom.”

Individual members constructed church as family through visual representations, photographs, and slides that showcased Kingdom kin. Most interviews took place in kitchens. Even those few where we finally settled on the living room couch to talk originated in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil for tea or coffee. Almost every City COC home I visited had a refrigerator covered with photographs of church members at events and nuclear family photos. Refrigerators could display dozens of photographs at once; some were neatly arranged and fitted together as a collage, some haphazardly placed about the door. They were also easily altered, additions made when new City COC family arrived and family groups shifted. Because I spent a lot of my field time in Pat’s home, I watched as new leaders and new family group members claimed space on her refrigerator door. When I approached the refrigerator at Jackie’s
home, Jackie and her “sister” Linda pointed to individuals in tiny plastic magnetic frames, putting faces to the stories they had just told me of their church “brothers” and “sisters.” Members also displayed photos of church family on mantels, bookshelves, side tables, and shelves. The character of these photos resembled the family albums shown during local services through slide/video service presentations that pictured members with their arms around each other, enjoying meals and outings together. During the twentieth anniversary service for the City COC congregation, we saw a lengthy slide show of disciples sharing momentous occasions (e.g., weddings and births), disciples moving into new homes, socializing, and proselytizing at local restaurants and city landmarks. The visual presentation made it seem as if members had a long and intimate church family history.

Constructing church members as family by comparing them to family of origin members was another way individuals worked to legitimate disciples as kin. Members and leaders used a variety of adjectives to describe and distinguish biological family from their church community family: “biological,” “physical,” “family of origin,” and “earthly” family members were contrasted to “real,” “spiritual,” “church” family members. Tom opened a family group gathering with a prayer in which he thanked God for his “spiritual family.” Members often described church family as more “real” than members’ biological/families of origin because they were “closer” to church members and church members truly “cared” about one another. Jackie’s gesture, in describing her church family, symbolically cast City COC relationships as more significant than her biological/family of origin relationships: “I feel like I have a physical family (Jackie gestures with both hands to the left as if she is setting her ‘physical family’ beside her). And then I have the church (Jackie draws a larger circle in front of her, both arms extended). Do you know what I mean? When I say my family a lot of times it’s the church (repeats drawing of large circle) and by that I mean everyone in the church.”

I asked Jackie, “By the physical family you mean . . .?” She responded, “The family that I was born into. Even if they were members of the church they would be, you know, my family (draws large circle again). My church family, these are people that I am extremely, extremely close to.” Jackie painted an image, through gesture and language, of her church family as bigger and as encompassing a much larger portion of her life.
than her biological family, whom she neatly pushed to the side for the smaller role she saw them playing in her life.

What were the individual and group consequences of naming this new religious group as family? For the community, as it has for tightly bound religious movements over time and across cultures, this naming built strong boundaries around the group, ideological walls that cast inside as most important and sacred, and outside as profane and often dangerous. For individuals, as in many other social relationships where people name new kin, this was a purposeful naming that established “fictive kin,” a strategic social practice that may bring about reciprocity in emotional and practical resources. What kinds of emotional and practical resources did naming church family accomplish? We have already seen how naming church sisters, brothers, mothers, and fathers served therapeutic functions in marriage and family life, and how discipling provided a network and community for child care and teen intervention. But naming brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of God accomplished another very significant measure in the development of moral Christian selves: brothers and sisters were there to teach you how to be powerful and productive Christian men and women through upholding the movement’s evangelical mission. Members believed, as many other Christians do as well, that God had called them to share their faith, to spread the Word and convert nonbelievers; becoming an ICOC sister or brother meant receiving constant encouragement, pressure, and strategies for achieving this goal.

A major subject of discourse in naming church as family was that disciples, as Kingdom kin, were supposed to be, above all, a family for God (for the movement), a family whose ultimate goal, above all else, was spreading the Word and gaining converts to the Kingdom (ICOC). “We have to take care of God,” one female speaker suggested forcefully at a local Women’s Day event, “and not let life get us distracted from the Word.” To achieve these goals, members and leaders argued, disciples had to be fulfilling appropriate ICOC gender roles and ideals: embodying ideal masculinity and femininity would shape productive evangelists. In shaping the bodies and personalities of these brothers and sisters, the movement sustained familiar contradictory gendered expectations, and introduced a few new dilemmas as well. In institutional efforts to form muscular men and muscular women for the Kingdom’s advancement, we
see again that the movement’s expectations and prescriptions for evangelical masculinity and femininity were anything but clear. They were, like most cultural pursuits that attempt to clarify gender, awash in ambiguity. Nevertheless, disciples marched on, trying to present a coherent vision of brotherhood and sisterhood in the movement through passionate assertions of what Kingdom warriors should be: forceful displays of wavering between traditional masculinity, femininity, and egalitarian, expressive ideals. It was an ideological wavering, as I have asserted throughout this ethnography, that made sense to members and potential converts. It was meaningful because these were the very contradictory expectations that, through various institutional venues, had already deeply affected their journeys as gendered selves.

Muscular Ambassadors/
Sensitive Brothers

There is in the Bible an upholding of masculine strength and power. I’m not talking about arrogance and cockiness, I’m talking about a man’s man . . . Moses the man. You don’t want to mess with Moses. He could just burn a hole right through you.

—Sam Laing, from audiotape Real God/Real Men

To be a true brother in the ICOC Kingdom was to be engaged in a constant effort to become a physically and spiritually strong and sensitive Kingdom man. ICOC brothers were taught to embody hegemonic masculinity: to be strong, aggressive, muscular, instrumental bodies in control of emotions (Connell 1995). Yet they were also taught to be sensitive, caring, therapeutic brothers, not afraid to express emotion and to embrace and understand the emotions of their church siblings. ICOC leaders and members searched and appropriated particular cultural tools and approaches to use on their conscious journeys to develop muscular, aggressive bodies and sensitive souls working for the Kingdom of God.

The effort to build muscular/sensitive ICOC brothers was in many ways not so different from the pursuit of masculinities imposed on men today in other primary groups (e.g., biological/family of origin, military, sports teams, etc.). Like the pursuit of multiple and contradictory masculine ideals within other evangelical religious groups, ICOC’s approach offered a range of gender assumptions and prescriptions. As Gallagher
(2003), Bartkowski (2004), and Lockhart (2000) have suggested, the evangelical subculture aggressively promotes a wide range of seemingly contradictory masculinities. Evidence for the promotion of these various stances can be found in even a cursory look at evangelical websites (such as Focus on the Family or New Man, www.newmanmag.com). For example, an article written by Donald Miller and posted on the New Man website demonstrates the multiple and contradictory masculine ideals pervasive in the evangelical Christian approach to manhood. Miller recounts a conversation with a female friend: “‘Women don’t want to be thought of as helpless,’ my friend began, ‘It’s hard to say that without sounding like a feminist, because so many people think in black and white these days, but it is true. The knight in shining armor figure is a desire for some women, but the female part of that fantasy involves the knight bringing her back to his castle where they walk and talk together, and he adores her. They have a relationship. He is gentle and fun, and he is a good communicator. These are the things women find sexy.’”

Religious organizations that in any way claim to help men become traditionally masculine are in fact forced by the increasing value placed on gender egalitarianism and therapeutic ethics to present, as well, contradictory notions of expressive masculinity in their discourse repertoires. A religious movement today, in the United States and other Western nations, would likely not experience significant growth if they only stressed a traditionalist, strong male patriarch image. Egalitarianism and expressive masculinity have grown too strong as cultural ideals. In most of the research on religious groups that promote a traditionalist masculinity, at least some level of accommodation to egalitarian ideals and men’s liberationist beliefs and practices is shown (Bartkowski 2004; Gallagher 2003; Lockhart 2000). Furthermore, evangelical movements with specific conversion goals, like the ICOC and the Promise Keepers, for example, may integrate and waver between gender positions at a higher level than other conservative communities as they seek to appeal to a wide audience (Bartkowski 2004). Including such a broad variety of approaches and beliefs naturally presents a challenge: how are these religious organizations and individuals to promote and manage these contrary ideals as they frame distinctive organizational identities?

James Davidson Hunter (1983), in his study of evangelical Christians in the United States, presents an accommodation model of religious
identity construction, that the beliefs and practices of evangelicals are an accommodation of mainstream society, efforts to fit with the “plausibility structures” (Berger 1967) of a secular, pluralistic, and bureaucratic society. Understanding religious groups and subcultures as a process of accommodating and/or resisting contemporary culture leads to support of Hunter’s (1991) subsequent “culture wars” thesis: a working theory that presents the United States as divided between the ultimate resistors—conservatives and religious traditionalists—and the accommodators—liberal religious denominations and secular humanists. While the accommodation and resistance model is helpful to a certain degree, it can inhibit grasping the greater complexity that underlies cultural “battles” over, for example, gender, family, and education in modern and contemporary U.S. society. Such a model also stands in the way of understanding the more multilayered processes of, for example, individual constructions of religious and gender identity. Groups and individuals do not just accommodate and resist; they appropriate, challenge, selectively draw from, and recast—they creatively rewrite, use, and then throw away religious and secular culture as they learn and give birth to new strategies for becoming moral communities and selves.

Sociologists of religion have recently called attention to this multiple creative approach that religious organizations and individuals use in crafting moral selves and organizations, stressing that the tools of religious identity construction come from various cultural beliefs and practices and originate from various social institutions, groups, and structures (Ammerman 2003; Bartkowski 2004; Gallagher 2003; Smith 1998). This new model of understanding religious identity construction is essential. In the new model, contemporary religious identity and experience is better conceived as a creative engagement with culture, an ongoing piecing together of cultural beliefs and approaches that gives organizations, individuals, and movements vitality (Smith 1998). Geertz (1973) spoke of religious ritual and cultural symbol and practice as producing “lasting moods” and “motivations,” instilling beliefs and worldview in the minds of individuals. But these moods, beliefs, and worldview are, in essential ways, always shifting and in conversation with one another. In our contemporary world, moods are disrupted often by local and world events, challenged by governments, organizations, and individuals; moods and motivations are always, as Swidler (1986, 2001) would note,
representative of culture *in action*. Thus, when analyzing new religious movements like the ICOC, groups that are, without doubt, engaged in a highly active process of crafting, pulling, grabbing, rewriting, and constructing religious identities culled from shifting cultural ideals and practices, it is crucial to move beyond a model of accommodation and resistance. We need theoretical models that leave room for complex, dynamic, and creative approaches as organizations and individuals shape religious/spiritual identities in our pluralistic marketplace.

Operating under this new model of understanding, Bartkowski (2004, 53–65) crafts a useful analytical tool for thinking about the construction of gender in a world of competing and shifting masculinities and femininities. He argues that Promise Keeper (PK) authors may have different tendencies toward either more traditionalist (the “Rational Patriarch”) or liberationist (the “Expressive Egalitarian”) gender ideology, but that regardless, PK authors are most times shifting constantly between the two. Using a rhetorical device Bartkowski names “discursive tacking,” he describes how PK authors, like a sailboat, move away from their central position or course and then return to this central ground as they explicate what a PK man is and should do. This discursive tacking ultimately establishes gender archetypes that “seem to overlap rather than overtly contradict one another.” This rhetorical device, Bartkowski argues, “enables Promise Keeper writers to construct discursive bridges over the chasms that would otherwise place these ideologies at odds. Discursive tacking enables PK writers to produce flexible visions of godly manhood that appear ‘holistic’ and ‘well-rounded’” (Bartkowski 2004, 65). Discursive tacking is a useful analytical tool because of its ability to leave room for multiple ideological beliefs and practices creatively engaged along the course of the sail.

As I suggest in chapter 2, the ICOC gender discursive path moved in seemingly erratic patterns, back and forth between traditionalist, essentialist, egalitarian, expressive, feminist, and men’s liberationist gender ideals and practices. At times, gender discourse, while drawing heavily from the organizational repertoire, seemed determined by individual position, goals, and group status. But throughout all, relationality stayed the center of the rhetorical course; therapeutic ethos was centering, emerging as a straight and reliable position. Returning to relationality and a therapeutic ethic with consistency and fervor made, as Bartkowski suggests
above of PK discourse, the ICOC’s contradictory and varied positions of muscular and expressive sensitive church brothers appear “holistic” and “well-rounded.”

**Muscular Brothers**

When traditionalist, essentialist gender beliefs and ideals surfaced in ICOC formal discourse, they centered around brothers in the Kingdom becoming muscular men whose physical stamina and strength would enable them to be extremely productive evangelical workers. ICOC emphasis on building muscular, healthy bodies as an essential piece of religious identity formation is indicative of “muscular Christianity,” a historical movement that produced the YMCA, the Boy Scouts, public recreation, and playgrounds, as well as our cultural emphasis on sports as forming moral and healthy individuals:

Between 1880 and 1920, American Protestants in many denominations witnessed the flourishing in their pulpits and seminaries of a strain of religiosity known, both admiringly and pejoratively, as “muscular Christianity.” Converts to this creed included Josiah Strong, a Social Gospel minister who thought bodily strength a prerequisite for doing good; G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer psychologist who wished to reinvigorate “old-stock” Americans; and President Theodore Roosevelt, an advocate of strenuous religion for “the Strenuous Life.” These and other stalwart supporters of Christian manliness hoped to energize the churches and to counteract the supposedly enervating effects of urban living. To realize their aims, they promulgated competitive sports, physical education, and other staples of modern-day life. (Putney 2001, 1)

Muscular Christianity was a religious movement that took shape at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, a time when many white Protestant males feared the rising and passionate participation of women in religious activities. They wanted to bring young men back into the church, to rescue them from an industrializing society that they saw as threatening to produce a culture of effeminate men with no physical stamina (Putney 2001; Rotundo 1993). The YMCA and other similar organizations arose around this newly defined “masculinity” that they believed would be able to fight the feminization of religion, the threats
of immigrant populations to white Protestant values, and the dangers of
an industrializing nation.

This form of aggressive, race-driven muscular Christianity faded
somewhat after 1920, but we have seen a recent return in the later quar-
ter of the twentieth century. Most notably we can see major tenets of
muscular Christianity in the controversial Promise Keepers movement,
an evangelical men’s movement known for its meetings in football stadi-
ums across the country. Bartkowski (2004, 32) notes that muscular
Christianity in the late twentieth century has appeared, just as it did in
the early twentieth, alongside serious shifts and changes in our family and
gender landscape. The continued participation of women in the work-
force, women engaging in strong political action, the rising attention to
women’s sports, and significant gay/lesbian/bi/transgender challenges to
normative heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are just a few late
twentieth-century developments that have given rise to current muscu-
lar Christian movements.

Early twentieth-century attempts to build strong, healthy bodies for
a Christian mission took shape through a promotion of sports and ath-
etics. Putney (2001, 45) notes that muscular Christians at the turn of the
twentieth century were “undoubtedly best known for their celebration
of bodies.” This concern with developing healthy and strong bodies was
not just of concern to muscular Christians: “Many nineteenth-century
reformers, first in England, then in America, expressed faith in the power
of strenuous activity to overcome the perceived moral defects of urban-
ization, cultural pluralism, and white-collar work.” Early muscular Chris-
tian clergy were themselves especially active in sports and athletics
(Putney 2001, 50–64). Today’s muscular Christian men turn to the insti-
tution of sports and athletics as well; in the late twentieth/early twenty-
first century, these appeals to sports and athletics are framed by our
current cultural obsession with shaping “healthy” bodies and promoting
health and wellness.

In our society, many individuals see sports as building skills that will
help young people succeed in future “team” endeavors, building moral
conscience and as providing a love of physical activity that will encour-
age a lifetime of “healthy” body choices. Connell (2000, 188) notes:
“The image of sport is one of healthy bodies in vigorous action. Sport
might seem our society’s health-giving activity par excellence—exercise,
fresh air, good fellowship.” Yet sports upholds its own sets of contradic-
tions; for example, given the extreme emphasis on sports as producing
healthy bodies, sports, as an institution, supports the normalization of
pain and injury (with its own medical subspecialty to deal with the
blows) and promotes using bodies as instruments of aggressive and vio-
lent action (Messner 1992).

Concern over development of healthy selves and bodies through the
shaping of athletic disciples was exemplified in the ICOC’s “sports min-
istry.” ICOC male members, whether they were active in sports or not,
clearly felt the social pressures of sports as a performance of masculinility;
they understood the male dream of succeeding in sport that bears down
on young boys and men, and so they came to understand, as ICOC
brothers, that muscular bodies were ideal instruments in winning King-
dom goals. Like many other religious groups today, ICOC men would
gather to play sports. In the ICOC, these social gatherings had names
like “brothers’ basketball,” “brothers’ football,” or “brothers’ baseball.”
Formal discourse featured ICOC leaders as healthy and dedicated ath-
letes active in the brothers’ sports ministry. In fact, ex-members joked
often about the extreme emphasis in group on the sports ministry and
how the movement’s founder, Kip McKean, bragged about his children’s
sports accomplishments. For a while in the mid- to late 1990s, a humor-
ous picture circulated on ex-member websites: a digital photo of a
brother’s basketball team where all players were given the face of Kip
McKean. The emphasis on body strength, of building strong muscular
men, was a large part of the formal construction of ICOC brotherhood,
and its manifestation in group was particular to the developments of our
contemporary health and wellness movement.

The ICOC creatively drew from contemporary cultural tools of
health, wellness, and dieting as they constructed their version of body as a
temple theology. They worked to convince members and potential con-
verts that the ICOC approach to shaping bodies resulted in strong men
who lived awesome intimate relationships and who would become pro-
ductive evangelists for the Kingdom. Their concentration on shaping mus-
cular Christian bodies through diet and exercise was reflective of a
long-standing relationship between body, health, and religion.4 American
Protestantism has a particularly rich history of diet as part of Christian
discipline and lifestyle. From John Calvin and the Puritans’ emphasis on
fasting to nineteenth-century physician Edward Hooker Dewey, who “taught that disease was often caused or abetted by gluttonous behavior and excess body weight and advocated both extreme and mild forms of fasting as a panacea for all ills” (Griffith 1999, 220), to John Harvey Kellogg, a late nineteenth-century Seventh-Day Adventist who introduced cornflakes cereal as a substitute for greasy breakfasts full of meats, Protestants have stressed thin bodies as the location of grace and salvation. Griffith notes that “by the early decades of the twentieth century, Anglo-American diet reformers had achieved colossal success in their quest to demonize fat and preach thinness as necessary to personal salvation” (1999, 221).

That mainstream health and wellness diet and exercise fads made their way into ICOC body as a temple theology and discourse is not unusual for modern and contemporary U.S. Christian subcultures. According to Griffith, the first Christian text to “articulate” new “consumer-driven values of slenderness and beauty” in body as a temple theology, and “the first twentieth-century representation of the Christian diet book genre, was *Pray Your Weight Away* by Presbyterian minister Charlie Shedd (1957).” In her study of fasting, dieting, and the body in contemporary Christianity, Griffith calls attention to the proliferation of Christian dieting publications and groups in the evangelical subculture:

In the fifty years after *Pray Your Weight Away* was published, American Christianity saw the rise (and sometimes fall) of iconic groups and hopeful concepts like Overeaters Victorious, Believercise, the Faithfully Fit program, and the Love Hunger Action Plan. . . . *Devotions for Dieters* was published by pastor Victor Kane, a book that was reprinted in 1973 and again in 1976 . . . as [Charlie Shedd] his 1972 book *The Fat is In Your Head* remained on the National Religious Bestsellers list for 23 months and sold more than 110,000 copies by 1976. Evangelist Frances Hunter produced *God’s Answer to Fat* in 1975, a top religious best-seller. . . . Other striking successes in this period include titles such as *Help Lord—The Devil Wants Me Fat!* (1977); *Slim for Him* (1978); and *Free To Be Thin* (1979); the latter sold more than half a million copies and spawned a virtual industry of diet products marketed by the author, including an exercise video and a low-calorie, inspirational cookbook. (Griffith 1999, 223)
Muscular ICOC brothers were playing sports and working out in the gym, just as early muscular brothers of the YMCA were dedicated to building strong bodies for evangelical purpose. However, the ideas and methods for achieving strong and healthy bodies were shaped by contemporary notions of dieting and health and wellness. Today’s Christian dieting and health and wellness discourse draws from popular language that stresses contemporary approaches to weight loss: “low-carb” diets, measuring “fat” indexes, striving for “low cholesterol,” regulating “metabolism,” relaxation through “yoga,” an appeal to a wide range of medicalized and weight loss “experts’” prescriptions and terms. Health and wellness is central to the consumer market, with a vast array of exercise programs, food, pharmaceutical products, and professionals. These products and approaches are highlighted in the evangelical publishing industry and were used in various ways to stress the building of strong bodies for ICOC evangelical purpose. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century jumping jacks and healthy diets were replaced by twenty-first-century body shaping techniques like weight-lifting machines, the South Beach Diet, and low-fat, low-carb diet obsession. These cultural approaches made sense to ICOC men and women; they seemed productive actions in the war against weight gain, secular humanism, and the growth of their movement. To become a disciple was to engage in good “healthy” turn-of-the-twentieth-first-century body consumerism.

We live in a culture where personal trainers are hired to push women and men to bodybuilding heights, to produce ideal body shapes by holding hands and monitoring progress. Laing and other ICOC leaders’ promises to serve as trainers who would actively shape masculine brothers no doubt made sense to many members and potential converts. I was not allowed to attend all-male events, but I did listen carefully and analyze all-male audiotaped events. One tape, given to me by a leader when I requested to attend the yearly regional Men’s Day, was of a clearly energetic collective performance like Marriage Enrichment Day and other special events where thousands of members gathered in one space in megachurch style. Sam Laing was the guest speaker on this particular tape; his preaching style and rhetorical emphasis on building a hegemonic masculinity that views the male body as a strong instrument of Christian social mission were indicative of historical and contemporary muscular Christian leaders. Laing began the day with the promise that he
would “transform” them into men. His pledge was met with cheers from the men in the conference center.

Not surprisingly, a large part of the ICOC path to shaping masculine bodies for God’s Kingdom and to improve personal relationships involved losing pounds. For men, getting stronger meant more muscle and less fat. Recall Laing’s statement in chapter 2 regarding husbands losing weight: he didn’t want to hear about “metabolism” or “genetics” and promoted the idea that men could and should lose weight if they needed to. Following Laing’s promise to transform his audience into men, he offered a personal testimony of weight loss, relational health, sexuality, and masculine power:

I remember, when I got in my thirties, I realized that for me to get in shape it’s going to take a lot more effort than when I was in my twenties. I could go out and play brothers’ football without even warming up. . . . I said to Geri [his wife], “I’m going to start going to the gym,” and she said, “I like you just the way you are.” Well, I started working out and she said, “Oh, I like you even better the way you are.” . . . I was an animal. I tore the gym apart. I got motivated, honestly brother. I don’t care whether you run or go to the gym or do something, but Abraham and the guys in this book [Bible] are examples of men who stayed strong spiritually and physically. Look at Paul, Joseph, and Jacob, they got stronger as they got older, they got more full of life.

Today, muscular bodies are talked about through a particular health and wellness discourse. When religious communities promise to shape bodies for moral, spiritual, and organizational purposes, they draw from various cultural tools and strategies, in creative ways, as they paint images of ideal gendered bodies. Laing’s message that day, and on other occasions, made clear that God was calling men to develop their muscular Christian selves so that they would be better able to serve as evangelists in the Kingdom, as well as improve intimate relationships with spouses and girlfriends. Throughout ICOC discourse, strong and healthy bodies were presented as exceptionally able to tackle the demanding proselytizing goals that leaders had set. In fact, disciples who did not aggressively work to produce converts often emerged in group and individual narratives as “lazy” and “unhealthy.”
Muscular ICOC Christian bodies were built to win and to conquer souls, body images that suggested competition and aggression; yet muscular brothers were held to high expectations of relationality. While I was not privy to the individual social conflicts within the group over evangelical power, leaders often felt the need to address such tension during formal events. Laing and City COC leaders clarified to ICOC brothers that not everyone could become an evangelical leader. To get "on staff" as a paid ministry leader was presented as an important, coveted, and high-status position in the movement. The creation of muscular ICOC brothers produced a competitive evangelical environment, generating much disappointment when only a certain number of church brothers were offered a position at the helm of regions, congregations, and missionary posts. In part, to legitimize the reality that not all brothers would be able to "lead," the leadership stressed group imperatives that brothers should be sensitive and caring, listening faithfully to the needs of fellow brothers and able to admit that they may not have "leadership potential." Images of strong, competitive masculine bodies for the Kingdom were often rhetorically softened by images of expressive brothers behind the front lines of the evangelical war. As disciples were likely told growing up and playing competitive sports, they were not in competition with their team brothers, but in a close-knit church family working together for evangelical success. Living this contradiction was familiar, as was the dilemma posed by the expression of male intimacy bounded by the demands of a heterosexual hegemonic masculinity.

In contemporary U.S. culture, stressing the importance of men showing emotions and dedicating themselves to a therapeutic ethos necessarily presents a challenge to hegemonic masculinity. I use the term hegemonic here because, despite the pervasive influence of emotionality and expressive masculinity as rising contemporary masculine ideals, and the challenges of gay and transgender movements, normative constructions of the heterosexual male continue to dominate (Connell 1995). When hegemonic heterosexual masculinity confronts expressive masculinity's show of emotion and intimacy among men, individuals and groups must develop strategies for balancing the resulting discord. Part of this balancing can be rhetorical, moving the discursive course back and forth from an affirmation of heterosexuality to the valuing of male expressivity and emotionality. Sometimes this discursive balancing, in upholding
heterosexuality, involves the assertion of male dominance in relationships with women. Messner (1992, 85–107), for example, notes how men in locker rooms, as they confront actions and displays of male connectedness and team intimacy, voice sexual conquests of women and deny emotional connection and expressiveness in their relationships with women. Explicit downplaying of emotional connection with women was not an option in the ICOC, as relationality in marriage was so strongly valued. However, one could argue that Laing’s story of tearing apart the gym, of becoming an “animal” while working out, was a story of sexual conquest as he implied his wife liked him “even better” after his workouts.

The task of balancing heterosexual masculinity with expressive masculinity was a big challenge in the ICOC. They seemed to balance by returning most frequently to the relational, expressive masculine ethic. ICOC leaders often boasted of how Kingdom brothers were not afraid to hug each other, kiss each other, put their arms around each other, and show emotion. In the City COC congregation, relationality, enacted through the expressive, emotive male, was in the forefront of congregational and individual depictions of Christian masculinity. To “lead” the movement, just as to “lead” in the home, was to be a strong, muscular man—but hegemonic masculine notions of body shaping patriarchal leadership seemed to take up less rhetorical space. It was in formal movement discourse (specifically events, publications, and audiotapes meant for men only) that I heard most about ICOC brothers armed with a physical power that magnified their ability to evangelize the world and push Christian muscle in “building the Kingdom.” The call to build muscular men was not as prevalent in my data of mixed gender functions or individual formal interviews. First and foremost in my field notes and interview transcripts were stories and prescriptions of ICOC men able to enact valuable relational skills and who helped their fellow male disciples learn to do the same—this was the central course of the discursive path I witnessed.

The course of the discursive journey, where and when language and symbol pull away from and return to a particular ideological position, depends on audience, space, and individual and organizational performance goals. Perhaps I heard more emphasis on expressive masculinity and relationality because the City COC brothers I formally and informally interviewed thought that I would respond more favorably, as a woman, to
their presentation of self as expressive and emotional. And too, perhaps hegemonic, muscular Christian prescriptions did not dominate in mixed-gender events because they knew these prescriptions, and the language used to convey their message, would not fall well on ICOC women’s and potential converts’ ears. Had I been allowed to participant in male-only social events, I might have heard more assertions of hegemonic masculinity and the claiming of physical superiority and ultimate male power and male headship in family and church.

Muscular Sisters/
Domestic Kingdom Workers

Kingdom sisters, as evangelical workers, were engaged in a different creative approach to balancing gender ideals as they fulfilled religious duties: melding muscular sisterhood with more traditional notions of domestic womanhood. In chapters 2 and 5, we saw how ICOC’s gender discourse regarding roles, attitudes, and practices for women in family relationships wavered from a more traditional (as in female submission and women as caretakers of small children) to a more egalitarian, postfeminist stance (as in mutual submission and individual satisfaction). Throughout, egalitarianism, gender equity, and relationality held rhetorical prominence. The juggling of somewhat contradictory gender prescriptions and ideals was true on the evangelical front as well. In their roles as sisters in the ICOC Kingdom, women were to be strong, physically fit, attractive, and beautiful sisters on the front lines of their movement’s evangelical war, speaking out at large public events, publishing in DPI, and living the exemplary life of a productive Christian missionary and evangelist. Yet, this female ICOC evangelical fervor was cast in a language reminiscent of late nineteenth-century domestic Protestantism, where women were relegated to the home to craft pious domestic spaces for the good of their family and church.

Connell (1995, 230–231) reminds us that “though most discussion of masculinity is silent about the issue, it follows from both psychoanalytic and social construction principles that women are bearers of masculinity as well as men. . . . Girls and women participate in masculinized institutions and practices, from bureaucracies to competitive sports,” and I would add here, to spiritual endeavors to conquer and wage religious battles. When the first female Palestinian suicide bomber succeeded in
killing herself and others, the world seemed shocked that a daughter would engage in such an aggressive act previously committed by sons. But the truth is, women regularly embody and enact what many think of as masculine principles such as aggressive action and competition. When they do so, it often “occurs in a context of patriarchal institutions where the ‘male is norm,’ or the masculine is authoritative” (Connell 1995, 231). In the ICOC, church sisters were cast as muscular evangelical workers and warriors, just as their Kingdom brothers; the organization made clear that both genders were to develop strong and healthy bodies, to use these bodies as instruments, to go into the world, sometimes on “dangerous missions,” and fight for the ICOC evangelization of “the world in one generation.”

In his historical look at muscular Christianity, Putney (2001) notes that even though the historical movement was fueled by a fear of the feminization of religion and thus included misogynous rhetoric, many women invested in similar ideals of strong female bodies and athleticism for Christ. At that time, some, like Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, started their own religious spaces based on more “feminine” principles and a rejection of the pursuit of body health. But many women, Putney argues, especially those shaping the late nineteenth-century Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), the Camp Fire Girls, and the Girl Scouts, “embraced” the “Strenuous Life,” especially “those aspects of it that advanced health.” They promoted the belief that girls, as well as boys, “deserved to draw strength from nature and from strenuous outdoor games” (Putney 2001, 145). Putney names his chapter on women “Muscular Women.”

ICOC “sisters,” as turn-of-the-twenty-first-century strong female Christian bodies in pursuit of health, echoed the efforts of women during those early years of the YWCA—exercising and shaping bodies with resolve and strength for use in a social evangelical mission. However, ICOC’s discursive repertoire was composed of cultural tools and strategies that were particular to late twentieth-, early twenty-first-century U.S. society: language, beliefs, practices, and habits that come from the growth and dominance of our medicalized consumer health and wellness movement concerned with weight loss and “healthy” eating in the face of much medical and social concern over a rising “obesity epidemic.”
Several ICOC women talked about how important it was for a female disciple to “take care of herself physically.” Exercising daily and eating the right foods would make you a beautiful sister and productive evangelist. At one Marriage Enrichment event the guest female speaker talked about how she had worked out that morning at the wonderful gym in the hotel and how important it was to exercise. Looking “in shape” would benefit your relationship with your spouse and enable you to attract new female converts to the movement. During events, women talked about how being a sister in the Kingdom of God had helped them shed pounds, and how disciplers had helped them stay on goal. Formal prescriptions of health and wellness for ICOC sisters were also found in DPI texts. In *Life and Godliness for Everywoman* (Jones 2000, 112), disciple and medical doctor Helen Salsbury, in a section on growing older, writes: “If your diet is poor and/or you need to lose weight, get advice. Maybe you could volunteer or get a part time job at a weight loss center or a health food store. You will learn much about living and eating healthier. There are multiple sources on the Internet for medical and dietary newsletters. Just ask around and look. Try growing some herbs or learn organic gardening.”

Dr. Salsbury echoes a historical body as a temple theology: God gave you this body, he has uses for it, it is a gift, and so you must do your best to keep it pure. She offers advice for weight loss strategy and warns that obesity could be deadly:

Do something drastic to change. Losing weight can help you feel better about yourself, no matter what age you are. It helps your attitude and will eliminate some of your physical complaints. There is a reason that that joint hurts. It may not just be arthritis. Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, difficulty breathing, snoring and depression are some of the consequences of obesity. If you are obese, get help quickly and believe you can change. You can change. Learn about weight control and do not give up. Fast foods are killing Americans. Unfortunately, we have created a generation of junk food junkies, and it reeks of Roman debauchery. (Jones 2000, 112)

Implicit in Dr. Salsbury’s and other formal ICOC lectures on weight loss and health maintenance was that healthy and strong female bodies gave way to productive evangelical lives. Salsbury charges, “If you are overweight, you are not just hurting yourself, you are hurting God”
Jones 2000, 112). How exactly were they hurting God? McKean and other top leaders made clear that women were to be active church leaders, missionaries, and evangelists. An “obese,” “lazy,” and “diseased” woman did not fit the ideal soldier for the Kingdom image. They would not have the energy to get the work of the Kingdom done, nor would they serve as examples of ideal womanhood that would draw new converts.

Women in the City COC often spoke informally of the “strong” women’s ministry in the church, women as “powerful ambassadors for God,” and attributed a large part of the success of the movement to the strength of the women’s ministry. Like Dana’s call of “Women power!” before the showing of Secrets of the Heart (chapter 4), leaders and members were constantly naming and praising powerful church women. Kip McKean, in his manifesto, RR, speaks of the birth of the women’s ministry under the guidance of his wife, Elena McKean, and another founding female member, Pat Gempel:

Another aspect of restoration that enriched the movement was led by Pat Gempel and Elena McKean. That was the creation of formal training for women leaders and the discipling of all women. Thus, a dynamic women’s ministry was created. This opportunity for leadership excited the sisters and attracted non-Christian women to God’s movement. Many women in the traditional church perceived their role as “second-class” since they simply prepared meals for fellowship dinners. Thus, with no real purpose, many became lazy and/or discouraged in their daily Christianity. . . Pat, Elena and I, by studying the Word together, came to understand that God commands women to be responsible for and lead the other women. Ultimately, women could then put their all into the church because they saw from Scripture their purpose was exactly the same as the purpose for men—to change the world by making disciples.

In McKean’s pronouncement, we can hear loud and clear a postfeminist position: women in other churches that promoted a return to “tradition” were treated as “second-class,” while women in the ICOC had equality in evangelical purpose and community roles. In that delicate rhetorical floating of traditionalism with egalitarianism, leaders and members may move away from egalitarianism at points to stress an ultimate gender hierarchy that put male leaders in charge of female leaders.
However, egalitarianism and mutuality would always return as essential in gender relationships and informally (female and male) members sometimes reversed the traditionalist positions. Some told me that local women leaders would, even if it was not named as such, disciple and lead men. The breadth of the organization’s gendered discursive repertoire gave women and men options for framing group interactions, and the audience, social space, and individual performance goals influenced members’ discursive paths.

In organizational discourse, ICOC muscular sisters were caught in a dance of power and influence that has historically been the case in many religious communities. Jualynne Dodson (2002), for example, in her book *Engendering Church: Women, Power and the AME Church*, offers an in-depth look at the formal and informal mechanisms through which black women wielded incredible power and influence in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, an institution that for the first half of the nineteenth century had no formal positions for women. Throughout religious history in the United States, there have been many cases where women’s formal power has been limited, yet informal organizational power, influence, and responsibility were great. Women, per the significant body of social research documenting these cases, have historically carried a large portion of the public grassroots community work that sustains religious institutions and communities, even if they have been offered limited public and institutional credit for doing so. The ICOC women’s ministry provided women in the movement with a voice and mechanisms for asserting public influence and power.

In formal discourse, ICOC muscular women took their strong bodies and minds on exciting missiological trips, traveling around the world to dangerous places. At times, their descriptions of paid and unpaid ICOC missionary efforts sounded like advertisements for intrigue and adventure. Megan Blackwell writes in Linda Brunley and Sheila Jones’s DPI text, *She Shall Be Called Woman*, volume 1 (Jones and Brunley 2000, 39): “As I write this, we are preparing to leave for the Middle East tomorrow morning. Americans are advised not to travel there, but we are convinced that the kingdom must advance.” Blackwell, a mother, is aided by the conversion of her biological father to the ICOC family as she prepares to leave her children: “God has comforted me by providing my father, who became a disciple a year ago, to take care of the kids.” Kay
McKean, the founder’s sister-in-law, writes in the same text, “My life is, indeed, an adventure. With each adventure, God is molding my character to have the Christ-like qualities of love, bravery, strength, patience. . . . It’s thrilling to be able to live a life that can make an eternal impact on others. . . . He is with me, leading me, changing me, and giving me the victory!” (Jones and Brumley 2000, 139–140).

ICOC women were encouraged by the organization to be out in the public beating the evangelical war drum. Teresa Ferguson offers Deborah (Judges 4) as a model—she was a biblical woman who “inspired a nation of women to step outside of their household duties and put their hands to the battle.” She speaks of her renewing commitment as a high-ranking women’s ministry leader: “Like Deborah, I have to keep listening to God daily. I am a woman chosen by God to speak his words to others. . . . I must recite the victories which God has given me and to those other faithful warriors around me” (Jones and Brumley 2000, 65). We hear, in the voices of formal ICOC female testimonies, a clear belief in the woman warrior for Christ, healthy and strong women ready to travel across the world to fight the battle. But these were the glamorous, high-status aggressive missionary assignments: to be chosen to travel to another country, to be a “guest speaker” from state to state, city to city at regional ICOC Women’s Days and Marriage Enrichment Days, to be asked to author an essay for a DPI volume. The more common female ground soldiers heeded a call to leadership and missionary work in domesticity.

When women are called to do masculinity in organizations, their adherence and performance of masculine actions are creatively cast through feminine form: institutions may combine sisterly duties and/or motherly duties with aspects of normative masculinity to explain and justify particular organizational goals. Formal, and especially informal, church discourse was driven by ideals that echoed clearly the beliefs of late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century domestic Protestantism. Domestic Protestantism was born of the “separate spheres” doctrine that arose in our industrializing nation from white Protestant culture. Domestic Protestantism was based on the idea that men went out into the dangerous, sinful working world and came home to a pious, Godly home sphere tended by and shaped through women’s domestic efforts. The home sphere was to soothe and provide spiritual rejuvenation from a
harsh, industrializing working world. Even though ICOC women were expected to keep up with their evangelical brothers as warriors for God's Kingdom, they were also told by leaders and fellow disciples that they were naturally more suited and able to entertain, cook, and keep homes clean, neat, and attractively decorated. One woman declared during a local women's brunch gathering: “Women are naturally looking for things to do. We’re bothered by messes.” The majority of ICOC married women were charged with the overseeing and upkeep of the movement’s domestic conversion spaces.

DPI’s 1995 book, *The Fine Art of Hospitality: Sharing Your Heart and Home with Others*, emphasized the potential for members to evangelize the world through inviting neighbors, friends, and acquaintances into their homes and offering them tempting hospitality, a performance of warm home and mouth-watering food. As Kim Strondak writes:

You may ask, “How can I make an impact in my neighborhood?” “How can I turn a perfect stranger into my new best friend?” “How can I win souls and be abundantly fruitful?” Your home is one of the most important avenues for evangelism that God has given you. Looking back over the past ten years of being a disciple, I realized that every new friend I’ve made, every soul I have helped to convert and the ministry I have helped to build have been affected by time around my dinner table. Brunches, luncheons, dinner parties, pizza extravaganzas, campus turkey dinners, chili and “chowda” fests, Sunday BBQs, birthday parties, wine and cheese parties, chocolate parties and jam-making gatherings are some of the fond and fun memories of the hospitable ways I’ve used my home to win hearts and souls for Jesus. (Jones 1995, 70)

Opening homes and providing hospitality was presented in group formal discourse as an evangelical advantage in a world where strong community and social connection was threatened. Kay McKean writes, “God’s kingdom must advance, and we as 20th-century disciples will have a great hand in that advancement as we obey the command to be hospitable. As I read in the Bible of souls being saved through hospitality, I am reminded of so many stories of conversions in recent years that began with the question, ‘Would you like to come to my home?’ As those in our modern world become more and more isolated from one another,
we are exhorted to be different and to open our homes to the lost and to the saved” (Jones 1995, 63). Winning souls for the ICOC Kingdom involved meeting cultural expectations of domestic order.

ICOC prescriptions for female hospitality adhered to twentieth-century rigid ideals of domestic cleanliness: “In order to be encouraging and effective in our hospitality, we must be content in the situations (houses or apartments) God has given us. We must have order and consistency in cleaning and decorating our houses, so we can reflect the nature and beauty of God’s character” (Jones 1995, 10). Furthermore, women were encouraged to pursue a Martha Stewart, Better Homes and Gardens approach in designing their domestic space. Jeanie Shaw advises: “Does your home reflect the glory of God? Does the creative energy you put into it with color, design, sound, light, plants and fun cause those who enter to feel warm, happy, peaceful and ‘at home’? . . . Get ideas from others about decorating your house. Take note of styles you see and like in others’ homes, and then imitate them. . . . Use colors that complement each other and group pictures attractively” (Jones 1995, 31–32).

In their creative confrontation with late twentieth-century cultural gender assumptions, members and leaders knew that they could not get away with assigning evangelical domesticity solely to the sisters; they had to include brothers in their prescriptions as well. And so, there was a chapter in the hospitality book entitled “Not for Men Only.” The author of the chapter, Ron Brumley, admits that the other twenty-one entries are by women and that women in the church are more likely to be readers of this particular DPI text; still, he advises us to read on.

The statistics are not in yet, but I imagine that, after perusing the Table of Contents of this book, the majority of readers will be women. Quite honestly, if I hadn’t been asked to participate in the writing of it, I probably wouldn’t have purchased a copy either. . . . My point is that men often leave “hospitality” up to their wives—the same men who believe in 1 Timothy 3:2 and in Titus 1:8 that says ‘the overseer must be . . . hospitable.’ . . . It is my firm conviction that all male disciples can and need to grow in the gift of serving—of being hospitable as we reach out and influence the fragmented world in which we live. . . . So men, let’s read and study and grow in our hospitality. It’s definitely a subject not for women only. (Jones 1995, 65)
During City COC services, events, and in my formal and informal interviews with members, I heard numerous stories about and compliments of men who contributed to the household labor, cleaning, and cooking. For example, one woman proudly noted that her husband cleaned the bathroom and did the dinner dishes, and one female leader told me how her husband cooked for the family and complimented him on his chicken pot pie. When I spoke with him, he agreed that it was superb and offered to give me a copy of the recipe. Member and leader focus on male involvement in domestic chores is reflective of the rising attention in the evangelical subculture to the participation of men in both housework and parenting (Gallagher 2003, 105–126). Still, in all of their presentations and performances, church husbands, fathers, and brothers were “helping” the women. As in secular culture and the wider evangelical Christian subculture, men are asked to be more involved, but the actual work done is still gendered.

The evangelical domestic duties of muscular sisters were essential to the success of the movement and the organization often stressed this point. Indeed, local City COC congregations had no official buildings (the result of an early edict by McKean and top leaders based on the idea that disciples were the brick and mortar of God’s Kingdom, not buildings), and so except for weekly services, which were held in rented hotel conference rooms, other church buildings, or auditoriums, much of the social life of the church took place in members’ homes. It was important then for potential converts attending Bible studies and social events to have an impression of “healthy” domestic and family life—the domestic female warrior then was a key to Kingdom success. For a movement that claimed to produce “awesome families,” the reflection of this exceptional character in the appearance of domestic homes was important. Sisters in the church seemed to bear the brunt of this evangelical task.

Brothers and Sisters for the Kingdom

Church sisters struggled to meet nuclear family demands of domesticity, child care, and necessary contributions to household income, and some also felt the added pressures of pursuing long-sought individual professional and occupational goals. Their church family status as sisters for the Kingdom of God introduced new, yet familiar contradictions. To be an ICOC disciple was, in many ways, to pursue a demanding career
choice—to become a strong and productive evangelist, active in church missionary programs, and maintain their homes as welcoming domestic evangelical spaces. The female members I spent the most time with in the City COC, while not high-profile ICOC women missionary leaders, spoke of themselves as strong, outspoken Kingdom workers who managed to balance work, family, home, and church. They saw their role in the Kingdom as equally important, and witnessing the high demands placed on female evangelists and leaders, never spoke of wanting to become an ICOC public face.

ICOC brothers too seemed to struggle to manage wage work, nuclear family, and church family therapeutic demands with such high evangelical demands and pressures from leadership to be productive warriors for the Kingdom. Many talked of demand in the group to develop muscular, slender bodies, to look the role of healthy and strong church members, fathers, and husbands. Like their church sisters, the demands of ICOC brotherhood and discipleship magnified existing work/family dilemmas and introduced new and powerful tensions between church and family gendered roles and responsibilities. Many found the role of muscular brothers as relentless and demanding; for them, the discursive emphasis on expressivity and relationality offered a much more soothing ground and retreat from leadership pressures on “numbers” (converted).