Awesome Families
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Chapter 7

A Kingdom That Promised Too Much

At the start of this ethnography, I asked how we might make sense of the contradictory portraits of the ICOC: an ideal family community alongside a dangerous and destructive one. How do we come to understand why individuals join religious groups that seem a direct affront to deeply held social values? My ethnography of this movement is not exhaustive; no doubt there are relationships and institutional dynamics that I was not allowed to see. However, my work does suggest that the answer to this puzzling ICOC family paradox lies somewhere in the recognition that members and leaders were incredibly of this world. Their attraction to the movement, their attempts to shape better selves and relationships in unsettled lives, were not based in radical departures from cultural belief and practice, but on religious, family, and therapeutic strategies and approaches that already permeated their lives. I have shown here, and others before have suggested, that controversial new religious movements are not so much a break from the norms and cultural expectations of the mainstream as they are attempts to order/make sense of our world (Beckford 1985). They are magnified attempts to use and push beyond dominant cultural boundaries.

The sociological study of radical or controversial religious movements must pay rigorous attention to the complexity and ingenuity of groups’ creative use of various cultural beliefs and practices even as it develops an analysis of social control within authoritative systems. Researchers of controversial new religious movements have tended, until recently, to be labeled by one another as “cult apologists” (those more sympathetic to groups) or “cult bashers” (those who are highly critical and negative of controversial groups) (Zablocki and Robbins 2001).
These divisions have resulted in somewhat separate camps that argue over theoretical paradigms and language (such as whether to call these groups “cults,” given the pejorative nature of the term, or new religious movements). Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins (2001, 9) rightly call attention to the need for those studying controversial new religious movements or cults to continue to break down these opposing camps, to maintain ongoing dialogue, and to search for cooperative theoretical engagement. To look for answers to the question of why and how people join radical religious movements by focusing primarily on “deceptive conversion tactics” or “brainwashing” is a dead-end analytical street. People do not make such life-altering commitments to controversial groups because they have been duped or have fallen prey to some sort of mind control. Likewise, not recognizing the effects of tightened social controls in religious groups with high levels of creative cultural engagement could be dangerously limiting. Understanding and developing an analytical middle ground, as Zablocki and Robbins (2001) suggest, is essential. This approach will help us further uncover how culture is actively shaped in and through controversial religious/spiritual movements, and teach us more about how organizations and individuals draw from multiple cultural sources as they confront unsettling experiences. Developing such an analytic approach is essential in a world in which we are threatened by religious groups that violently pursue their political and religious goals. It is with this commitment to exploring a middle ground that I wrote this ethnography.

A sociohistorical analytical approach is critical in these efforts as well. In controversial new religious movements, as in all religious groups, old axes of variation and deeply felt cultural cleavages are still at work, just as new ones are introduced. Crafting clarity from cultural ambiguity is hard individual and organizational work; in comparing historical and contemporary groups’ performance efforts, processes of institutional and individual resolution are more easily recognized and understood. I have noted here, for example, the similarities of the ICOC and the Oneida community, as well as muscular Christian approaches in contemporary and early twentieth-century U.S. society. Looking at the YMCA and other such organizations highlights the historically complex and persistent nature of gender and the importance of economic and political conditions in shaping religious goals and institutions.
Over the past twenty years, the discursive debate between the followers of McKean, church leaders, and former members and critics of the movement has been fought in pulpits, publications, and on-line with cultural swords of relationality, individualism, dysfunctionality, sickness, and health, through Christian, family, and medical therapeutic discourse. Most of these frontline performances were of members’ empowerment and disempowerment, presented as a war of “good” versus “evil.” But when we move beyond the front lines and into the experiences of everyday life, ritual practice, and narrative performance, we begin to see that the ideological boundaries that at first seem so clear are indeed gray, the result of dynamic use of many different cultural beliefs and practices. In the ICOC’s sustaining of cultural contradictions, we see vibrant “culture in action” (Swidler 1986, 2001) as members and organizational leaders creatively strive to fashion a strategic approach to intimate relationships.

**Vertigo**

Experience in the ICOC seemed, for many, to result in a disturbing state of cultural vertigo. The capricious individual course of the ICOC discursive journey, supported by an organizational repertoire with perplexing breadth, was often confusing, lacked cohesion, and brought members to a place where they felt unsure of ideological paths and relationships among disciples. Connell (1995), and later Barbara Risman (1998), use the term “gender vertigo” to represent the results of extreme attempts to challenge normative assumptions of masculinity and femininity, to push beyond—as many transgendered and transsexual individuals and groups do—the notion that there are only two genders. The experience of gender vertigo comes from attempts to change, take apart, and creatively alter taken for granted notions of what people (as gendered individuals) “naturally” do and want, and how they are to interact. A call to bring about gender vertigo by sociologists like Connell and Risman is partly a political venture, an effort to bring about social change. For transgendered and transsexual folks the cause is political as well, grounded for many in a commitment to validate individual choice, lifestyle, and subculture. Pursuing these goals in the production of gender vertigo is a different task from what I observed in the ICOC, but the highly active process of challenging, ignoring, and creatively molding cultural
ideals, beliefs, and practices to produce a better social environment is similar.

The ICOC organization and individual members, in crafting what they hoped was a more suitable, rewarding Christian family environment, exercised culture in ambitious ways: their discourse and group practices summoned familiar cultural ambiguity, magnified existing contradictory ideals and practices, and introduced new ideological and practical disconcertments. Even though it may seem as if the ICOC was adhering to “traditional” social positions that accommodated and appropriated contemporary notions of equality, egalitarianism, and therapeutic culture, my ethnographic analysis of group performance and individual narratives demonstrates how they were involved in a much more complex and inventive cultural process.

Drawing high boundaries, rendering the ICOC as an exclusive Christian community, and setting extremely high conversion goals pushed the movement to a high level of cultural creativity. They were involved in a process that, as Risman (1998, 11) suggests about gender vertigo, goes “beyond gender whenever we can, ignoring gendered rules, pushing the envelope until we get dizzy.” The ICOC pushed to move beyond cultural boundaries, and many members did indeed feel scattered in the creative organizational production of “awesome family” that upheld and magnified existing cultural contradictions and introduced a number of new and deeply paradoxical beliefs and stances. They felt so scattered, in fact, that they had to retreat to familiar cultural ground. It is ironic that a search for clarity in intimate relationships was a major impetus for many joining the movement, and that a search for clarity in intimate relationships was a driving force for many in abandoning McKean’s vision.

**Familiar, Magnified, and Added Cultural Cleavage**

To be a member of the ICOC was to live with a constant affront to U.S. values that support a respect of religious pluralism and acceptance of difference. City COC members never directly said that they were saved and all others who called themselves Christians were not. Some, in fact, were clear about not wanting to “judge” others and cited the Golden Rule defense, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” as
legitimation for not offering judgment. Their frequent citation of the Golden Rule reflects a heavy contemporary mainstream religious investment in Golden Rule theology (Ammerman 1997, 368). Frequent return to this rule is understandable given its reflection of relationality—the idea that we are to listen and take seriously the ideas, concerns, and beliefs of others just as we would assume that they should do for us. Most members, however, did not directly challenge the official institutional position: to be a Christian meant to be involved in discipling relationships, and the ICOC was the only contemporary Christian community that had gotten discipleship right. One official movement legitimation for exclusivity was repeated often: if you were a true Christian who, in your heart, wanted to follow discipleship as Jesus had commanded, why then would you not join the ICOC community? Clearly, some did not know of God’s ICOC “modern-day movement”; they were, of course, to be the target of strong national and international missionary zeal. But if you were a member of another Christian congregation (most of which were talked about as “dying” and lacking true discipleship) and heard the ICOC’s message, why would you not want to be a part of God’s modern-day Kingdom when introduced to the truth through the First Principles study?

For some, this self-identification with an exclusive movement while valuing religious diversity was not a new dilemma, but a magnification of previous membership in conservative religious denominations that implicitly claimed to have the right religious worldview while tolerating religious pluralism. These institutions (here I am speaking of the more fundamentalist wings of various U.S. religious denominations) may show rhetorical respect for other religious views, while insisting that their moral community is the way God intended individuals to live and worship. Living with the paradox of religious exclusivity in a nation that is called to respect diversity and religious difference is a long-standing, familiar social cleavage. Freedom of religion and freedom from religion has always been a precarious balance. Historically, respecting religious diversity and freedom of religion has existed alongside the elevation of particular religious worldviews. Many of our major cultural institutions including medicine, education, and sports, as well as our dominant workplace culture, were shaped by a white Protestant ethos. For ICOC members then, pledging commitment to a social group that claimed ultimate truth in a society where respect of religious difference and
diversity was highly valued was not new—it was not necessarily a strange and out of the ordinary religious position, but rather a comfortable paradoxical stance.

As demonstrated throughout this ethnography, ICOC’s gender discourse was full of familiar essentialist gender notions that supported traditionalist gender roles in marriage and family alongside contemporary ideals of egalitarian marriage and gender equity. Members and leaders stressed the muscular and relational character of Christian women. They stressed female power and ability in public endeavors and careers in a culture that continues to associate domesticity with women. A strong therapeutic ethos pushed constant rhetorical return to egalitarianism and gender equity. All women and men in our culture are swimming along, challenging at particular points in our lives established ideals about gender and embracing normative notions at other times. Like it or not, we must confront and answer these social forces as we shape ourselves and our most intimate relationships. And, inevitably, much of our performance of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) varies according to social status, the particular audience, and our political and individual goals at the moment. Laura and Alicia were able to describe themselves as being “led” by their husbands through asserting their own will because they had group status and inside organizational knowledge. “Baby Christians” did not emerge as such savvy users of the discipling system. City COC women and men, in their storytelling and daily interactions, seemed to move back and forth along a gender course where their exact positions were determined by personal circumstance, social environment, and audience. As discussed in chapter 6, ICOC’s creative use of existing gender beliefs and practices added its own level of contradiction: prescriptions of muscular Christian womanhood that magnified the role of both public church worker and domestic evangelist. In many ways, women in the ICOC experienced an extreme form of postfeminism: like Phyllis Schlafly and Beverly LaHaye (voices from the New Right’s Concerned Women for America), they preached domesticity, but much of their lives was centered around a public evangelical Christian mission that supported feminist principles.

City COC members and other ICOC former members across the country, as they left the unified movement, voiced a need to return to less intensified gender contradictions. Many talked of the ICOC as moving women too far away from traditional notions of female domesticity
by aggressively pushing evangelical and therapeutic church responsibilities. Bartkowski (2004, 65–66) argues, regarding the downfall of the PK movement: the “loose mélange of gender discourses is likely one reason for the Promise Keepers’ quick rise to prominence during the 1990s. Given the diversity and flexibility of these gender ideologies, PK was able to appeal to men with a wide variety of gender sensibilities. However, flexible ties are not those that bind . . . the ideological diffuseness of the Promise Keepers probably contributed to the movement’s equally fast decline.” The sustaining of various gender positions in the ICOC organizational discourse repertoire may have attracted more folks to the movement, but clearly the resulting confusion from prescribing such varied positions with great intensity and evangelical purpose contributed somewhat to the downfall of the unified movement.

Marriage disciplers appeared in group and individual narratives as attractive ideological specialists in their efforts to sift through confusing gender beliefs and practices. Ultimately, however, marriage disciplers presented members with yet another level of cultural tension. Much of the marriage advice and prescriptions described in narratives of marriage discipling efforts in sermons, individual interviews, DPI literature, and KNN productions mirrored secular and other evangelical Christian approaches to healing marriage. In particular, they supported what members understood as a legitimate ambiguous marriage position: spouses were individual selves with rights and responsibilities regarding their own health and happiness, and spouses were supposed to be deeply dependent on one another. This contradiction was a familiar one, supported by divorce and therapeutic culture, as well as major conservative religious ideologies. But the contradictory stance was magnified in the ICOC: you were an individual responsible for your own happiness and “healthy” marriage relationships, but you were also joined in great intimacy with the discipling community, in particular, with your marriage disciplers. The four of you worked together to ensure a satisfying marriage; you had responsibilities and reciprocal ties to one another that secured a family-like bond. When you gave up on a marriage, or were having a difficult time resolving spousal issues, you were seen as abandoning God, your spouse, and those brothers and sisters in the Kingdom who had invested much time and effort in your relationship. Jeremy appropriately described
this level of therapeutic involvement when he told me: “We are really in each other’s marriages.” Former members complained that such intense involvement of a third party in marriage relationships took focus away from the primacy of the marriage relationship.

Such high-level bonds and involvement of disciplers extended to members’ relationships with their children as well. The movement appropriated evangelical discourse on child rearing, especially in painting a grim picture of threats to children in the secular world. This story of the world as a dangerous place for kids and teens was familiar. Like Dobson and other evangelical spokespeople, they promoted giving parents more authority, teaching parents to raise obedient children, giving them permission to use corporeal punishment to do so, and relieving the pressure to appeal to medical therapeutic experts. Yet, even as they tried to return power to parents, they introduced a new and even more intrusive moral authority—the discipling system. Group members were autonomous parents, but officially, they were asked to appeal to their disciplers regularly regarding child rearing. If they were confused about a particular interaction or issue with their children, they were to turn to their disciplers right away. When children entered the preteen and teen years, parental authority and responsibility seemed to further diminish as teens found peers and counselors in the preteen and teen ministry programs. Through marriage and child-rearing experiences in the ICOC, we see how members were resocialized to a familiar, yet intensified, contradictory cultural position as free individuals dependent on institutional authority.

Our position as individuals dependent on social institutions has been given a great deal of sociological thought. Classical theorists like Durkheim, Marx, and Weber all puzzled over the pull of social forces and the role of the individual. Contemporary social theorists wrestle with these questions as well. In the United States, individualism is a strong and pervasive belief and social value. Yet many institutional arrangements structure, guide, and limit our individual actions, choices, and life goals. We are responsible for maintaining our own “health and wellness,” yet are dependent on the methods and moral diagnoses of medical and therapeutic professionals to do so. We are workers capable of pulling ourselves up, moving up the social ladder, yet we are dependent on government, corporations, and other institutional structures to do so. We
are dependent on our families of origin, and yet expected to earn our own way in life, making something of ourselves and becoming independent workers. ICOC members were on familiar ground then when the movement demanded they be responsible for their own actions, self-motivated, successful in family and evangelical endeavors, and at the same time pledge submission to disciplers and leaders who were to guide them and have authority in major life decisions and relationships. The dual position of being independent selves responsible for their own success and satisfaction, as well as dependent on institutional support systems to fulfill their needs, was deepened and made explicit in the ICOC movement.

The pull between individual responsibility and dependence on institutional structure is a contradiction that varies in intensity in spiritual and religio-therapeutic groups. Irvine (1999) notes in her study of self-help groups for “codependents” that individuals join as “victims” of family “dysfunction,” of “codependent” relationships, and are determined to learn to spend more time on themselves and do what they need to do as individuals. Yet the irony, as suggested in the title of her book, Codependent Forevermore, is that this journey of selfhood takes place through dependence on others. Many self-help groups, of course, like “codependent” self-help groups, downplay group dependence and authority and do not engage in high levels of social control. We tend not to see a great deal of explicit authority and control in healing/spirituality groups because of our strong cultural promotion of self and individual therapeutic journey. On the other hand, groups like the ICOC and, for example, in the late twentieth century in Manhattan, the Sullivan Institute, a “psychotherapeutic community,” or “quasi-religion,” as Amy Siskind (1994) names it, push to incorporate high levels of authority and control with therapeutic beliefs and practices. The ICOC therapeutic structure bore strong resemblance to the Sullivan Institute, where “patients/members were under constant surveillance by other members and by their own therapists, who were obligated to report dissidents to the leadership” (Siskind 1994, 51) The Sullivan Institute faded in the 1980s after media attention around a custody case and the exit of high-ranking therapists/leaders in the group. The ICOC faded in 2004, after much ex-member, media, and therapeutic and religious “expert” criticism, the resignation of Kip McKean and other leaders, and on-line distribution of
deep and passionate criticisms from leaders and members throughout the Kingdom.

There is an important lesson to take away from this ethnography and the rich body of literature that sociologists of religion have produced on the contemporary religious/spiritual marketplace: a little bit of authority with individuality works, we live it every day, it is part of our institutional and therapeutic culture, but at the end of the day a dominant cultural emphasis on individualism reinforces that we should feel as if we are in control of our own lives. In fact, the therapeutic edict of the importance of individual selves on journeys of improving self and relationship dictates that individuals must control the wheel. They can take direction from others, but in the end, the individual must at least feel and be able to describe themselves as in charge of their most important life decisions and relationships. The ICOC movement (and groups like the Sullivan Institute), through its mandatory and authoritative counseling structure, upset this delicate balance too much. Even a most personal, individual level of spiritual and religious experience of the divine, of having “Jesus” in their “hearts,” was too often interrupted by authoritative ICOC discipling interventions; disciplers often acted as mediators who would bring you to Jesus, and who would tell you whether or not God was in your heart. Such constant interference with the individual’s relationship with God was disconcerting. On the issue of individualism versus dependence, the ICOC pushed disciples to a place of cultural vertigo—resulting in many members feeling scattered, unsure of themselves, their relationships in group, and their relationships with God. In the first years of the twenty-first century, most members were ready to return to more familiar, if ambiguous, cultural terrain.

Another very deeply felt contradiction was the pull they felt between church community and nuclear family/family of origin. Here again, some of the tensions were familiar, but in the ICOC, the responsibility one sustained to one’s own nuclear family and family of origin was constantly in tension with church family goals and responsibilities. It was clear, in the formal discourse of the ICOC movement, that “God’s family” should be your number one concern. It was also clear that your nuclear family should be a number one concern. Many could only sustain these split allegiances for so long. They were already torn in several directions with wage work, child care responsibilities, domestic duties, and
family of origin caretaking—even though they received some assistance from the discipling community network, their church therapeutic and evangelical chores were often consuming. The maintenance of two competing prime kin networks was almost impossible to sustain in the context of other responsibilities like wage work and evangelical duties.

Organizational Dissolution

Eileen Barker (1992), in her lecture “Behold the New Jerusalems! Catch 22s in the Kingdom-Building Endeavors of New Religious Movements,” argues that “the plain truth is that new religious movements do not have a particularly impressive track record when it comes to restructuring society.” By this she means not that new religious movements (NRMs) have had no effect on society. “Christianity and Islam, were, after all, NRMs in their time,” but that NRMs have not been especially successful when it comes to maintaining the often radical grounding social visions of their charismatic leaders. New religious movements often fade away, or become more mainstream in the religious/spiritual marketplace. As Berger (1967) noted, to survive, radical sects in a modern setting either lose their controversial status and come to resemble one another more and more in bureaucratic structure and theological intent, or come to huddle together under “sacred canopies.” McKean’s radical vision of discipling, in its attempt to balance to such a high degree of authoritative and submissive demands with egalitarian/therapeutic principles, has followed in the footsteps of other “radical” new religious movements that ultimately retreated or became more like the dominant religious culture. In the Oneida community in the late nineteenth century, John Humphrey Noyes attempted to promote individual expression of sexuality, Christian socialism, and group marriage ideals through a highly monitored, authoritative group structure. Too much dissent from mainstream views combined with introduction of heightened cultural contradiction was not a viable institutional approach. Oneida members eventually returned to romantic love and more mainstream religious structure and approaches to intimate relationships. Most members of the ICOC movement, as the unified movement fell apart, returned to a more mainstream balancing of family, religious community, and therapeutic intervention. Only McKean and a small group of
followers, huddled together under a sacred canopy in Portland, Oregon, tried to revive McKean’s “radical” vision of Christian discipleship.

The City COC congregation, over the years (1995–2000) during which I conducted field studies, did not seem to grow, appearing to maintain instead a core group that made up at least half or more of its membership. Again, these are my visual estimations; my request to survey the congregation was denied by local leadership. Accurate membership numbers for the unified movement were almost impossible to obtain; numbers were produced solely by the church and often calculated through weekly attendance at services (which would include guests). The unified international movement did have a high dropout rate—ex-members and critics claimed 50 percent of new members left the movement each year, which would, in the first few years of the twenty-first century, suggest that there were a large number of former members. Some former members have admitted to doctoring numbers because of leadership pressure to baptize and see congregations grow. I would suggest then that the majority of ICOC growth appears to have taken place primarily in the years prior to 1996–1998, not long after core leaders signed the Evangelization Proclamation in 1994 (see chapter 1). But for thousands of individuals, being an active part of the discipling community made sense for a number of years. How did the movement keep commitment and belief in discipling alive and sacred for these individuals? What forces led to the unified movement’s crumbling at century’s end?

Individual narratives, formal group discourse, and powerful collective rituals legitimated the discipling structure and cast the ICOC movement as truly sacred, as “awesome.” Heightened group contradictions and ambiguity were rendered meaningful through stories and language that legitimated the feeling of being pulled in one direction and then the other—being ultimately responsible for one’s children and at the same time the success of the ICOC movement. Institutions have long been adept at legitimating contradictions through storytelling (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In ICOC stories and performances, disciplers were cultural guides, helping members sift through various ideals and approaches and performing heroic relational interventions creatively composed from contradictory approaches. Most important, individual stories and group narrative employed a great deal of discursive movement, shifting back and forth from one belief to another: stressing at one moment
discipline and authority and at the next relationality; arguing at one moment that women were naturally domestic and the next that they belonged in front of the congregation, in coffee shops, and on streets evangelizing for the Kingdom; arguing one moment that men were to lead families and sexual encounters, and the next that men needed to recognize and give in to their wives’ needs; demanding at one moment that disciples were first and foremost responsible for the growth of the Kingdom of God and at the next that their nuclear families were most important. This dynamic discursive dance was idiosyncratic as well—the only constant step was toward ideals, habits, and practices that emulated relationality and therapeutic ethos as they tried to embrace authoritative social control. This well-performed dance was a major source of legitimation for these intense contradictions—its choreography made the ICOC seem whole and morally sound. It also provided a repertoire for a multitude of situations; for example, if it was in the interest of an ICOC woman, at one particular moment, to present herself as submissive to male leadership in family and church, she had the language and script to do so. If she wanted to present herself as a strong evangelical missionary, she had the language and script to do so. If she wanted to present herself as “doing motherhood,” she had the language and script to do so.

The movement’s dynamic discursive performance was made exceptionally potent through contemporary media venues, mechanisms that made multiple and contradictory approaches and ideals seem natural and purposeful. The ICOC movement, like many other religious institutions today, used the power of film, music, creative arts, and printed publications to sustain and sacralize group beliefs. My findings here stress the importance of media today in religious practice and institutional health. Film, music, publications, and on-line religion are becoming the blood and heartbeat of religion—many religious organizations now depend on these venues to successfully bring alive religious symbol and belief. Religious institutions today, after all, operate in a culture that is saturated by these forms (Brasher 2001; Martin-Barbero 1997; Wuthnow 2003). KNN films like Secrets of the Heart and The Prodigal Daughter, ICOC’s rock band, the Radicals, and their music video, theatrical and comedic scripts, modern dance performed during weekly services and special events, and DPI’s long list of ICOC self-help and relationship manuals
were powerful ritual media mechanisms. These mechanisms made a significant contribution to the ability of group narrative and sacred symbol to resonate through collective effervescence.

Sociologists of religion should pay greater attention in the future to the interconnectedness of media, various creative expressive venues, and religious/spiritual life. Wuthnow (2003, xiv) notes that there has been “surprisingly little attention” given “to the role of imagination and the arts in Americans’ spirituality. Standard treatments of religion and the arts have focused on famous paintings in fine galleries, church architecture, and belles lettres. They fail to tell us how people experience the arts in congregations and communities in everyday life.” As Martín-Barbero (1997) suggests, the electronic church, religious films, and other media venues are part of an engaging process of the reenchantment of the contemporary global community. Media, in its broad sense incorporating print, video, music, and web, is an inescapable and powerful contemporary tool of bringing the sacred into everyday religious life.

There was another very important factor that contributed to the ability of the movement to grow and sustain membership in the midst of cultural vertigo: many members developed very real and meaningful social kinship networks during their tenure with the church. If they left the movement, they would most likely, to a large degree, be cut off from those disciples whom they had come to love and care for, and to whom they had entrusted their most intimate relationships. Once a member had developed strong family bonds in the church, he or she seemed less likely to give it up. While there are certainly those individuals who were glad to be rid of church family relationships that were not satisfying and that they described as abusive, many ex-members confirmed that severing these ties was the hardest part of the process of leaving the ICOC. Many former ICOC congregations today still hold strong to the brothers and sisters they made during their tenure in the unified movement.

Another force keeping members within the movement was the successful group process of boundary making. Powerful individual narratives and group performances of tightly knit, intimate social networks succeeded in setting boundaries that deemed those inside the Kingdom as saved and those outside as not saved. Some expressed a deep fear of “going to hell” and eternal damnation as impetus for staying in the
group. Many were truly fearful that if they left the movement, they would have to leave God behind.

Despite all of these institutional forces and mechanisms for sustaining membership and keeping cultural confusion at bay, members could only tell the story as long as it made sense: narratives of self and organization have to resonate in some way with real-life experience. To use again Kai Erikson’s (1976) classic and exemplary cultural analysis of Buffalo Creek, the West Virginia community ravaged by flood in 1972: the people could only sustain the balance of independence and reliance on the Coal Company so long as they found validation for the contradiction in their everyday lives—when the company betrayed them and the floodwaters raced down filled with black coal, killing over one hundred members of their community and leaving thousands homeless, their orientation as both independent and dependent successful beings fell apart. The ICOC did not kill, but members did come to see the movement as betraying them in many ways. There came a point, as the century turned, when many disciples stopped and realized that they were in a Kingdom that promised and demanded too much. They became seriously dizzy, and felt scattered in trying to balance and negotiate ambiguous cultural tools of right relationship, self-development, gender, parenthood, marriage, and the time-consuming evangelical and therapeutic demands of discipling at every turn.

There is a lesson to be learned in the efforts of organizations to produce a structural panacea (like discipling) for intimate relationships at the turn of the twenty-first century. Religio-therapeutic movements that attempt to embody multiple contemporary understandings of family, gender, and therapeutic relationships may initially attract a wide range of individuals and see growth. Although they might work for a while, eventually the vertigo is likely to take over. One can only pursue this precarious cultural course for so long; cultural cohesiveness will likely unravel, and no amount of ritual legitimation can repair when options are available in a pluralistic society where religious, spiritual, and secular approaches for developing community, faith, family, and health and wellness abound. Sustaining high levels of cultural contradiction then, like charismatic authority, is necessarily precarious. As the dizzying effect took hold in the ICOC, there were other organizational qualities that contributed to its rapid dissolution: the extreme movement emphasis on
“numbers” and evangelizing from top leadership became more apparent and seemingly destructive to individuals, families, and local congregations; their founder and charismatic leader faltered; and local leaders and evangelists began to powerfully speak out and name church abuses.

The fall of the ICOC unified movement was no doubt influenced by the unyielding efforts of critics to label the group as a “dysfunctional church” and a “dangerous cult.” Barker (1993, 340) suggests that external obstacles play some role in the success of NRMs: “Throughout history, new religions, especially those that aspire to restructure society, have typically been viewed with the deepest suspicion by the rest of society . . . from sensationalist and inaccurate stories in the media and virulent attacks and lobbying from anticult groups, to forcible hospitalization and illegal deprogramming; from refusal to grant peddlers’ licenses or permission to hold meetings in church halls, to litigation resulting in financially crippling judgements” (340). The ICOC was a constant target of organized critics; ex-members came to develop their own websites and support groups, producing an anti-cult culture of its own. However, the ICOC movement was strongest at a time when the Cult Awareness Network and anti-cult organizations were faltering somewhat in social influence. The “brainwashing/cult” paradigm and the use of “deprogrammers” had been questioned and delegitimated through court cases and therapeutic “experts.” The mid- to late 1990s was, after all, a time when, through bankruptcy purchase, a member of one accused “cult,” Scientology, was able to purchase and now controls the Cult Awareness Network name and on-line activity (www.cultawarenessnetwork.org). ICOC leaders and members then had a powerful social backdrop to successfully enact a form of “tertiary deviance” with ready-made discourse from an anti-anti-cult movement. “Tertiary deviance,” a process named by John I. Kitsuse (1980), represents the efforts of those openly labeled “deviants” to reject these labels and attempt to win acceptance based on their own actions as morally sound. Outside negative labels of family “dysfunction” were most definitely a challenge for the organization, but as I’ve illustrated throughout this ethnography, they were also used as fuel to legitimate discipling on moral grounds. The downfall of the unified movement must be attributed more to in-group dynamics and structural and ideological obstacles rather than to outside labeling and legal pressure.
Media, print, video, film, and websites, as I’ve noted, are powerful contemporary mechanisms that are capable of bringing the sacred into everyday religious life. They are also capable of turning the sacred negative, of circulating, with incredible efficiency, dissenting ideas and convincingly composed condemning manifestos. In 2002, the prolific DPI writer and charismatic ICOC preacher, Gordon Ferguson, authored a book with another leader, Wyndham Shaw. This book, *Golden Rule Leadership*, is described on the current DPI web page as “a book on leading others the way you would want to be led. The word is getting out on this book as it challenges leadership paradigms and calls us to build a spirit of team and family in the body of Christ.” This book brought criticism from those who adhered strictly to McKean’s vision of discipleship and articulated many of the concerns that leaders and members had regarding authoritative “one-over-one” discipling practices.

As I listened on-line and informally interviewed several members as the unified movement fell apart, I heard an often repeated question: “Have you read the Kriete letter?” On February 2, 2003, Henry Kriete, from the London ICOC church, posted a final version of his “open letter” to the “elders, teachers, and evangelists” in the ICOC “fellowship of churches” entitled “Honest to God: Revolution through Repentance and Freedom in Christ” (www.reveal.org). Kriete posted his letter (covered in detail below) at a time when many members and leaders were questioning the authoritative aspects of discipling and the claim that the ICOC was the one true church (OTC) doctrine. McKean and several other leaders had posted resignation letters, and the organization had held a “unity conference” in Los Angeles in November of 2002 to try to address in-group criticisms and bring top evangelists back to common ground. The ICOC movement, from the top to the bottom, was ripe and ready for dissension; Kriete’s letter circulated on-line, read by many members and leaders with eager and open “hearts.”

Henry Kriete and his wife, Marilyn, were powerful leaders in the ICOC. In his own description of their service to the movement he writes: “We first visited Boston in 1981, and moved there in the Spring of 1982. . . . I have been discipled by all these men: Bob Gempel, Kip McKean, Al Baird, Jim Blough . . . and others. . . . Before moving to London (our second time), we served in the American Commonwealth Region . . . from 1994 till 2001. In various capacities, Marilyn and I
have lived and served on four continents, in six countries, two world sec-
tors, ten churches and about 15 different ministries.” In his introduction
he voices damming revelations about the movement: “Much grace and
power has been lavished on all of us by God. . . . However, at this mo-
moment in our brief history, I have never been more alarmed, even ashamed
of what we have become. . . . Our movement is no longer moving . . .
the things we boasted in: our numerical growth, our retention rate, our
member to fall away ratio, the faithfulness of our children . . . our unity.”
Before he begins with his indictment of the “four systematic evils” of the
movement, he asks that the “brothers and sisters” in the Kingdom who
read his letter will also recognize that several leaders who have resigned
in the past have also offered “sincere and conscientious” criticisms.

Kriete captures the feeling of unrest and questioning that permeated
the movement in its final years. Under a section entitled “God Says
‘Enough’” he writes, “A backlash from years of ‘not listening,’ insensi-
tivity, abuse, coercion and legalism—as well as cowardice from the full-
time ministry leaders to stand up for the truth—is now underway. . . .
[He]arts are still breaking, and hearts are being crushed. . . . [In] spite of
all of this, the Christians are feeling liberated, emancipated even.” What
exactly are they freed from? Reviving the words of national heroes to le-
gitimate his claims, just as McKean had done in his early “Revolution
through Restoration” manifestos, Kriete argues: “In London, the up-
heaval is against systemic evils that have gone unchallenged for too long.
Resistance, if not rebellion, is always the fruit of conformity. . . . As JFK
once said, ‘If you make peaceful revolution impossible, you make violent
revolution inevitable.’ Please pray for a peaceful revolution.” Kriete sets
the stage for revolution through sinful repentance as he names the exo-
dus of many ICOC leaders: “Hundreds of leaders, if not thousands, in-
cluding myself,” have been “trapped in . . . systemic evils . . . that is the
stubborn reality and nature of our hierarchy. As you will see, many of the
issues I am going to raise in this paper are endemic to our ‘culture’ as a
movement—the corruption of power, selfish ambition, the continuing
climate of fear and cowardice, the bravado and rank duplicity from our
‘top leaders.’ Why I am so ashamed and saddened is that I have been as
much to blame as anyone. But really, whether more or less is beside the
point, because almost all of us are guilty to some extent.” The ICOC
movement “system” he argues, made the leaders into Pharisees (that
group of high-status Jews portrayed in the gospels as hypocrites and legalists who were not able to hear Jesus’ message): “We have become proud and blind, just like the Pharisees. And being blind without knowing it is the most frightening kind of blindness of all. This paper is an attempt to open our eyes before it is too late. My goal is not only to break our heart, but in a sense, to slap us in the face as well.” Kriete then forcefully lays out the “Four Systemic Evils” as follows:

- our corrupted hierarchy
- our obsession with numbers
- our shameful arrogance (the cause of/by-product of 1 and 2)
- our seduction by money

Evil number one speaks to the high level of authority, dependence, and social control in the movement: “We have become a religious hierarchy that has created, fostered, and sustained a culture of control and dependence on men, rather than freedom.” He justifies his usage of the phrase “culture of control”: “Consider the facts: we are a hierarchy, and have been led by one man at the top. We have had a ‘founder,’ complete with personal and ‘kingdom-wide’ authority that we were expected to respect and follow. We have had World Sector leaders and Geographic Sector Leaders—to consolidate the grip of power and establish a global network of control over every last congregation . . . local church autonomy is practically viewed as heresy.” He also accuses some administrators of using “smoke and mirrors” in church accounting and some “wholesale financial mismanagement” due to pressures from top church officials. This control, Kriete makes clear, has led to routine violation of Christians’ freedom in religious experience: we “have fostered in them an unhealthy dependence, rather than freedom to grow and mature.” Kriete’s message fervently addresses the dizzying effect of the movement’s contradiction of promoting individual freedom even as they encouraged dependence and much submission to church authority. When members still loyal to the ICOC movement read systematic evil number one, they heard a familiar dilemma and justification of doubts they may have had regarding loss of their individual choice and will.

Systematic evil number two, “our obsession with numbers,” also legitimized many of the concerns and frustrations of members. Kriete is harsh in his charge: “Many of our leaders have become so obsessive about ‘the
numbers’ it has retarded them spiritually, made them neurotic, or even idolatrous.” He talks of “dishonesty” in reporting statistics, “fudging” and “inflating” attendance, or not “accurately” doing the “‘month end’ because ‘we have to grow this month’ or ‘there is no way we are going negative.’”

In Kriete’s voicing of systematic evil number three, “our shameful arrogance,” members heard a welcome questioning of the one true church (OTC) doctrine. Letting go of this church tenet would enable them to embrace other Christians as “saved.” Suddenly, mothers and fathers that members had not been able to convert, perhaps those who, under the OTC doctrine, were damned to hell in Catholic parishes and Presbyterian pews, were actually eligible for salvation and everlasting life. Members could abandon their condemnation of family of origin and their ongoing sense of responsibility to convert their biological/family of origin members.

Kriete’s systematic evil number four charged that ICOC clergy took the hard-earned money given by members to “advance the Kingdom,” and used it in ways that were inappropriate. The movement had argued that lead evangelists needed higher salaries, a nice house, and health benefits so that they could concentrate on “building the Kingdom.” Kriete rejects this as an excuse for granting those high up in leadership with better houses. He charges that leaders, when speaking at local events, would stay in fancy hotels and “presidential suites”: “As the ‘clergy,’ we have allowed for incredible retreats and pet projects: we have had harbor retreats, mountain retreats, castle and Hawaiian retreats, deep-sea fishing expeditions, five star hotels, presidential suites and the like.” Kriete’s charges are somewhat validated by my observations; for example, during one Marriage Enrichment Day, which took place at a high-end hotel downtown, Kay and Randy McKean said that they were not able to use their fancy suite for the night as they had to get back home to the children. They had a drawing so that another ICOC couple could use the nice room. Furthermore, when one new lead evangelical couple moved to town, they purchased a house where property values were high. Kriete argues, “We have demanded extraordinary monetary sacrifice from our members, but comparatively, it appears we have demanded so little from ourselves.” No doubt this indictment rang true to many members who, over the years, had watched some leaders receive special treatment and funding.
Kriete concludes with several points that also legitimated the dizzying effects of ICOC’s cultural engagement. With respect to gender, he charges that the movement led to a loss of manhood and womanhood. “So many thousands of men have been effectively emasculated by legalism and compliance to authoritarian leadership,” Kriete writes. “The squelching of personal dreams, inner feelings and convictions has had a demoralizing effect across the board. More than several men have lost their manhood.” His charge: the demand that men submit unquestionably to church leadership “emasculated” them. For the other gender, Kriete argues that too much power and evangelical duty for women in the ICOC leadership made women overburdened and “conflicted.” This strain placed on women resembled, in Kriete’s assessment, that of the “western model of the ‘total woman’”: “Unfortunately, our western model of the ‘total woman’ has by and large been forced upon almost all of our women in the full time ministry.” Echoing a familiar evangelical antifeminist justification for male church headship, Kriete continues, “We have elevated our partnership with women in the gospel to the role of co-evangelist in many respects, and I am afraid this model has crushed several of them.” This articulation of the loss of manhood and rise of feminist model in the church no doubt spoke to members’ experience of the heightened gender contradictions. Members and leaders, men and women, were called to an evangelical mission that took away focus from their own families, further complicating and magnifying gender expectations. Kriete’s letter named and framed this very real ICOC dilemma.

Kriete’s letter also validated members’ frustration with the overtaxed therapeutic discipling system. Congregations nationwide seemed to experience the dilemma I observed in the City COC: members sometimes talked about others in the community as a drain to the therapeutic efforts of members and leaders. Members and leaders described these individuals as having “serious” mental health issues. Even though they referred one of these individuals to a professional health care worker, the individual still came to depend on her church sisters in an excessive way—calling all the time and with any “little” problem. There is evidence in formal movement discourse that this was a movement-wide problem. For example, Sam Laing announced during one regional event: “If you are continually having to be helped by disciplers . . . beat up on and disciples
and saved out of misery, you are not dealing with your own life. . . . By this time you should be saving other people. By this time some of you should be a Bible talk leader or something.” I heard local and national ICOC leaders preach of overtaxing the therapeutic structure several times over my years of fieldwork.

The ICOC’s lack of formal training for disciplers as religio-therapeutic experts was another structural condition that likely contributed to this system flaw. They promised a community full of excellent counselors, but had no real system in place to adequately train or monitor one-on-one, two-on-two, or D-group discipling sessions. This left much room for abuse and less than productive therapeutic efforts. With such lofty religio-therapeutic promises and no official training program, it appears that the movement was further weakened when members (whether “officially” diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder or not) continually needed intensive therapeutic treatment.

Certainly not all members agreed with Kriete or read his letter. One former member told me that she intended not to read the letter and would make her own assessment. The important organizational point here is that the “Kingdom” was in large part ready for some explanation of the confusion and disappointment they had experienced in the discipling community. The on-line distribution of Kriete’s manifesto contributed to the hurried downfall of the unified movement in 2003–2004. The movement had seen dissension before; for example, in February of 1994, the Indianapolis COC left the ICOC due to leadership disagreement with core ICOC principles, and stories and criticisms about the split circulated on member and former member websites. Leaders’ resignation letters and on-line statements before Kriete’s played some role in ripening the organization for change—for example, Sarah and Rick Bauer in 1992 and 1993 and David Medrano and Natercia Alves in March of 2000 as they left the Madrid, Spain, COC (reveal.org). Well-articulated and heartfelt letters after Kriete’s helped legitimate the decisions of those who were exiting. For example, Patricia and John Engler’s resignation statement, May 28, 2004 (http://www.barnabasministry.com/iccresignationp.html), offered an account of their leadership experiences and the “blessings” and problems encountered in the Denver ICOC congregation. Throughout the dissolution of the movement, the Delphi ICOC discussion forum provided active on-line discussion for
members and former members. On the ground, members gathered in local congregations for heated and sometimes contentious debate and discussion of past abuses and sins of leadership and the discipling system. Two members told me that they purposely avoided participating in the on-line ICOC-related websites. Nevertheless, clearly these on-line discussions and postings played a major part in the dissolution of the movement.

“A Loose Brotherhood”

As I write in the fall of 2004, the unified movement of the ICOC has dissolved; it is difficult to paint an accurate portrait of all its constituent congregations. Kip McKean is in Portland, Oregon, and has founded the Portland International Church of Christ. In 2003, he posted a letter on the ICOC Delphi forum discussion group and Portland church website titled, “Revolution through Restoration III.” In this document, which recounts again the birth of the movement and the thirty would-be disciples in the living room in Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1979, he repeats much of the history of the church, stressing numbers and purpose. At places, he adds recent commentary to old texts; for example, at one point he argues that he never supported the one true church (OTC) doctrine, that there are quite possibly other Christians out there who practice discipleship as they should and are saved. He admits again, as he did in his resignation letter and at the 2002 Unity Conference, that he made mistakes in leadership and family, that he was sometimes “cruel” and “humiliating.” He talks of his child who, in 2001, struggled spiritually and “fell away” from the church, admitting his young idealism when it came to predicting salvation for Kingdom children: “An older brother and past mentor who has faced similar challenges in raising children recently pointed out to me that I and many people in the movement had taught [about child rearing] . . . incorrectly. We had simply said, ‘Train a child in the way he should go and . . . he will not turn from it.’ As idealistic young evangelists leading an idealist young movement, we foolishly concluded that all of our children would become disciples, never struggle or fall away.”

For the most part, McKean’s presentation reads unchanged; he is still balancing much authority in one-over-one discipling with individual choice and will, stressing relationality along the way. He defends the
need for a “system,” referring indirectly to Kriete’s letter and, taking care
to define terms, argues that “autonomous” churches and “democratic”
church bodies are not desirable. McKean attempts to revive his charis-
matic authority by presenting himself as having had some sort of divine
message and rebirth while on a beach sabbatical. Toward the end of his
letter he writes, “In the midst of these troubled times, I still have the
dream. I still believe in Jesus’ dream to evangelize the world in our gen-
eration.” In this letter and in more recent postings on the Portland website,
McKean presents himself and the movement as revived and recovering
from the downfall. As throughout the life of the movement, McKean
rarely, if ever, provides hard membership numbers. Portland hosted a “Ju-
bilee” conference in the summer of 2004 where McKean and others
preached of reviving the Kingdom, being “radical,” and not listening to
all that on-line “spiritual pornography” (www.portlandchurch.org). The
likelihood of his efforts actually creating a strong new (or reborn) reli-
gious movement is doubtful; as I write now, few former churches seem
willing to have McKean as a leader.

Trying to make sense of the dissolution and rebuilding is a confusing
task. Chris Lee, a former member, posted an ambitious attempt to do so
on the REVEAL website in February of 2004. He writes, “How does one
capture ‘history’ as it is making progress? It is a difficult task at best, some-
what akin to shooting a moving target?”—especially, as he notes, when the
movement no longer produces publications and “gets more fragmented.”
In his attempt, he outlines what he sees as three “emerging factions”:

1. A reformist group that has taken heed to Henry Kriete and oth-
ers, who are actively trying to make things better and change.
They recognize a number of problems. Some have broken away
from the ICC (Salt Lake City) or are making progress toward
unity with Mainline Churches of Christ (Tallahassee, Florida).
Others have reconciled with “enemies” or ex-members or
strived to improve in areas of abuses (Chicago, Atlanta, Triangle).
2. There is a moderate group that, while they recognize that re-
form is necessary, feel that the current rate of reform is sufficient
and believe that the abuses will be taken care of eventually. They
do not feel that they need to go to the perceived “extreme”
measures of the reformist group, to be radical about reform.
3. There is a conservative or traditionalist group, that feel that Kriete’s letter and other criticisms (even positive ones) are just being used by the enemies of the ICC in trying to tear it down, and that the ICC has become “soft” and “weak.” They want to return to the glory days of old, when things were more black-and-white and definitive (for instance, mandatory disciplers telling people what to do). This group is divided however, some want a return of high power, Kip, but others do not want Kip to return.

My monitoring of on-line activity related to the ICOC’s dissolution and my interviews with a handful of former members in various positions across the country suggest that Lee was correct in his assessment. Since February of 2004, the movement seems to have grown more fragmented; even members who were more “conservative” or “traditionalist” seem to be questioning a return to “glory days,” considering major changes in discipling practices and more realistic evangelical goals.

Those individuals I have talked to and listened to on-line in 2003–2004, regardless of their level of dedication or abandonment of previous ICOC doctrine and affiliation, seem to still be involved in an active search to order their lives. Many hold dear to the church family relationships that were born during their time in the movement. Some have been completely disillusioned and, as they often say, “damaged” by their experiences in the ICOC; these are the former members who have joined Mainline Churches of Christ or other denominations, or left Christianity altogether. It is likely that many former ICOC members may find a familiar home in the Mainline Churches of Christ, the denominational church environment that first gave birth to the radical ICOC sect. Some former ICOC leaders attempted to maintain a healing conversation with the Mainline Churches of Christ as the movement was dissolving. Former ICOC leaders Gordon Ferguson, Gregg Marutzky, Al Baird, and Mike Taliaferro went to the Abilene Christian University forum to talk about the history of the ICOC movement and the mistakes that had been made. Lee (2004) mentions the Tallahassee, Florida, COC group as moving toward “unity” with the Mainline COC. Some members have, as Lee suggests, tried to keep their congregational body and ministries together, paying much attention to the criticisms raised in Kriete’s letter and fashioning new autonomous, democratic church bodies. Other
members with whom I have spoken also seem incredibly confused, tearful, hoping to capture the sacred energy of the discipling movement in congregations that are trying to “soften” and “rethink” discipling. Most of these folks seem quick to distance themselves from McKean. Finally, there is that small group of members who believe, along with McKean, that the fall of the unified movement was just a phase in their divine mission—these are members in Portland and what seem to be a few scattered leaders across the country willing to associate with McKean.

What has happened to the City COC congregation? After the Unity Conference in LA in 2002, like many other congregations, they went through a process of leaders confessing sins, apologizing for the abuses of discipling, and trying to come to some resolution so that they could move forward. The City COC congregation ultimately chose to fashion what they call a “self-governing” church body. Core members are still together, relieved to be cut free from the excessive therapeutic and evangelical tasks the leadership of the International Churches of Christ movement demanded, yet still very much tied to each other—attached to the extended church kin networks they established over the years. They name nearby former ICOC congregations as a kind of “loose brotherhood.” Most of the members I interviewed are still in the City COC working to shape this new self-governing church. After reading the bulk of this book, Tom, a member of the new leadership committee, wrote for inclusion in this ethnography: “As the hierarchical leadership structure and internal discipling patterns of the ICOC have been deconstructed, there are wide arrays of differences among the congregations who have come out of this organization. There will likely be no return to a similar structure in the future, but a large degree of brotherhood and cooperation remains and is being rebuilt, and there is a common unifying experience, doctrine, and culture that continues to define churches, and individuals who have spent much time as part of the ICOC.” It is clear that members of the City COC want to continue caring for each other and listening to each other, and are concerned about raising their own nuclear families. They want to be Christians who live and practice as they feel Jesus asked them to do. Most important, they seem to be working hard to hold on to the powerful church family relationships they created while in the movement.

I worried about showing this ethnography to my major research participants in the City COC. I worried that these friends I had come to
know over the years would be offended by my sociological perspective. I worried that my highlighting of the major contradictions in ICOC ideology and practice would make them angry and might shake their faith. I worried, as sociologists studying controversial new religious movements do, that I would receive harsh words from the formal church organization and an onslaught of e-mails from current members disturbed by my analysis. Much of my worrying was in vain as the downfall of the unified movement offered a unique ethnographic opportunity; I was able to ask my research participants to read my description and analysis of their experience at a time when they were critiquing their own experience. I gave the book to Pat and Tom, and after they had read *Awesome Families* we sat for a couple of hours in front of a warm fire in their living room and engaged in conversation.

Pat noted the absence of her spiritual journey in the book. Her husband Tom agreed, and offered the following written statement in response: “I would like to point out that an academic study from a sociologic point of view does inherently fail to capture some of the spiritual factors in people’s lives that transcend sociologic consideration. Therefore, the study fails to give any one looking for a full overview of the ICOC movement some of the spiritual dimensions that defined people’s involvement.” I suggested to Pat and Tom, after reading the previous comment and talking with them about this issue, that perhaps the reason I did not capture more of their individual spiritual experience was because in formal ICOC group performance, movement growth and therapeutic benefits of discipling were front and center. They agreed that this could well have been the case and that, for some members, such an emphasis on gaining new members and submitting to discipling resulted in barriers to individual spiritual life. The pull between wanting an individual relationship with God that nurtured spirituality and the enforced accountability to ICOC disciplers was representative of the tensions felt in maintaining individuality within such an authoritative structure. Pat and Tom validated that the contradictions and resulting cultural vertigo I speak of in this ethnography were large factors in the downfall of the unified movement. They also offered the following statement: “I acknowledge that the content [of *Awesome Families*] accurately reflects the realities of being a part of the ICOC, especially the larger overarching dimensions. Minor details could be contested on many points but
such could be expected by the author interviewing only a sampling of participants in a study group. The sociological picture that is painted is, in my estimation, true to the everyday realities that most people experienced.” Pat and Tom spoke of having to come to terms with the pull between individual freedom, choice, and the authoritative characteristics of discipling. They talked about how some current members were now working to purge high dependence on church leaders and structures and promote individual choice in relationship and life issues. For example, Tom talked of a church member asking how they should feel about many of the “moral” issues at stake in the 2004 presidential election. Church leaders answered her by encouraging the member to make her own political decision guided by her individual faith and “heart.” Some members missed the old ICOC day-to-day assurance that someone else would take care of their difficult relational, political, and moral decisions. The congregation necessarily confronts the effects of secondary socialization in the old ICOC authoritative structure as they shape their new self-governing community of faith.

This ethnography makes several contributions to understanding how individuals could be drawn to, and remain committed to, social groups that demand high commitment and submission to authority. Members were, as are many in this country who join religious communities, searching for new and fruitful church kin networks and guidance for healing and building intimate family relationships. In their constant presentation of narratives of awesome family relationships, members were able to balance familiar contradictory beliefs and practices through a vibrant use of culture, creatively legitimating seemingly incoherent approaches to healing and constructing family. However, the power of such balancing is short-lived when burdened with too many points of tension in cultural beliefs and practices. On an organizational level, Awesome Families calls attention to the precarious nature of social movements who, in their discursive repertoires, commit to extremely broad and contradictory values and cultural approaches. Important too is the way in which this ethnography validates the importance of collective rituals and new media forms for giving life to sacred visions, and calls attention as well to the power of these collective performances and mechanisms in drawing crucial breath from charismatic movements.