

News Watch Article: DC611

INTERNATIONAL CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN UPHEAVAL

This article first appeared in the News Watch column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 26, number 1 (2003). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

After nearly a quarter century of worldwide growth and notoriety, the International Churches of Christ (ICOC), known in its early years as the Crossroads Movement and more popularly as the Boston Movement, is undergoing unprecedented changes fueled by the resignation of its founder and autocratic leader, Kip McKean.

McKean's resignation on 6 November 2002 followed a yearlong sabbatical from his duties as ICOC World Missions evangelist and leader of the World Sector Leaders of the International Churches of Christ. In his request for a sabbatical, McKean had cited "serious shortcomings" in his marriage and family. The most public aspect of the events leading to his resignation has been the defection of his daughter, Olivia, from the movement when she left home to attend Harvard University. McKean taught that the defection of a leader's child from the ICOC disqualified him from leadership. McKean has been reassigned to the south region of the Los Angeles ICOC and is reportedly still employed by the movement full-time. The leadership of the ICOC has fallen to longtime leaders Al Baird and Bob Gempel.

Despite McKean's seemingly humbling tumble from on high, there is no indication that he has revised any of his teachings or beliefs, including one of the most important ICOC tenets, that the ICOC is God's movement for today, and that only its members are true Christians. Some who have watched behind the scenes say McKean did not capitulate as readily as his statement might indicate. Calvin Kwan, a former ICOC member currently with a resource group for former ICOC members called Reveal (www.reveal.org), told the JOURNAL, "I do not believe for a moment that he resigned on his own. I believe he was pressured to do so by many leaders within the ICOC. Due to his family dynamics at the time and perhaps deeper issues within the church, he was persuaded to resign." Kwan doesn't believe McKean is finished with the ICOC: "I don't think it is in Kip's personality or character to voluntarily give up the limelight and power. It is my opinion that he truly believes he is 'God's greatest living treasure on earth' and that the movement could not function without his hand directly involved."

Upheaval Spreads. The event has sparked a plethora of problems, criticisms, complaints, and defections from the movement. Insiders and outsiders, including ex-members, have noted a myriad of ongoing problems, including high disaffection rates, financial improprieties, abuses of authority, false record keeping, and member complaints. During the summer of 2003 structural changes appeared headed toward greater autonomy for individual congregations, greater leadership authority for unpaid local elders and deacons, and a sizeable decrease in full-time paid staff and leadership.

The ICOC has been controversial since its inception, amid charges that it was exclusivistic, autocratic, extremely controlling of individual members' lives, doctrinally aberrant, practicing deceptive recruitment techniques, and siphoning huge amounts of funds from rank-and-file members to enable elite leaders to live lives of sumptuous extravagance. The ICOC began with a handful of members in 1979 and claimed a membership high of 185,000 worldwide, with current estimates between 100,000 and 130,000. Estimates of members who have left hover at 250,000.

Longtime watchers of the ICOC are encouraged by McKean's resignation and other potentials for change in the ICOC, but they are also concerned that if the fundamental principles on which the ICOC is founded are not jettisoned, the ICOC will remain controversial, albeit on a smaller scale and perhaps without the charismatic one-man leadership of McKean.

Apology Has Domino Effect. McKean's resignation letter was published throughout the ICOC and posted on multiple Web sites (e.g., www.upcyberdown.org/icocmain/Documents/11_02/mckean_resignation.htm). Parts of the letter demonstrate a rarely seen candor and humility from McKean. In the first paragraph he states, "My leadership in recent years has damaged both the Kingdom and my family. My most significant sin is arrogance — thinking I am always right, not listening to the counsel of my brothers, and not seeking discipling for my life, ministry and family." He goes on to mention anger, making people fearful to speak up, failing to build good relationships, disrespecting other leaders, and insensitivity. He notes that he "focused more on numeric goals than on pleasing God."

Following McKean's resignation, evangelist Henry Kriete, a longtime leader in the Boston ICOC and currently a leader in the London ICOC, published a 39-page open letter that contained an apology to ICOC rank-and-file members and an exhortation to ICOC leaders to admit their doctrinal and leadership failures and correct their errors. Kriete's February 2003 letter was followed within weeks by a similar apology from 42 ministry leaders at the Los Angeles ICOC headquarters. At least a dozen ICOC churches in the United States have subsequently issued online apologies. Some churches are encouraging their members to air their problems and work together for solutions, while others are reportedly stifling any dissent and dissuading their members from accessing any information critical of the ICOC on the Internet or elsewhere.

Honest to God. Kriete's letter unveils the depth and breadth of the problems in the ICOC from his perspective as a longtime member and leader. Arthur R. Ryter, who runs a support group for ICOC members, told the JOURNAL, "It was a stinging indictment of the practices of the ICOC....It was a wake up call to many members and leaders in the ICOC. Various other churches had meetings to discuss the points raised by...Kriete."

The most candid of all the statements from ICOC leaders, Kriete's letter is seen by many as the benchmark by which the sincerity, humility, and repentance of other ICOC leadership will be judged by most members. James K. Walker, president of the countercult organization Watchman Fellowship, told the JOURNAL, "The letter is a call for repentance for past sins, and, unlike earlier apologies, cites flaws in the ICOC structure and related doctrines themselves rather than unrelated failures on the part of individual leaders."

The subtitle to Kriete's letter is "Revolution through Repentance and Freedom in Christ." The table of contents is a chronicle of the errors Kriete says have plagued the ICOC as systemic, entrenched problems — not merely random errors caused by out of control individuals. Four of the most significant problems he lists are: "Our Corrupted Hierarchy," "Obsession with Numbers," "Our Shameful Arrogance," and "Our Seduction by Money."

Kriete's introduction emphasizes the seriousness of the problems as he sees them:

Virtually every high-gate we have built, and every trophy that we have boasted in — as proof to ourselves and to the world — that we are "God's Modern Day Movement," has been effectively dismantled. The things we boasted in: our numerical growth, our retention rate, our members to fall away ratio, the faithfulness of our children, our never missing a Special Contribution, our consistent sacrificial giving, and now, perhaps most painful of all — even our unity — all these have been leveled by the hand of God.

He summarizes the kinds of problems plaguing the ICOC, noting,

Fallen elders and evangelists; countless other leaders who have resigned or stepped down — staff and non staff alike; questionable practices and teachings; serious concerns over finances; the heartache, disappointment and even disgust from the mouths of faithful but weary disciples who are now "allowed" to talk openly (some in great anger); the quarter million who have fallen away; the tens of thousands who have walked away or been pushed away; and the enormous subculture of critics that constantly challenge us (and let's be honest, several of them are sincere and conscientious) — all of these things and more — have damaged our integrity, deepened the mistrust between "clergy" and "laity," and given reason for many to question our moral authority and even legitimacy.

Kriete declares, "those practices and sins that are systemic to our movement are being exposed by God," and "whether from commission or omission, cowardice, bad theology or irresponsibility — our sins need to be exposed and acknowledge for repentance and healing to take place, and for the crucial restoration of trust." Kriete then spends more than 30 pages detailing the problems he believes are systemic in the ICOC, giving specific examples, and citing particular practices that he says cannot be tolerated in a truly biblical movement.

How Far the Changes? Will the changes precipitated by McKean's sabbatical and resignation foster fundamental change in the ICOC, so that it will no longer be a theologically problematic and behaviorally destructive movement? Most observers of the ICOC have not yet reached such a conclusion.

Some remember other times when change was promised but never materialized or was cosmetic rather than foundational. Support group leader Ryter, referring to some of the leaders' apology letters he has read, notes, "Others were obviously attempts to do damage control and to stem the exodus of members." He explained to the JOURNAL, "Many leaders also talked of change and promised to reform their ways; but, because the focus was always on the harmful practices and never on the core doctrine that enabled these practices, very little meaningful change has occurred." Ryter also noted that the drastic drops in finances and active membership have caused some leaders to cling to the past: "This is resulting in some drastic measures that tend to retract the promised changes. This [in turn] causes those members who have been waiting to see the changes implemented to leave. This further complicates the financial picture." Ryter even thinks this may mean the end of the ICOC: "It appears to me that the ICOC is in the process of self-destructing." Watchman Fellowship's Walker states that "some former members are concerned that there will only be a 'kinder and gentler' version of the same organization and that the alleged abuses, legalism, and authoritarianism will just be more subtle and less obvious."

Ryter, Kwan, and other ICOC watchers are concerned about McKean's future in the ICOC. Ryter says McKean may not be finished as an ICOC leader, noting, "I do not believe that McKean is capable of changing his methods or beliefs and if he can, he will continue to run an organization he can control." Reveal's Kwan has similar concerns. He remembers the way people viewed McKean before his resignation, telling the JOURNAL, "I also think for a long time there was sort of a type of idol worship within the ICOC. Kip McKean and many of the leadership were almost viewed as above human failings. Members were almost in awe of the leadership, in an unhealthy manner. I think Kip's resignation has brought many members back down to earth, so to speak." Kwan warns, "I think Kip will not be content until he regains his previous role as the top leader of the ICOC. I also think that his reputation and credibility within the organization will never again be the same as it was before his resignation." Kwan notes the current rumor that McKean has been offered leadership of the Portland, Oregon church: "It is my opinion that Portland is not Kip's only ambition. I think he will use Portland as a springboard to regaining control of the ICOC."

Some observers are concerned by other leaders who exhibit some of the same characteristics that seemed to cause the most problems in McKean. Kwan told the JOURNAL that he has a continuing concern that the "culture" of autocratic leadership remains in the ICOC, with a significant number of members and leaders retaining the belief that they alone are the "one true church." He warns, "My fear is that this segment will not be satisfied until the ICOC is back to its previous 'glory days' and if they'll have their way, all the supposed changes within the ICOC will be scrapped in favor of 'what worked' in the past."

The Future of the ICOC. Most observers will wait to see the depth of changes and continuing activities of the ICOC before they pronounce the movement dead, reformed, or back to the same beliefs and practices; nevertheless, the events of the past year will have lasting effect.

Ryter predicts that some churches will become autonomous, moving on independently of the ICOC along lines favored by their own membership. He thinks other churches will not survive the upheaval and their members will scatter to other churches, form their own churches, or perhaps become inactive Christians altogether. He predicts that a third faction "will retain the old model and continue in all the old doctrine and practices. Kip McKean may well become the leader of this group because they will perceive him to be the only one able to reconstruct the ICOC." Watchman Fellowship's Walker shares his concern: "Even if there are social reformations, I am concerned that the underlying doctrinal problems will remain. Foundational doctrinal problems persist — mainly their belief that the ICOC is the only true church and that salvation is dependent upon a person's performance and obedience, including ICOC baptism and a commitment to daily contact with one's discipler."

-- Gretchen Passantino