

Future of Controversial International Church of Christ in Question

The group, considered by many to be a cult, reportedly has been in 'chaos' since its top leader stepped down

The only thing that seems certain about the controversial International Church of Christ (ICOC) is that the organization is in a state of flux.

A recent leadership change and a widely circulated letter by a British leader critical of the group's practices are provoking speculation about the organization's direction and future.

The ICOC, founded in 1979 and also known as the Boston Church of Christ, is considered by many to be a cult. Claiming more than 100,000 members, the ICOC has been banned on at least 40 college campuses. Attention has been focused on the group's aggressive recruiting practices and its insistence that followers be baptized and disciplined by the ICOC. Former members claim the group teaches they are the only ones going to heaven.

However, after the group's founder Kip McKean stepped down from his leadership position late last year to address self-described "character sins," a leader from one cult watchdog group described the ICOC as being in "a state of chaos."

"Nobody is stepping into a clear leadership position," said James Walker, president of the Watchman Fellowship. "They really haven't replaced the leadership position that Kip held. They are like a ship without a rudder and are hemorrhaging

people.”

ICOC spokesman Al Baird disagreed, telling Charisma the church is a “movement in progress” and that the facts don’t bear out Walker’s statement. “We’re going through transition, not chaos,” he said. “We’re growing, not dwindling.”

Baird described the change as a “maturing of the movement from a one-person to a consensus-style leadership” and “a move in the right direction” toward its stated goal of trying to restore New Testament Christianity. Baird said the feedback he has received overall about the changes has been positive.

The Boston Globe reported that McKean’s resignation came as a result of his daughter’s decision to leave the church. He was forced to resign because of his rule that leaders must step down if their children leave the ministry. He said in 2000 “that when a teen falls away [from the church] ... there are some sinful dynamics in that family,” the Globe said.

In addition to McKean’s resignation, a 39-page letter written in February by Henry Kriete, a current leader in the London Church of Christ, and addressed primarily to the leaders of the ICOC, is being widely discussed. The letter has been circulated on the Internet and calls for ICOC leaders to repent and renounce their abusive practices and aberrant teachings.

Michelle Campbell, director and co-founder of REVEAL, an organization aimed at helping former ICOC members, said Kriete’s letter is “very much like that of the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. There was inappropriate behavior and disorder, and he wrote to them in hopes of

turning their hearts toward the will of God rather than on the will of man.”

However, Walker said while it could be a genuine attempt to change the legalism in the church, the problem of the movement’s message of salvation by works has yet to be dealt with. But the letter “shows something big is happening,” he said. “Whether it’s for better or worse I don’t know, but I’m optimistic.”

Activist Dave Anderson, founder of , a Web site providing recovery information for those affected by the ICOC, said the church’s leadership has apparently become decentralized. “Local leaders seem to have the ability to chart the course,” he told Charisma. “Some are making changes, and some are standing fast, but it’s really hard to say what they’re doing. They’ve lost uniformity.”

Prior to McKean’s resignation he had taken a one-year sabbatical, which according to a November 2001 statement was to address “serious shortcomings in our marriage and family.” McKean is currently on staff at the 9,000-member Los Angeles International Church of Christ.

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