

A Christian community falters

Loss of leader, governing body hurts group formed in Boston

By Farah Stockman, Globe Staff, 5/17/2003

It was one of the fastest-growing and most controversial churches in America, banned as a cult from dozens of college campuses while boasting 135,000 members worldwide. Its followers were known for spending their free time recruiting new members and waiting on doorsteps at 4 in the morning, hoping to persuade those who had "fallen away" to come back to the fold. But now the central organization of the International Churches of Christ, a strict religious body founded in Boston, is collapsing.

Thomas "Kip" McKean, its charismatic founder, has stepped down. Its world governing body has dissolved and dozens of local church leaders have resigned or been fired, in part because churches can no longer afford to pay their salaries.

Behind the story of a teetering church empire is the tale of the autocratic visionary who built it and his independent-minded daughter, now a Harvard senior, whose decision to leave the church sparked turmoil in the already troubled group.

"It caused her father to have to step aside and it caused the group to reexamine itself," said Michelle Campbell, executive director of REVEAL, a nonprofit organization that provides information and support to former members of the church. "It was sort of inevitable that Kip would fall. The standards he set, no one could meet. Not his children, not even himself. The very thing that he created came back and bit him."

McKean, who was forced to resign his post because of his own rule that church leaders must step down if their children leave the church, said in a telephone interview that he participated in his own demise.

"I think I hurt people's feelings in some areas," said McKean, who still belongs to the church. "I do think there is some bitterness and some hurt."

Years ago, few could have imagined the church without McKean, a wiry, gregarious self-described "prophet" whose followers filled the Boston Garden -- or without his daughter, Olivia, a straight-A student, a promising junior tennis player and beauty pageant contestant whose life successes filled the pages of the church's many publications.

"They are like celebrities," said Jim Procanik, a former Bible talk leader, of McKean's three children, Olivia, Sean, and Eric. "It would be like the president's kids. They had to be the best at everything."

The son of a strict Navy admiral, McKean began preaching in the 1970s as a chemistry major at Florida State University. At a time when other students were partying, he led Bible studies in fraternity houses and gave inspiring religious speeches to crowds. McKean went on to study at a Baptist seminary, but grew disillusioned and dropped out after ministers criticized his strict interpretation of the Bible.

In 1976 he married a fellow Florida University student and took a job as a campus minister at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Ill., working with one of a network of 15,000 autonomous Churches of Christ. Hundreds of college students flocked to his congregation, but he quickly became controversial. In 1979, months after a local newspaper explored accusations that he used coercive tactics to pressure people to join and donate money to the church, McKean moved to a church in Lexington.

There, McKean constructed a new kind of church based on a hierarchy some have likened to an Amway sales pyramid and others have compared to the military. Every church member has a superior called a "discipler" to hold him or her accountable for sins. Known as the Boston Church of Christ or the "Boston Movement," the church attracted tens of thousands of members from all backgrounds, who later moved on to form the Manhattan Church of Christ, the Chicago Church of Christ, and hundreds of other churches, spreading to London, Sydney, Moscow, Nairobi, and other cities. Wildly ambitious, McKean's goal was a church in every sizable US city and in every country within a few decades. But the system had a dark side: Those who failed to give 10 percent of their income or who couldn't recruit enough new members were publicly humiliated, according to former members. Those who questioned authority were shunned or kicked out.

"Any major life decisions would have to be run through your discipler," said Procanik, who led Bible studies at churches in Boston and Los Angeles before quitting the church three years ago. "Vacations, going home. . . . If you are spending too much time with old friends, that would be frowned upon, unless you are recruiting them. All your free time is accounted for. Dating has to be pretty much approved. You can only date people in the group."

Some say McKean grew more uncompromising over time. In the late 1980s, he officially broke with the mainline Churches of Christ, preaching that his church was the only true church. Thousands of his members were rebaptized and all were told that outsiders, even other mainline Church of Christ members, were destined for hell.

As dynamic as a rock star and as hard-driving as a drill sergeant, he required meticulous record-keeping of baptisms, attendance records, and money tithed, and he erupted into anger when the numbers failed to grow, according to former and current leaders.

"It was not just like a church; it was like a corporation," said Rick Torres, a former leader at the Manhattan Church of Christ. "If your numbers were going negative, they would come up with a reason that God is not with you."

McKean could be generous, buying expensive clocks, artwork, and dinners for his closest followers. He knew how to lavish praise from a pulpit. He knew how to make you feel you were the only person in a room. But he also knew how to humiliate you. Former leaders describe him as a man who would throw things and yell if he lost a Ping-Pong game, a preacher who might ask you to repent if you failed to work your way through a crowd to greet him.

Thousands left the church, going on to seek out support groups or contribute to the half-dozen websites that post negative information about the group. Still, others stayed, hoping for reform or unable to leave.

"A lot of the upper-level leaders who I was friends with had tons of doubts about the group, and would even joke about it being a cult," said Procanik. "They knew there were serious problems, but they felt trapped financially. They had kids, and a house. . . . They had no other job skills. No other church would hire them."

In the early 1990s, McKean moved his family to Los Angeles to build the church there and enrolled his three children in Brentwood School, which currently costs \$19,500 a year. There, they became academic achievers constantly spotlighted on Kingdom Network News, the church's official media arm.

In church literature, the date of Olivia's baptism is listed as a milestone, alongside the opening of the first church in Moscow and the first urban ministry:

"First second-generation disciple born, raised, and baptized in the Movement," it reads.

"I coached Eric's basketball team, and the Lord blessed us with the championship," McKean wrote in the KNN newsletter. "All three have made straight A's this year and have been active in a tennis academy where they have reached out to and baptized their coach."

Teased as "cult kids" by the same peers they were forced to invite to church, they spent their Friday nights -- known as teen nights at the church -- in another spotlight. They received special treatment and were envied for their lofty positions.

McKean let his children know that their successes were ammunition in his war for the Lord.

"I'm convinced," McKean told followers in Washington, D.C., in 2000, "that when a teen falls away [from the church] . . . there are some sinful dynamics in that family, and that family, that mom and dad, need to repent."

But Olivia had just left for Harvard University, and she was already tasting the freedom of life away from home. For a while, she attended the Boston Church of Christ and even gave dynamic speeches to crowds of hundreds. Although the church paid for her discipler, a young woman from Los Angeles, to move to Cambridge with her to guide her spiritual growth, by January 2001, Olivia stopped coming to church and told her friends she no longer wanted to be a member.

"She finally just stood up and said, 'I'm sick of the whole thing; I'm leaving,' " said one former church leader who knew her personally. Her father "was pretty brokenhearted."

Olivia McKean declined to comment for this article. But her father acknowledged that mistakes he made as a leader and a father led to his departure in November from the church's leadership.

"I am very, very sorry," he wrote in a resignation letter posted on the church website. "My most significant sin is arrogance -- thinking I am always right. . . . I take full responsibility for how my sins have spiritually weakened and embittered many in our churches. I also take full responsibility for the spiritual condition of my family."

In a recent interview, he said he and his daughter have overcome their differences.

"She's doing awesome," he said. "We're very well-connected. She has no bad feelings toward the church. . . . We're cranking on as a family."

McKean's resignation, pushed by some who had long resented his leadership style, opened the floodgates of demands for reform, including a widely circulated letter from one leader who charged the church with "coercive giving," violating individual liberties, and inflating its growth rates. Dozens of leaders apologized for their sins, and the central body that governed the church dissolved, leaving churches across the country to declare autonomy.

Financial problems due to reduced donations prompted massive firings, and missions abroad are declaring that lack of funds might shut them down.

"We are going through a challenging time," said Gordon Ferguson, an elder in the Boston Church of Christ. "Some of the critiques we have received are valid. We are trying to reexamine things we have done and not lose the good things."

Now the future of the International Churches of Christ is as uncertain as the future of its founder, who is planning to release a new letter to the world congregation in the coming weeks and who has been attending whirlwind meetings with church officials and old friends.

Asked if he is staging a come-back, McKean said, "We're praying that God will lead us to a new ministry. You might say, 'What is that?' I don't know."

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