

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, John F. (2010) "The International Churches of Christ: A Historical Overview," *Leaven*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss2/3>

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The International Churches of Christ: A Historical Overview

JOHN F. WILSON

1960–1968

Though “Chairs of Bible” were established by Restoration Movement churches at state universities as early as the nineteenth century, Churches of Christ became particularly active in sponsoring these arrangements between 1960 and 1968. These “chairs,” as the name implies, were primarily academic in nature. They were designed to provide students at state schools with university level courses similar to those being offered at the time in church-related colleges. The directors of these chairs had graduate training in Bible and religious studies and were considered (and considered themselves) to be academics. Nevertheless, many of these ministries were eventually expanded to include worship services for students, opportunities for Christian interaction and community, and programs of evangelistic and benevolent outreach.

In the mid-sixties some staff members at the Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas, not previously involved in state campus ministries but strongly influenced by the work of the evangelical organization Campus Crusade for Christ, conceived of a different model of campus ministry—one that would be almost entirely centered on evangelism. Calling themselves “Campus Evangelism” (CE), they sponsored a series of well financed and skillfully produced “seminars” designed to introduce this new model to those already involved in the Bible Chair movement and to encourage the initiation of new campus ministries based on a more evangelistic model. Bill Bright, president of Campus Crusade, was invited to speak at the first of these seminars (1966).

A second seminar was held in 1968 in Dallas, ambitiously called “The International Campus Evangelism Seminar.” Over 1,000 people attended, the majority from congregations already supporting Bible Chairs. At this event CE announced it would sponsor a pilot project at the University of Florida in Gainesville, led by Chuck Lucas. Lucas had no prior connections with the Bible Chair movement.

1969–1978

Like the Bible Chair movement, CE promoted a number of new doctrinal emphases and models of Christian communal activity and stressed increased commitment and renewal. Unlike the Bible Chair movement, however, while the CE project had high visibility, it did not always enjoy the confidence of church leaders on the local level. Moreover, it soon became identified by many with the forces of radical change in the larger society that characterized the late sixties and seventies. While CE did not survive, the project in Gainesville did continue to thrive, sustained by strong support from the elders of the local congregation, now called the “Crossroads Church of Christ.” By 1971 as many as 100 baptisms a year were being reported. An aggressive training program for potential campus ministers was developed and by the mid-seventies a number of young men and women had been trained to replicate the philosophy and methods of the Crossroads Church in other places.

The evangelistic success of Crossroads was highly attractive to other university churches. Numbers of young ministers trained there were hired by churches eager for more effective outreach. In many, perhaps most, of those communities the number of baptisms increased dramatically. Local church leaders soon discovered, however, that Crossroads trained ministers looked to their mentors in Florida for guidance and formed a growing national network not always inclined to accept the leadership of local elders. A cloud of controversy began to overtake campus ministry throughout the country. Local leaders began to question what they considered authoritarian attitudes by these campus ministers and excessive control over new converts. The Crossroads oriented ministers, in turn, believed that the opposition revealed a lack of commitment on the part of existing churches, whose leaders and members were satisfied with a kind of religion that demanded little of its adherents. Mutual distrust and recrimination became more and more prevalent.

1979–1988

Among the early converts at Gainesville was a young man named Kip McKean who had been personally mentored by Chuck Lucas. McKean enjoyed considerable evangelistic success in a campus ministry at Eastern Illinois University. He then moved to Massachusetts, where the Lexington Church of Christ (soon to be called the Boston Church of Christ) grew dramatically under his leadership. Numerous students were converted at Harvard, MIT, Boston College and Boston University. The epicenter of the new movement began to shift from Florida to the Northeast.

Tensions between the Bible Chair movement and the CE movement existed from the beginning, partly because the latter was highly critical of the former. Nevertheless, many Bible Chair directors admired the evangelistic success of the Crossroads ministries and for more than ten years they made sincere efforts to work in tandem with these ministries. Eventually it became clear, however, that only those trained by Crossroads or Boston related mentors and who accepted in detail the methods taught there would be accepted as partners in the newer movement.

Meanwhile, relations between what was now called “the Boston Movement” and the larger brotherhood of the Churches of Christ became more and more strained. The level of mutual mistrust and a growing environment of mutual judgment as to whether the other point of view was even “Christian” finally led to overt schism. Boston Movement leaders began to “reconstruct” existing congregations, excluding members who did not accept the Boston system and re-baptizing many of those who stayed. Finding this process disruptive and cumbersome, however, they turned more and more toward the establishment of entirely new congregations where there would be no opposition. In 1986 *The Christian Chronicle*, which served as a sort of unofficial newspaper for the Churches of Christ, announced it would no longer run stories about Boston Movement churches. By the end of 1988 the churches in the Boston Movement were for all practical purposes a distinct fellowship, initiating a fifteen-year period during which there would be virtually no contact with what they called the “traditional” Churches of Christ. Those who wished to minister in the Boston Movement began to move to Boston for training, thereby gaining acceptance as leaders. A distinct hierarchy and an increasingly distinct theological and organizational system developed.

The Boston Church increasingly focused on world evangelism. By 1987 it had planted new churches in Chicago, New York, Toronto, London, Paris, Bombay (Mumbai), Tokyo, Mexico City and Buenos Aires. It had “reconstructed” churches in Atlanta, Kingston and Sydney. Later, large congregations would be established in Hong Kong, Johannesburg and Moscow.

By 1988 McKean was regarded as the undisputed leader of the movement. He took on the title “World Missions Evangelist.” As the movement grew internationally, he and other leaders developed a system of centralized control, believing that a worldwide organization was essential to continue worldwide expansion. McKean appointed nine “world sector leaders” whom he charged with leading the movement in their

respective sections of the world. Two of these were designated “elders” and charged with strengthening all the churches and developing an international outreach to the poor.

1989–2000

In 1989, the Boston World Missions Seminar was attended by 12,000 persons from many nations. During the seminar, teams were officially sent out to Tokyo, Honolulu, Washington, DC, Manila, Miami, Seattle, Bangkok and Los Angeles. In December of that year the McKean family moved to Los Angeles to lead a new church, planted some months earlier. McKean planned for this church to be the dominant one in the movement, calling leaders from a number of other locations to move to Los Angeles. Within a few years Los Angeles, not Boston, was the fulcrum of the movement. At its peak (1999) the Los Angeles church reached a Sunday attendance of 14,000.

In 1992 John Vaughn, a Southern Baptist minister and former instructor at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri, dubbed the movement “The International Church of Christ.” This designation was attractive to leaders of the movement and was adopted as the name of choice. Some wondered whether the name is misleading, since the “traditional” Churches of Christ had far more members outside the United States than did the ICOC. In any case, the ICOC certainly has had an intentionally international outlook. In 1994 McKean and the world sector leaders challenged the movement to plant a church in every nation that had a city of at least 100,000 by the year 2000. Growth continued to be dramatic. By 1999, forty-two churches in major cities of twenty-five countries had a weekly attendance of over 1000—some as many as 10,000. The goal set in 1994 was reached in 2000, with 403 churches in 171 countries and a Sunday attendance of 197,000. In addition to evangelistic projects, the ICOC initiated a ministry to the poor in 1989, called HOPE *worldwide*. This ministry prospered as well, becoming a global benevolent entity formally recognized by the United Nations.

At the same time, however, as numbers of church plantings grew, there was a slow and steady decline in the rate of overall growth in the movement. The expectations and pressures for sacrificial giving and the loss of local leaders to new planting projects took its toll. In some areas large decreases in membership began to occur.

2001–2009

In 2002, after a number of years of growing unrest over McKean’s authoritarian leadership and pragmatic approach to theology, other leaders of the ICOC removed him from his position as leader of the movement. They began to seek for ways to correct abuses and mistakes and to create a new leadership style. London-based evangelist Henry Kriete wrote a letter in February 2003 highly critical of several aspects of the movement and its leadership. The letter made its way onto the Internet and was distributed worldwide. Kriete’s letter set off a firestorm among ICOC members. “Town meetings” or “open forums” were held in many churches around the world to discuss the issues raised in the letter. The trauma of 2003 resulted in massive lay-offs of ministry staff, missionaries being called home and large membership losses. Public and private apologies were repeatedly made by the remaining leaders, regarding both systemic sins and errors in judgment. Many of these leaders saw the upheaval caused by the Kriete letter as divine discipline and a sober call to repentance.

These events had the effect of opening doors of dialogue with others from whom the ICOC had been alienated in earlier years. In 2004, at the initiation of Abilene Christian University, three leaders from the Churches of Christ and three from the ICOC dialogued both privately and publicly before large crowds at the Abilene Bible Lectureship, engaging in open and frank discussion that resulted in apologies, forgiveness and movement toward mutual respect. The large audience of attendees were clearly moved by this event and showed their sincere desire to seek further rapprochement. Since then leaders from Churches of Christ including Jack Reese, John Wilson and Tom Olbricht have been invited to speak at various ICOC events.

After his removal as leader, Kip McKean at first remained in fellowship with the ICOC. However, in 2004 he moved to Portland, Oregon, to lead a small church and to begin efforts to regain influence and control of the ICOC. In 2004, seventy of the key ICOC leaders publically disfellowshipped him. His response was to start a new movement, called “The International Christian Church.” In 2007, accompanied by a number of followers from Portland, he returned to Los Angeles where he remains today.

Also in 2007, ICOC leaders drafted a “Plan for Unified Cooperation” and began efforts to clarify the nature and mission of the movement and to develop new ways of working together. Approximately 500 of the surviving 581 ICOC congregations have accepted the “Plan for Unified Cooperation” and others are still considering it. The ICOC is once again reporting growth. About 120 churches have been planted since 2003. ICOC churches are meeting in 150 countries with a current membership of about 95,000 and an approximate attendance of 120,000.

JOHN F. WILSON- A LONGTIME LEADER IN CAMPUS MINISTRY EFFORTS AMONG CHURCHES OF CHRIST SINCE THE 1960S, HAS SERVED AS DEAN OF SEAVER COLLEGE AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERISTY AND IS CURRENTLY AN ELDER FOR THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHRIST IN MALIBU.

