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The International Churches of Christ (ICOC)

ROBERT CARRILLO

It was a warm spring evening, one of those early summer days with the sun setting and a jet flying high over our heads leaving a brilliant white cotton stripe across the changing sky. I could smell summer and change was in the air. We were college kids packed in a car, laughing and joking about nothing in particular. We were en route to Poway, California, a small suburban town thirty minutes north of San Diego. Midweek service would soon start and we were eager to arrive because that night I was getting baptized. Within two weeks my life had been transformed by what I was learning in the Bible and what I was seeing in the lives of this church's members. I had never even heard of the Church of Christ one month before that evening. My companions were students like me, from all different backgrounds and races and yet clearly they loved and enjoyed being together all the time. At first it seemed to me peculiar and even unbelievable, but as I became more and more familiar with these guys I was amazed and convinced that this was the real thing. In the two weeks that preceded that midweek service, I had given up drugs, immorality, hatred and hypocrisy and nailed them along with my pride to a cross. Unlike the little gold cross I had worn since high school, this cross meant everything, this cross opened my mind and broke my heart. That night I would make my good confession that Jesus is Lord, be forgiven in the waters of baptism, and the ride would begin!

That year we were simply a "church of Christ." No sooner had I become familiar with that term than I would have to become familiar with the term "Crossroads" or "Crossroader." Not too long after that we were being called the Boston Movement and then the International Churches of Christ. Controversy surrounded us, but I always assumed it was because we preached the truth and people don't always want to hear the truth. Now, twenty-five years later, I have a bigger and hopefully a bit wiser perspective.

The International Churches of Christ (ICOC) were born out of the campus ministries within the Churches of Christ in the 1960s. Chuck Lucas led a dynamic and growing campus ministry in Gainesville, Florida, in a congregation that would later take the name "Crossroads Church of Christ." The campus ministry was widely known for both its explosive growth and for producing many young campus ministers with a passion to reproduce the same results in other cities. In fact, there were many young men rising up and taking leadership roles as campus ministers in Churches of Christ in Gainesville and across the United States. These included Sam Laing, Sam Powell, Bruce Williams, Tom Brown and Andy Lindo (who went to San Diego). Of the many young men and women who went out from Crossroads, Kip McKean is the most widely known, though he is no longer part of the ICOC. Initially these young men were hired into established Churches of Christ as campus ministers and youth ministers. This campus movement started in the late 1960s and 70s; the world was going through many changes and these young men often held a different vision than much of the established leadership in the congregations in which they were employed. Although they quickly established themselves as highly fruitful campus ministers, they were controversial in both their methods and expectations. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a continual increase in fruit and in controversy. Clashes between what were then called "Crossroads" ministers and the rest of the "brotherhood" spread and opened

a growing divide. The Crossroads ministries emphasized personal (some would say aggressive) evangelism, purity and open confession with one another. *The Master Plan of Evangelism* by Robert Coleman¹ made a significant impact on this young movement. We were committed to the plan.

In 1979 Kip McKean landed in Boston, Massachusetts, at the Lexington Church of Christ. There he was given the pulpit and leadership of not just the college students but, with the cooperation of the elders Bob Temple and Al Baird, the entire congregation. The Lexington and later the Boston congregation grew in numbers explosively. The first year they baptized 170 people. By the third year (1982) they baptized over 300 people. This drew the attention of not only the Crossroads ministers but also many from across the Restoration fellowships. Kip McKean was asked to speak at functions of black Churches of Christ, bus ministries, and Oklahoma soul winning workshops. The simple fact that this method of growing campus ministries was working with adults as well as college students raised many Restoration church leaders' curiosity. McKean was certainly not the first to attempt these methods with adults, but he was by far the most successful. This began the eventual organization of the Boston Church Movement and gave birth to the International Churches of Christ.

Over the next ten years many of the Crossroads ministers, as well as many "mainline" Churches of Christ and even some Christian Church ministers, began moving to Boston to be "retrained" on how to build an entire congregation of "radical, committed disciples" of Jesus. In 1982, Milton Jones' *Discipling: The Multiplying Ministry*² impacted and inspired many of the leaders and members of the new movement. The Boston Church grew to thousands and began sending out mission teams. The first group was sent to Chicago. Next a group was sent to London and then New York. The mission teams were groups of men and women, usually in their early to late twenties, led by a "retrained" evangelist or pair of evangelists. Nearly all these teams were highly successful—baptizing hundreds from their inception. Mission teams were sent from Boston to all the major cities of the world, including Paris, Johannesburg, Mexico City, Hong Kong and Bombay. The results were often even more amazing than in the United States.

On the domestic front, from its earliest days the success of the Boston Church drew the attention of the Crossroads churches as well as others. Some asked Boston to help them imitate its example, and many churches began a "reconstruction" of their congregations, submitting themselves to the leadership of the Boston elders and evangelists. The motive for such radical steps was their desire to be as effective and fruitful as possible. Churches in Atlanta and San Francisco in 1987, San Diego in 1988, Fort Lauderdale in 1989, and more underwent these changes. This often meant the entire leadership of a congregation would relocate to Boston, and Boston would send a team of leaders to "reconstruct" the local congregation. Even previously planted mission churches like the Kingston Church of Christ in Jamaica and a congregation in Sidney, Australia, asked for such help. The reconstructions caused even deeper tensions between the ICOC and Churches of Christ. Some of the tension came because with these reconstructions, many of the members were "rebaptized." After an initial loss of members the reconstructed congregations experienced explosive growth within a year of their "reconstruction." Most members accepted the changes gladly with great excitement, but that was certainly not the case for everyone. A growing number of disgruntled members began to leave the Boston Movement. Because of the large number of people being saved, this issue did not attract a lot of attention early on in the movement's history.

Despite its global spread, the new movement remained a cohesive group, operating much like one worldwide congregation with Kip McKean as lead evangelist. As the movement spread across the United States and around the world, the need for greater organization arose. In the spirit of cooperation and unity, a hierarchical structure was set up to manage the growth and training of evangelists. In 1988 the globe was partitioned into seven sections called world sectors, each with an appointed leader. Each world sector

1. Robert Aphael Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Revell Books, 1994).

2. Milton Jones, *Discipling: The Multiplying Ministry* (Star Bible & Tract Corporation, 1984).

leader organized the leadership and missions of their respective sectors. The world sectors were organized as follows: China, the Far East, the Commonwealth, The Northern Federation (Russia and Scandinavia), ACES (Africa, Caribbean Eastern Shore) Latin America and Europe. In 1994, a document titled the *Evangelization Proclamation* was issued by Kip McKean³ and the world sector leaders as a call to focus all efforts and resources to evangelize the world in one generation. World evangelism became the increasing focus of every event, activity and dollar spent among the ICOC churches. Meanwhile, campus ministries grew to hundreds both in the United States and internationally, producing dozens of new young evangelists to spread the message and the movement. Top universities in the United States like Harvard, MIT and Berkeley provided talented leaders to train for the many mission teams being sent out.

The vision of world evangelism was fueled by a constant flow of amazing and miraculous true stories from around the world. Many of these stories were documented in a monthly video series titled *Kingdom News Network* (K.N.N.). In every congregation marriages were being saved, individuals were being set free of drug addiction and families were experiencing great victories at home. Testimonies were an integral part of the ICOC culture, inspiring greater and greater commitment. A team of twenty-two Christians, comprised of both blacks and whites, was sent to Johannesburg in 1986, while Apartheid was still in effect. The results were amazing—hundreds were baptized from the church's inception, despite the watchful eye of the government. The Johannesburg congregation grew to a fully integrated group of 3000 members by 2001. In Africa a witch doctor medicine man was converted and years later, having proved his faithful life, was appointed an elder in the church. In Hong Kong and Mexico City the congregations grew to over 1300 in their first five years. Eventually both numbered more than 5000 and planted dozens of new churches across their countries. Mission teams were sent to the Middle East with encouraging results. In Jerusalem, the church, led by a Palestinian, was comprised of Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity. Although there were other Churches of Christ in the area, none had members who were former Muslims and Jews. In 1991, before the fall of communism, the Moscow Church of Christ was planted by Andy and Tammy Fleming, graduates of Abilene Christian University. The Flemings had become part of the ICOC after being inspired at a Boston world missions seminar. In its first year 273 people were baptized in the Boston Church. In its second year over 1000 people were baptized. Moscow sent out mission teams to the major cities of Russia seeing similar results in many of the cities. By 1996 the International Churches of Christ had grown around the world to a point where 51 percent of the membership lived outside the United States. Since 1996 the ICOC has become increasingly international; now, approximately two-thirds of its membership is outside the United States.

In 1990 Kip McKean moved to Los Angeles and set out to build a "super church." As part of this plan, McKean asked churches from throughout the movement to send leaders to help him build this fast growing congregation. The rapid growth was sustained by a constant inflow of funds and leaders from across the United States, and even some foreign churches. A silent but growing resentment spread across the fellowship of the ICOC, particularly in the United States. As funds and resources were vacuumed to Los Angeles, more and more pressure was put on everyone, from the church membership to the church leaders. After the turn of the century, the price of such explosive growth began to manifest itself in many areas of the fellowship, as the financial and leadership sacrifices from some churches hurt their local ministries. In 2001 Kip McKean resigned as leader of the Los Angeles Church and as worldwide lead evangelist. The previously established world sectors were quickly dismantled by leaders and members alike.

In 2001, a letter written by an evangelist in the movement spread across the fellowship, voicing many of the complaints and concerns members held against the methods used to sustain such rapid growth. Over the next three years many of the United States and international congregations went through a firestorm as they examined and tested themselves. In nearly every congregation leaders made public and private apologies for

3. <http://www.devsite.org/religion/icoc/EvangelizationProclamation.pdf> (accessed August 26, 2009).

mistakes that had hurt people. In February of 2004, a group of key ICOC leaders made a formal apology at the Abilene Christian University Lectureship to all who would listen among Churches of Christ. The apology was recognition by the ICOC leadership of arrogance and pride displayed toward the mainline Churches of Christ. Throughout the ICOC fellowship, many young evangelists were discouraged by the loss of purpose and direction, and quit. Many of the evangelists and other leaders began research and self-examination, seeking further education both in secular institutions and in theological schools including Harding, Abilene Christian and Pepperdine Universities. Most were searching for understanding and answers to their questions about how to build better, healthier churches. The ICOC lost nearly a third of its membership, dropping from 135,000 to 88,000 between 2001 and 2006. Over the next several years the ICOC churches went through structural and theological changes. Kip McKean, after initially apologizing for personal mistakes, later condemned many of the changes and withdrew his fellowship from the ICOC, establishing the International Christian Church as his new movement in 2006.

Today the ICOC is a diverse fellowship of congregations. Theologically they share the common heritage of Restoration churches and the ICOC. The movement remains devoted to world evangelism and the conviction of practicing open, honest discipleship. Basic practices such as the use of authority, the method of discipleship and motivational methods have been examined, and in many cases radically changed. Despite suffering several years of loss and little fruit, the International Churches have begun to grow again. From 2005–2008, over one hundred new churches were planted. Today's ICOC congregations reflect both their heritage from the former Crossroads and Boston Movements and the present leadership's renewed convictions. They remain relatively unique and differ from typical mainstream Church of Christ culture and practice and other Restoration churches in their approach to cooperation, discipleship, pluralism, women, music, transparency and campus ministry.

COOPERATION

Although no congregation or leader of the ICOC desires the hierarchy of the past, nearly all the congregations and leaders continue to work closely together. There remains a general rejection of the doctrine of autonomy. Churches are organized along voluntary cooperative efforts. In 2006 a letter asking for agreement of basic doctrinal issues and a commitment to cooperation among the ICOC churches was circulated across the movement. It was received with mixed feelings. Many eagerly signed the letter, but some chose not to sign as a matter of principle. Perhaps the greatest testimony of the new unity is the fact that all the signers and non-signers continue to work closely together. There are still many issues that require constant dialogue and resolution, but the ICOC congregations are learning how to work without hierarchy and with mutual respect.

DISCIPLESHIP

Perhaps one of the most controversial of practices in the ICOC, discipleship has undergone a practical overhaul. Because so much diversity exists, it is difficult to describe one method that every congregation in the ICOC practices, but it can be safely said that most are making focused efforts to strengthen healthy discipling relationships. "Top down" discipling has been widely rejected. This hierarchical discipling too often opened the door for abuses of authority and leadership. Today congregations are trying to develop healthy discipling relationships based on the many "one another" and "each other" scriptures that lead toward maturity in Christ. There will always be the need for "older brother" relationships but even those are based on a mutual respect. After recent years of strong reaction against past abuses, the movement is growing in maturity and in relationships in which men and women help each other through mutual respect, encouragement, admonition, honesty and most of all, love.

PLURALISM

Since the Crossroads days in the 1970s, the movement has always been very racially diverse. Congregations typically reflect the racial make-up of their communities. The idea of a black church, white church or Hispanic church would be absurd in the ICOC. Likewise the congregations tend to be socially diverse. In the United States, some have Spanish ministries but it is primarily for language and evangelistic purposes. Today over 65 percent of the ICOC fellowship is outside the United States (of the 546 congregations that associate themselves with the ICOC, only 145 are in the United States).

WOMEN

The ICOC made some radical departures from mainline Church of Christ views early in its history in regard to women's ministry and women's leadership roles. Although there exists a conservative biblical adherence to scriptures regarding women preaching to men or holding authority over men, the ICOC gave over many other traditions. Outside of clear biblical mandates, women were allowed and encouraged to preach to, teach, disciple and lead other women. In many congregations, wives of evangelists were essentially female versions of the evangelist, running women's ministries alongside their husbands. Along with the many other changes that occurred in the past five years, the role of women in church leadership has been discussed and debated in all the ICOC congregations. The common conviction still held by most is that it is more effective and fruitful for women to teach, disciple and counsel each other. Women's ministry has been restructured but is once again growing and developing. Churches are filled with young women eager to help change the world.

MUSIC

Early in the Boston period the ICOC churches began to use instruments in worship services. Although most of the early leaders of the Crossroads and Boston Churches came from the *a cappella* Churches of Christ, the thousands of newly baptized did not. Many of the traditional beliefs from the Church of Christ were not adopted or passed on to the next generation. This has been predominantly a movement of young people who engendered a culture of questioning and testing tradition. Both women's ministry and worship were very affected by this open approach.

TRANSPARENCY

In the early days at the Crossroads Church, a culture of confession and openness was encouraged and enforced through "prayer partners." Later confession and apologies became a regular part of the ICOC culture as part of the practice of discipling. With so many young converts from non-religious backgrounds, this was an important doctrine for maintaining the fellowship's purity and righteousness. Many congregations were filled with thousands of young converts with alcohol, drugs or sexual immorality in their backgrounds. Likewise, many of these congregations were led by men who were themselves still young Christians. This opened the door for mistakes and unspiritual uses of authority. These have all been scrutinized and examined carefully over the past five years. What now remains is the simple belief that everyone must be regularly confessing sin and being honest before the Lord and each other. This is certainly one of the most important characteristics that defines the ICOC fellowship.

CAMPUS MINISTRY

The ICOC was born out of campus ministries. It continues to place major emphasis on reaching college students for Christ. Most every major congregation in the ICOC fellowship is at this time focusing money, energy and talent in this area. Campus ministries are once again growing in increasing numbers. Consequently a new generation of leaders is emerging among the ICOC churches. Leadership training is once again a high priority in most congregations. Many young leaders are being trained on campuses as campus interns and through Hope Youth Corp, a benevolent works branch of the ICOC members.

Today the ICOC fellowship is growing and finding a healthier path. Although there is a wide spectrum of opinions on many issues and a learning curve of maturity among the many congregations, there is also

a cohesive understanding as one community. World leadership conferences and regional gatherings keep the fellowship united and members learning from each other. After years of self-examination and critical self-analysis, confidence is growing and a new vision is developing. 2008 saw revivals across many of the large United States congregations. Over the past three years leadership conferences have evolved from times of consolation to inspiration. Most congregations are growing and new churches are being planted all over the world. Missions and campus ministries are on the forefront of the fellowship's collective conscious. Likewise the fellowship is taking an even greater interest in serving the poor around the world. Working closely with Hope worldwide, churches are mobilizing their memberships to become connected to their respective communities and the global community. On April 26, 2009 the entire fellowship of 546 congregations fasted for the poor of the world. Along with a new vision for advancing the kingdom of God, a new unity is flourishing through our common vision for world evangelism.

During the first part of this new century many of our churches suffered from overreaction and made new mistakes in their efforts to correct themselves. The pendulum has swung back and forth several times in the last eight years. Although the proverbial baby was indeed sometimes thrown out with the bath water, most are bringing the baby back. A new confidence is visible, tempered by the deep humility that comes from God's discipline. Many lessons have been learned and discussed in leadership circles that have led to greater understanding of important principles like grace, mercy and mutual respect. The many leaders who have gone searching for answers have brought into the fellowship a wider, deeper understanding of the role the ICOC plays in Christianity as a whole. Bible study, soul searching, biblical education, church history and fellowship with Restoration leaders outside the ICOC have injected the fellowship with both greater humility and renewed confidence in God and his purposes. Speakers from Abilene, Pepperdine and Harding have encouraged and inspired our fellowship to learn from the past and continue to grow in zeal for God. Although we no longer see ourselves exclusively as the "one true church," we are confident as members of the Lord's church, and thus compelled with the responsibility to advance the truth, the gospel, sincere love and spirituality in this postmodern world. In the past I was inspired and moved by the powerful passion, zeal and vision I heard from my brothers as they preached at conferences around the world. Today I am even more moved by the humility, determination and fresh zeal I see in so many who are leading. Our prayer as a fellowship is that we continue to walk humbly and learn from the many resources God gives us. That we never become self deceived and self-confident thinking we have arrived as the fully restored New Testament church. That our confidence grows in the grace of God and the power of the cross. And that our victories are always acknowledged as gifts from the Lord.

ROBERT CARRILLO, EVANGELIST OF THE SAN DIEGO CHURCH OF CHRIST, WAS BORN IN JUAREZ, MEXICO IN 1963. HE GREW UP IN CALIFORNIA AND WAS CONVERTED TO CHRIST IN 1983 AT THE POWAY CHURCH OF CHRIST WHILE A STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO. IN 1988 HE WAS SENT ON A MISSION TEAM TO PLANT A CHURCH IN MEXICO CITY. IN 1989 HE AND HIS NEW WIFE MICHELE WERE SENT TO MIAMI, FLORIDA TO START A NEW CONGREGATION. IN 1992 THE CARRILLOS WERE SENT TO SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO TO LEAD THE NEW CHURCH PLANTING. IN 1994 THEY MOVED TO HELP THE WORK IN KINGSTON, JAMAICA. IN 1995 THEY WERE ASKED TO COME TO NEW YORK AND SERVE IN THE NEW YORK CITY CHURCH OF CHRIST, A CONGREGATION OF 3000 MEMBERS. IN 2004 THEY AND THEIR THREE CHILDREN RETURNED TO SAN DIEGO, WHERE BOTH ROBERT AND MICHELE SERVE FULL-TIME IN THE MINISTRY. CURRENTLY THEY ARE IN THE PROCESS OF FOUNDING THE MISSION CENTER OF HOPE AS A COMMUNITY RESOURCE, WHERE THE CHURCH CAN SERVE THE POOR OF SAN DIEGO AND ITS CLOSE NEIGHBOR, TIJUANA. THEY ALSO SUPPORT, BOTH SPIRITUALLY AND FINANCIALLY, MISSION WORKS IN THE PHILIPPINES, MEXICO AND THE MIDDLE EAST. ROBERT IS PURSUING A MASTERS IN DIVINITY AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY IN MALIBU.

