

The 'one true church'...or a 'dangerous cult'?

An investigative look at the Boston Church of Christ

By MATTHEW MALLIO

(Editor's note: This is the first article in a three-part series concerning the Boston Church of Christ, which holds prayer meetings every Sunday at Winchester High School and has an administrative office in Woburn.)

Opinion about the Boston Church of Christ couldn't vary any more sharply than it does.

Members say that it's the "one true church," dedicated to strong and loving families, following Biblical principles, and serving the world.

But some former members and a number of counselors say it's a dangerous mind control cult, one that demands absolute control over its members, draining them emotionally and financially and scarring them psychologically.

Members of the Cult Awareness Network (Chicago), the International Cult Education Program (New York) and the Interfaith Coalition of Concern of Cults (New York) all say that the Boston Church of Christ is the one group they have received the most complaints about in recent years.

"There is no question as to the destructiveness and damage of this group," said Marcia Rudin of the International Cult Education Program.

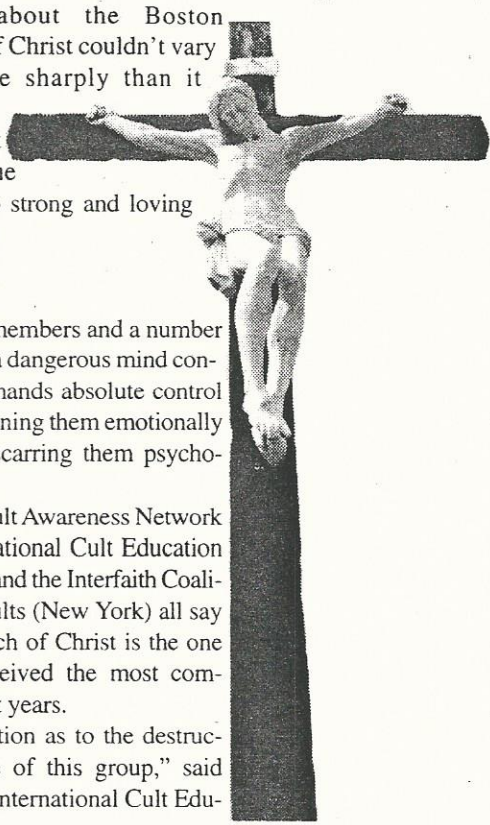
Arnold Markowitz, a counselor for the Interfaith Coalition of the Concern of Cults said the Boston Church of Christ is "probably one of the groups we get the most calls about."

Steve Hassan, M.Ed, author of the best-selling book "Combating Cult Mind Control," puts the Boston Church side-by-side with the Unification Church (the so-called "Moonies"), the Church of Scientology (following the philosophy of Dianetics), The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Hare Krishnas as "one of the most dangerous cults in the country."

But there are many members who have said repeatedly that the church is in no way dangerous, and in no way a cult.

Following negative reports on television and in magazine articles, local members of the church wrote numerous letters to television news organizations such as WCVB News and the "20/20" TV show and Time Mag-

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azine. A church spokesperson made several of these letters available to the Town Crier.

In a June 1994 letter to Victor Neufeld, executive producer of "20/20," Elisa K. Mak wrote that joining the Boston Church of Christ was "the best decision I ever made."

Other members wrote Neufeld that they can understand why church members are perceived as a cult. They believe the term results because church followers are constantly going against societal norms in terms of living their everyday lives.

"What I have found in the Boston Church of Christ is a group of people who are committed (as I am) to a daily decision to follow Christ rather than the world," wrote Teresa Foster, in August 1994 letter also directed to Neufeld.

"We are controversial: So was Jesus. His disciples will always be looked down on by society, because we try to live by standards that the world rejects. My heart goes out to those people who have left the church, especially those who feel mistreated," Foster added.

Very differing views

Rick Bauer, a former member of the Boston Church of Christ who rose to a leadership role before leaving and lived in the Middlesex County area, said he knew many members of the church in Winchester and is the author of the book "Toxic Christianity," a history of the Boston Church of Christ.

"I think it's a dangerous group and I think as we get closer and closer to

the turn of the century they will get more and more radical," said Bauer. "I'm concerned about the presentation of a religious group that uses all the classic mind control techniques that others who have studied the phenomenon have identified."

That view is certainly not shared by Kevin P. Sullivan.

Sullivan, a church member from Malden, wrote in another letter addressed to TV producer Neufeld, "My sense of joy and fulfillment in the church has grown continually during those eight years [Sullivan said he became a member in 1981]. In that time I have had countless close personal relationships with people inside and outside the church. I believe my personality has developed more fully as a result of my knowing and applying the Bible."

Sullivan added many members are very happy; that through the church and knowledge of the Bible and applying Biblical principles to their lives they have "been liberated from backgrounds of drunkenness, gambling, immorality, greed, selfishness, etc."

The Malden man identified church followers as "those who have been accepted (many for the first time) despite backgrounds of AIDS, homosexuality, crime; teenagers who've been redeemed from leading gangs, committing unfeeling acts of violence and a life without hope. Of hundreds who have been married and are still members of the church, none has been divorced. This statistic is staggering in a society in which the divorce rate is 50 percent."

And, according to its literature, the Boston Church of Christ has helped

set up medical clinics and soup kitchens to aid the sick and the starving, through an organization called HOPE International, labeled the "benevolent arm" of the church.

A history of the church

So just what is the Boston Church of Christ and where did it come from?

According to official church literature, the founder of the Boston Church was a young energetic preacher named Kip McKean, who packed up his belongings and moved to Massachusetts in 1979 to preach at the small Church of Christ in Lexington.

"That's what it was originally," said Gordon Ferguson, a Boston Church of Christ elder and media representative for the church. "They were just a small group. Usually they say somewhere around 30 or so. But Kip McKean came and began leading it — he really had a focus on being evangelistic for one thing. But he was really just trying to get back to the basic thrust of the Bible, using it as a guide, and things just started clicking for the church and have been ever since."

Other sources say McKean moved to Lexington because he was fired from his preacher's role at a mainstream church in the Midwest for his extreme views. Soon after McKean's arrival at the Lexington church, some members of the small congregation felt uncomfortable with his leadership and left, leaving the church to evolve in its new direction.

Since 1979, the church's popularity has exploded, building on the idea of "planting" churches in other parts of the country and the world.

The Boston church now, according to church literature, has approximately 3,500 members in the Boston area alone and as many 60,000 members worldwide. The church further claims it has a Sunday attendance of over 100,000, citing 173 church chapters worldwide.

But do most members remain with the church?

Carol Giambalvo, a Florida consultant for the American Family Foundation which has helped in the exit counseling of many former members, said church members are leaving at a rate of approximately 25 percent per year. Giambalvo said this is especially true in the older churches, such as those in New York, Chicago and Boston.

Winchester, Woburn connection

One of the local Boston Church of Christ chapters meets at Winchester High School every Sunday for services. And a major administrative office and training center for the church is at 1 Merritt St. in Woburn. The Woburn chapter includes the towns of Woburn, Stoneham, Reading and Wakefield.

Unlike many church groups, the Boston church organization doesn't construct many actual church edifices. Members say the church has expanded so rapidly that there really hasn't been time to construct buildings. They also say that a church isn't necessary, as the Bible says that "wherever two or more Christians are gathered in my name, God is there as well."

Many of the former members and counselors who spoke about the

church were of the opinion that many Winchester and Woburn residents have no idea that the Boston Church even exists, let alone plays a role in their communities.

These sources believe that the Boston Church of Christ is a potential threat to area youths of because of their aggressive recruiting practices.

Rev. Robert Watts Thornberg, dean of Boston University's Marsh Chapel, was instrumental in having the Boston Church of Christ removed from the BU campus, expelling them from the campus pending hearings with the school's religious life council and student activities office.

Thornberg wrote in an August 1987 letter to Boston church elder Dr. Al Baird: "This action is very grave because we consider the situation to be most serious. Long discussions between the University chaplain and the leaders of the Boston Church have sought to emphasize that the continued pressure and harassment of students to attend meetings, to leave other faith traditions and join the extensive activities of the Church of Christ will not be tolerated."

Thornberg said, in a phone interview, that the Boston Church of Christ "is dangerous because they especially go after a community's youth using mind control techniques."

Church members and administrative leaders outright deny the accusation.

(In next week's second article in the series, recruiting techniques of the Boston Church of Christ will be analyzed, and more experiences from current and former members published.)