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TWENTY CENTS

## Area Schools Fear Campus Proselytizing

By RICHARD M. MURPHY

In 1978 a Fundamentalist preacher named Kip McKean became pastor of the Boston Church of Christ, which at that time was based in Lexington and boasted only 30 members. Today the Church holds Sunday services in the Boston Garden for a fanatically loyal flock of well over 3000.

Among the throng are 30 Harvard undergraduates, many of whom have joined the church in the past year.

### News Feature

The increasing number of students attracted to the church has drawn concern from administrators and clergy at several schools in the Boston-area, who are stepping up their efforts to stem proselytizing on their campuses.

At Harvard, officials in the College and the United Ministry have distributed a special pamphlet to warn students about proselytizers in general and have been outspoken in their criticisms of the Boston Church of Christ. They say the Church's recruiting pattern at Harvard and at other colleges in the area oversteps the bounds of legitimate religious activity.

Harvard officials say these practices, which include door to door solicitation in dormitories, repeated odd hour telephone calls to potential recruits, and deceptive descriptions of Church structure and activities, amount to harassment of students.

Concerns about the Church have grown this year as it dramatically increased its Harvard recruiting efforts, targeting especially freshman.

Church officials deny these charges, claiming they are simply obeying the New Testament edict that Christians should spread the Gospel everywhere.

"I'm not aware of any real harass-

ment of outsiders by our members. We simply believe very strongly that people need God, that people need to come to God. In order to bring this about, we will talk to people as long as they will listen," says Boston Church of Christ Harvard Ministry leader Preston Shepherd.

"The means that we use to try and persuade people aren't any different from the ones that anybody might use to talk a friend into doing the right thing, or even into going out to dinner or a movie," Shepherd says. "Persuasion is a normal part of everyday life."

One student recruited by the church, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, says she joined the church after she was approached while eating dinner alone in the Union. The student says she was asked to go to a bible meeting, where everyone was very affectionate and caring. It was made clear, she says, that these friendships would only continue if she devoted herself to the church.

Psychiatrists at University Health Services (UHS) say freshmen are especially vulnerable to high-pressure proselytizing because of their recent severance from home support networks. A correlation exists between the poor academic records of some freshmen and their involvement with the Church, Harvard and United Ministry officials say.

But Church officials point to students whose grades have improved since they joined the Church. They claim that the Church provides a supportive, caring environment in which converts can grow spiritually while continuing to achieve in the secular world.

Nonetheless several universities have increased their efforts to stem the Church's influence on their campus.

Boston University recently banned the Church's non-student members from entering University buildings.

The school's chaplain, Robert Thornberg, wrote in an August letter to the Church that they had "repeatedly engaged in actions which interfere with the privacy of Boston University students and the policies of the University regarding solicitation and proselytizing on campus, particularly in the residence halls."

Thornberg says Church members had been in the habit of signing into B.U. residence halls to visit particular students, and then going door-to-door once they gained entry to the building. B.U. proctors, like their Harvard counterparts, also have reported many instances when students complained of being harassed by Church members to attend meetings.

While no such drastic action is contemplated by Harvard, administration officials, such as Dean of Freshman Henry C. Moses, say they will act strenuously to protect individual students' right to be free from coercion.

The United Ministry at Harvard has disavowed the Church, which occasionally holds services in Phillips Brooks house, on the grounds that it refuses to conform to the Ministry's official policy against all religious proselytizing on campus. The administration and the United Ministry both say, however, that they do not oppose the right of Church members to freely express their religious beliefs on campus.

Dean of Students Archie C. Epps III says the Boston Church of Christ has received no official permission from Harvard to conduct ministry on campus. But he plans no specific measures against the Church.

Administrators at B.U. say official restrictive measures against the church and other proselytizers are necessary because students are not equipped to deal with high pressure religious recruiting.

"Students, particularly those who have just left home, are ultimately vulnerable in that they are in an unfamiliar and often hostile world cut off from their usual sources of support such as parents, friends, and home churches," Thornberg says. "When duplicitous, high-pressure recruiting tactics are used by religious groups, the basic trust of education is violated."

"Students need to be protected not from ideas—for they can make up their own minds given sufficient evidence—but from manipulative proselytizing," Thornberg says.

The Harvard congregation is small but growing, with between 40 and 50 baptized members, 30 of whom are undergraduates. At a recent Harvard church service in Phillips Brooks House, fully half of the group had joined in the past year.

McKean is still the spiritual leader and primary preacher, but most of the day-to-day operations of the worldwide church, drawing on members from more than 75 different countries, are entrusted to a

# Boston-Area Universities Battle Aggressive On-Campus Religious Recruiters

group of church Elders led by Al Baird, who holds an M.I.T. doctorate. Contributions from members make up the Church's financial holdings, which total approximately \$3 million. Most of the money goes to support new church "plantings" in climes as exotic as Johannesburg and Bombay.

Churches of Christ dot the country; religious experts say they are the inheritors of the 19th century Campbellite Fundamentalist reform movement in America. The Church of Christ should not be confused with the United Church of Christ, a much more centrist descendant of the New England Congregationalist tradition.

But the Boston Church of Christ is unique in its aggressive proselytizing efforts. The Church bulletin publishes weekly service attendance, contribution and baptism figures, and sermons often stress the absolute importance of the members being "fruitful," both in terms of recruitment or "disciplining," and in personal cash contributions.

During the Sunday service in PBH, a young member got up and discussed a passage from the Book of Malachi, which stated that the Lord disdains people who bring him inferior offerings. Immediately afterwards, a collection plate was passed around amongst the student congregation, which promptly filled it with five and 10 dollar bills.

According to Thornberg, the leading Boston area expert on the Church, the average weekly contribution per member is \$22. Thornberg also claims that the Church bills members for "voluntary" contributions, and that these accrue if not paid week to week. Church officials deny this.

They freely admit, however, that members are rigorously expected to "fellowship," or spread the word, outside the Church community. Indeed, some senior members such as Shepherd left ministerial posts in other denominations because they were dissatisfied with the slow conversion rates.

"I was frustrated by the non-growth of other churches, the sense that they were all preaching the same tired, mellowed out Christianity and that they had departed from the Scriptures," Shepherd says. Shepherd went on to stress that evangelizing was "a direct command of Christ," and that members who did not evangelize were by definition bad Christians in the Church's view.

Doctrinally, the Boston Church of Christ doesn't differ that radically from other Fundamentalist churches. They, too, preach that the Bible is the ultimate authority on all moral questions, that adult baptism by immersion is necessary for salvation, and that most established churches have departed from the true path of the Lord.

What sets the Boston Church of Christ apart is its rigidly authoritarian organization, in which all members are responsible to superiors in the Church for all facets of the conduct of their daily lives. All but the most junior members, further, are responsible for ensuring the spiritual progress of certain designated "younger Christians". Members practise public confession of their sins to their peers and to their Church superiors.

According to a former member who left because she was fed up with the authority structure of the Church, there is subtle but omnipresent pressure to confess.

"We were never explicitly told to confess our sins, but in fact there was always the sense that we weren't supposed to hide anything, that any secret actions or doubts were by definition bad, and that we should therefore feel guilty about them," the former member says.

"Everyone is self-programmed to think that, while doubt is inevitable, it is also unnatural and comes from Satan," she says. "The goal is to eliminate all doubt and become confident in one's faith."

Members tend to live, work, eat and sleep with other members, and dating outside the Church is strictly forbidden, according to both current and former Church members. Indeed, according to one former member who asked that she not be identified, many people end up leaving the Church because they become involved with outsiders.

While members are not specifically urged to sever contacts with former friends, there is always the sense that outsiders are only relevant insofar as they are convertible.

One freshman, who was intensely recruited over a period of about 10 days, without going to any meetings says that his contact had been less interest in him for himself, despite extraordinary friendliness, as in wracking up personal spiritual points by bring in a convert.

"Greg made an incredible effort to convert me, but for his own sake, not mine. He did it to get himself to heaven, and once it became clear that I wasn't going to buy it he never called me again."