

Atlanta Church Keeps Tight Rein on Its Flock

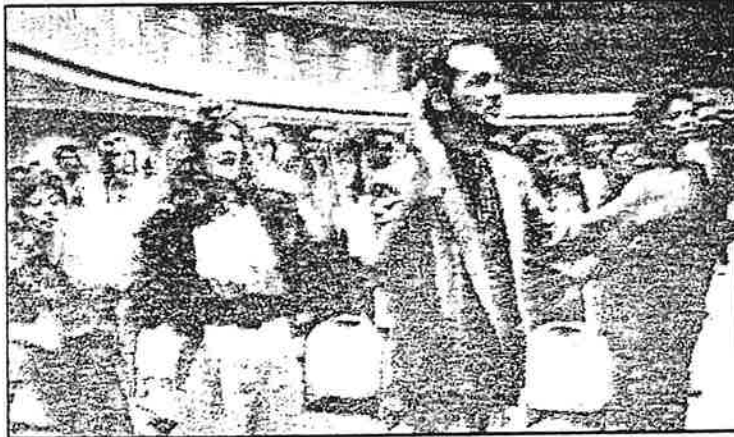
From Sex to Money, Members Required To Consult Mentors

By Gayle White
Staff Writer

A new fundamentalist congregation — one so strict that even some conservative Protestant denominations consider it authoritarian — has sprung up downtown Atlanta.

The Atlanta Church of Christ, which meets Sundays in the Peachtree Plaza Hotel, insists on being involved in members' lives, whether it's a matter of money or sex.

Before Jimmy Thomas asked Alli Burel to be his steady, he sought permission from his church-appointed adviser. Mr. Thomas, a 27-year-old college graduate with a re-



RICK SORENSON/Special

About 1,100 worshipers gather weekly at Atlanta Church of Christ services, held in the Peachtree Plaza hotel; some critics have denounced the church's strong control over its members.

sponsible job, then pushed the issue and asked if he could kiss her.

After Tim and Nancy Mansfield found a bargain on two tennis rackets, church advisers

chastised the couple for spending \$100 without checking first with them.

A church adviser also questioned Mrs. Mansfield weekly on whether she complied with

a church requirement to have sex at least three times a week with her husband, to distract him from the sins of lust and adultery.

Both couples are former members of the Atlanta Church of Christ, which draws about 1,100 people to its weekly services, usually held in the Peachtree Plaza hotel. Established in 1987, it is part of the vision of a Boston pastor to evangelize the world by founding "pillar churches" in major cities.

The most controversial aspect of Pastor Kip McKean's theology, which sprang out of his Boston Church of Christ, is the practice of permanently assigning spiritual guides to new members, who in turn act as mentors to others, building a kind of religious pyramid.

Mrs. Mansfield found herself asking the same intimate

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questions about the sex life of a fledgling church member assigned to her. Although she now cringes, at the time she accepted it unquestioningly as a part of her duty to the church.

All members are required to consult their "disciplers" daily, on every issue of life from where they live to what hours they work. Obedience is not officially required, but former members say the pressure of being proclaimed as "in sin" or "having a bad heart" usually compelled them to follow their mentors' recommendations.

Atlanta Church of Christ leaders say the spiritual mentor system is structured on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. "Discipling is basically teaching people about Jesus, teaching them what God wants and requires, and how he wants them to live," said Steve Sapp, the church's lead evangelist.

Mr. Sapp said the Atlanta church represents a return to New Testament Christianity in its purest form.

Members cite no creed but the Bible and claim as their major goal taking the message of Jesus Christ to the unsaved — a doctrine similar to many groups, including Southern Baptists, the country's largest Protestant denomination.

"We're trying our best to be like Jesus and answer to him," Mr. Sapp said. "All we're trying to do here in Atlanta is be a Bible-based Christian church and teach people to live spiritual, God-filled lives."

But others warn against the creation of "super-Christians." Watchman Fellowship, a conservative Protestant cult-watch group, likens the church to "a destructive cult." The editor of the Christian Chronicle, a 100,000-circulation conservative Christian newspaper, calls it "a dangerous movement within the body of Christ." And an official of the Southern Baptist Convention, who keeps an eye on new religious movements, expressed concern about "strong control over the lifestyle of their people."

Many of the mainline churches of Christ, a conservative federation of congregations, have likewise condemned the movement, even though it grew out of their association. There is no "ministry to the weak," said Flavil R. Yeakley Jr. of Abilene Christian University, a conservative institution supported by churches of Christ. "People either become super-Christians at

once or they drop out."

Criticism is the price members pay for commitment, church officials say.

"If you're not being rejected, you're not following Jesus," evangelist Bill Burke of Philadelphia, a University of Georgia graduate, told the Atlanta congregation in a sermon urging them not to be like the rest of the South. "We are the kingdom of God. We've got to be different."

A Young, Clean-Cut Crowd

The rousing sermon, with shouting and pulpit-pounding, came during a 2½-hour Sunday service charged with the energy and enthusiasm of a pep rally. Worshipers cheered baptisms like touchdowns and sang out hymns like fight songs — without instrumental music, a feature of the congregation's primitive-church roots played out in one of downtown's glitziest hotels.

Members are largely young and clean-cut. Unlike most churches in Atlanta, the services attract blacks, whites, Hispanics and Asians. Many on that particular Sunday were couples with small children.

Some people say they come because of strong personal relationships and an emphasis on the Bible.

Eric Hyche, 24, a graduate student at Georgia Tech, has attended the church since shortly after it began and finds the intense structuring inspiring.

"They're not just surface relationships where you see somebody at church and say hello to them, but relationships like you find in the Bible," Mr. Hyche said. "I want to grow as a Christian and need other people in my life to challenge me."

But others have found the all-consuming nature of the church stifling.

Jimmy Thomas and Alli Burel liked the enthusiasm and friendliness when they visited the church last year. Soon they were spending every night in group Bible study, private meetings with their mentors or scouting out prospects for the church. The schedule squeezed out family and friends outside the church.

Spurred by leaders' urging to go beyond the biblically set tithe of 10 percent, Mr. Thomas gave 12 percent of his gross salary to the church, plus \$1,200 to a special offering for a missionary effort.

By this summer, he was ready to enter full-time ministry. When he told his family his plans, "It really hit the fan," he said.

His mother, Judy Ware of



Former member Tim Mansfield said leaving the church means leaving 'all your relationships.'



Jimmy Thomas said he was 'disowned' by church members when he left the congregation.

Charleston, S.C., was disturbed before her son's decision to change vocations. "I never liked it. My son was so smart and he wasn't thinking for himself."

A Family Confrontation

Mr. Thomas's relatives arranged a confrontation between Mr. Thomas and other family members, with a minister present to answer theological questions. A few weeks later, he and Ms. Burel, also 27, left the church. They intend to marry this weekend.

Failing to coax them back, people from the church hardly speak to them, Mr. Thomas said. "The people I would have died for have disowned me." He is now helping to organize a support group for former members.

"All your friends and all your relationships, that's what you leave," said Tim Mansfield, 25, a co-founder of the support group. A counselor from the mainline Church of Christ, Craig Elam, is assisting them. The group is committed to "sharing experiences, sharing information, and fellowship," he said.

Despite abandonment by some members, the congregation of Atlanta Church of Christ is growing at a rapid rate, more than doubling in size over its two-year existence.

The Atlanta Church of Christ is one of the latest shoots from the branch of American-grown religious movements that grew out of its frontier period, with the general aim of turning the Protestant church away from denominationalism and doctrine.

The most conservative of the movements was churches of Christ, which usually use a lower case "c" to emphasize their independence from denominational structure, and now have more than 2 million members.

In 1979, Mr. McKean took over a small church of Christ congregation in Lexington, Mass., renaming it the Boston Church of Christ. He introduced aggressive proselytizing and a system of spiritual mentors.

Although some people left in disapproval, new members

poured in, filling building after building, until the congregation finally settled in the Boston Garden, sports home of the Celtics and the Bruins. Some 5,000 people attend services weekly, giving an offering of \$100,000, according to church reports.

A Worldwide Vision

In the early 1980s, Mr. McKean decided spread the ministry worldwide.

As part of the plan, Boston officials came to Atlanta in the summer of 1987, planning to take over operation of the Atlanta Highlands Church of Christ. Instead, opposition from some church leaders forced them to begin a new congregation, using many members of the Highlands church as a base.

Al Baird, lead evangelist and elder in the Boston Church of Christ, said the growth of the Boston and Atlanta congregations is a direct result of the failure of more prominent denominations. "We call it like we see it. The mainline church is dying," he said.

While mainline denominations do criticize the movement, they are also envious of the attraction it holds for young adults — and the dedication it provokes.

"It reveals a capacity within people to really commit themselves," said Chuck Jones of Macland Church of Christ in Marietta. "I think we underestimate our people and the level of commitment they would be willing to offer God."