

THE BOSTON CHURCH OF CHRIST

EXPOSE Critics call it a cult, but members maintain their church's legitimacy...

By Linda Hervieux

"I would have marched to my death for the Boston Church of Christ."

**— Karen Gray,
Wellesley
College
senior**

Wellesley College senior Karen Gray joined the Boston Church of Christ when she was at a low point in her life. She wasn't getting along with her boyfriend. She was having difficulty with her family. And she had an eating disorder. She was drawn to the comfort and security the church offered, and she liked her nice new friends. Her parents threatened to cut off her tuition if she didn't leave the group. She was not deterred. She was willing to quit school for the church. Gray says the church deliberately discouraged her from seeing her parents; they were considered a dangerous influence.

+++

It is 10 a.m. Sunday morning and disciples of the Boston Church of Christ, clad in their Sunday best, are joined in song. Arms locked and voices harmonized, their bodies sway to a melodious *capella* hymn.

In a location more suited for a late-night rendezvous than a church service, some 60 adherents, faithful to the Boston University house church, line the rooftop lounge of the Kenmore Square Howard Johnson's. Since evangelist Kip McKean — the church's leader — came to Lexington nine years ago, the 30-member congregation has surged, outgrowing Sunday services held in the Arlington Baptist Church and the Boston Opera House. The Boston Garden now serves host to Sunday services several times each month, alternating locations with the 61 "house churches" around the state.

Today the 60 Boston University disciples, together with their 3,000 or so brothers and sisters dispersed among the house churches, comprise the fastest growing church in New England. One thousand new members were baptized into the church last year. A recent study identifies the group as not only the most rapidly growing church in the area, but names its offspring, the New York and Chicago Churches of Christ, as two of the most rapidly multiplying congregations in those cities. The church recently raised its weekly budget from \$55,000 to \$70,000. Pledges for missionary work overseas account for another \$3 million each year.

But success has been both boon and bane for the fledgling church. Bitter criticism, delivered by clergy and former Boston Church members, has cast a pall on the church's evangelizing. Their aggressive recruiting practices, particularly on college campuses, have prompted restrictive action from two universities: BU banned the group last August; Northeastern issued a similar

order in December. At Harvard, Tufts and the University of Massachusetts at Boston, campus ministers regard the Boston Church as a potentially destructive religious group. However, no administrative action to curtail the church's proselytizing has been imposed at those schools. And a New York organization, Fundamentalists Anonymous, is considering a class action lawsuit against the Boston and New York churches. The charge? Alleged financial fraud and mistreatment of members.

Former adherents and observers describe the group as "coercive," and accuse the church of practicing a subtle form of mind control. Wellesley College senior Karen Gray, who likens the group to a "stereotypical cult," was a Boston Church member for about five months until she was tricked by her parents into attending a deprogramming session last summer. Gray, 20, says that, in retrospect, the mind control to which she fell victim was extreme.

"I would have marched to my death for the Boston Church of Christ," she adds.

Buddy Martin, a minister at the Cape Cod Church of Christ, says the Boston Church "has all the characteristics of a mind control group." Last year in Houston, Martin called the group a cult.

"It is a human doctrine and system of control, conceived and promoted by human beings." The pyramid structure of the group creates an authoritarian, destructive hierarchy, Martin says.

"Members are told that if they leave the Boston Church of Christ they will go to hell."

Martin has documented incidents where former members have been harassed. One woman was phoned by a former friend within the church and called "a dirty black sinner."

Other critics are more reluctant to label the group a cult, although many say the church employs "cult-like" tactics. Robert M. Randolph says he believes the term "cult" is useless but describes the group's approach as "controlling and authoritarian." Randolph is an associate dean of students at MIT and a minister at the Brookline Church of Christ.

+++

Nearly 2.5 million Americans, scattered among some 13,000 churches, claim adherence to the "mainline" Church of Christ. With roots back to the 19th century, each church is autonomous and devoid of a rigid, internal hierarchy. Although there is doctrinal diversity between the congregations, Churches of Christ tend to be theologically fundamental and conservative. The Boston Church is part of the "Crossroads" movement — an offshoot of the "mainline" church — distinguished by its practice of aggressive recruiting called "shepherding discipleship."

Kip McKean, the Boston Church's charismatic evangelist, brought the church to Lexington in 1979. McKean's powerful message calling for a return to "New Testament Christianity" proved effective. Within three years, the group's ranks swelled from 30 members to 1,000. A Sunday service at the Boston Garden two weeks ago drew 3,146 people, according to the church's

ant.

In the early 1970s, McKean, a student at the University of Florida in Gainesville, was recruited into the Crossroads Church of Christ by an influential minister named Chuck Lucas. Lucas' theology, which called for the intense "discipling" outlined in Robert Coleman's 1963 book *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, was considered extreme by many mainline ministers. Several years after the Crossroads movement was born when about three dozen of Lucas' recruits left Florida and hooked up with existing Church of Christ congregations nationwide. But many of these congregations split when this new aggressive evangelical element entered their churches.

Kip McKean traveled to Charleston, Illinois, and, in 1976, became the campus minister for the Heritage Chapel of Christ. But the next year, the elders of the church withdrew financial support for McKean and another evangelist. In a letter to the congregation dated April 14, 1977, the elders accused McKean of bringing "unBiblical practices, peculiar language, and subtle, deceitful doctrines to Charleston from the Crossroads church at Gainesville." The elders also warned that adherence to procedure in Coleman's book is "dangerous." Two years later, McKean came to Lexington.

†††

We've got to understand that when Christians are not growing there's something wrong. When they're not growing numerically there's something wrong... If we are not growing, something is wrong!

Kip McKean is preaching at a recent Sunday service at the Boston Garden.

His bellowing voice, echoing off the Garden rafters, beckons the congregation to work toward Christian growth and maturity. A powerful speaker, his voice laced with slight Southern cadence, McKean holds the audience rapt, spicing his sermon with scripture.

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed," McKean says, reading from Mark, 1, 35. He uses the verse to chide the minions who may regard sleep as the path to rejuvenation.

"More strength does not lie in more sleep. More strength lies in less sleep and more time with the father," he instructs. "The secret for you to find strength is to get up earlier and find God."

The sermon is seemingly appropriate ammunition for critics who accuse the church of pushing its members too hard. The Boston Church is, for the most part, a seven day commitment.

"Anna," a 19-year old sophomore in the College of Liberal Arts, accuses the church of turning its members into "zombies" by scheduling virtual 'round-the-clock activities that allow little time for sleep.

"Someone will call you and wake you up to say 'Good morning, praise the Lord!'" she says, adding that disciples sleep about four or five hours a night. Anna dropped out of the church this summer before she was baptized. She agreed to speak on condition that her name be withheld.

At the time she became interested in the church, Anna was depressed. She was lonely and was not getting along with her roommates. Mistaking the group for a youth group, she saw the opportunity for new friends. But they were so nice. Too nice, in fact. And Anna became suspicious. Her discipleship partner — the older Christian each member is assigned — was calling all the time, sometimes five times a day and asking all types of intimate questions. Anna's discipleship partner was constantly asking about her sexual experiences, probing to detect her weaknesses. Anna, a candidate for baptism, became suspicious.

The day she was supposed to participate in a "sin study" was the day she decided the church was dangerous. According to church members, in order to lead Anna from the darkness of her sinful previous life to the light of baptism, she had to confess all of her sins before several women in her house church. Her journal entry from that day reads:

"A feeling of panic seized me when everyone's attention became focused on me. They were determined to find out what kind of person I was."

Describing the persons in the room — all of whom were baptized members of the church — she writes:

"The people on the floor in the living room were mostly Caucasians without any particular abnormalities; however, they all had a sort of dull, glazed look in their eyes."

The next day her friends, worried about Anna's involvement with a group that they considered to be a cult, showed her a newspaper expose investigating the church. The next day she called her discipleship partner and told her she was quitting.

Wellesley's Karen Gray says that the church deliberately discouraged her from seeing her parents; they were considered a dangerous influence:

"I had the same blank expression to everything," she says. "I had to do what God tells me to do... Whatever my parents told me I'd tell the leadership and they would tell me a response."

When she went home to Atlanta for a visit, her parents tricked her into visiting a deprogrammer in Tennessee. About 17 hours into the session, Gray says she "broke" and started thinking on her own. "It's amazing how much you can sever yourself from the real world in six months," she says.

For prospective members, it all starts with a Bible talk and the assigning of a discipleship partner. Three weeks later, on average, a committed member can expect baptism. From Sunday services, house church or spiritual classes on Wednesday, to Friday's "Devotional" mixers with other Christians, church members are expected to attend all scheduled events. Wellesley's Karen Gray says spirituality is determined by how actively an individual member participates in church activities. When organized activities are not planned, members typically spend time together.

But leaders insist that members voluntarily follow the rules of the church. Dr. Albert W. Baird, one of two Boston Church elders, insists that people can't be forced into acting against their will. The commitment expected of members is rigorous, he concedes, but pales in comparison to the commitment of early Christians.

"Our commitment is to be like Jesus and his commitment," he says.

“They don't tell people up front who they are or what they want from them,” Steven Hassan says.

A former Unification Church member, or “Moonie,” Hassan calls himself an “exit counselor” for individuals involved in religious cults. He's worked with about 30 former Boston Church members. He says the church strategically preys on the emotions of prospective members with the intention of recruitment and says that its methods — using guilt as a means of control — and its hierarchical structure are common to all destructive cults.

Karen Gray describes the atmosphere in the church as a “double bind.” Disciples were always told they should be doing more in order to be a true Christian, she says.

“They really play on guilt. I felt guilty all the time.”

Disciples of the Boston Church are very nice. A first-time visitor to a Bible talk or church service can expect to be surrounded by church members and welcomed into the group immediately. The church's proselytizing technique, called “love bombing,” has drawn some of the sharpest fire from critics.

Prospective members are “love bombed” by church members who are, some contend, unnaturally friendly. Here at BU, the practice may involve an exchange in the George Sherman Union Link or in a CLA bathroom. Next comes an invitation to a Bible talk. In some instances, male Boston Church members have invited female students out on various dates before the students realized, or were told, that their new friend was a member of the Boston Church of Christ.

Hassan refers to this practice as “cross-sexual recruitment.” Hassan and former members interviewed agreed that the sole purpose of this tactic is induction, and once the person becomes involved in the group, she is likely to be “dropped” by the male member who initially led her in. In the church, only men are allowed to initiate dating.

Anna, the CLA sophomore who was interested in the joining the church last summer, said she was introduced to the group when a student she worked

with invited her on a hiking trip with a “few friends.” Anna was surprised to learn on the day of the trip that 50 “friends” were coming along. She thought the invitation was a date.

Ellen Queeney, a Wheaton college senior, recounts a similar experience. When she was studying in Paris last year, Queeney, 22, was invited on a number of “dates” by another student who later invited her to join a new church that his friend was starting up.

“He led me on,” she says. “I felt I was dating someone, he felt he was just recruiting.”

The new church turned out to be a “planting” of the Boston Church of Christ. The church has plantings in more than 12 foreign countries including South Africa, England and Hong Kong.

Freshmen and international students are particularly vulnerable to the “love bombing” approach, according to campus ministers. Exposed to a new environment, freshmen battling depression and homesickness are seeking the type of friendships the church is offering. International students, who comprise a substantial portion of the church's ranks, are prime targets.

Louis Meucci, student development director at the BU International Students and Scholar's Office, says most of the nearly 200 students that his office annually assists are approached at least once by a religious organization. Often a foreign student's culture hinders the student from resisting an aggressive approach, he explains.

“Their natural inclination is to go along with it, to be polite. They feed into it.”

Last September, BU banned the Boston Church from soliciting students in dormitories. Marsh Chapel dean Robert Watts Thornburg says the action was in response to about 30 complaints received from students over the past year. A number of international students residing in university housing complained of harassment, he adds. Charges ranged from door-to-door solicitation, to repeated telephone calls, even after it was clearly established that the students were not interested in joining the church.

Since their first Bible talk was held on campus back in 1979, the group has been the focus of disciplinary action against BU students who violate university rules to recruit for the church.

At Northeastern, the Boston Church of Christ has been on campus for about four years and boasts about 90 disciples, according to campus Episcopal chaplain Colin Gracey. Between one and two student complaints against the Boston Church are received each week, Gracey says. The university banned the group from campus solicitation last December. Gracey says the church employs “cult methodology,” offering simple answers to profound questions.

“It is a way of avoiding the troubles of the times,” he adds. But unlike students at BU, Northeastern students have gone on the record with their complaints.

Don Chase, a New York City lawyer representing Fundamentalists Anonymous — a nationwide legal and emotional support network for former religious group members — says his firm has documentation of mistreatment of members and financial fraud in the Boston and New York churches.

“Without the sex scandal, this is what we refer to as a small PTL,” he says, referring to the Jim and Tammy Bakker incident last year. Chase says the organization began receiving complaints about the churches in June, 1987, and will decide in the next two months whether to file a class action lawsuit.

“If the stories we hear are verified, and if our documentation is verified, we would not hesitate to file suit,” he adds.

†††

Texas researcher Flavil Yeakley, who has observed the church for 15 years and has been studying it intensely for the past three, accuses the Boston Church of cloning its members into uniform personality types.

In his 200-page book, *The Discipling Dilemma*, due out February 20, Yeakley details a study he conducted at the request of the Boston Church leadership. In the study, Yeakley, who is the director of the Church Growth Institute at Abilene Christian University, posed 94 questions to 900 church members and found that members are being cloned into the image of the Church's leadership. Yeakley says this loss of individuality and personality change pattern is common in all cult groups.

“Without the sex scandal, this is what we refer to as a small PTL.”

— Don Luce,
New York attorney

But church elder Baird calls the test controversial, adding, "We're not talking about cloning people; we're talking about becoming more and more like Jesus."

The foundation of Christianity, Baird says, is learning to become more like Christ, and this is the behavior church disciples learn.

"If you can't learn to think, you can never raise up leaders. You can never grow and expand," he explains. "If all you're doing is creating clones who think alike, you'll never go anywhere."

"You want to know what we believe?" asks Russ Ewell, the outgoing campus minister at B.J. "Just read the Bible."

Ewell's entrance into the church seems to verify the benefits of proselytizing. A casual, likeable person, Ewell says he was always interested in God and became involved with the church because nobody else had ever approached him with their religion.

"The thing that draws us together is God, and that's an intense feeling," says Ewell. School of Engineering sophomore Phil Hildebrandt, 19, says the church motivates him more than anything else in his life, offering incentive to boost his low grades.

He adds, "People think it's so weird that we go around having Bible talks and teaching people the Bible. But that's what Jesus did."

But the critics persist.

MIT's Randolph says the Boston Church approach uses theology as a veneer, adding that "their theology is much less important and much less different than their methodology."

However, he concedes that their methods are effective.

"Their psychology is very good. They know how to make people feel important, needed."

Hassan, who has counseled disciples to leave the church, says that in reality the church employs "a very powerful technique to undermine people's ability to be independent adults."

James S. Woodruff will resign as a minister at the Burlington Church of Christ on March 31 to work full-time counseling emotionally traumatized people who have left the Boston Church. Woodruff, who will work with a volunteer staff, plans to distribute 600 monthly newsletters to people who have left the church.

Researcher Yeakley predicts that the hierarchical structure of the church will render it fragmented by the end of the century.

But Kip McKean sees it differently, pledging a commitment to spread the Word of God to the world.

"We try to live out what we teach," he says. "We're not hypocrites." □

THE DAILY FREE PRESS

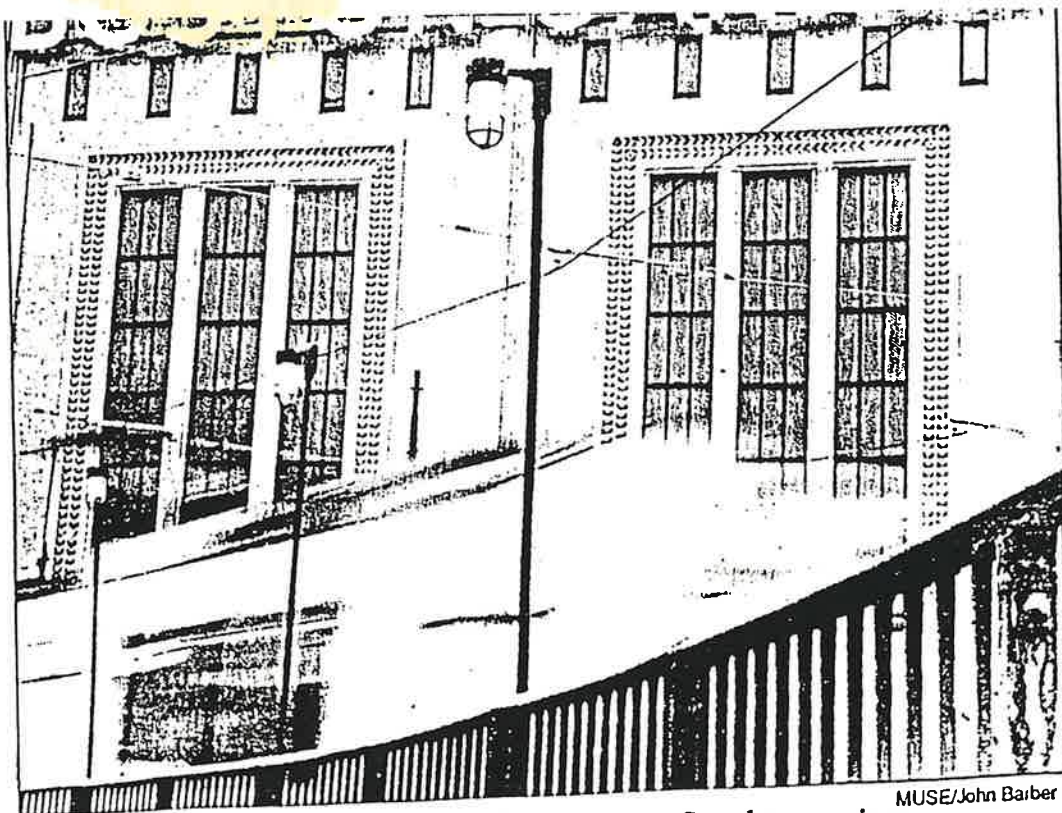
842 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215

Editor Gregory J. Lang
Managing Editor Scott Gallnsky
News Editor Cheryl Suaskind
Editorial Page Editor Steve Barnes
Sports Editors Mike Ferraro, Michelle McKenzie
Photo Editor Matt Warren

Business Manager Jorge Chavez
Advertising Manager Paul Tedeschi
Comptroller Robin Karp

Muse Editor Dan Charnas
Book Review Editor Mark Hartstein
Science/Tuesday Editor Nancy Filesler

Assistant News Editors Pam Long, Roger Ochoa, David Vogel
Assistant News Editor/CityScope Terrence Klernan
Deputy Editorial Page Editors Catherine Burns,
Jonathan Katkin, Mark Silver
Assistant Photo Editor Cindy Cowan
Assignment Editors Keith Lyle, Chris Nagl, Leslie Skantz,
Lauren Terrazzano
Promotions Manager Pamela Martel
National Accounts Manager Jana Gray
Classifieds Manager Vicki Melsel
Office Manager James Donnell



MUSE/John Barber

Boston Garden: site of the church's massive Sunday services.