

Keepers of the Flock

Boston spawns one of Protestantism's hottest churches, but critics call it a cult and accuse its leaders of dictatorship

By **RICHARD N. OSTLING**

STAID NEW ENGLAND IS NOT KNOWN as a hotbed of evangelism. Yet it has sprouted one of the world's fastest-growing and most innovative bands of Bible thumpers. Launched in 1979 by a young evangelist named Kip McKean, the Boston Church of Christ has grown from a 30-member community into a global empire of 103 congregations from California to Cairo with total Sunday attendance of 50,000.

Yet along with its success has come a remarkable degree of opposition. A loose network of "exit counselors" seeks to pressure church members into quitting. Universities that welcome all manner of oddball groups on campus actively seek to curb these evangelists. Critics mail out booklets and tapes denouncing them. Some defectors—who number half the converts since 1979—charge that the church has done them psychological or spiritual harm. Many are crying "cult," although dropout Rick Bauer thinks "authoritarian sect" is a better label.

Why all this fuss over a church that expounds no exotic new heresies and is unblemished by financial and sexual scandals? Hostility focuses especially on the rigid control the church hierarchy exercises over the lives of members. McKean, 37, who left the 3,700-member Boston flock in 1990 to head its Los Angeles offshoot, is the undisputed leader. He personally instructed 10 male elders and assigned them to supervise various regions around the world. McKean says these leaders govern by consensus but adds, "I'm the one who gives them direction." Says Al Baird, a veteran Boston elder: "It's not a dictatorship. It's a theocracy, with God on top."

The church, which rents facilities rather than erecting its own buildings, sponsors rallies in hotels and arenas such as the Boston Garden and the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. One congregation is formed per city. As each expands, it is broken down into "sectors," which supervise "zones," which in turn run the neighborhood Bible-study groups that are the church's main recruiting units.

Each baptized member is subject to a personal "discipler," who gives advice not only on spiritual problems but also on daily life. Dropouts complain that the advice,

which members are expected to obey, may include such details as where to live, whom and when to date, what courses to take in school, even how often to have sex with a spouse. One former convert says he was led through a detailed financial inventory to ensure that he would contribute heavily. Despite such extraordinary intrusions, many insist the group has uplifted them. Boston chiropractor Ken Lowey, for

cipler's advice may be rejected "without sinning" if a member is convinced he is doing God's will. But defectors predict the demands on members will change little.

The control system is designed to focus energies on proselytizing. "All you think about is recruiting," says Mark Trahan, a former Bible-group leader in New York. When Trahan left in 1990, he was "marked," meaning former church friends



RICK FRIEDMAN—BLACK STAR FOR TIME

Deacons being introduced at a crowded Sunday service at the Boston Garden; right, founder and world leader Kip McKean



were directed not to contact him. The biggest problem, contends exit counselor Jeff Davis, is that the group identifies itself so closely with God that people fear they must forsake God in order to leave it. All this is especially nettlesome to conventional Churches of Christ, the conservative body of 1.6 million adherents from which McKean and his colleagues broke away.

Randy McKean, who succeeded brother Kip as leader in Boston, says conflict occurs because "the Bible calls people to a greater commitment than what they're used to." Even Boston University chaplain Robert Thornberg, who deems the movement "a real menace," grants that it has devised an "incredibly ingenious system for church growth." Indeed, the Boston Movement shows the effectiveness of getting each church member devoted to evangelistic effort—as well as the dangers identifying the dictates of man with the will of God. —*Reported by Sophronia Scott Grego Boston*

one, says that before he and his wife Ann signed up, "there was a real emptiness, no sense of purpose in our lives."

Hammered by defectors and opponents, the Boston Church admits some disciplers may have gone too far and says it will "readjust" its discipling practices. Formerly, writes Baird, members were told to obey leaders not only on specific biblical commands but also on matters of "opinion." Now, he says, leaders may demand specific evangelistic efforts but not dictate "such things as choice of food, car, clothes, exact amount of giving." A dis-