

# Recruiting Tactics in the International Churches of Christ (ICoC)

*The International Churches of Christ is a discipleship-oriented, Christianity-based group unrelated to the traditional Church of Christ. The group, which is also sometimes called the Boston Movement, has been accused of abusive control of its members. Some former members say the church determined how they lived, dressed, worked, and even dated. The ICoC has been banned from some college campuses following allegations that it used high-pressure tactics to manipulate students. This article explains some of the recruiting tactics used by the group.*

By Eugenia McGovern

I can still remember the first time I went and shared my faith as a new member of the International Churches of Christ in Orlando, Florida. I was terrified. I had never done anything like this before in my life, and here I was about to invite total strangers to my new church. As a new member, I knew very little about the church and only that it was now my "calling" to go out and recruit potential members. I expressed my concerns to the others who were with me, older more seasoned members. I was rebuked and told that I was selfish and that my pride was standing in the way of people's opportunity at salvation. Who was I to protest? I shut my mouth, took a deep breath and went for it.

It was very difficult for me to walk up to complete strangers and invite them to church. It felt very unnatural, and I could tell that my nervousness showed through to the few people I did talk to. No one I spoke to seemed very interested, and none would come to church. I was very discouraged, and I knew my leaders would not be pleased. Afterwards, the older, more experienced members criticized my sharing and offered me some pointers for developing my technique. They said I should show more excitement and enthusiasm, and that this would attract people.

With experience, approaching people became easier for me. I eventually became very proficient at sharing my faith and

bringing people to church. As a result, I rose to the rank of Zone Leader in the Singles Ministry, leading over 30 women to "go make disciples of all nations."

I should point out that the word "recruiting" was never actually used in the ICoC; instead one "reached out," and this was done in several ways: by building friendships, by blitzing, and by arranging social events.

## Building Friendships

"Building friendships" was a term which meant becoming friends with neighbors or coworkers, usually on a one-on-one basis, with the hidden motive of slowly inducting them into the church.

An instance of this in my own time at ICoC was the time I met someone at work who seemed to be a bit of a "loner." I started saying "hello" to her, taking lunch breaks with her and talking with her. I would subtly mention my church, what we did and what we believed. We later began to do things together after work: interesting things and fun things. I took those opportunities to introduce her to my true, loyal, happy, cool and spiritual friends (all church members), who also reached out to her.

All the while, I portrayed a friendly, interested, loyal and spiritual friend. I saw myself as someone who would set an example for her. I would show her what it was like to live a righteous life in an unrighteous world. I believed I was her way into the "kingdom", her way to being saved. I thought I was introducing her to a different way of living, one filled with love, purpose, excitement, happiness, true friends and salvation to boot. But she was being recruited through a step-by-step process approved by the ICoC as the best way to make and keep a disciple.

Now that I have left the ICoC, I feel very guilty and sad about what I did. I feel that I disrupted this friend's life, just as I disrupted my own. When I think about the things I said and did to recruit her, such as telling her she basically had no other options besides joining this organization or going to hell, I realize I wasn't

being honest with her.

I know that had I not been in the church, I would not have sought her out to be friends. I can't imagine the things I put her through emotionally and mentally. We are still friends, however, and we talk often about our shared experiences. I'm happy to know she is recovering as well. I am very grateful that she understands what we went through and fortunate that she doesn't hold anything against me.

## Blitzing

Another form of recruitment at ICoC was "blitzing," which was a term used for the times when a larger group of members decided to go to a particular public place and canvas the area, interacting with as many people as possible in a short amount of time. Some popular locations were malls, local parks, college campuses and mega-stores such as Wal-Mart.

A group of members would meet in a pre-designated location, like a member's house or a local parking lot, and decide where to blitz and what goal to set for recruitment. Specific numbers of pre-made invitations were passed out to each member of the group for handing out to potential recruits. The number of invitations one received was the number of people one was required to meet and invite to either the next Sunday service or to a Bible discussion. The group then split up in pairs and moved out on an unsuspecting public.

Later we would regroup to count how many phone numbers and/or commitments we were able to obtain. A commitment was only viewed as such if the person committed to going to the event also gave their phone to the member of the church. This phone number would certainly be called and followed up on. Blitzing is a popular method of "reaching out to people" and is often encouraged during what is called a "push month".

## Push Month

A "push month" was when the leaders of the church had decided on a special baptism goal for the month. For example, it might be announced at Sunday service that the church had a goal of 100 baptisms for the month of September. Each member of the church, whether married, single, a teen, or a college student, was given a to-

(continue on page 6)

tal number of baptisms they were expected to meet. The term "push month" was mostly used by the upper leaders of the church and rarely referred to or used with the rank and file members of the congregation. Such special goals for new baptisms might be announced any time attendance, the number of baptisms, or the general commitment level of members was determined to be low.

### **Organized Events**

The other way the ICoC recruited new members was through organized social events. These events were a way to have non-members interact with members in a non-threatening, less religious, social environment. They were chances for us to get into non-members' homes or to get them into ours. Ultimately, they were a way for us to get into the lives of non-members.

On the weekday nights and weekends that members were not busy with church events, such as bible talk, midweek service, or regular Sunday service, they were very busy with planning these events. Garage sales, volley ball games, dinner parties and sporting events were just some of the many ploys used to introduce someone to the group and to meet new people. We were instructed to have someone into our house at least twice a week.

### **Citywide Events**

The church as a whole extended this concept by planning large-scale events to which the whole congregation invites people, thus tapping thousands of people within a city at one time.

The women's ministry had (and still has) an all-day yearly conference called "Women's Day," which focused on women's issues. It was a very modern and professional event with close to 1000 women in attendance, and it has since continued to grow larger each year. This highly emotional conference was a very strong tool and usually results in many new recruits.

The men had "Men's Day, an all day multi-sporting event, filled with "manly" competition, medal ceremonies and lots of food. Men's Day attracts hundreds of male non-members who would usually scoff at being invited to a bible study or church event. ICoC members believed

non-members are impressed to learn that such "real" men believe in God.

And then there were the concerts, plays and multi-media events performed at some of the city's most prestigious arenas and theaters. All of these huge events keep members excited, focused and committed to the cause.

Ultimately whole cities are reached and affected by these groups. When such an event takes place, it is not uncommon to invite someone who has already been approached several times.

### **The Personal Connection**

People who accepted an invitation to a large event were usually looking to make some new friends, were wanting a more active social life, or were just looking for something more interesting than what they currently have in their lives. All these things left them vulnerable to recruitment.

Once a friendship was struck at one of these larger events, it was then that a member turned their focus on building a relationship with their new-found friend. These relationships, built over time and bringing the recruit into full membership in the church, were the fabric that held the church together, especially among the rank and file members.

These relationships were intensely stressed by leadership because they knew that it was mostly out of loyalty to these friendships that so many members stayed long after they were exhausted and wanted to leave.

### **"Just Like Everyone Else"**

Another reason behind so many different kinds of social events was that the leaders were very careful to project a "cool" image of the church and its members. "See? We're just like everyone else and we're not 'Jesus Freaks,'" they might say. Or: "We love God, live fun, exciting lives and we're going to heaven!" The term often heard is "relatable." One had to be relatable to the outside world in order to attract people. In addition, members were subtly taught that in order to attract new members they had to be attractive, both physically and socially.

I have given some of the recruiting

methods of the ICoC so that readers can recognize them and be wary. The people trying to bring new members into the church will not fully tell you what you are getting in for. You may be told that you will have a calling to make disciples, but you may not realize the pressure behind that calling until you do not make your numbers. If someone had told me before I joined the ICoC that I would be required to spend all of my time (in and out of work) on church services, bible talk, discipleship meetings, leadership meetings, and mid week service and other church functions, I might have reconsidered.

Over the three years I was in the ICoC, recruiting and bringing in the numbers was such a high priority that I began to feel as though my focus was no longer on God or my relationship with Him. Whenever I brought my concerns to the leaders of the church, the usual response was that I was being prideful and that I should pray for strength to do the will of God. Eventually, the strain of being pulled between what I thought was right and what the leadership was pressuring me to do became too much. I decided to leave the ICoC, even though I had been taught that doing so was the same thing as leaving the will of God. I was devastated, believing that my world was going to end.

Only after I left, however, did I begin to recognize the double-standards and manipulations of the church. As long as I followed along, I had value to the church, but the moment I expressed a differing opinion, I was labeled divisive and prideful. Eventually, I began to see that, although I had never been a perfect disciple, that there were serious problems with the church. I'm happy to say that my world did not end, and that I feel closer to God than I ever did at the church.

As with so many high pressure groups, recruiting tactics in the ICoC are subtle and sometimes not so subtle and motives are downright deceptive. These tactics are required learning for all members and are practiced continually. The leaders invent new ways to attract more members, reach more people and keep their current members focused, purpose filled and busy, busy, busy. This leaves no time for contemplation or subjective examination of the controlled path one's life is being led down.