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## Anyone Can Protest, Only We Can Save Souls: Authority and Dissent in a Brazilian Christian Church

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## Abstract:

(Brazil, politics, religion)

More and more, religion scholars question the usefulness of the category of “religion.” Many reject presumptions that what “religion” signifies is unique, universal, inherently meaningful, and, perhaps more importantly, *self-evidently* “religious.” Scholars have therefore reconceived “religion” as a modern technology fabricated as a private domain intended to contain political dissent. Such arguments, however, depend on a distinction between the religious and the political rather particular to North America. My project, in contrast, aims to explore these categories through a history and ethnography of the lives of contemporary Brazilian evangelical Christians belonging to the International Church of Christ (ICOC). I take issue specifically with the narrowness by which recent arguments have defined “politics,” arguing for a more nuanced understanding of what the political is in relation to local forms of religious organization in the Brazilian ICOC.

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

“Anyone Can Protest, Only We Can Save Souls”:  
Authority and Dissent in a Brazilian Christian Church

By

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A thesis submitted to the  
Department of Religion  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with  
Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded: Summer, 2015

The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of defended on April 24, 2015.

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## **Bounding the Body of Christ:**

### **A History and Ethnography of a Brazilian Evangelical Church**

#### **I. Introduction**

##### *Thesis*

This thesis stems from a paradox. Members of Santa Marina International Church of Christ (ICOC) in Brazil originally considered their faith to be rooted in social engagement. Yet, a conspicuous absence of such engagement has more recently characterized the church. At a critical moment in Brazilian politics when other church groups were quite active, the church appeared apolitical. In the summer of 2014, ICOC members were absent from public protests against Brazil's use of public funds for the World Cup. For all intents and purposes, the church seemed to be channeling its political energies into the apolitical domain of religion, confirming scholarly suspicions that religion serves the political goal of removing or restricting volatile emotions to nonpolitical domains (McCutcheon 2003: 262). But appearances are deceiving. Tracing the historical origins of this situation reveals that the ICOC's current political hiatus is not the result of an apolitical orientation. Rather, I argue, it reflects an internal political struggle within the church over how best to realize that orientation in contemporary Brazil. The Santa Marina Church of Christ in Brazil *has* political goals, but it has self-consciously withdrawn from playing an active role in Brazilian politics and society because members have preoccupied themselves with political tensions *within* their church community, not vis-à-vis the state. The church's current absence from political engagement with the state is, in fact, the result of its excessive political involvement in the past, and not, as I intend to show, a result of the apolitical nature of religion. The church's retraction from politics *is*, ironically, a political commentary: Brazil's political system is unworkable—the state has effectively abdicated its commitment to its

population. While members of other churches protested the state's failures in the summer of 2014, ICOC members remained embroiled in the aftermath of a long political struggle of their own to take an active role in Brazilian society. But even during the protests, they did not simply limit or confine themselves to a religious domain separate from the political. Instead they pursued a religious vision that never separated the religious from other realms of life. For ICOC members, reconstituting the internal unity of their divided church was a prelude to acting with integrity in the world. Those religious groups that *did* protest in the summer of 2014 did so presumably because they were *not* struggling to manage their own internal cohesion. Interestingly, the ICOC stands today as a microcosm of the larger Brazilian political situation, with striking parallels between the conflicts that beset the church and the broader tensions fracturing Brazil today.

In this thesis, in light of my study of the Santa Marina Church of Christ, I critically appraise Russell McCutcheon's use of the "political" and argue that a broader definition is needed. The ostensibly apolitical nature of the Santa Marina Church of Christ appears to confirm Russell McCutcheon's contention that religious practice sustains the political status quo by removing turbulent personal emotions from the political realm. In my fieldwork, I observed something different occurring: members of the ICOC were re-negotiating *how* to assert their concerns within their larger socio-political context, but they did so through idioms and metaphors that McCutcheon would restrictively categorize as "religious" when, in fact, they bridged both religious and political domains.

### *Outline of the Thesis*

I begin my thesis by discussing theories of religion with which I will frame my critical study and of the categories of "religion" and "politics." More and more, religion scholars

question the usefulness of the category of “religion.” Such arguments, however, depend upon a distinction between these two categories rather particular to North America. My project, in contrast, aims to explore these categories through an ethnography of the lives of contemporary Brazilian Christians.

I relied primarily upon a participant-observation approach, undertaking semi-structured interviews with church leaders and members whenever possible. I discuss my methods in greater detail, however, revealing my own personal connection to the Brazilian ICOC. I therefore take issue with another debate in contemporary religious studies and also involving McCutcheon: namely, over the allegedly conflicting roles “critic” and “caretaker” in religious studies scholarship. I hope to show that these methodological standpoints need not be directly opposed. In ethnography, they are mutually reinforcing. Without my personal connections to the ICOC in Brazil, I would not have had such ready access to members. My parents, John and Barbara Porter, both converted to the ICOC in the 1980s and worked as missionaries in Canada, Mexico, and Brazil. They spent nine years leading the church with which I did my research in Santa Marina. To this day they remain active in its ministry. In short, my connection to the church as a “caretaker” gave me the access to and rapport with members that has enabled me to study it critically. And more importantly, while a project need not and should not be dominated by its subjects, when we critique power and structure, there are still people involved who should be considered. Finally, I conclude the first section by describing the political tensions and conflicts surrounding the FIFA World Cup in the summers of 2013 and 2014 in Brazil.

Next, I tell the story of the International Churches of Christ in the United States. I will show that the ICOC has transformed itself drastically in the past decade. Where community engagement and church unity once characterized and drove the church’s mission and identity,

debate about church boundaries now stifles meaningful involvement in the lives of community and church members. I then return to my critique of the categories of “religion” and “politics” to demonstrate why the ICOC’s contrasting distinction among the religious, political, and spiritual matters to our understanding of the church as a political force and why its “spiritual battle” eludes easy encompassment by the “political” as McCutcheon defines it. Rather, I will show that his conception of the “political” cannot account for the contestation of power at a more granular level. I conclude with a re-reading of the ICOC’s contemporary situation in light of its pursuit of the spiritual battle in today’s Brazil.

I will then offer my ethnographic analysis of the ritual practices and management structure of the Santa Marina Church of Christ and how the International Churches of Christ came to Brazil. I pay particular attention to the ways in which the church establishes and enforces criteria for determining who should and who should not exercise power—an inherently political question. Key to understanding such dynamics is the ICOC’s concept of “spiritual capital” and of the “spiritual battle,” a category that falls, strictly speaking, into neither the domain of the political or the religious; rather, it encompasses both. Next, I explore how ICOC members defined and embodied in practice the categories of “religion,” “politics,” and the “spiritual battle.” I hope to show that, while the church currently appears apolitical, such a description of the “political” fails to capture governance on a local level in the ICOC.

### *Theories of Religion*

Scholars of religion are increasingly challenging both the usefulness and the historicity of the category of “religion.” Their questions have evolved from a focus on the origins and causes of “religion” to its function and meaning, and also to its relationship to politics, law, and power. Until recently, despite significant disagreement among many theories of “religion,” they are all

alike in that they presume their objects of study are obviously “religious.” Mircea Eliade, for example, describes the uniqueness of “religion” in terms of that which he calls the “sacred,” the source of all meaning and that which is irreducible to anything else. The “profane” is the ephemeral, mundane, and meaningless apart from the “sacred.” Even in reductionist theories like those of Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud, while the *function* or *cause* of “religion” is explained by things outside of “religion,” namely the social or the psychological, that which is *being explained* is taken for granted as clearly “religious” and distinct from other social institutions or practices.

On the other hand, some, like J.Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon reject presumptions that that which “religion” signifies is unique, universal, inherently meaningful, and perhaps more importantly, self-evidently “religious.” Smith, for instance, has notably argued that

while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (Smith 1982: xi)

In other words, in his view, “religion” is an *imagined* category, a scholarly tool by which certain aspects of particular texts, acts, and agents in specific conditions are classified and contextualized historically (xiii). Smith’s understanding of “religion,” however, is incomplete in that it fails to recognize how the construction and contestation of “religion,” even as an abstract or an imagined category, is not merely an exercise or scholarly tool reserved for academics, but rather a *range* of stakeholders. Hugh Urban, in his account of the history of Scientology and its self-conscious attempt to be recognizable as a “religion,” demonstrates just that. Rather than occurring in the context of a purely academic debate, questions about the legitimacy of

Scientology as a “religion” take place in the media, among government agencies, judges, and everyday people (Urban 2013: 4). Furthermore, Urban’s history shows how the question “Is this a religion?” is unavoidably a *political* one, as well as an academic or a metaphysical one, for it involves a socio-taxonomic struggle over whether a particular group will be preferentially treated as “set apart” or not.

The late anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose study of ritual purity systems in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* uses the difference between “dirt” and “soil” to make a similar point about the relational aspects of classification. She argues

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. (Douglas 1966: 13)

Drawing on her work, McCutcheon focuses on the interests expressed in our understanding of “religion,” a signifier we regularly (and mistakenly) cast “backward in chronological time and outward in geographic space” as a timeless and shared element of human experience (McCutcheon 2003: 255). In doing so, we fail to realize that we are not recognizing a unique aspect of the world, but rather producing one instead. After all, the term “religion” is a fairly new term, and one for which many languages do not even have an equivalent word. How then can we even begin to talk about the “religion” of Australian aborigines, for instance, without using an imported category assumed to be universal? McCutcheon writes:

By means of such projection we may be doing something more than neutrally or passively classifying the world around us; instead, by means of such classifications we may very well be actively presenting back to ourselves the taxonomies that help to establish our own contingent and inevitably provincial social world as if their components were self-evident, natural, universal, and necessary. (255)

So, classificatory acts do not represent something “essential,” about that which is being classified—classification is a purely social act. Acts of classification are neither natural nor benign, but have very real material consequences that reveal the interests of the structures and people who are *doing* the classifying. The task for scholars of religion is thus in “*thoroughly historicizing the private/public, belief/practice, Church/State, and sacred/secular binaries, scrutinizing their historical development*” (259). Accordingly, given that “religion” is not an ahistorical or neutral category, McCutcheon asks, “What is accomplished by segregating some obviously historical, political, etc., symbol systems and actions by classifying them as religious? Why not simply call them political?” (259). That is to say, if all classifications admit the interests of their classifiers, and are therefore political, what and whose interests are expressed in employing and constructing the category of “religion”? Or, what do we do when we construct “religion”?

According to McCutcheon, what the domain of “religion” does is create a non-threatening, asocial, rhetorical space that “once established makes civil society possible” (McCutcheon 2003: 266). Thus he reconceives of “religion” as a *modern* technology in which it, as a fabricated *private* and *non-performative* domain, contains political dissent (McCutcheon 283). That this is the case, he argues, borrowing from Michel Foucault’s language of “governmentality,” a term which describes a shift from controlling bodies to controlling perceptions of selves (262). McCutcheon’s interest therefore, lies in how we come to make sense of ourselves and “which worlds are made possible by which classifications” (260). A powerful way in which governmentality occurs is through defining “religion” with a rhetoric of tolerance and interiority. McCutcheon historicizes these ideas, contextualizing them within debates concerning “nation building or nation managing” (267). Like “religion,” far from being

politically neutral or self-evident, “tolerance,” he argues, reinforces and maintains the work that “religion” does to manage dissent. Resultantly, the “efficiency by means of which privatization declaws actual dissent does pave the way toward the successful reproduction of an uncontested hegemonic status” (286).

As has been noted, members of Santa Marina’s International Church of Christ were evidently absent from public protests against Brazil’s use of public funds for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Protests marked a critical moment in Brazilian politics where many other church groups were remarkably active. Indeed, this appears to confirm McCutcheon’s contention that religion works to preserve political order by segregating unsettled emotions to an interior and apolitical domain. In light of my ethnography of the church, however, I observed a church struggling to manage its own boundaries and questions about *how* to assert their concerns within Brazil’s larger socio-political context. The church’s retraction from social engagement is thus not a result of an inherently apolitical status, but indeed indicates the need for a broader definition of “political.”

An important distinction must be made between what “religion” has been constructed to do and what it *actually* does. Keeping in mind that, as Urban contends, a range of people participate in the construction of “religion,” perhaps the tool once meant to control political dissent and make civil society possible is no longer working in the same ways. Most ICOC members have little to no recourse to the state. They recognize it as a force in their lives but see no viable way of interacting with it. The church, on the other hand, is a bureaucracy with which they do interact. In the history and ethnography of the Santa Marina ICOC that follows, I intend to show however, that McCutcheon’s argument reads and imposes a clarity on ambiguity. It simply substitutes one contested category for another, and imposes a universal understanding of

the “political” where no such consensus exists. And lastly, his theory, in employing such absolute categories, cannot account for the complex historical contexts in which “religion” is shaped and reshaped. If we do not pay attention to local categories, we cannot fully understand and appreciate the ways in which “religion” is actually working and respond to its dynamism.

### *Methods*

My fieldwork took place in Santa Marina, Brazil during the 2014 FIFA World Cup. I arrived on May 15, 2014 and returned August 2, 2014. Once there, I divided my time between two sectors of the International Church of Christ in Santa Marina—Oromilo and Vila Osvaldo. As a result of my existing relationship with the church, members were eager to speak with me and include me in their day-to-day lives. Many of the members I interviewed are people I have known my entire life but with whom I have maintained very little contact; other members whom I interviewed I met during my trip. A childhood friend of mine and member of the church was especially helpful in facilitating interviews by putting me in contact with other church members and leaders. In my ethnography and history of the ICOC in Brazil, I have changed all names, places, and some identifying details.

### *Personal Background*

I was born in Santa Marina, Brazil in 1992 to my parents, John and Barbara Porter who were missionaries there at the time. My older brother, Joseph, was also born in Santa Marina. My mother, Barbara, converted from Catholicism to the ICOC in 1986 while studying at Harvard Law School. My father, John, converted at Clemson University in 1985. In 1988 they sold nearly everything they owned and moved to Mexico City, Mexico as part of a mission team to plant a church there. After marrying in Mexico, my parents left to lead a newly planted church in Santa Marina, Brazil. Because of my brother’s and my poor health, we returned to the U.S. for a few

years before returning in 1996. In 2004, my family and I moved to South Florida where my parents led the South Florida Church of Christ. At 13, I was baptized into the church but I no longer consider myself a member of the ICOC or any Christian denomination.

### *World Cup Demonstrations*

In the summer of 2013, after a twenty centavo (the US\$ equivalent of ten cents) raise in bus fares, protests erupted in Brazil and quickly spread as Brazilians became outraged by corruption, inflation, and the rising costs of the FIFA World Cup. What began as protests initiated by a local group advocating for free public transportation quickly evolved to include a range of issues such as education, healthcare, and high costs of living. During a “March for Jesus” event, over a million evangelicals protested (Martinez 2013: 1). 2 Million Brazilian Evangelicals Shut Down Sao Paulo During March For Jesus Event.” At one protest, an estimated 2,000,000 people participated, making it Brazil’s largest protest since 1992 against former President Fernando Collor de Mello (“Brazil President Dilma ‘Proud’ of Protests.” *BBC News* 19 June 2013: 1). During my time in Santa Marina, millions protested against the state’s use of public funds for the 2014 World Cup. Police, public transit workers, and university professors and students all went on strike between June and July of 2014. Still, there was little mention of the protests during church services, and a remarkable absence of involvement in the protests or public debates surrounding them. I personally participated in two protests with the one member I met from the church who protested, but by the time I arrived in Brazil most of the protests were extremely violent. Understanding the intensified political context in Brazil at the time of my study is crucial for understanding what was the ICOC’s detachment from national politics. The demonstrations continue and most recently, in more than one hundred cities, hundreds of thousands of Brazilians have protested demanding the impeachment of the newly elected

President Dilma Rousseff (“Protesters Across Brazil Seek Ouster of President.” *Al Jazeera* 13 April 2015: 1)<sup>1</sup>.

## **II. History & Sociology of the ICOC in the United States**

### *The Crossroads Movement*

What is known today as the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) originated in a campus evangelism movement of the Churches of Christ in Gainesville, Florida in the 1960s. Before this, in 1951, Campus Crusade for Christ was founded and awakened Evangelical Protestant groups on college campuses. One of the leaders of the Church of Christ’s Campus Evangelism Movement, a movement whose goal was to encourage evangelism, was a young evangelist named Charles “Chuck” Lucas. Lucas aimed to “facilitate shepherding and evangelism” and, to that end, designed and established many of the structural and emotional foundations of the evangelistic zeal that would come to characterize the ICOC in its formative years (Stanback 2005: 28).

“Soul Talks,” the movement’s principal evangelistic tool, were group Bible discussions designed to guide visitors to the point of conversion. Church leaders exhorted members to invite friends, family, and even strangers to Soul Talks, usually held in the homes or dormitories of students at the University of Florida (Stanback 2005: 28). Soul Talks typically began with a prayer and an icebreaker question to the group relating in some way to the topic of discussion. Sometimes the hosts provided refreshments to encourage mingling between visitors and church members. Once the lesson began, the designated leader would read aloud a short Bible passage, such as a parable, and would encourage discussion. In particular, Soul Talk leaders wanted to make the passage relatable as well as challenging. As such, discussion questions usually asked

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<sup>1</sup> I do not have any information on whether or not the Santa Marina Church of Christ has been active in current protests.

visitors to consider how the lesson might apply to their lives personally, and if so, what kind of repentance this might require of them. In closing, each Soul Talk leader posed a challenge to visitors and an invitation to study the Bible.

In effect, Soul Talks functioned as a way to both pique the interest of visitors as well as a means by which to gauge that interest in order to determine how best to proceed evangelistically. Members also sought to invite visitors to other church meetings including “two services on Sunday, a Wednesday midweek service, and a Friday night devotional” (Stanback 2005: 28) During such events, if possible, church members would meet with visitors to answer their questions and share the church’s convictions about the need to be baptized. If a visitor displayed interest, a disciple was instructed to “follow up” by calling that person and inviting them to a church event or to study the Bible. Some disciples took this practice to the extreme, going so far as to call a visitor every day until they agreed to meet. In “following up,” disciples were also encouraged to serve those who were “seeking.” For example, a disciple might do a “seeker’s” laundry, provide rides to church meetings, or pay for them to attend a special church event such as a conference or retreat.

### *Conversion*

The ultimate goal of “following up,” of course, was conversion. Usually, this was preceded by several weeks of “studying,” or “searching,” during which a person was expected to devotedly study the Bible, attend church events regularly, build relationships with other members, and repent of sin. A person seeking might also be encouraged to confess wrongdoing, apologize to people they sinned against, and explain to close friends and family their decision to convert. Eventually, Kip McKean, the founder of the ICOC, would standardize this process with a “study series” called “First Principles” which I will outline later in this chapter.

Studies also addressed questions about the inspiration of the Bible, the nature of sin, repentance, and lordship. For Crossroads in particular, the “divine inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, divinity and bodily resurrection of Christ, and the final judgment” were central doctrinal positions “more rigidly adhered to” than at other Churches of Christ (Stanback 2005: 37). This fact, along with the expansion of the Crossroads’ leadership, would eventually provoke Crossroads to split from the mainline Churches of Christ. By the 1970s, Crossroads had grown, and the ministers trained there moved to work with and lead other Churches of Christ in places like Tallahassee, Florida; Boulder, Colorado; and San Diego, California (38). The Campus Evangelism Movement expanded as Crossroads ministers baptized hundreds of people wherever they went, thanks to methods like the “Soul Talks” (38). These leaders and methods, however, provoked criticism by many both within and outside the Churches of Christ who accused Crossroads of “unscriptural” and cult-like teachings (38).

That the Crossroads movement was said to resemble a cult came as a result of its “exclusivistic conversion doctrine” and the “radically altered lifestyles” of its newly converted members (Stanback 2005: 39). The church required members to repent and be baptized as adults for the forgiveness of their sins in order to be “true” Christians. The idea of a second baptism for those members who already considered themselves Christians offended members of other Christian denominations with whom Crossroads members came into contact as they evangelized, not to mention the family members of new converts whose newly converted relatives told them that, without this second baptism, they were going to hell.

A second reason for the perception of the Campus Evangelism Movement as a cult came from the expectation of repentance and “total commitment” of its members to the church. Even positive lifestyle changes were a source of concern for parents, and “strict adherence to spiritual

disciplines such as prayer, fasting, Bible study, and confession of sin” appeared to some as “unhealthy and unnatural” (Stanback 2005: 39). Many members so committed themselves to the church and its evangelistic mission that they neglected other relationships, interests, and activities.

If a seeker was dating a non-Christian (a person outside of the Churches of Christ), it was either strongly suggested or in some cases required that they terminate the relationship before baptism. 2 Corinthians 6:14 was the main scripture used to justify this requirement. It says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” This is a reference to another scripture, Deuteronomy 22:10 which says, “Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.” Now, a yoke is a kind of collar fastened over two animals and attached to a cart they are to pull, and in the event that a weaker animal is yoked to a stronger animal, the stronger of the two is strangled by the strain of carrying the weight that the weaker one cannot pull himself. These scriptures are a warning about the “spiritual death” that comes when entering into a relationship with a person with whom you are not spiritually compatible. Furthermore, these warnings were a test of a “seeker’s” humility, submission, and willingness to “take up their cross” and follow Jesus. To this day in ICOC churches, dating outside of the church or Christian faith remains a contentious issue.

Not surprisingly, the point at which a person was “seeking” but was not yet “saved” was considered to be a tremendously vulnerable one wherein Satan was either literally or figuratively waging a “spiritual battle” on the seeker’s soul. This sense of vulnerability and spiritual warfare was expressed in several ways. For one, “seekers” were often warned beforehand to expect spiritual “attacks” once they began “studying.” These “attacks” could come in many forms, but the most common form was varying degrees of persecution from family and friends. In these cases, seekers were urged “not to give Satan the victory” by giving up, but to continue their

studies. A special effort was also made to encourage and support seekers by including them in “the fellowship” or church community. Other ways a seeker’s spiritual vulnerability was expressed was through the eagerness impressed upon and expected of them. Seekers were expected to prioritize their Bible studies above everything else; this was also true for disciples leading and participating in the studies. Any sacrifice as little as missing a quiz to foregoing an internship or job opportunity was believed to be blessed by God.

Consistent Bible studies were a way of arming seekers against Satan’s attacks. For this reason, it was discouraged that a person who was “studying” go on extended trips or breaks from their studies or from the church, “the body.” As part of a campus ministry (a ministry ministering to mostly university students), seekers who went home during breaks were considered to be in particular danger of losing focus or becoming weakened spiritually. This was also true for “baby Christians,” or recent converts. If for some reason a person had to spend time away from the body, they were encouraged to attend a local Church of Christ, if there was one, or disciples might offer to call them and pray on the phone to stay in touch.

The final step in conversion, “counting the cost,” included an informal interview with one of the Crossroad’s ministry leaders. The purpose of this final step was to outline the church’s doctrines deemed essential for conversion as well as to predict and prepare potential converts for any future challenges they might confront as Christians. If a person expressed doubt about their decision or a particular doctrine, they were encouraged to take more time “with God” by reading “the Word,” fasting, and praying until they felt confident in their decision.

Once a seeker successfully “counted the cost,” he or she was baptized almost immediately. Baptisms could occur at any time and at any place, but it was common for ministries, over time, to develop traditions of baptizing converts at specific sites such as a

fountain on campus. Moreover, a baptism could take place on very short notice in the middle of the night, or it could be scheduled for a time more convenient for others to attend, such as during or after church.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8<sup>2</sup> was a common example of the willingness expected of potential converts. Postponing a baptism, therefore, was usually discouraged. If a potential convert wanted to wait for a family member or friend to witness their baptism, they risked this being taken as a lack of urgency or perhaps a failure to understand the importance of being reconciled to God through baptism. Disciples attempted, at this point, to remind seekers of their spiritual vulnerability and their desperate need for salvation. Medical analogies were especially popular for accomplishing this. For example, disciples might ask a seeker to imagine their sin as a terminal cancer that only baptism could cure. But in cases where the disciples believed the baptismal candidate's waiting could potentially "impact" another visitor such that they might also want to be baptized, they encouraged waiting. Sometimes, however, when waiting was suggested, the opposite would occur and the baptismal candidate would become paranoid about postponing their baptism for fear of remaining in the "darkness" or "separated from God" any longer than necessary. In these instances, the disciples reassured the potential converts about God's grace and mercy.

Baptisms were public events and open to all church members and visitors who wished to attend unless the person being baptized requested otherwise. No special dress was required for a baptism, and people were usually baptized in gym clothes. Most baptisms followed roughly the same structure with minor differences depending on the location and the convert's relationship to the church. For example, baptisms held during a church service were usually much shorter than

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<sup>2</sup> The Ethiopian eunuch, upon understanding his need to be baptized, as soon as he spotted water, immediately stopped everything he was doing and was baptized.

baptisms held at homes which could last several hours. A person's pre-existing relationship to the church could also significantly enhance the emotionality of a baptism. The baptism of a "kingdom kid," a person raised in the church, could be especially meaningful because their spiritual upbringing had been closely monitored and invested in. Similarly, the baptism of a person who was known to be previously uninterested in a relationship with God was celebrated as a special kind of spiritual victory, and an answered prayer to many who prayed for years waiting for this moment.

A baptism most always began with a prayer followed by a time of "sharing" in which either the convert's friends, the person who led the studies, or the convert himself recounted the convert's spiritual journey and personal spiritual battle. A person's "spiritual journey" could include many things, for example, their spiritual background, how they were "reached out to," their first impressions of the church, the struggles or opposition they experienced while studying, or the point at which they realized they needed to be baptized. Other people like family, friends, or church members also could share, either simply to encourage the convert or perhaps to welcome them to the "kingdom of God." The point of this time was not only to introduce and initiate the person to the group as a brother or sister in Christ, but to legitimize the baptism and to acknowledge and celebrate a "victory" in the spiritual battle. Furthermore, it was a time where the body offered spiritual protection and support for what was to come in the spiritual battle. To demonstrate this, a person might say to the convert "We are in this fight together," write an encouraging card, or talk about heaven.

Once sharing was finished, two questions were asked to the convert before he or she could be baptized:

1. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he came to earth, lived a sinless life, died on the cross for your sins, and was raised from the dead on the third day? and 2. What is your good confession?

If a person answered “yes” to the first question and confessed Jesus as Lord, the person baptizing them would then announce:

Because of your good confession, I can now baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You will receive the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and be added to God's Kingdom.

At this point, the convert was instructed to hold their nose and was then fully immersed into the water. Once a person came up from the water, the crowd would cheer, sing, and embrace the new disciple.

### *Church Membership*

New Christians were called “baby Christians,” a reference to scriptures describing immature disciples as feeding on milk rather than solid food (1 Peter 2:2). The spiritual battle did not end at baptism, and “baby Christians” were still considered to be spiritually vulnerable. As such, baby Christians were more closely cared for and supervised than “mature disciples.”<sup>3</sup> This was especially important for campus ministries because college was considered to be an especially worldly environment. Depending on a baby Christian’s background, this care and supervision was administered differently. For instance, a new member who recently ended a relationship “in the world” might be advised against continuing a friendship with their ex-partner if doing so would compromise their own relationship with God. But in younger campus ministries with a growing membership such as Crossroads, the distinction between a baby Christian and a mature one was even more meaningful. This also meant that older disciples who had proven their time “in the faith” became all the more valued for their wisdom and insight.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, new Christians participated in “new Christian classes” specifically designed to meet their unique spiritual needs as newcomers to the Christian faith and community.

Crossroads encouraged and maintained members' radical commitment to Christ and to reaching the "lost" through various forms of social and spiritual regulation (Stanback 2005: 33). For example, the leadership instituted "prayer partner relationships" in which church members were held accountable for their "attendance at meetings, evangelism, quiet times, and confession of sin" (31). "Prayer partners" typically involved disciples of the same sex who agreed to pray at least once a week to confess sin, pray for "studies," or people to whom they were "reaching out" or studying the Bible, and to thank God.

Similarly, "quiet times" were devotional periods spent reading and praying, usually individually, but sometimes in a small group in order to strengthen convictions and build a stronger relationship with God and "the body," or the church as a whole. Most importantly, to pray and to read were demonstrations of humility and reliance upon God, a kind of preventative measure against developing a prideful spirit or "hard heart." Thus, the leadership strictly regulated these practices through "discipling." Every member was "discipled" by a "discipler." Discipling relationships encouraged openness, confession, and accountability during a weekly "D-time," slang for discipling time. In many cases, the person who led a convert's Bible studies would be appointed to this role.

Social regulations entailed strict dating practices and guidelines for dress such as modesty and grooming (Stanback 2005: 33). Leaders encouraged church members to meet regularly if not daily, following the example of the Antioch church who every day "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46,47). Leaders also encouraged frequent dating (between Church of Christ members only), and strict supervision to protect members from sexual immorality. Double-dating was common for this reason. Only "brothers" asked "sisters" on dates, but women could

demonstrate interest by “initiating a conversation during meetings or by giving small gifts, such as a card of homemade cookies, after being taken on a date” (Stanback 2005: 33).

As a result of Crossroads’ evangelistic focus and impressive growth, campus interns and leaders were in high demand. Disciples as young as a few months old led Soul Talks, Bible studies, and “discipled” younger Christians. If people demonstrated “leadership potential,” or expressed a desire to be trained in ministry, they would normally receive investment from more mature leaders who would “raise them up” as leaders.

### *Church Controversy*

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, worried parents went so far as to resort to protests and to seek professional help for their children from “decultifiers” or “deprogrammers.” In one instance in San Diego in 1981, “throng[s] of angry parents holding picket signs” protested for weeks outside of the Church of Christ (Stanback 2005: 39). An excerpt from an article posted by the *San Diego Union* about the event, “Crossroads... Poway Church of Christ Takes Controversy Strewn Route,” reported the following:

On one side, several parents who decry the church as a cult, say it has stolen their children and broken up their families in the name of God. Their children, according to the parents, gave up the normal pursuits of teen-agers—sports, music, homework, dating—to devote all of their waking hours to attending the church on Twin Peaks Road and bringing in new members. (39)

Church leaders typically responded to these accusations in two ways. They either explained this “bizarre behavior” as the response of “immature” and “overzealous” members over whom they had no control (39), or they framed this “persecution” by parents as an inevitable result of the Church’s high moral standards and a sign of what the church was doing right. A church elder and elementary school principal, Ron Brumley, responded to the accusations in this same spirit:

When a group of people begins to do something out of the ordinary in terms of religious conversions and evangelism and when we begin living the way the Bible wants us to live

by teaching our children high standards of morality and following through on those lesson, you get conflict. (40)

In the event of such opposition, many Churches of Christ defended their Crossroads-trained ministers, while other congregations discharged them from leadership. In some cases, tensions within a church between those who supported Crossroads ministers and those who did not resulted in church schisms (40).

In 1981, Lucas, an evangelist for the Crossroads Church, wrote an open letter to the Churches of Christ in which he shared his hope to continue united with the other Churches of Christ despite the recent controversy (Stanback 2005: 40). That same year, at the Florida Evangelism Seminar<sup>4</sup>, he expressed a similar desire to all the Crossroad's ministers he had trained, but by this point the controversy had taken its toll (40). Four years later, in 1985, Lucas calmly resigned at the request of the elders of the Crossroads Church and moved to Thomasville, Georgia where he started a family counseling practice and joined the local Church of Christ as a member (43).

#### *The Boston Church of Christ*

After the resignation of Lucas from this active ministry within the Crossroads Church, many within the Crossroads movement, which by this time had flourished across the US, sought “a new source of inspiration and leadership” (Stanback 2005: 43). That leadership came in the person of Kip McKean, a Crossroads minister trained by Lucas, who had recently founded a thriving ministry in Boston.

McKean was baptized as a freshmen at the University of Florida in 1972 (Stanback 2005: 44). After graduating in 1975, he accepted a campus leadership position with the Heritage Chapel Church of Christ in Charleston, Illinois (46). Within a few years of McKean's arrival, the

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<sup>4</sup> Florida Evangelism Seminars, hosted by the Crossroads Church of Christ, were annual gatherings in which prominent church leaders and Church of Christ scholars gave instructional and motivational lessons and sermons.

campus ministry at Eastern Illinois State University in Charleston had reached a membership totaling over three hundred people, making it the “fastest growing campus ministry in America” (46). Even so, the Charleston Church could not escape the controversy associated with the Crossroads Movement. McKean lost his financial support as a result. A letter from the elders, whose decision it was to withdraw support, accused McKean of bringing “unbiblical practices, peculiar language, and subtle, deceitful doctrines to Charleston from the Crossroads Church at Gainesville, Florida” (47). Although McKean found funding elsewhere, his ministry continued to face opposition partly as a result of events like the Jonestown massacre, which stirred a nationwide fear of religious cults.

In May of 1979, after some persuading, McKean and his wife, Elena, moved to Lexington, Massachusetts in a final attempt to save the small church from having to merge with the Burlington Church of Christ (Stanback 2005: 48). Here McKean describes the meeting of this church which would mark the beginning of a new movement:

On June 1, 1979, history was made as thirty would-be disciples gathered on a Friday night in the living room of Bob and Pat Gempel. Our collective vision was a church where not only the college students were totally committed, but also the teens, singles, marrieds, and senior citizens. This was a radical concept not witnessed in any other church or movement in my experience to this day. (49)

McKean began the work of building this new movement, the Boston Movement, by training new ministry leaders. The leaders-in-training attended weekly Saturday morning lessons on the book of Acts and other leader’s meetings in addition to the schedule kept by everyone else in the congregation (Stanback 2005: 49). All members attended two Sunday services—one for visitors and seekers and the other for members—and devotional services on Friday nights. Wednesday night lessons on the book of Acts were an additional option which included

“memory verses and quizzes on how to study with non-Christians” (50).<sup>5</sup> In addition, whereas married members with children attended a weekly evangelistic “Bible Talk,” singles and members without small children were often expected to frequent at least two additional “Bible Talks” a week. These “Bible Talks” replaced the former “Soul Talks” in order to emphasize the biblical aspect of the discussion and avoid the “awkward 1960s ring” of “Soul Talks” (50). Membership grew exponentially. During “the first year nearly 100 people were baptized, the second year 170, the third year 218, the fourth year 322, the fifth year 406, and the sixth year 594” (50).

The Boston Church grew because of an uncompromising focus on evangelism and accountability maintained by a “highly organized leadership structure” (Stanback 2005: 51). Nearly every aspect of the church filtered through its evangelistic mission. Church leaders even continued to teach classes on how to study the Bible with non-Christians. Eventually, however, the Boston Church of Christ came under the scrutiny of “key leaders” in the Churches of Christ. Even though Chuck Lucas had resigned his leadership of the Crossroads Movement, the Boston Movement and the Churches of Christ continued to suffer strained relations (65). Not all Churches of Christ distrusted the Boston Movement, however. Many of them invited McKean to speak at special events and workshops about his evangelizing methods (66). But the Boston church’s practice of rigid discipling and of re-baptizing longstanding members of other congregations damaged its image in the eyes of the Churches of Christ beyond repair. The disagreement boiled down to questions about church structure and who qualified as a “true” disciple (70). Several leaders in the Churches of Christ disagreed with the following teachings of McKean:

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<sup>5</sup> Verses from the Bible which were central to the church’s core beliefs were chosen as verses to memorize word for word and also for use in converting non-Christians.

1. That only “disciples” could be baptized
2. That only “fully-committed” disciples could be members of the “one, true church”
3. That each city should have only one church
4. That congregations in different cities should unite in the process of discipling (70).

McKean also initiated “reconstructions,” calls to mainline churches to repentance in all of the above areas. These calls caused the official division between the Boston Movement and the Churches of Christ, acknowledged officially by January of 1988. During a reconstruction, members were asked to either “renew their commitment at baptism to be a disciple of Jesus, to be baptised as a disciple of Jesus, or to leave” (Stanback 2005: 69). Congregations which underwent this process joined the Boston Movement and executed reconstructions in other churches (71). Finally, in 1992, the Boston Church changed its name to the “International Churches of Christ,” and Dr. John Vaughn, editor of *Church Growth Today*, recorded the change, listing the movement separately from the Churches of Christ (73) in that publication. From this point on, the ICOC had little if any contact with the Churches of Christ, but inherited and maintained the bulk of its culture and doctrine. In recent years, however, leaders in the ICOC have attempted to make amends with the Churches of Christ and recognize them as “brothers and sisters in Christ.”

### *The International Churches of Christ*

The 1990s:

The next phase of the International Churches of Christ’s history saw the flowering of its radical missionary theology and its dedication to community service. As a response to the perceived lukewarm devotion of other churches, McKean authored the “Evangelization Proclamation” in 1994 on behalf of the World Sector Leaders, a leadership team of nine men who each supervised churches and leaders in different sectors of the world (Stanback 2005: 88).

In the proclamation, McKean placed before each “true” disciple the “unanswered and most ancient of Christian challenges: the completion of the Great Commission” (McKean 1994: 1). In particular, the goal was to plant a church in every city of the world with a population of at least 100,000 people by the year 2000. To meet this challenge, which the ICOC eventually did, McKean called on all ICOC churches and members to make emotional, physical, and financial sacrifices. Mission teams divided into domestic and international “plantings.” Then they were trained and sent out into various countries. A leader in the Boston Church expressed his enthusiasm about the Ministry Training Program with the following words:

The class, now about sixty of us, did reports on universities around the world. It became a room full of maps of all the major cities in all the countries on Earth. We sat in a room surrounded by maps, and each team gave their report orally. And it all came together for me. What Kip wanted to do. And I realized we could do it. As impossible as world evangelism seems to one person, if each of us took a city and did what Kip had done in the last two and a half years in Boston, then we could do it. In one lifetime. (Stanback 2005: 85)

The church embraced McKean’s vision. Accordingly, the Boston Church appointed new leaders who made a serious effort to raise up national leaders from abroad in the hopes that they would return to their homelands as missionaries (91). Most foreign missionaries trained in Boston and then were sent out from the Boston church. Many missionaries gave up well-paid positions and promising careers for their new work. Some went as far as to sell all their possessions except what they could fit into one suitcase—the “One Suitcase Challenge.” Members who stayed in Boston also sacrificed for missions work, offering generous financial support in yearly contributions to missions. Church members often went to extremes to meet their goals for contributions, going as far as selling cars, wedding rings, even houses to support world evangelization.

A devotion by members to service, community, and social justice issues emerged as more and more missionaries moved to countries whose poverty and hardship became increasingly

evident to them (Stanback 2005: 103). The church mobilized to meet these needs in impressive ways. Kip McKean called the churches to repentance and eventually all churches adopted a weekly offering for the poor. A handful of aid projects were also established internationally. For instance, Stanback writes:

“Dr. Richard Rheinbolt, a former Church of Christ medical missionary to Guatemala, accompanied the Mexico City church planting and set up a clinic among the city’s poorest citizens—the trash heap workers of Santa Fe. Dr. Mark Ottenweller left his medical practice in Atlanta, Georgia and began an AIDS clinic in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. His work caring for children stricken by AIDS became well-known. In 1995 he was highlighted on ABC’s *World News Tonight* as their “Person of the Week.” (105)

Also at this time, the organization H.O.P.E. *worldwide*, an acronym for “Helping Other People Everywhere” was established (105). Following its establishment, several projects developed around the world: an adoption agency in Atlanta, a health clinic in Philadelphia for the uninsured, soup kitchens in Moscow, a leprosy colony in New Delhi which provided four hundred and fifty families with housing, and a hospital in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (105).

In 1996, the United Nations granted H.O.P.E. *worldwide* special consultative status and by 2001, it had programs in 100 nations and a yearly budget of \$30 million (almost half of which was funded from outside of the ICOC) (Stanback 2005: 107). However, not all church leaders and members enthusiastically supported such efforts. Those who objected worried that H.O.P.E. would divert financial support from the church. Still, service efforts were managed and supported by a strictly regulated church structure which was “utilized to marshal droves of volunteers to participate in special projects” (107).

The 2000s:

In 2001, McKean, the evangelist in the Boston Church of Christ, moved to Los Angeles with his wife with the hopes of building a “super” church. In a letter written by McKean to the

churches, impelled by the realization of the “Evangelization Proclamation” in which the ICOC successfully planted churches in every city with a population of over 100,000, he wrote:

Currently, [my wife] and I have our hearts set on building a “super” church in L.A., as a model, for all the churches to grow and mature to God’s glory. I am greatly encouraged that the churches in Atlanta, Denver, London, Kingston, Manila, Miami/Ft. Lauderdale, Orlando, and Toronto each have over 1,000 on Sundays. Also, the churches in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco each have over 2,000 every Sunday and the New York church has nearly 4,000. Excitingly, Boston recently had a Sunday service of 6,500! However, we envision scores of churches of thousands, as in the book of Acts (super churches). (Stanback 2005: 108)

To this end, McKean called many of the ICOC leaders to move to Los Angeles— a move which decentralized the churches’ leadership (110). Other ICOC churches in the U.S. sent their support for a new and large staff. As the church grew and diversified, it developed new ministries in order to meet its changing needs. The Arts, Media, and Sports (AMS) ministry, Chemical Recovery (CR) ministry, and the Spiritual Recovery ministry are examples of new ministries assembled at the time.

McKean’s dream of building a “super” church in Los Angeles, however, was brought to a halt only a year later when leaders in the Los Angeles church encouraged him to resign from his role as the World Missions Evangelist and take a sabbatical from work in the ministry altogether (Stanback 2005: 121). On November 11, 2001, at a special congregational meeting of the Los Angeles church, McKean formally resigned (121). A few days prior to this, in a letter addressed to “All the Churches,” he wrote:

God through His Word, through circumstances and through true bothers has made it clear that my leadership in recent years has damaged both the Kingdom and my family. My most significant sin is arrogance...I did not respect those whose leadership gifts could have complemented my own. I was insensitive to the needs of weaker Christians and churches. I also caused some to operate from wrong motives and others to stumble because I focused more on numeric goals than on pleasing God. To my shame I allowed myself to be glorified more than calling everyone to give God all the glory...Since these are character sins, they surfaced in my family as well as in the church. Therefore, because I have so severely failed

God and His movement, I have decided to resign from my role as World Missions Evangelist and the leader of the world sector leaders. (124)

McKean's resignation aroused a time of profound chaos and doubt. ICOC members worldwide questioned not only the legitimacy of McKean's position of leadership, but the authority of all church leaders. Without a central leader to "impose uniformity," the qualities and convictions that had made the church different were in question (122). Furthermore, the "tremendous evangelistic success of the movement usually led to a self-imposed repression of doubts or questions about how things were being accomplished" (122). Two main changes took place as a result: the church stopped using statistics and reduced spending considerably.

In 2003, McKean was offered a position leading an ICOC church in Portland, Oregon. He strongly criticized the new direction of the other ICOC churches and accused them of being lukewarm. In response, a group of elders, evangelists, and teachers, wrote a letter in which they expressed that McKean had shown no repentance for his publicly confessed sins. A few years later, McKean made attempts to take back his position of leadership and to divide the ICOC. In 2006, McKean was disfellowshipped (asked to leave the ICOC and make no contact with its members).

*"The Letter"*

In February of 2003, Henry Kriete, a longtime ICOC missionary and evangelist wrote a forty-eight page letter, "Honest to God: Revolution Through Repentance and Freedom in Christ" (more commonly referred to simply as "the letter"). The letter quickly circulated among leaders and members. In it, he criticized several ICOC practices including its obsessive focus on numbers, arrogance, practice of discipling, and use of resources to build big churches (such as the super church in Los Angeles) It said:

...at this moment in our brief history, I have never been more alarmed, even ashamed of what we have become. Or more grief stricken for my own sins in helping to deepen our current problems.

Our movement is no longer moving. This is no mere “awkward teenage phase” that we constantly hear about. Virtually every high-gate we have built, every trophy that we have boasted in—as proof to ourselves and to the world—that we are “God’s Modern Day Movement,” has been effectively dismantled. The things we boasted in: our numerical growth, our retention rate, our member to fall away ratio, the faithfulness of our children, our never missing a Special Contribution, our consistent sacrificial giving, and now, perhaps most painful of all—even our unity—all these have been leveled by the hand of God...

...Brothers and sisters, as leaders in the kingdom, as servants of Christ—we have a reason to pause and deliberate, deeply. We are at a crossroads, a crossroads that will soon become a crisis if we do not act courageously. Fallen elders and evangelists; countless other leaders who have resigned or stepped down—staff and non-staff alike; the heartache, practices and teachings; serious concerns over finances; the heartache, disappointment and even disgust from the mouths of faithful but weary disciples who are now “allowed” to talk openly (some in great anger); the quarter million who have fallen away; and the enormous subculture of critics that constantly challenge us (and let’s be honest, several of them are sincere and conscientious)—all of these things and more—have damaged our integrity, deepened the mistrust between “clergy” and “laity,” and given reason for many to question our moral authority and even legitimacy. (127-128)

A number of ICOC members and leaders applauded Kriete’s letter and were even grateful for the issues it brought to the surface and the way it opened the door to further discussion. On the other hand, others felt that the letter merely revealed Kriete’s own bitterness and did not accurately represent the feelings of the entire church. Nonetheless, the letter had a profound impact on the church as a whole. Membership dropped by 30% (Taliaferro 2013: 1).<sup>6</sup> Those who remained withheld offerings and pulled back dramatically from evangelizing, discipling, and giving to the poor. Worldwide offices of authority ceased to exist. Some churches simply stopped supporting their leaders and over 50% of full-time leaders left their jobs in the ministry. Many churches held forums and meetings where members could directly address their leaders. One leader described the period following the letter as “the death of certainty” (Interview, January 4, 2015). Similarly, another said, “We were known for a very clear message and boundaries. We knew what our

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<sup>6</sup> Disciples Today, at that time, was a publication but is now a website which gathers and publishes information such as church locations, sizes, contact information, events, etc. regarding the ICOC.

mission was and what it wasn't—everything was clear. It wasn't organic or from the heart, but it was very clear" (Interview, January 4, 2015).

### *Recovery & Reconstruction*

The years following the letter were years of hardship as well as healing. Leaders felt a tension between respecting struggling and hurt members on the one hand, and on the other calling them to true discipleship and maintaining high standards. One way in which the ICOC responded to the impact of the letter was to emphasize apologetics and deep biblical study. There was a sense that part of the reason why Kriete's letter had such a radical ability to disturb members was because they were so poorly grounded in the Bible. Thus, workshops, special lessons, and certificate programs such as the Athens Institute of Ministry (A.I.M) provided in-depth biblical study as a way to strengthen members' convictions and forge unity among the church. Furthermore, whereas most leaders had had no formal training in ministry<sup>7</sup>, many returned to school and attended seminary or divinity school to study theology and religion.

In 2006, the ICOC underwent a restructuring of its church government. Steve Staten, an evangelist and teacher, along with a coalition of nine other church leaders drafted what was first known as the "Cooperation Plan" and then later named the "Plan for United Cooperation." In the aftermath of Kriete's letter and the establishment of a new church by McKean, the proposal was first and foremost an attempt by leaders to both re-establish church unity and define its boundaries. To this end, its purpose was to "provide a structure for Regional and International cooperation among our family of churches around the world" (ICOC Cooperation Service Team Chairmen 2009: 1).

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<sup>7</sup> The Boston Movement emphasized and prioritized apprenticeship training as opposed to formal theological training.

The document outlined matters of importance for the churches and set up a new democratic system of governance including delegates and committees. For most churches, the proposal was not a controversial one. But for 25% of the churches, especially those in the southeastern U.S. who had strong roots in the Mainline churches of Christ, the proposal signified an excessive use of church authority. It was not the content of the proposal that was controversial, but rather the very fact of having a document at all in a church that claimed to have no creeds and would not affirm anything other than Bible. While there was no penalty for not “signing” the document, leaders who refused could not serve as delegates or committee members, and would not be invited to speak at church conferences. In an interview, one church leader said of the proposal, “I look at what Jesus did and I don’t see a lot of committees” (Interview, August 15, 2014). Eventually the controversy died out and the proposal became a non-issue. Presently, 570 churches in 138 countries have pledged their commitment to the proposal (Taliaferro 2013: 1).

#### 2010-Present:

In the 2010s, as the church continued to heal and reinvent itself, it finally began to experience a growth in membership. Between 2007-2013, the church grew by 14% and in 2012, during a World Discipleship Summit (WDS) in San Antonio, Texas, 17,800 people from ninety-six nations were in attendance (Lamb 2012: 1). The conference, “The Mountain of the Lord,” marked a defining moment for the movement and symbolized a rededication of the church to unity, discipleship, teaching, and the Great Commission. In an opinion piece posted on the church’s news site entitled “Has a New Era Begun in the International churches of Christ?,” Mike Taliaferro, organizer of the WDS, says:

Honestly, I have never been more proud to be a part of the ICOC. We always said that if we got off track, we would examine the Bible, correct our mistakes, and recommit ourselves to the mission. I believe that is exactly what has happened. So has a new era begun? Only time will tell, but it seems that “the storm is passing over.” Indeed, the clean up may be finished as well. Over the last few years, the climate has changed from one of looking backward to looking forward. Instead of correcting old mistakes, we are now focused on scaling new heights... In a word, we are leaving the distrust and reflection of the last decade behind, and moving into an era of growth and progress for God. (Taliaferro 2013: 2)

Also at the conference each geographic region announced a series of 2020 Vision Plans for missions. Each region produced a video outlining its own 2020 Vision Plan, including goals for new church plantings, campus ministry, youth & family ministry, academic training, partnerships with other churches, and service to the poor.

This positive outlook is shared by most and is not confined to the United States. The spirit of cooperation is evident as geographic representatives meet annually to discuss common themes and to share experiences, best practices, and even resources. Prominent leaders are making a concerted effort to eschew past errors and promote collaboration rather than hierarchy in the leadership structure. Regional and international conferences, social media, a significant internet presence, and an emphasis on the relationships among the top leaders are all seen as important ways to foster increased harmony among the churches.

Yet despite the ICOC’s restored hope and unity, there remains a groundswell of discontent. Most recently in the U.S., disagreements between leaders and members about church structure and culture have challenged its unity. One reason for this is that younger generations of Christians raised in the ICOC are now coming into leadership positions and disputing several aspects of church doctrine and practice. These second generation leaders appear to be less concerned with the ICOC “brand”—they wish to try different ways to conduct their worship services, are willing to experiment with uses of social media, and are less tied to having “Church of Christ” in their official name, preferring names such as “Turning Point” or “Bridge.” Issues

such as how to think about homosexuality and the role of women highlight the generational divide. Vestiges of the past hierarchical structure are more evident in some parts of the world than others, and their accompanying legalism is a source of controversy. In addition, a movement in favor of house churches has gained momentum, causing a rift in some churches between leaders and members who support it and others who do not. And while the numerical growth is slowly on the increase, some fear the slow growth is indicative of the movement's sluggish response to a changing societal reality. Thus, it remains to be seen what direction the ICOC will take, but it is clear that its future is dependent on an awareness of these issues.

### **III. History & Ethnography of the Santa Marina Church of Christ**

#### *Outline*

In what follows, I introduce the history, persons, church groups, themes, and methods of my ethnography of the Santa Marina Church of Christ. Initially I was interested in examining the extent to which congregants distinguished between or merged the “religious” and the “political” in their lives and the role of church theology and preaching in determining congregants' answers to this question. As my work evolved, however, I focused not only on understanding how congregants defined the “religious” and “political,” but also on the ways in which these categories worked in their lives. McCutcheon's contention that the category of “religion” is all about politics is too wed to a limited notion of the “political,” i.e. interactions with the state. But what I want to look at are dynamics of power across a broader spectrum of activities, not just in relation to the state but in relation to everyday life and the concerns they bring into the church which influence how power is negotiated. Contestations over the spiritual capital and image of leaders, church structure, and the practice of discipling are all examples of ways in which power

is exercised as well as resisted. Given this approach to the power dynamics in congregants' everyday lives, I argue a broader definition of politics is needed.

I begin with a history of the Santa Marina Church in Brazil. Next, I outline my research methods as well as the structure of the church and its leadership, with particular emphasis on internal church conflicts. This will include personal profiles of church leaders and members. Throughout each of these sections, I will also explore central themes such as the spiritual battle and spiritual capital. Additionally I will discuss church rituals and services and the power dynamics inherent to them. In so doing, I hope to show the slipperiness of these categories and the ways in which all politics is local.

*History of the Santa Marina Church of Christ*

1987-1992:

The Santa Marina International Church of Christ, the first ICOC church planted in Brazil, had its first official service on May 22, 1987 in Santa Marina. Six months before, however, a “team” of fifteen U.S. disciples led by a young married couple, moved to Santa Marina in order to learn Brazilian Portuguese. They met in a Methodist church in a central location in Santa Marina. In its first year, the young church had 105 baptisms, an accomplishment made possible by the mostly young married and single members of the congregation. Like the ICOC movement in the U.S., the Santa Marina church's evangelistic drive focused primarily on campus ministries, specifically at the Universidade da Bandeira (UB). In December of 1998, a year after the church planting, the couple who had planted the church moved to another mission field in Africa. My parents, John and Barbara Porter, moved from Mexico to become the lead ICOC evangelists in Santa Marina. Between 1989-1992, the Santa Marina church grew to 700 members. It then planted a church in another prominent city in Brazil.

Sister churches in the U.S. often supported church plantings, but at other times, church members in Brazil raised the necessary funds. Similarly to efforts in the U.S., fundraising occurred in a variety of ways, some more extreme than others. Leaders set high standards for giving, usually asking for donations of around ten to fifteen percent of a members income. To meet these goals, Bible talk groups or church regions organized to have garage sales, perform in the streets, host fundraising events, move to cheaper neighborhoods, or even sell their homes and cars. Leaders also gave generously.

Inspired by the commitment to evangelize the whole world, nearly every church event served an evangelistic purpose. Bible talks, devotionals, individual Bible studies, retreats, as well as cultural, artistic, and sporting events became the primary focus of the church as means for cultivating church unity and spreading the gospel. It was not unusual for members to meet nearly every day to pray, share a meal, or simply spend time together. Other evangelistic methods were less traditional. For example, for a special service in 1989, called “Bring Your Neighbor Day,” the entire church marched down a main street in the center of Santa Marina, equivalent to Times Square in New York City, carrying a banner and singing songs. At the end of the march, they kneeled and prayed in the street before inviting people in the street to church and sharing about Jesus. Despite a membership of only 150 in the church, 920 visitors participated in the event. On other occasions, members sang Beatles songs in the street or did aerobics to attract attention from strangers whom they hoped to reach.

Not all church members showed the same devotion to evangelism, however. Disciples who failed to meet the leaders’ standards for commitment were referred to as “weak” and “uncommitted.” In response, the leadership launched a period of “reconstruction” during which “fringe” members were “disciplined” and called to repentance. In some cases, noncompliant

members were asked to leave and were considered “fallaways,” disciples who had abandoned God. Leaders asked active members to avoid contact with those whom they had asked to leave. “Reconstructions” such as these were not uncommon in the ICOC and would lay the foundation for critiques in Brazil of the church as legalistic and abusive in the years to come.

1993-2002:

In 1993, my parents left Brazil to seek medical treatment for my brother and me who at the time were very sick. Sergio and Vilma da Silva, a couple who were converted as campus students, stepped in as leaders. Between 1993 and 1998, the church continued to grow and by 1998 when my parents returned, membership had reached 1,900 across four regions and eleven sectors. But this number came close to doubling when membership reached over 3,400 members in 2002. After a visit to Santa Marina, Kip McKean was so impressed with the church’s growth, he expressed to the leaders his desire that it be the largest church in the ICOC movement. According to one leader, McKean’s encouragement came with an enormous pressure, and even after goals were met, McKean was known for saying, “If you did it once you can do it again.”

As numbers grew, the church’s focus shifted. Sunday services became more important as membership not only increased but became more diverse. Bible talks continued but were less important as an evangelistic tool. Instead, people used other forms of “cold contact” evangelism and relied less on “friendship evangelism,” a form of evangelism in which members reach out to people with which they have existing relationships. Some examples of “cold contact” evangelism included sharing with strangers at shopping malls, at checkout lines, or on the bus. One reason for this change was that it was easier to meet large numbers of people through “cold contact” evangelism and it encouraged members to be “bold.” A by-product of this method of evangelism

was significant growth because people met this way were often easier to convert than friends or family.

The church expected everyone to evangelize and there was a lot of accountability to ensure that members did. Evangelism was a highly ordered and monitored system—there were expectations and goals, statistics and records. It was not uncommon for a member to receive a call every day asking for updates on how many people they had invited to church that day, how many people with whom they were studying the Bible, and how many studies they had scheduled that week. Churches sprouted in other major cities around the country. Couples known as “region leaders” led each church region and appointed campus and Bible talk leaders. By this time, Brazilians had mostly replaced Americans in leadership positions and most leaders from the original “team” had left to plant other churches in other countries. Opposition during this period was minimal and came mostly from family members angry about a relative’s conversion; in fact, several lead evangelists even received death threats from disgruntled family members of recent converts.

Also at this time, under the influence of the work of H.O.P.E. Worldwide, ICOC churches in Brazil increasingly focused on serving the poor and their local communities. In 1996, during an event hosted by the church, thousands donated blood in the largest blood donation in the history of Santa Marina. Another project taught several hundred church members and non-members to read and write. One sector in particular was active in serving a nearby *favela* or slum where 100,000 people lived. In conjunction with a local hospital, church members hosted lessons on hygiene and safety, offered free dental care and tutoring, donated food, and built houses. In general, the church served only the poor in the community and the leaders were taught that helping poor people in the church could poison their motives. And ultimately the church taught

that a disciple's job was not to eradicate poverty, but to save souls. For the U.S. leaders in Brazil, the poverty they encountered was shocking and overwhelming. But in contrast the Brazilians in leadership were surprisingly indifferent to poverty. At the same time, almost all leaders (Brazilian and American) had come from upper and middle class families and had given up lucrative positions in order to lead in the church—while they preached anti-consumerism and anti-materialism, they simply did not understand how poor many church members actually were. ICOC leaders observed other churches and groups that preached the prosperity gospel and did not want to make promises they could not keep. In the meantime, as community projects thrived outside the church, poor members within the church felt incredibly overlooked.

An investment in youth & family ministries, ministries devoted to families and the second generation of young members also grew as older members matured and began to build families. A resurgence of campus ministry also took place, and Sergio and Vilma da Silva were appointed as campus ministry leaders. Sector Itamara, a sector devoted specifically to professionals, artists, and families (similar to the A.M.S. ministry in Los Angeles) began around this time in the wealthy neighborhood of Itamara. To date it is the most controversial sector of the church in Santa Marina because of its socio-economic status. Members of this sector were mostly middle class Brazilians: business owners, lawyers, musicians, artists, and athletes. But most members of other church sectors were among the working class in Santa Marina, and resented the church's financial investment in that region and the class divisions it perpetuated within the church. For this reason, in 2003, spurred on by Henry Kriete's controversial letter, church members demanded that Sector Itamara disband. Some moved to other sectors of the church while others left for other churches altogether or even established their own churches. Some abandoned the Christian faith.

Shortly before Sector Itamara disbanded, Kriete's letter spread within the movement criticizing the ICOC for its legalism, abusive discipling, and financial mismanagement. In particular, Kriete criticized the practice of discipling which he found coercive and controlling. Many members agreed. They felt that leaders had taken advantage of and manipulated them into sacrificing both their time and money for the good of the church and even submitting themselves wholeheartedly to the advice of leaders and "disciplers." Nearly every church in the movement was shaken by the letter, but the largest churches in Los Angeles, New York City, Manila, Santa Marina, and London were hit the hardest. Following the spirit of the letter, many congregants in Santa Marina criticized the salary and lifestyle of church leaders, to which most church members could not relate. Leaders typically lived in nicer neighborhoods, could afford private educations for their children, and owned cars. Indeed, many church leaders came from wealthier backgrounds. They had been converted at UB and pursued successful professional careers before becoming church leaders. Great economic disparities exacerbated such church conflicts, as congregants accused leaders of owning three Mercedes, or even submarines, although no evidence ever emerged to support these accusations.

As a result of the controversy, church membership dropped from 3,400 to 1,300 members and church offerings dramatically decreased. Most staff members and leaders were either fired or resigned, and those who remained received significant salary cuts of nearly sixty percent. Nearly all women in leadership lost their jobs since the church could no longer afford to pay for minister's wives. To make matters worse, in 2003, just weeks before the letter reached the church members in Santa Marina, my parents left Brazil and moved to Florida, a decision that had been made by the Porters many months prior. At their going away party, over 3,000 were in attendance, but after the letter spread, the churches in Brazil accused them of abandoning the

church in a time of crisis. In 2005, four leaders, Aurelio Paiva, Vitor Selva, Antonio Teixeira, and Samuel Goncalves attempted to centralize and unify church leadership, but their efforts to stabilize the church backfired as members in several regions rejected their leadership and founded independent churches.

2010-Present:

In 2010, the ICOC as a whole, worldwide, experienced a steady revival. Its churches saw growth for the first time in years, partly as a result of the second generation who became disciples and the renewal of the campus and youth ministries. Community outreach and evangelism again became expectations of the church, although much less so than before and without the same degree of accountability. Another reason for growth was the maturity of the church's older members who had experienced its history and hoped to avoid repeating it. During the first fifteen years of growth, most ICOC members had been under the age of thirty-five, but now the church was more generationally diverse. The churches in Brazil, however, continued to struggle. They had felt the impact of the Kriete letter after the United States had and had fewer resources to recuperate after losing most of their funding from US churches.

The church in Santa Marina, for example, lacked a central leader, and the four regional leaders, split their time among eight regions. The church therefore reorganized as it reevaluated its priorities. But the leadership that remained had neither the experience nor the trust of the church necessary for a prompt recovery. Oromilo, one of the regions I studied, for example, did not trust its leader, Sergio da Silva, so the church forced him to resign.<sup>8</sup> But once the church hired Samuel Goncalves as da Silva's replacement, the church split, and several members left for another region. Disagreement and bitterness among members over the salaries of leaders and the church's structure in general remains, but by the time I arrived in Brazil, most members were

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<sup>8</sup> I do not have sufficient information regarding why he was asked to resign.

tired of dwelling in the past and were hopeful about the future of the church. In spite of the mistakes that had been made and acknowledged by leaders, the members who have remained are for the most part committed to the church and to persevering through its challenges. They firmly believe that the church teaches biblical truth which includes that the church will face times of turmoil. Furthermore, congregants maintain that they have experienced what they consider to be the transformational power of God in their lives.

### *Ethnography*

The Santa Marina Church of Christ presently has around 1,400 members throughout eleven regions. For the purpose of this study, I conducted fieldwork in only two of the eleven regions—Vila Osvaldo and Omorilo (most regions are named after the neighborhood in which the group meets). I selected these two regions for my study for several reasons. For one, Omorilo is the oldest region, and the region with whose members I am most familiar. Second, Omorilo's campus ministry provided both unique perspectives for my study and a group of people whose schedule was more flexible and conducive for participant observation. I therefore spent the majority of my time with the church in Omorilo and its campus ministry. Third, I selected Omorilo because at the time Edmilson, the church's new leader, was rotating around the churches but happened to be preaching there. Lastly, I selected Vila Osvaldo, at the recommendation of Leticia, Edmilson's wife, who thought it would be an interesting contrast to Omorilo.

### *Regiao Omorilo*

Omorilo is one of the oldest regions of the church, and is located in the neighborhood Omorilo, near Universidade da Bandeira (UB). In fact, Omorilo began as a campus ministry for students at UB where most of the current leaders were converted in the 1990s. It has around 150

members divided into several ministries: marrieds, singles, campus students, teens, and children. During my time there, Omorilo was led by Samuel and Marinalva Goncalves, though Edmilson was preaching. Samuel was also overseeing the campus ministry with the help of a paid intern, Washington. Samuel and Marinalva have since stepped down as paid ministry leaders and are pursuing secular jobs; they have been temporarily replaced by Edmilson and Leticia who oversee the church in Santa Marina.

Within Santa Marina, Omorilo has the reputation of being an elite church; one member commented that if you listed the church regions in order of their wealth, Omorilo would be at the top. One reason for this is its location—Omorilo is a wealthier neighborhood in close proximity to other wealthy neighborhoods where many congregants live. Another reason is its geographic proximity to UB, one of the most elite schools in South America. For this reason, the campus ministry of UB worships in the Omorilo sector. In general, members of Omorilo are middle-class (which makes them wealthier than most other church members), well-educated, and more established within ICOC networks. When disciples from the U.S. visit Santa Marina, Omorilo is the most common region they visit. Congregants in Omorilo are also more likely to attend international conferences or participate in international exchange programs such as the “GO Program,” which send interns (usually English-speaking) from Brazil to the U.S. or vice-versa.<sup>9</sup> My observation of Omorilo confirmed my initial suspicions that the church would reflect, at least to some degree, the power struggles occurring concurrently in the nation. I also observed a correlation between Omorilo’s social and economic status and its members feeling entitled to be more vocal in their opinions and critical of their leadership.

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<sup>9</sup> The ICOC sponsors programs which encourage young people to train as missionaries or church leaders in foreign countries (eg. the GO Program). Because many UB students speak English, they are candidates for these programs. Moreover, H.O.P.E. Worldwide sponsors programs called Youth Corps in which young people spend time serving the poor in other countries. Because more members of Omorilo speak English than in other regions, the Youth Corps met for church services there.

*Regiao Vila Osvaldo*

Vila Osvaldo is one of the newest regions in the Santa Marina church, located in the neighborhood of Vila Osvaldo. It has around fifty members, the majority of whom are in the singles ministry. Though Vila Osvaldo is a middle-class neighborhood, many of the church's congregants travel from poorer neighborhoods by bus to attend church. These trips can take hours and are particularly risky for women because of the well-documented occurrence of criminal assaults in urban centers in Brazil. On average its members are working-class, less connected to leaders in the ICOC, and older than members of Omorilo. One member described the region as simple but closely knit, like family. Vila Osvaldo was noticeably warmer and friendlier than Omorilo. Members spent more time together during special events and parties hosted by the church. This was possibly the case because several of the members and their families came from broken homes and/or homes in which one parent was not a member of the church and as a result relied more on the relationships within the church. Furthermore, from what I observed, members of Vila Osvaldo faced different kinds of concerns and struggles than those in Omorilo (or perhaps were more open about their struggles than the members of Omorilo). In Omorilo, the members I spent time with were mostly concerned with getting into college, issues surrounding dating members outside of the church, or a lack of attendance at church events. But in Vila Osvaldo, I noticed that members were more concerned with drug abuse, members' children getting pregnant, and leaving the church.

Vila Osvaldo is led by Antonio and his wife Sara (who became a paid staff member while I was there). Antonio also works part-time as a professional. He is deeply respected in the Santa Marina church, but not especially popular. More than any other leader, Antonio preached about the spiritual battle and was most aware of the ongoing political situation in Brazil. His sermons

were also more interactive and inclusive of the voices of members. Interestingly, in spite of Antonio's heightened awareness of and preaching about Brazil's unstable economic and social condition, members of Vila Osvaldo demonstrated less concern about this than their wealthier counterparts in Omorilo. They seemed to make no separation between the political and the religious, whereas the Omorilo church did. Perhaps differentiating between these domains is a marker of class position.

### *Ethnographic Methods*

Given that my time in Brazil was constrained to three months, my research represents a provisional interaction with the church focused primarily on perceptions of authority garnered from interviews and participant observation. Most members were enthusiastic about speaking with me and being interviewed. I formally interviewed around fifteen members, seven from Vila Osvaldo and eight from Omorilo. I selected participants based on members who interested me and based on an attempt to gather a variety of opinions. Food was an important component during interviews. At each one, I was invited to enjoy a meal while I conducted the interview. Such is the nature of Brazilian hospitality. In addition, on several occasions, I met with participants for an interview only to find that they had other plans for their time with me. Often they wanted to have fun or were interested in hearing my opinion about the church or the World Cup more than they were interested in being interviewed.

I have known many of the members I interviewed for my entire life but have maintained very little contact with them. Other members I interviewed I met during my trip. As a result of my relationship with the church, members were eager to speak with me and include me in their daily lives. Even so, I felt that nearly all of my respondents held back in their responses to interview questions, and in particular to those related to leaders in the church and internal church

conflicts. I had to reassure participants that leaders would not have access to the identity of the interviewees and that interviewees' names would not be used. Given the church's history with discipling, their hesitation to speak openly did not surprise me. During interviews participants expressed an unwillingness to "gossip" or complain about the church or leadership as well as confusion about the relevance of the questions to my study.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, I found participant observation to be my most useful method of ethnographic research.

During my time with the church, I attended Sunday church services, midweek services, devotionals, Bible studies, discipling times, and special church events over the course of three months. I also spent time with church members as they watched the World Cup, shopped, and worked. Sermons and meetings centered around themes of healing, repentance, renewal, and the spiritual battle. I even protested in public with one member against the rising cost of public transportation because of the World Cup. Throughout my time in both regions, I observed almost no interaction of church members with non-members. Even at gatherings outside of church or church organized activities, non-members were noticeably absent. Presumably this was in large part due to the fact that my interactions with members were limited, but it was nonetheless clear that the church was detached and isolated from its surrounding community and consumed with its own members, history, and dissension. In interviews, participants presented a unified front doctrinally, but what I observed was far from a unified group. Rather, I found a group of people struggling to manage their own cohesion and values and to construct a discourse in which to discuss these matters. This is the case, I think, because issues involved with power and unity, not doctrine—that is, political issues, not "religious" ones per se—caused most of their internal conflicts.

#### *Governance in the ICOC*

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<sup>10</sup> My status within the church both enabled and restricted access to the opinions of church members.

The Santa Marina Church of Christ (and most ICOC churches) are governed by a rigid order of leadership. In the early 2000s, the image of leadership, of leaders, and the nature of their relationship to other leaders and church members drastically changed as a result of discontent with leaders' overly controlling and authoritative style. Control over ICOC churches thus shifted from Kip McKean and other geographic sector leaders into the hands of local ministers over their own churches.

In particular in Santa Marina, many leaders completely lost the trust of their churches. Before this, church leadership went largely unquestioned, and virtually no area of a congregants' lives was exempt from a leader's advice or scrutiny. This was the case for several reasons. One reason for the absolute authority of leaders was the perceived need to impose unity on and define the boundaries of the church. Church identity was defined by a total commitment to evangelism, to the practice of discipling, and to the doctrine that salvation was only possible through adult baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The role of leaders therefore, was to enforce these practices and beliefs and hold members accountable to them. That the ICOC was so united on these issues, however superficially, was essential to their evangelistic success and incredible growth. Members lacked the ability to criticize leadership and so leadership went unquestioned. But now, it seems people in leadership are floundering to regain their authority.

The difficulty in implementing such a narrow vision of unity was that it fostered an impatience for and distrust of difference, be it gendered, cultural, or doctrinal. In other words, the leadership taught that instead of embracing differences, differences should be overcome by Christ. Leaders failed to recognize how they were unavoidably imposing their own culture and doctrines, presenting it as "wise" or "biblical." Those whose class, gendered, and cultural differences were overlooked by leadership and deemed insignificant "in Christ" felt neglected,

unimportant, even spiritually weak. Eventually, many of them became bitter toward their leaders, exacerbating pre-existing class conflicts in the church.

Beyond appeals to spiritual authority, the main rationalization for the controlling and authoritative style of leaders was the concept of the “spiritual battle.” Unity was not only seen as healthy for the church but necessary as a defense against Satan. The belief that the church was always under attack and that “baby Christians” or “weak Christians” were especially vulnerable to “falling into sin” or “falling away” (leaving the church) enforced the importance of obeying leaders whose advice would, they said, protect you in the battle. Angry family and friends and even protesters merely fueled the sense that the church was under attack. If a member challenged a leader at any level, they ran the risk of being considered unwise and hard-hearted or divisive and uncommitted. Since then, the church has tried to move from being “leader-led” to “spirit-led.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, in many cases, the loss of trust in leaders resulted from class divisions, between them and church members, rather than doctrinal or spiritual disagreements. Thus at the local church level, offices of leadership did not change as much as did the *image* of leaders and their authority over and relationship *to* lay members did. This is critical because the *image* of leadership is really all there is; you cannot separate the image from the structure of which leadership is a part. Authority is established and maintained through image, but it is also maintained by the inertia of the structure. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between positions of authority and their image. Leaders remain in positions of authority, yet members view them differently. And while they hold positions of leadership, they are not always

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<sup>11</sup> Kip McKean emphasized the notion that leaders were responsible for the spiritual health of church members. Leaders felt compelled to be deeply involved with members' personal lives because they were answering to God for the members in their care.

recognized as leaders. At the local level of ICOC churches in Brazil, it is the ability to obtain spiritual capital and maintain its image which authorizes and legitimizes authority.

### *Requirements for Leadership*

Leaders are hired by a church council consisting of elected church members who work together with other church leaders to appoint new ministry staff. Presently, positions of leadership in the ICOC are organized much like most evangelical churches in the U.S. Offices of leadership include but are not limited to lead evangelist, women's ministry leader, deacon, elder, church council, Bible talk leader, and discipler. I will devote most of my time to lead evangelists in the church.

Locally, the lead evangelist holds the highest level of authority and is ultimately paid to deliver a product: church health and numerical growth.<sup>12</sup> His role includes preaching on Sunday, leading staff meetings, training and discipling other leaders, and ministering to congregants' needs. Other responsibilities might include serving as a church delegate on an international church committee such as Youth & Family Ministry.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, leaders have a crucial role in determining and maintaining the direction, doctrine, and boundaries of a church community. But given the instability of the Santa Marina church and its leaders, its direction, doctrine, and boundaries were both unclear and highly contested during my stay. This is most evident in the church's recent implementation of house churches, an attempt to create an egalitarian and more sustainable style of worship.

### *Gender*

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<sup>12</sup> This would not be the case if the church had official elders, but in Santa Marina, there are none.

<sup>13</sup> The ICOC has international committees to address, in a unified manner, specific needs in the churches world-wide. Some of these committees are "Teachers" (to address Bible education), "Singles" (to address relational and spiritual needs of singles), "Campus" (to address events designed to train, motivate and unite college students), etc.

There are specific requirements for leadership in the ICOC, the most important of which is male gender. This is true for all ICOC churches, and applies as well to leadership in the home and even in dating or peer relationships. Only men can lead churches, households, relationships, prayer, worship, or preach and teach during meetings. Women may only lead other women, and most women enter leadership only through their relationship to their husbands. In discipling relationships, women can only disciple other women, and men can only disciple men.<sup>14</sup> Often, especially in poorer or smaller churches, women leaders, both single and married, are either not paid or work part-time for the church. Women are also the most dispensable leaders as they are usually the first to be let go if a church must minimize its number of full-time staff. It is rare that single women hold leadership positions, and in these cases they usually lead with other single men and in positions of little formal authority over the church.

There is an emergent contestation, however, about what constitutes authority. While women in leadership positions may hold a certain prestige or respect, they have little institutionalized authority. Popularity and respect, however, are forms of power that women do have. Ironically, as was the case in Brazil, women in leadership (evangelists' wives) were criticized for being paid to be stay-at-home moms at the same time that they were not allowed by the church to truly exercise any meaningful authority or responsibility. In Santa Marina, since 2003, most evangelists' wives were not paid staff members. It was not until I arrived there that Edmilson, the newly appointed lead evangelist of the Santa Marina church, made a controversial announcement that women in the ministry (wives of current region leaders) would begin to receive a salary. He was careful to reaffirm that the "biblical" authority of men as the head of the

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<sup>14</sup> The ICOC teaches that, before God, men and women are equal, but they fulfill different roles in the church and in society. In addition, because discipling relationships are intended to be intimate, and in order ostensibly to protect sexual purity—the church seems to ignore the existence of lesbian and gay members—men have discipling relationships with men and women have discipling relationships with women.

women would remain, but that women are necessary in leadership as helpers to their husbands. The church in Omorilo responded quite awkwardly to this news. I later found out that many of them opposed the idea of paying women as full-time ministry leaders, some of these women were either paid or held positions of authority without really having to work.

### *Marinalva*

One of these women, Marinalva, is the wife of Omorilo's leader, Samuel, and was one of the most controversial and disliked figures in leadership. She and her husband Samuel have been leading in Omorilo for the past eight years. Samuel was converted as a campus student in Santa Marina and Marinalva was converted as a single professional. Both have worked in ministry for over fifteen years. They have two children and live near Itamara, a wealthy neighborhood in Santa Marina. Marinalva has the reputation of being cold, distant, consumed with her children, and even mentally unstable. In fact several members of Vila Osvaldo claim to have left Omorilo after Marinalva made it clear to them they were no longer welcome there. Marinalva and Samuel's apartment was one of the nicest I visited among both church members' and leaders' homes and has been a source of controversy in the church. Even though the apartment was bought by Marinalva's mother, a fact few members seemed to know, it is the image of her as snobby and remote that caused members to distrust her. Even I sensed that she *wanted* to be viewed as wealthier and better than other church members. But the controversy surrounding Marinalva and Samuel represents broader class struggles and tensions within the church between leaders and lay members over the distribution of church resources as well as spiritual authority and labor. I will further explore these themes later in this section.

My encounters with Marinalva were limited but generally positive. Unfortunately, she refused to be interviewed. Although she had a position of authority as an evangelist's wife, members did not recognize her as a leader because of her virtually nonexistent spiritual capital.

### *Sara*

On the other hand, in Vila Osvaldo, the news that Sara (the wife of Vila Osvaldo's leader, Antonio) would be returning as a women's ministry leader was celebrated by congregants. In fact, this made Sara the only full-time woman in the ministry. Sara is warm, funny, giving, and incredibly popular in Santa Marina. Prior to her re-appointment, Sara had been a full-time paid women's ministry leader for several years before having to step down to work in her profession. She and her husband, Antonio, live with her mother about an hour away from the city of Santa Marina. Despite living so far away, Sara maintains a connection with Vila Osvaldo. Toward the end of my time in Santa Marina, Sara and Antonio were looking for apartments closer to the city so that they could be more available to the church. Whereas some in Omorilo were resentful of hiring Marinalva, members of Vila Osvaldo were grateful for their new leader, especially since her hiring is seen as a positive sign of growth and a return to the stability of leadership in the church.

### *Class*

When U.S. missionaries first planted the church in Santa Marina, it was a campus ministry. Nearly all evangelistic efforts, therefore, took place at UB and other nearby campuses. Much of the church's membership was comprised of elite campus students who were trained for leadership positions, many of whom did become leaders in the church. Campus church models worked well in the U.S. where higher education is more widely available across class lines and the majority of church members hold college degrees. In Brazil, this was not the case—college is

for the elite and for the middle class (who make up a very small percentage of the population). Over the years, as the church grew and expanded, its membership became more diverse and representative of the Brazilian population.

Missionaries responsible for training new leaders considered college graduates to be the most qualified for leading, however, and invested primarily in them. These new leaders left lucrative careers and sacrificed in order to remain in the church hierarchy, but even so they remained in financially privileged positions, and not everyone in the church equally appreciated their sacrifices. It was the tithes of church members (most of whom were working class) that made it possible for the church to offer leaders salaries competitive with the jobs they had left behind; this did not bode well with members who felt they were the ones sacrificing to maintain a staff that made more money than they did. Additionally, church leadership hoped that well-educated and privileged leaders could be used as a tool to attract other middle and upper-class Brazilians to the church.

Class struggles related to campus ministry and leadership are an ongoing debate in the church. After the Kriete letter, almost all ICOC churches ceased to invest in campus ministry and campus ministers. In the mid-2000s, however, there was a resurgence of campus ministry in the U.S. churches and across the world. Churches began to reinvest in campus outreach and in the future generation of church leaders. In Santa Marina, most members appeared to support rebuilding their campus ministries, but others resented investing in a ministry the benefits of which they would not receive unless their children went to college—an unlikely prospect for most members.

In my time with Omorilo, I observed class conflict inside as well as around the campus ministry. It was especially evident in the class dynamics similar to those at the beginning of the

movement and reflected in the raising of leaders. A main way in which students are trained for the ministry is through participation in internships and conferences. Opportunities such as these often require that students speak English and can afford to travel (usually to the U.S.) or take time off from school or work (again, usually to the U.S.). Accordingly, members who cannot afford such opportunities or who do not have access to church networks for funding never access these opportunities. This is also true also for everyday meetings among campus students. One group of students regularly invited me, for example, to meals after church; but the restaurants they picked were almost always too expensive for other campus students to afford. More than one student perceived this as an intentional move to keep poorer students from spending time with the group.

On a local level class is critical to the ways in which commitment to the church is perceived. In the past, lay members have critiqued leadership both for having excessive expectations of them and pressuring them to prove their commitment to the church in what they considered to be unreasonable ways. At most church meetings, leaders called members to rededicate themselves to evangelism, discipling, and Bible study—church leaders want to inspire commitment, but their authority is undermined by members who do not feel that leaders relate to their daily struggles as working class people. Even though most leaders in the church presently work part-time jobs to supplement their income, many of them have spent most of their careers working exclusively in the ministry. There is a sense, then, that leaders are *paid* to be Christians but maintain the *same* high expectations for members who have secular jobs.

### *Spiritual Capital*

The second most important requirement for leadership in the ICOC is spiritual capital. Spiritual capital is not a term used by the ICOC, but it is how I will describe a typology of

different categories that distinguish certain people from others as being more “spiritual” or in line with ICOC principles. In fact, the church would not even recognize that there exists such a typology. If anything, members use kinship terms such as “brother” and “sister” which de-emphasize and disguise a spiritual hierarchy. Some of these categories, in order of spiritually weak to spiritually strong, are: fall away (someone who has left the church and/or God); weak disciple; member in good standing; strong disciple; and faithful disciple. Spiritual capital is not about doctrine but rather reflects a manner in which power is negotiated and legitimized. It is not that congregants’ doctrine is inconsequential to spiritual capital, but it is far from the most important criterion. Instead, other criteria such as a person’s church attendance, family, gender, time in the church, proximity to leaders, conformity to church culture, knowledge of scripture, fruitfulness, and popularity work together to determine a person’s spiritual capital.

But what *counts* as spiritual capital as well as what *kinds* of spiritual capital count are subjects of debate rumbling just beneath the surface because there is no agreed upon vocabulary or discourse to critique leadership. The leaders I observed, Antonio, Edmilson, and Samuel, represent three different structural positions within the church and provide a lens through which to analyze debates about spiritual capital. The politics of church leadership are extremely personal and determined by perceptions of an individual’s spiritual capital both in church settings and beyond. There is also therefore a charismatic dimension determined by how a leader operates beyond the networks that define his or her power. Locally, churches expect and desire different things from their leaders and consequently hold different standards of what constitutes legitimate spiritual capital.

*Edmilson*

When I arrived in Santa Marina, Edmilson Fonseca had recently been appointed Lead Evangelist of the Santa Marina Church of Christ. Edmilson moved from a smaller city in Brazil with his wife Leticia to lead the church in Santa Marina. He is friendly, eloquent, smart, playful, but serious and intent in his new position. He has a high paying job working for the government, but was able to negotiate working from home so that he could also serve as the Lead Evangelist. He is not paid a salary by the church but does receive a living stipend. Unlike most of the church's members, Edmilson is well-educated, fluent in English, and middle-class.

His wife, Leticia, works as an unpaid Women's Ministry leader. Edmilson and Leticia have two young children. Like Samuel and Marinalva, they live in Itamara, a wealthy neighborhood a few blocks from the building in which I was raised. Their children attend private school, they own a modest car, and they have a maid who cooks and cleans for them. While sending your children to private school and having a maid is common even among the middle class of Brazil, the middle class make up small percentage of the population and of the church. Although Edmilson and Leticia's lifestyle is by no means extravagant, it looks very little like that of most Brazilians.

Before Edmilson's leadership appointment in early 2014, no single leader had held this position since Sergio da Silva was discharged in 2005. The loss of a central figure to impose uniformity and unity had cast the church into a state of aimlessness and confusion. Edmilson's arrival as the Lead Evangelist thus raised many questions about the role of leaders and the purpose of the church. One way in which questions emerged related to ideas about house-church movements originating from leaders in the United States. Under some house-church models, the role of most full time leaders was unnecessary. Edmilson was hired to oversee the different regions of the Santa Marina church and to stabilize and unify them toward a new direction. For

many ICOC churches, having a central authority for a group of regions is a sign of a healthy church. Given the historically complicated relationship between church leaders and lay members in the Santa Marina churches, the fact that Edmilson has little experience there allows him to represent a fresh start for the church. He is new enough that there is neither strong support nor opposition to his leadership. As a result, I observed a leader working to build and establish his spiritual capital through loyalty and trust. Overall, he has been well received, but I observed a tension between members who felt privileged and grateful to have a well-educated and successful leader, and others who felt they did not relate to him and questioned whether or not his spiritual qualities are as impressive as his “worldly” ones (economic success, job status, educational background, etc.). The disagreement concerned his spiritual legitimacy and authority as a leader. As a result, I sensed a hesitation among some members to embrace and trust in his leadership.

### *Samuel*

Samuel is a polarizing figure in the church. At the time of my research, he was working full time as the evangelist for the region of Omorilo and its campus ministry at UB. He was converted as a college student at UB and has worked in ministry for twenty-four years, eight of which he spent leading Omorilo. But Samuel’s time in the church does not seem to have earned him the respect or loyalty of church members in the same way it has for other leaders. One reason for this, I think, is that some in the church doubted Samuel and Marinalva’s motives as leaders; they had the impression that they were out of reach and unreachable. Even though I have known Samuel for many years, I still do not feel as if I know him. He is friendly and calm, but emotionally distant. He agreed to be interviewed once but avoided being interviewed thereafter. From what I observed, he was unpopular among many members both in Omorilo and in Vila

Oswaldo. Some of the congregants I spoke to characterized him as apathetic, lazy, and criticized his sermons for being poorly organized and dull. Preaching is one of the most important tasks of an evangelist, and Samuel's failure to effectively inspire and teach his congregation prevented him from leading them in the spiritual battle, at least for many of his congregants, diminishing his spiritual capital.

That said, some campus students described him as invested and attentive. In fact, campus students were the main members with whom I observed Samuel interact and connect. Samuel disciples Washington, Omorilo's campus intern, and meets with him weekly. Samuel also organizes regular service trips with the campus ministry to a local senior center. This was the only organized community involvement by the church I observed during my time in Santa Marina. I was surprised by this given that I had heard gossip that Samuel had been neglecting his duties at UB. Indeed, the few times I went to UB, Samuel was absent. When asked about Samuel's absence, campus students shared that he had not been on campus in a few months, but did not indicate that this was a sign of neglect like some other members had expressed to me. For example, in one instance I called Samuel to ask about the Bible talk at UB and he responded somewhat defensively and aggressively that there was no Bible talk. But when I called Leticia, Edmilson's wife, she offered to give me a ride to the midweek service later that night. Upon observing this interaction, a church member said, "This is why no one likes [Samuel]. And this is why no one wants to pay women to be stay-at-home moms. This is why I love [Leticia]. She's on top of things." Campus students acknowledged the region's mixed feelings about Samuel, but they maintained that their experience with him was different.

When I arrived in Santa Marina, Edmilson had already begun leading in Omorilo. It was my impression that Edmilson concentrated his efforts in Omorilo because of its status as a pillar

church in Santa Marina and controversy surrounding Samuel and Marinalva's leadership. Edmilson, not Samuel, preached on Sundays and occupied a position of utmost authority in the region. For all intents and purposes, it was as if Samuel had already resigned. Most members appeared neutral about Samuel; they did not feel animosity toward him but neither did they show allegiance. Members hesitated to talk about him even though there were clearly problems beneath the surface. Some joked that they were afraid because of his wife, Marinalva. In this sense, Samuel not only failed to develop strong spiritual capital in Omorilo, but Marinalva's poor standing in the church weakened whatever capital he had. Among the campus group, however, his relationships were stronger, but it is not the campus students whose approval mattered. Similar to the hierarchy determined by spiritual capital that existed in leadership, a hierarchy existed among members. Not every member had the same amount of influence in the church, and most campus students had little spiritual capital.<sup>15</sup> And Samuel's work with the campus and with the senior center were not especially valued by the church or helpful in increasing his spiritual capital.

### *Antonio*

Antonio is known by the church for his intellect, conservatism, and introversion. In 1992, he was converted in another part of Brazil as a professional in the military. Soon thereafter he moved to Santa Marina and joined the ministry. In addition to working as an evangelist, Antonio has also worked as a teacher for the church. A few members even commented that Antonio was better suited to work as a teacher since that is the office best suited to his "spiritual gifts."<sup>16</sup> For several years he and his wife Sara worked full time for the church, but in 2005 after the Kriete

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, college students who were raised in the church, while generally having less spiritual capital than adults, tended to have more spiritual capital (because of their longevity and relationships with people of influence in the church) than their "non-kingdom kid" colleagues.

<sup>16</sup> Teachers are men who tend to be better educated and/or have had some degree of formal Bible training. Their role in the church is to provide deep Bible teaching with a more academic emphasis (as opposed to motivational sermons). Recently, women have been added to the Teachers Committee.

letter came out, the church could not afford to maintain all of its leaders and almost all of them were forced to take secular jobs to supplement their income. Unlike some leaders, Antonio's time in the church is viewed as a testament of his faithfulness and perseverance. Most recently, Antonio was working a secular job part-time in addition to working part-time as the lead evangelist for Vila Osvaldo and another region. He and his wife Sara lived with her mother and their three children in another city an hour away.

The first time I visited Vila Osvaldo, I noticed that Antonio seemed out of place. While everyone in the congregation fellowshiped together, he awkwardly stood alone. It is a well-known fact that Antonio is reserved, and the irony of his leading a lively group such as Vila Osvaldo was not lost on the church. Nonetheless, Antonio is kind and attentive. In one interview, when asked about the leader of Vila Osvaldo, one member responded that Vila Osvaldo had no leader, but that Antonio was their teacher. The distinction between teacher and leader is a distinction between different types of spiritual capital and the kinds of qualities that admit people into particular positions of authority. The ICOC regulates the admission of members into distinct roles in the church using the language of "spiritual gifts" or talents. At the same time that Antonio's analytical and complex sermons have earned him the region's respect and the title of teacher, they also make him hard to relate to his region and unable to fully assume his position as Vila Osvaldo's leader. On another occasion, I overheard members joking about how Antonio used to get angry at the children for running around during service. Although he has come to be warmer in recent years, his authority is undermined by his lack of intimacy with people in the region. He makes up for this, however, not only because of his perceived dedication, but also because of Sara's spiritual capital. Her warmth and popularity in the church temper members' indifference towards Antonio.

### *House Churches*

Recent proposals to adopt a house church model in the Santa Marina ICOC are a response to the church's current structure and its failures. On the one occasion in which I heard Samuel speak, it was to introduce house churches as a new model for and direction of the church. Among the churches in Santa Marina, there was a reluctance to recognize the fact that the ICOC is not modeled on the biblical church but on a corporate structure. The idea in Santa Marina to replace the ICOC's current structure has stemmed from a variety of sources. In the early 2000s, several of the members who left the church (in Brazil and in the U.S.) formed house churches. More recently, influential leaders in the U.S. have advocated for this model's adoption as well. In September of 2014, the first house church in Brazil was planted in Goiania. But the impetus for implementing house churches is financial as much as spiritual. House churches are inexpensive whereas the ICOC's present model costs more. Current churches must pay for the salaries of church administrators and staff, retirement plans, rental fees, and equipment, all financed by the tithes of church members. Under a house church model, the ICOC's expenses and staff would drastically decline. Proponents of the new model claim that house churches would also address other problems in the ICOC such as "lazy worship," alienation from leaders, and the absence of church involvement in local communities.

The house church movement has become increasingly popular in U.S. evangelical churches, and U.S. leaders backing it have had considerable influence on the leaders in Brazil. From what I observed in Brazil, members were supportive but confused by the model and raised several questions about the proposed changes. Congregants were most concerned about how a house church model would impact their unity. When asked her opinion on house churches, one member said, "How are we supposed to be unified in separate groups when we are not even

unified as a whole?” There were also questions about the impact house churches would have for the church’s current staff. For instance, under this new model most of the staff would become superfluous and lose their jobs. But the debate about house churches was really one about the ICOC’s identity, purpose, and politics. Did the church exist for its members or non-members? What did it mean for a church to be unified? How could the church have been wrong about something as fundamental as its organization? Such questions were a shock to the stability of the church, especially to members who have for years been contributing time, energy and money to maintain a church structure that is now discredited.

We can therefore see in the house church movement an attempt on the part of the church hierarchy to reconcile the tensions of gender, class, and spiritual capital and the resulting discrepancies that emerge from and within these domains. Ironically, as the house church movement aims to create a more democratic church by dismantling the leadership structure, it is also being imposed upon the church by leaders. The house church controversy reflects the local politics of the church, revealing how McCutcheon’s failure to grasp the reality of local politics and his attempt to root power in state bureaucracies occludes the lived experience of the Santa Marina church and their contestations over power.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have argued that theoretical assertions, such as Russell McCutcheon’s which contends that religion works to preserve political order by segregating unsettled emotions to an interior and apolitical domain, employ a view of the “political” particular to a rather western view of power that assumes the state and state institutions are the normative regulators and reflections of power dynamics. I agree with McCutcheon that religious institutions most often create insular social spaces wherein people may become more preoccupied with their own

local politics rather than politics at a state level. McCutcheon argues that there is always a political interest in defining religion, but there is something about his definition of politics that is problematic. I take issue, specifically, with the narrowness by which McCutcheon defines the term and argue for a more nuanced understanding of what the political is in relation to contestations of authority within the ICOC. Outside of the church, positions of authority within the Santa Marina church are insignificant; even within the church, such positions may or may not be meaningful. But in cases outside of a state bureaucratic context such as the ICOC, the political must be understood at the local level. “Religion” is not keeping the congregants of the Santa Marina Church of Christ docile or engaging them in what “really” matters, and it is certainly not containing dissent. As I have shown, whereas the ICOC members see the church as a bureaucracy with which they interact, most members recognize the state as a significant force in their lives but see no feasible way of interacting with it.

My ethnography of the Santa Marina church therefore raises several questions about the political stakes of religious practice among marginalized groups. Members of the Santa Marina church have virtually no voice in the Brazilian government, for example, and yet the problems of dissent that they face within the church, especially since they cannot agree on who is in or out of the church, is of a highly political nature. McCutcheon’s theory takes into account protests or dissent as interactions with the state, but politics is not simply a matter of contesting the state. Only a rather elitist assumption would say maintain that it is. I thus highlight contestation *within* the ICOC on a local level at which point the state all but disappears, especially in Brazil’s context. Whereas McCutcheon and other commentators on religion would say that religion stands apart from broader political movements in Brazil, the Santa Marina church was actually facing the same kinds of political contestations, such as debates over the role of class, gender, and

authority in church leadership, that mirrored trajectories of conflict in the rest of Brazilian society. The micro-politics of the larger national political dynamics in Brazil can therefore be explored in local detail and in rather explicitly defined Brazilian religious communities.

From the ethnography and the history of the ICOC in the United States and Brazil, I have revealed ways in which the concepts of the spiritual battle and spiritual capital work to establish, legitimize, maintain, and contest power within the church as well as beyond it. Just as ICOC members challenged the legitimacy of certain leaders within the church, they did the same for leaders in Brazil. The public perception of leaders, and thus their authority, related directly to their level of spiritual capital and, correspondingly, to their perceived victory in the spiritual battle. Indeed, the church was constantly responding to problems of authority, reinventing itself and struggling to define and maintain its boundaries. In conclusion, both the history and ethnography of the ICOC show how organizational unity and authority—even in overtly religious contexts—are political dynamics and how the lack of unity and legitimacy within a church indicates a political struggle that can only be understood on a local and relational basis.

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### **List of Subjects**

In Order of Appearance:

1. Edmilson and Leticia Fonseca: principle leaders of Santa Marina church leadership team and leaders of the Oromilo Region.
2. Samuel and Marinalva Goncalves: former leaders of the Oromilo Region.
3. Washington: Campus ministry intern.
4. Antonio and Sara Teixeira: part of the leadership team of the Santa Marina church as well as leaders of the Vila Osvaldo Region.
5. Sergio and Vilma da Silva: leaders of the Oromilo Regon prior to the Goncalves'.
6. Pedro Paulo Macedo: one of the principle leaders of the Santa Marina church since 2003. He currently leads a church in another city in Brazil.
7. Aurelio Paiva: part of the leadership team of the Santa Marina church as well as leader of a large region.
8. Vitor Selva: part of the leadership team of the Santa Marina church as well as leader of a large region
9. Jefferson: a student at Universidade da Bandeira.