

Mike Leatherwood Letter to the Leadership of the NYC ICOC

Dear Steve and Lisa, the Elders, D-Group and Staff,

After 25 years in the Movement and 17 years on staff with the NYC Church of Christ, I have decided to leave the ICOC. It has been a difficult decision and one that cost me a great deal. It has divided my immediate family and I am paying a very high price both personally and professionally. I say this because I want you to know that this is not a selfish decision or a matter of simply having my ego or feelings hurt. It is a matter of conscience!

Over the past 17 years a number of things have occurred with which I did not agree but I know that no one or no church is perfect and for the sake of unity I decided to resolve or simply overlook what I considered to be non-essential matters. I hope my track record shows that I am not a divisive person. Why then would I choose to leave now?

In the past two years I have seen scores of disciples in individual counseling sessions. The majority of these clients have suffered various types of abuse in their past. What has been disturbing however is the majority of these people have been exposed to more trauma at the hands of many leaders in this church. I realize that most people do not feel what I feel and I do not expect them to. Most people will not agree with my decision to leave and I understand that too. If I had only seen what most disciples have, I would probably remain as well. As a matter of fact, I want to be on record as having encouraged all of my clients to stay. I am only leaving because I have to and I wouldn't expect anyone else to leave unless they felt the same.

My vantage point, however, has given me a unique perspective. Seeing 30-40 disciples each week has allowed me to see a pattern of trauma, abuse, and oppression that is appalling. Last Thursday brought all of this into a very sharp focus. I had been praying about my concerns and asking God to make what I needed to do clear. Thursday I received my answer, a moment of clarity when all doubts and confusion suddenly just vanished.

A young man whom I have known for several years came into my office that day. Although he has a number of problems, I believe that he loves God and is a disciple. He suffers from a severe panic disorder, agoraphobia, which makes it extremely difficult for him to leave his house and attend all of the church services. He told me in tears that he had been called into an appointment with his sector leader the previous Thursday and confronted regarding his lack of attendance at the services. He was informed at that time that he had actually been taken off the church role the previous November but had never been notified. He was told at that time that he was not considered a disciple because of his lack of commitment. In order to be restored to the church role he would have to redo the studies that the church does with non-Christians and that he would not be allowed to date during this time. He left the meeting so traumatized that he suffered a severe panic attack. He described how his thoughts began to race and how he began to feel totally out of control. He stated that he knew that it was wrong and that he shouldn't have done it and then he raised his sleeve to reveal self-inflicted wounds, gashes cut into the entire length of his arm with a pocketknife. He stated that cutting his arm was the only way he knew to relieve the pain that he was suffering in his mind and heart. In my opinion it's probably the only thing that kept him from committing suicide. I felt a wave of sadness and rage crash over me. I felt physically sick. It was all that I could do to stay in the session.

My first thoughts were, "What a tragedy, this didn't have to happen." What was done to him was not only unethical but also criminal. What kind of system fosters such abuse? How can we stand

in judgement on the Catholic Church and the abuse of their priest? How self-righteous! Although this may be seen as an extreme example, this is not an isolated instance. It is merely the tip of the iceberg. This happened in spite of the fact that I have offered, been prepared, and been promised on numerous occasions, to help train the staff in order to prevent what I feared would happen. I don't blame the sector leader for this. I understand that he is a young leader, but I do hold Steve Johnson, the Elders, and Steve and Lisa's discipleship group, responsible. You could have prevented this from happening.

Brothers you know my life. I am far from perfect, as my children and my wife can attest, but you know the ways that I have faithfully serviced Christ and His Church for many, many years. From my perspective, and again I realize that it is a unique one, what came into focus for me is a Church that in its heart has absolutely lost Jesus. Although I know that there are many faithful Christians in the NYCC of C, I do believe that it is, or is in grave danger of becoming, a body severed from the Head, that is Christ. I see very little resemblance of Jesus in the leadership. What I do see is an emphasis on works and a legal system created by Kip and fostered by you as leaders. Legalism breeds religious pride, cruelty and oppression. I don't think that this was or is your intent, but intended or not, it is the fruit of 20+ years of works righteousness.

My intent is not to pull people away from the NYCC of C. Again, I don't expect people to agree with my perception or decision. I expect you to be angry and defensive. I don't expect you to take a hard look at yourselves. For some reason that seems almost impossible for Steve. Maybe this will help you to change, although I must say that I am not extremely hopeful. Instead, I expect you to attack me and my family for our obvious faults. This allows the focus to remain on someone else. After all, if we can use such loaded terms as "fall away" or "divisive" then you can avoid the pain of the radical humility that it will take to turn this around. I know that some of you just don't see what I've seen, but how much do you want to see it?

Those of you who have been Steve and Lisa's closest advisors regarding the emotional needs and the spiritual health of the Church have done an absolutely horrendous job. I hold you especially responsible. Your religious pride and arrogance coated by a thin veneer of false humility makes it hard to detect the hatefulness and harshness that only the weak will ever be subjected to. You have missed the heart, the compassion, and the empathy of Jesus. In closing the door on the emotional recovery ministry and not aggressively training the staff to empathically relate to others, you have denied nurturing and healing to those placed in your care. David and Coleen Graham came to New York with a lot of hurt, but with a fresh and vibrant perspective that clearly resonated with the members in the North NJ sector. It is a shame that they did not receive the support that they needed, but only resistance and criticism. I think it shows a lack of connection with the needs of the members. The way that they were treated reflects the fear of losing of control that is so pervasive in your leadership. What exactly is it that makes controlling people so important?

I have decided not to meet with Steve although he has made repeated attempts to meet with me. It has been my experience in my many meetings over the last 17 years that they are not productive. It is extremely difficult to be heard. I have felt either overpowered, manipulated or patronized. This is not a personal matter. It is a systemic one. I applaud the efforts of the Boston Church in making sincere efforts to dismantle a legalistic system that breeds oppression and denies freedom. I think you as leaders often wonder why you have so much trouble getting the members to read their Bibles, pray, tithe, etc. What do you expect when you infantilize people in order to control them because they are not to be trusted with their freedom? Again it sounds like the reasoning of the Catholic Church.

When you strip people of their freedom you create a spiritual nursery which allows you to control people in order to make yourselves feel more powerful, or get more done (after all, you can get more done in the short run by getting people to follow orders). But then we turn around and get mad at them and humiliate them in "D" times because they aren't growing up and taking responsibility for themselves. No wonder people are confused and frustrated. You can't have it both ways. Legalism and control fosters oppression and immaturity. You cannot continue to control and manipulate people and expect them to be mature and responsible. Can't you see that the spiritual immaturity of the church is simply the result of the lack of grace and freedom you have denied people in order to control them, even if it was with the best of intentions? The end does not justify the means. The real end is a weak and immature church in which you have to shout louder or get more "fired up" to get results. Grace and freedom are central to the teaching about Jesus and without it we will only seem to grow.

I am not interested in the least in starting a new church. I will not solicit people to leave the NYCC of C. However, I will continue to love God and care, and I am very grateful for that. I will be a part of his Church. I will continue to advocate for the oppressed. I am committed to offering a place of shelter and safety, a place of freedom, compassion and dignity for those who are weary and burdened. This is the Great Commission that I'm convinced that the NYCC of C has lost sight of. I will pray for you that you will have the humility and courage to look deeply within yourselves as leaders. This could be the defining moment for the church, your opportunity to step up, as the leaders have in Boston, and to lead the church out of the darkness of legalism, oppression and immaturity. It is only to that Church, a Church committed to the heart of Jesus, that I will ever again belong.

In Him,

Mike