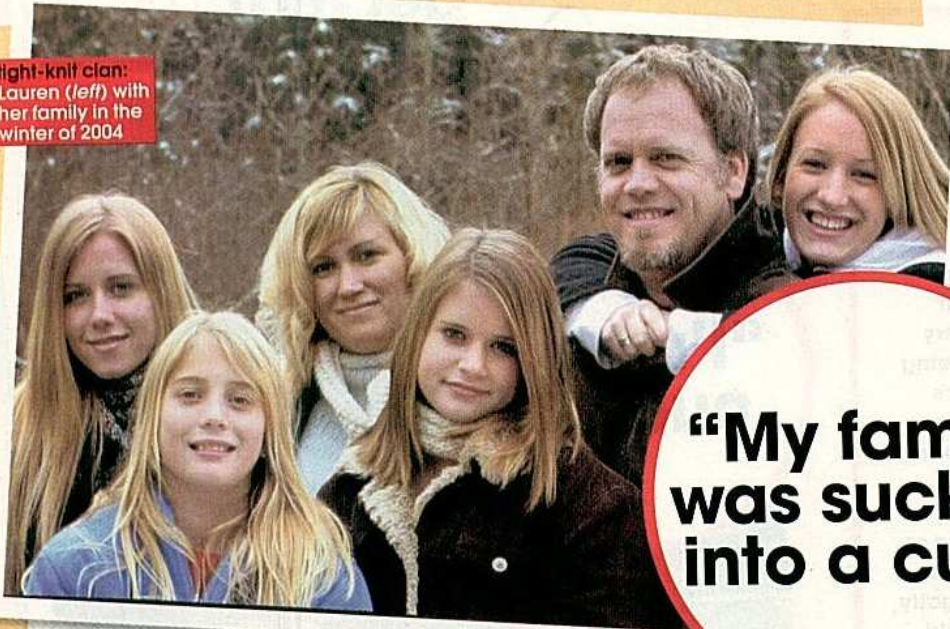


tight-knit clan:
Lauren (left) with
her family in the
winter of 2004



**“My family
was sucked
into a cult”**

Lauren Wolverton, 18, and her family felt loved by everyone at their church. But then things got weird. **AS TOLD TO MICHELLE LEE RIBEIRO**

In 1989, after they'd graduated from college in Montana and gotten married, my parents took me and moved to Portland, Oregon, to start a new life. Since they'd been raised Christian, they decided to join a church to meet people. My dad's sister had recently joined this new church, the International Church of Christ, in New York, and loved it. Started in Boston by this guy named Kip McKean, the ICC had just a few local branches in the U.S. at the time—but within a few years, it would grow to include hundreds of thousands of members around the world. When my parents heard that an ICC was starting up in Portland in 1990, they went to check it out.

warm welcome

My parents immediately felt welcome at the ICC and became good friends with everyone. So my three sisters—who were born after we moved to Oregon—and I grew up spending most of our free time doing church-related stuff, like youth group meetings and social events. I had so much fun and made tons of friends, like Jessica. We did everything together. What I liked about the church was that it felt like everyone was important. Like, you didn't

have to be a “man of the cloth” to deliver a sermon—certain members were chosen to be “leaders,” and they were the ones who delivered sermons. Every member was called a disciple and was assigned a discipler, who they met with weekly to confess their sins and seek guidance on personal issues like family problems and work. It made me feel really cared about.

elite club

The ICC was very exclusive: They believed the only real Christians were their own

members, and that everyone else—including other Christians—was going to hell. They encouraged us to bring people we knew to our church. And if someone left the church, they'd be labeled a “fall-away” and a member would be asked to call them and try to get them to come back. Jessica and I used to talk about how some kids at school who weren't members seemed like good people. Then we'd remember that we shouldn't get too close to them because they were going to hell.

losing faith

My family was totally devoted to the ICC. My parents gave 10 percent of their salary to the church, as required. Most Christian churches

encourage donations, but at ours it was a *must*. If you didn't give, other members would call and ask you why. Even kids were urged to get a job so they could contribute. That's why when I was 13, I started baby-sitting—so I'd have money to give and be seen as a good Christian.

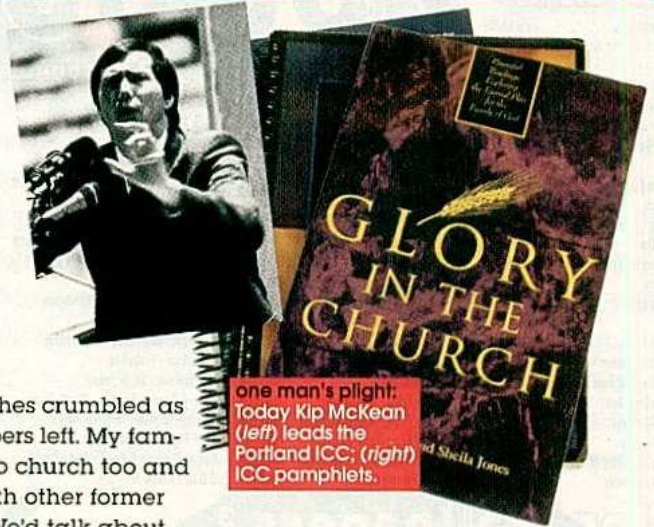
But in the summer of 2003, when I was 16, everything changed. One of the leaders of the London ICC sent an e-mail to some members of his branch. It got forwarded to almost everyone in the ICC. He claimed that leaders were spending our donations on personal stuff, like vacations and sports tickets, instead of on the church. And he questioned the rules we'd all been following: *Why were we better than other Christians? Why did we seek advice from disciplers in our personal lives? I guess no one had questioned anything before because we didn't want to look like bad Christians. But once one person did, everyone started speaking up. The leaders of our ICC refused to discuss it, saying anyone who doubted*

the church was unspiritual. Members all around the world were hurt and confused. Suddenly we were all being treated like sinners by a group that had claimed to love us so much.

Entire ICC branches crumbled as thousands of members left. My family stopped going to church too and started meeting with other former members to pray. We'd talk about what we *really* believed—instead of what we'd been told to believe. No one from the ICC tried to get us to come back. I guess there were just too many fall-aways at that point.

searching for truth

I've lost a lot of friends—even Jessica, who still belongs to the ICC. She doesn't talk to me, and I miss her a lot. But I'm finally free to live my life



one man's plight: Today Kip McKean (left) leads the Portland ICC; (right) ICC pamphlets.

*how I want. I'm even dating a guy who rarely goes to church! I still have faith, but I'm taking my time before I join another church—as is the rest of my family. I want to make sure I pick the right one for me. There are so many different ways of looking at things. And the way I see it, the more I surround myself with people who have *different* beliefs, the more I'll learn, and the better off I'll be.*

don't be fooled! The ICC still has about 100,000 members worldwide and is actively looking for new members. Cultwatch, a counter-cult group, says that the ICC is definitely a cult and estimates that there are thousands of other religious cults out there that have not been identified yet. If you experience any of the following from a group, you may be being pursued by a cult:

- > They monopolize your time.
- > They put down anyone who's not a member (even your family) and try to keep you away from them.
- > They tell you they aren't a cult
- > They won't answer any of your questions about the organization.
- > They don't ask you for money—they demand it.
- > They tell you that their way is the only path to salvation.

—Reported by Mollie Kazan

For more information about groups on the cult watch list or to get help, visit cultwatch.org and cultclinic.org.

MCKEAN PHOTO, GLOBE STAFF FILE PHOTO/JANET KNOTT. "DON'T BE FOOLED": EXPERTS, MARK VRANKOVICH, CULTWATCH.ORG.

"I was a Christmas tree. I had green padding cut into a tree shape on my front and back." —Libby, 15, Montgomery, TX