

What Are The Real Issues?

This letter precedes each of these documents: (1) *What Really Happened In Latin America?*, (2) *What Are the Real Issues?*, (3) *What Were the Real Efforts to Seek Reconciliation?* Please note that while this introductory letter is reproduced in all three documents, each document contains unique and important information.

December 13, 2010

To the brethren and ministry of the United Church of God,

Why more documents? And equally important, who authored them? Our Church of God culture and our personal convictions include a deep commitment to submission to authority, which includes upholding the office, even when the humanity of office holders shows through from time-to-time.

What possible circumstance could warrant the writing, publication and distribution of documents that frankly counter the official statements of the leadership of our church? It can only be a crisis of the greatest magnitude, summarized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I also [imitate] Christ." Only in the most extreme of situations, such as that of Paul stepping away from the example of Christ, would those Christians served by him not follow his lead.

Christian wives who seek to live by Ephesians 5:22 ("...submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord") sometimes face this most difficult of marital questions: Has my husband's leadership become so toxic to me and/or to our children that I must step aside from what I know God would prefer that I normally do?

Over the past six months the current leadership has chosen to dismiss all meaningful efforts to seek reconciliation through face-to-face meetings within the ministry. In addition, the leadership has also chosen to go *public* with their communications. As of late June, the leadership began going directly to the lay membership of the church, making open accusations and declarations about the crisis at hand, and about those in the ministry who have sincere concerns. This has taken place in a number of member letters, documents of accusation, and in video sermons played in all congregations of the United Church of God. And, most recently the Council also released three documents to the membership attempting to justify concerns that 57 of us addressed in our open letter to the president on December 4, 2010.

As a result of these actions, we feel it is our responsibility, as ministers, to inform the membership of the church what is the truth about the core issues that have caused so much upheaval within the United Church of God over the past two years. This is not the best way to handle this type of conflict. And we realize that the membership should *never* have had to be brought into this discussion. Thus, we would be the first to admit that dealing with these issues

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should have been done in private, with the leadership and ministry discussing and striving to find understanding and truth in the matters. However, since all efforts to accomplish this in private over the past 18 months have proved fruitless, and since the administration and Council have gone public with their accusations and justifications, we believe our release of this information is needed and appropriate.

As to authors, this document was prepared by concerned ministers in the United Church of God who believe the truth should be made known. There are several authors, all of whom are pastors in the UCG. There was a broader team of many more ministers who contributed to and reviewed this document for accuracy—including those who have firsthand knowledge about the subjects addressed. The names of individuals are not important; it is the factual content of this document that is important. All authors have signed their names to the two letters of appeal so they are not hidden.

These issues are *not* about governance or the proposed move to Texas. The two core issues are (1) the abusive way brethren and elders have been treated, and (2) the sinful and unethical behavior of the church leadership. We ask you to look at the facts, and, in Christ's words, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" or, as the New Living Translation puts it, "Look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly" (John 7:24).

Our desire is to speak the truth in love. It is the only way that true peace, unity and desired reconciliation can be accomplished.

Signed,

Your brothers in Christ, who authored, contributed to and reviewed the Open Letter to the President of December 4, 2010. (For the names, please see that document.)

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Introduction

Virtually every minister and member realizes that we are experiencing turmoil relating to the management and direction of the church. Unprecedented Internet commentary, sermons sent out from the president, regular letters to the UCG membership, resignations, dismissals, discussions at church services, etc. have made this reality inescapable. The United Church of God is experiencing a crisis of confidence in its leadership.

Although some individuals are well-informed, many members and elders are not; they genuinely desire a more complete understanding of what has and is taking place. What are all of the issues? How and when did this breakdown in trust and subsequent reaction start?

More recently the President and Council of Elders are claiming that this “crisis” in the ministry is over two fundamental things: 1) the rejection by some ministers of the UCG’s form of governance, and 2) hurt feelings over the rescission of the church’s move to Denton, Texas. There has been an additional issue raised over whether these ministers desire to preach the gospel since they supported the relocation to Texas. Neither the rescission of the move to Texas nor any subsequent events have dampened the passionate desire that this group of ministers has for preaching the gospel. *This is not an issue* with those who are in disagreement over the conduct of the current Council.

It should be noted that these claims are *totally false* and deflect and ignore the real issues that ministers, many former Council and former administration members have been concerned about and have asked to be addressed for over 18 months. This document gives a factual overview of the current crisis within the United Church of God and an objective summary of the issues, concerns, and their fruits within the United Church of God.

Why are so many people upset? A great deal has happened over the preceding months; however, are all concerned parties able to recall and synthesize all of the events and conditions that have led to our current crisis?

All leaders will make mistakes from time to time and God’s people are patient and forgiving. However, a remarkable number of missteps and actions lacking judgment have occurred over the last year or so, resulting in this crisis. The purpose of this paper is to document these events, which will explain why so many ministers and members are deeply concerned with the present direction and leadership in the UCG. This is not intended to be an examination of opposing views. It only strives to chronicle verifiable, recent historical events and their impact.

The General Conference of Elders has both a fiduciary responsibility as members of the corporation that constitutes the UCGIA and a spiritual responsibility for the care of the church. As cited in the UCG Constitution (Article 3.2.2.3): “Every ordained minister in good standing of the United Church of God, *an International Association* (UCG), is an elder of the UCG and is a member of the General Conference of Elders. The general assembly of all such elders is the ‘General Conference of Elders.’ God has established the office of elder to provide care and oversight to the congregations. Thus, the General Conference of Elders is responsible to God to ensure that His people are served and their needs attended to.”

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As such, the purpose of this document is to clarify and share accurate information with the General Conference of Elders, in order to help them fulfill their oversight responsibility as defined in our governing documents.

Furthermore, it is intended that this material will help church members by providing a factual, comprehensive overview and context to our recent past, which will help answer the questions posed above.

This material is offered in the spirit of 1 Peter 5:2-4: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

Current state of affairs/fruits

No one can deny that the environment within the United Church of God today is greatly lacking in harmony, trust and peace. How did we get to this point? Have the actions by leadership contributed to or lessened the unsettled atmosphere within the church? Consider the state of the United Church of God today:

- Many members and ministers are confused, upset and concerned about doctrinal statements and issues presented as “white papers” (Fasting, Sabbath).
- Members are concerned about 1700-2000 members and 14 ministers in Latin America who are no longer part of the United Church of God, and the events that led to their being removed.
- It is self evident that there is an increasing negative public image of the UCG resulting from administrative decisions and how they are perceived.
- The UCG’s income is down significantly.
- Two Council members resigned in July 2009 for several reasons, the “straw that broke the camel’s back” being the manner in which a document (“Private Discussion Groups”) was prepared by the Council and sent to the GCE.
- The president, all corporate officers, all operation managers, all Regional Pastors and one Senior Pastor were removed or replaced between April and October of 2010. Never has there been such an upheaval in UCG’s history. This has resulted in great concern and confusion among the members and ministry.
- Members are concerned over expectations expressed by the Council of Elders and administration in member letters as well as sermons that state compliance and agreement with decisions of leadership is *required*, because, “It is the will of Jesus Christ.”

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- Jack Hendren, pastor of three congregations in Texas, was called to Cincinnati to defend his refusal to suspend Arnold Mendez, Sr. During the meeting, Mr. Hendren explained to Messrs. Luker, Kubik and Rhodes that he could not accept their spiritual authority because they were breaking the 6th and 9th Commandments with the “background” letters sent to the entire church concerning Leon Walker and Latin America. Mr. Hendren was immediately suspended from his ministerial responsibilities; on August 12, he was terminated and removed from the GCE.
- Larry Salyer (minister of over 40 years) was suspended and removed as pastor for explaining to his congregations after Sabbath services the doctrinal concerns of the white papers on “Fasting and the Will of God” and “Sabbath.” Mr. Salyer states unequivocally that he never criticized or attacked any specific individuals and yet, the official reason given to the ministry for his suspension was for “criticizing” the leaders of the UCG.
- After Ken Giese’s efforts as pastor to stabilize two polarized and divided congregations were undermined for over two years by multiple members, elders, current administrators and Council members, he was asked to transfer because of his inability to bring unity to those congregations. Mr. Giese’s recommendations for a solution—along with those of three elders serving in the area and four former administrators who dealt with the situation for several years—were totally disregarded. He resigned from the ministry of the UCG.
- Paul Carter and Jon Pinelli (pastors of five congregations) resigned from their jobs and from the GCE over issues of conscience.
- Ron Kelley (pastor of three congregations) was relieved of his pastoral responsibilities and subsequently resigned from the GCE and the United Church of God. Had he not resigned, he would have been decredited and suspended from fellowship with the UCG anyway over his failure to support the actions of this Council and this administration. Mr. Aaron Dean wrote the following statement to Mr. Kelley in notifying him of his status: “As it happens, however, your case was presented to the COE on Wednesday, December 7, 2010, and they decided at that time that you no longer qualified as an elder of UCGIA in good standing based on biblical standards and principles and spiritual criteria and granted the request of Ministerial Services to revoke your ministerial credentials with UCGIA” (December 10, 2010).
- Mike Hanisko, UCG pastor in Wisconsin and former regional pastor, received a phone call from operation manager for Ministerial Services, Victor Kubik, on Friday, December 10, 2010 informing Mr. Hanisko that he was temporarily suspended from his ministerial duties and was not allowed to attend services. Mr. Hanisko had conducted a deacon and elders’ question and answer meeting the evening before. One person in attendance complained to Mr. Kubik about Mr. Hanisko’s responses. Based on that one complaint and contrary to the biblical injunction that requires at least two witnesses, Mr. Hanisko was suspended.
- All of the Latin American pastors and all but two of the elders either resigned or were terminated over a period of six months (June to December 2010).

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- A long standing issue has been the Council's suspension of Joel Meeker's authority to perform ministerial functions anywhere outside a French-speaking region. He is not permitted to speak or even give a prayer in any other congregation or to write articles for our English publications (even the journal that goes only to elders). Why? *Years ago* he posted an item on the private elders' Internet forum, and the monitor objected to its tone, demanding an apology. Joel apologized publicly on the forum, but the Council continues to censor him years later because he hasn't apologized to specific people for making the private post. He did offer to apologize to any and all such individuals if the Council would tell him precisely how he had broken the Elders' Forum rules, but he has never received any such explanation.
- Unnamed ministers and pastors were labeled as "spiritual wolves" in a public letter to entire membership with no evidence to support the accusation and no effort to talk with said individuals in a spirit of resolving any problems that might exist.
- Fellow ministers and members are wondering who is next and when will this end?
- Four Council members resigned just prior to and during the December meeting of the Council of Elders. The primary reason for the four resigning was an issue of conscience and their inability to support some of the decisions being made by the Council. An additional factor is the continual wear and tear the hostile environment has had on the individual member's health.

What is the result? Many pastors and members of the GCE have lost confidence and trust in the current UCG Administration and the Council's leadership.

Document/policy/internal practices violations

Over the past 15 years, previous Councils and administrations have worked hard to establish policies and procedures for the purpose of protecting and preserving the church. Have these developed and approved policies and procedures been followed with respect to our governing documents and the standard best practices? Have the Council and administration handled matters according to established precedent and in a way which reflects openness, fairness and due process?

- Vague and misleading reasons were given for replacing the Council reporter in July of 2009, an action which was initially done without Council involvement or proper process. This step was on the heels of his being pressured to delete text from his report that would accurately and fully reflect Council discussion of the "Alternate Forum" matter (later known as "Private Discussion Groups").
- Bylaws were violated by Council discussions/decisions without full Council involvement. A list of more than a dozen violations was prepared and presented to the Council, but nothing was done. When Jim Franks and Doug Horchak tried to get this on the agenda for discussion, the vote was 10 to 2 against.

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- The Ethics Committee dealt with a member without the knowledge of the entire committee responsible for this action. The Ethics Committee chairman convened a meeting of only certain select committee members for this purpose but left out others. Those left out were known not to agree with the opinion of the committee members called to the meeting. This is not acceptable conduct.
- Two job performance assessment documents for the president were prepared by the Council in August of 2009, one of which contained numerous unproven allegations against him, his three operation managers and another member of his administrative team. All of these statements were rebutted and proven to be false, and an extraordinary two-day meeting of the Council was called in October of 2009 to discuss these issues, although several were never addressed. However, only the president and Ministerial Services operation manager were allowed to be in this two-day meeting. Despite several requests prior to this meeting, the other staff members were not allowed to attend, address the accusations or defend themselves; no reason was given for this decision. In February, 2010, some six months later, the document was formally withdrawn and an apology extended to the president, but by that time serious damage had been done to the reputations and working relationships of everyone involved. The Council never held accountable or disciplined whoever made these false accusations and put them in writing. Even though there were many accusations made in the document from several Council members, only one member of the Council ever apologized to the operation manager for Ministerial Services for what that Council member had written.
- Doctrinal statements/communications were made public without Doctrine Committee involvement or Council approval. The doctrinal review process *requires* that all papers or letters with doctrinal material be shared with the Doctrine Committee. This was not done with either of the so-called “white papers” (Fasting and Sabbath Observance).
- Corporate officers were denied the right to put forward an agenda item for balloting by the GCE, a right allowed and guaranteed by our Bylaws.
- UCG Rules of Association were ignored (Article 1-130; Article 3-110) in the manner with which the Spanish Regional Director and the Latin American ministry were dealt. The Rules of Association allow international areas to develop their own infrastructure and select their own leadership unless they agree to something else. Consider the following:
 - Who selects the ministerial leadership and national committee chairman in Germany? Answer—the German National Council.
 - Who selects the ministerial leadership and national committee chairman in Australia? Answer—the Australian National Council.
 - Who selects the ministerial leadership and national committee chairman in South Africa? Answer—the South African National Council.

The point is that international areas have set up their own infrastructure and selected their own leaders according to the Rules of Association. What about Latin America? Why were they denied this privilege?

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- UCG Rules of Association were ignored (Article 1-130; Article 3-110) by unauthorized, unrequested and unannounced visits to Caribbean congregations by Council members. Individual Council members have no authority in international areas unless directed by the Council and approved by the local National Council. But, contrary to this principle, two Council members have made unannounced visits to the Caribbean to check on the ministry.
- UCG Bylaws allow for respectful dissent among members of the GCE, yet such dissent has been disallowed and/or soundly criticized by current leadership.
- There is concern over the leadership's disregard of previous precedent-setting decisions coupled with exclusion of those who could have added credible information regarding these subjects of concern (motion to rescind, Sabbath issues, Latin America, etc.).
- There is concern over the public criticism and imputing of improper motives to the 166 elders/pastors who signed the private communication of appeal for Latin America. This characterization has been made before the entire church and to those outside the church as well, for it was published on the Internet.
- There is concern over the replacement of the senior pastor in the U.K. without first consulting with the National Council in the United Kingdom, which violates the Rules of Association (Article 1-130; Article 3-110).
- Lastly in this category, there is concern over bypassing our standard practice when the U.S. field structure was changed. It has been the UCG's practice to solicit input on matters of ministerial administration (regional pastors, pastors) from the field ministry and the Council of Elders in the removal or replacement of senior pastors, regional pastors and MS team. In an open Council session, it was suggested that *before* any changes would be made in the U.S. field structure, a survey of the U.S. ministry would be conducted. That would have been in keeping with our practice, but it never took place.

Contradictions in statements/actions

The president and leadership's encouragement for all to practice *love and brotherhood* during current crisis is a positive gesture. However, have the actions and words (towards employees and elders in general) reflected a focus on patience, love and humility?

- Legitimate questions and concerns about current leadership and decisions have been framed in sermons and letters as rebellion against the authority of Jesus Christ.
- All questions and concerns about leadership and decisions have been framed as simply an issue of "governance."
- The president writes in letters and states in sermons the "need to talk"—yet all efforts to discuss concerns of policy, ethics and doctrine are ignored and result in no effort to seek biblical reconciliation.

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Latin America

The church bears the responsibility to *consider first the well-being of the church and contribute to the needs and growth of the church*. Have the actions of church leadership demonstrated a deep concern for the impact of their decisions on the lives of upwards of 2,000 brethren and elders in Latin America? Details and contradictions concerning the handling of the Latin American situation have created confusion and have served as further examples of the *policy violations* and *contradictions in statements vs. actions*.

- Consider first how Leon Walker was dealt with; we see the hasty removal of a man of 50+ years of experience without a real dialogue or following reasonable due process. His complete removal—job and credentials—occurred over a matter of days, when options for seeking resolution were available. There was no discussion with Mr. Walker regarding discipline or correcting of any imputed improper behavior. Mr. Walker was removed without warning or opportunity to make corrections.
- The process policy for removal of an elder was not followed in the removal of Leon Walker, Saul Langarica and Larry Roybal. The policy is clear in the steps that *must* be taken to remove an elder's credentials. These steps were not followed. Therefore their removal was illegal.
- No input was sought from the Latin American pastors regarding Mr. Walker's role and possible replacement, even though there are legal boards in at least five of the countries. This violates the Rules of Association.
- Mario Seiglie's involvement is a conflict of interest issue on several levels.
- Despite public statements of having great concern, actions have demonstrated little real love to the vast majority of Latin members and ministers affected by these events.
- On August 3, an appeal to the Council to meet with the ministers in Latin America and to seek reconciliation was signed by 166 elders in a very short period of time. These elders were publicly attacked and denigrated within a day by the administration in a letter sent to the entire church. This letter questioned the motives behind this appeal, claimed the authors were manipulating people, likened it to a "political caucus," and characterized the appeal as an attempt to undermine the governance of the church. This was a very confrontational position to take and a very unfair judgment upon the 166 elders who signed this statement in good faith.
- The effort to talk and meet with Leon Walker only transpired after an appeal made by 166 elders/pastors.
- No effort has been made to meet with or discuss the issues with the entire ministry in Latin America, nor has there been any follow-up with Leon Walker, even though the entire UCG was assured that efforts were under way. As the agent for Mr. Luker, Mr. Seiglie did make contact with some of the men, but because of their feelings about him, the conflict of interest inherent in his involvement and his actions in Chile; they chose not to talk with him.

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- The vast majority of the Latin American members feel there has been a failure by the administration and Council to take the initiative in seeking reconciliation and peace; members in Latin America are still confused and hurt, not understanding why they have been cut off from UCGIA when they never wanted to leave UCGIA. Given the time that has transpired with no positive steps toward many of their pastors and elders, they are now largely alienated from any desire to return to the UCG.

Doctrinal issues/concerns/trends

Although no official doctrinal changes have occurred, wording in papers coming from the president and chairman contradicts our previous doctrinal understandings and practices regarding the Sabbath and Fasting. Selective references to previously approved doctrinal papers, along with a laxity in supporting our approved practices have created additional questions about the intent and competence of the leadership. Should not the leadership of the church always clearly support current doctrinal teaching of the church in all communication? One of the requirements for being an elder in good standing is to support the Fundamental Beliefs of the UCG. Doesn't that involve supporting official doctrinal decisions that have been made by the UCG?

- There is confusion caused by the Sabbath paper, which implied a different doctrinal teaching and understanding or a different position in terms of the practice of Sabbath-keeping. Subsequent letters have done little to address the core issues and questions that are bothering people.
- There is confusion caused by the "Fasting, Prayer and the Will of God" paper, which implied a change in the doctrinal teaching or understanding of the church.
- There is concern over the president and chairman's refusal to remove the two documents (Sabbath and Fasting) from the members Web site at the request of the Doctrine Committee. Messrs. Rhodes and Luker wrote to the chairman of the Doctrine Committee stating that the two papers in question did not contain doctrinal issues that would require a formal review by the Council Doctrine Committee. In spite of this claim these documents *did not* follow established church policy for doctrinal review. The policy requires that all material published that contains doctrinal material of any type is to be copied to the Doctrine Committee for its review. (Policy is available upon request).
- There is suspicion over the lack of transparency created by the refusal to name the writers who authored the doctrinal "white papers" sent out by the president and chairman. The president admitted to the ministry in Daytona Beach during the Feast that he did not write the papers. At a private dinner he acknowledged that he did not agree with some aspects of the doctrinal papers but he was willing to sign his name to both of them.
- There is concern over the apparent failure of the leadership to understand doctrines, doctrinal issues and the UCG's already-approved official review process.

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- Lastly, there is concern over the apparent failure to support previous doctrinal and policy decisions concerning the application of doctrine. The Council of Elders approved a statement regarding owning a business and its operation on the Sabbath and/or Holy Days. The decision was that it would be a “violation of the Sabbath” to keep a business open on the Sabbath or any Holy Day. This was adopted in 2002.

Summary

The specific matters contained in this document clarify the real issues that have deepened the concern and eroded the trust of so many in the ministry with our current leadership. This document seeks to clarify the *real* issues in response to the false claims that our current crisis is over “administrative” differences, rejecting of the UCG governance, bitterness over not moving to Texas or jealousy over who are in positions of leadership. This document strives to speak to actions taken by current leadership that are causing substantive concern in the minds of many members of the church and the members of the GCE. The implications of these concerns are extremely important—and go to the core of competence, honesty and integrity.

Since current leadership has chosen to use its authority to criticize or stifle all efforts to seek reconciliation through face-to-face meetings within the ministry; and since the leadership has also chosen to go *public* with their communication—going directly to the lay membership of the church in making open accusations and declarations about those in the ministry that have sincere concerns; it now behooves us, as ministers, to inform the membership of the church what is the truth about the core issues that have caused so much upheaval within the United Church of God over the past two years.