

What Really Happened In Latin America?

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.

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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 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

Beginning in June, 2010, a series of events began to transpire in Latin America that precipitated a crisis of unprecedented proportion in the United Church of God, *an International Association*. Between June and December, the regional director for Latin America was terminated, all but two of the ministers in Latin America were decredited and United lost an estimated 1700 attendees. The actions taken by the president and Council of Elders sent shock waves throughout the ministry and membership around the world, and quickly alienated most of the Latin membership.

In the early stages of dealing with the regional director and ministers, the interim president (Roy Holladay) and the Council of Elders quickly took punitive action. Leon Walker was terminated while on his trip to Latin America and his credentials were removed in short order by the Council of Elders. There was no discussion with Mr. Walker beyond the meeting in Hawkins, Texas (explained below), which is contrary to the approved process for suspending or removing an elder. Saul Langarica and Larry Roybal were removed once Mr. Luker became president and took over as director of the Spanish region. No one spoke to these two men at all prior to their removal from the ministry. All subsidies to Latin America were stopped effective July 1, 2010 without any warning, cutting employees' salaries, cutting monies for congregational expenses such as Sabbath hall rentals, festival assistance and member assistance.

Various reasons were given for these extraordinary actions, the most common one being alleged insubordination on the part of the regional director, Mr. Walker. It is strange that a single act of "insubordination" should lead to such dire consequences for an entire region. Roughly 10% to 15% of the entire attendance of UCG resides in this region. One would think that extraordinary efforts would be taken to reach out and salvage a relationship with the members and elders. Instead, the course of action taken was horribly ill-advised, confrontational and heavy-handed. It also quickly became framed solely as an issue of submission to the governing authority of church leaders—while ignoring the real causes for this crisis.

The story that follows was written by several authors and reviewed by a wider group. These men are pastors who also signed the open letter to the president. This story is a shame to the Church of God and its legacy. The current Council failed to follow the agreed upon Rules of Association and the due process for disciplinary matters for all elders in what can only be described as an attempt to destroy one man (Mr. Walker) and gain complete control of a region of the world with its primary assets.

Dealing with Leon Walker

Mr. Walker, the ministry and the membership of Latin America left the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) in April, 1995 as an intact group. They did not join any other group but came to United in July, 1995. The agreement when they came was that they would stay together and that

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Mr. Walker would be their regional director. They came with 1500 brethren and a number of elders. This is the largest group by far that joined United in its 1995 beginning.

There were no legal obligations (outside of the governing documents at that time) that Latin America had to accept when coming to United because the Rules of Association were not adopted until 1999. There was no clear line of authority, specifying for whom Mr. Walker worked. This question was never completely answered during the early years, but all parties were happy with the arrangement and nothing happened to alter the structure that had been in place since WCG days. In fact, the relationship between all of the international areas (not just Latin America) with the president and Council has never been defined in terms of supervision and authority.

The Rules of Association were adopted in 1999 to clarify the administrative autonomy for each international area (see Article 1-130). Each was to choose the form of structure that best suited its region and local laws. They had the options of: 1) choosing to be under the home office administration (the president); 2) developing their own structure and choosing their own leadership; or 3) choosing to come under a neighboring region's government structure, if they had no desire to develop their own. Article 4-140 of the Rules of Association explains that the home office (the president) is in an advisory role for international areas where a board/national council exists unless the area decides otherwise.

The ministry in Latin America chose to stay as they were, which is to say, they chose the second option (structure determined by the national councils/boards). They developed their own infrastructure, handled their own region, hired and transferred ministers within the region as determined by the pastors and the regional director—with no direction, supervision or administration from the Council or the president (only an advisory role according to Rule 4-140). Five legal entities were developed to provide the legal umbrella for the countries in Latin America. These entities existed wherever there was a pastor (in Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru and Chile). Each entity qualified under the Rules of Association as a legal board, which is to say, they served as National Councils in these countries. The pastors in Latin America served more along the lines of regional pastors, since several of them had responsibilities in more than one country.

At no time was the regional director or the individual countries in Latin America informed that they came under the direct supervision or line authority of the president, the home office or the Council of Elders. They operated as most other international areas and in accordance with the Rules of Association. That is true to this day in Germany, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Italy, New Zealand and the Caribbean. They choose their own leaders (chairmen or office managers) and manage the affairs of the congregations within their regions without U.S. supervision.

In April of 2010 Mr. Walker sent an e-mail to five pastors answering questions they asked him about the men who had sponsored the resolution to rescind the transfer of the home office to Texas. He explains in his June 25, 2010 letter to Mr. Luker: "They also mentioned to me their

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continued concern about the five Council members who sponsored the resolution to rescind the vote to transfer the Home Office from Ohio to Texas. They stated that they believed this was unethical and contrary to our documents. They also stated that they would never vote for any of these five to be on the Council. However, they could not remember specifically all of their names and they asked me to tell them who of the five were nominees for the Council in May.” Mr. Walker gave the pastors the names, as requested, information which is published on the members Web site for anyone to read. He did not circulate the e-mail beyond these five, who asked for the information, because they wanted to know if these were men whose names were on the upcoming ballot for seats on the Council. In the e-mail, Mr. Walker referred to the actions of the men who sponsored the resolution as being unethical, in his opinion. This was his private opinion shared with a group of friends. The document published by the church on “private discussion groups” in the summer of 2009 supports the right of every elder to express his opinion privately to those he considers friends, just as Mr. Walker did. He did not tell the pastors how to vote during the upcoming annual GCE ballot.

This e-mail was forwarded to the Council of Elders in June of 2010, by an elder who was not among the five to whom the e-mail had been sent. Upon reading the e-mail, a portion of the Council expressed anger toward Mr. Walker. Some demanded that Mr. Walker be dealt with for the comments he shared with the pastors, requesting that he be terminated immediately. The decision was made to send three men on Tuesday, June 15, 2010 to talk with Mr. Walker about his e-mail. Roy Holladay, Victor Kubik and Jason Lovelady (HR supervisor) subsequently traveled to Hawkins to meet with Mr. Walker. After a two-hour meeting, Mr. Holladay indicated that the issues were addressed and their questions were answered. Mr. Walker was led to believe this was the end of the matter.

He did not believe he had done anything wrong by sharing his personal opinion with five friends in the ministry since an official document of the church allowed for such communication. Besides, he was responding to the questions of these pastors and he did not initiate providing the information. During the meeting Mr. Walker informed Mr. Holladay that he was leaving on that Thursday, two days later for his regular trip to Latin America. He would be visiting a number of countries and the tickets had been purchased. Mr. Holladay wished him a safe trip and said nothing about cancelling it.

On Wednesday, June 16, 2010, the Council was informed of the discussion from the day before. That evening the Council passed a resolution giving interim President Holladay the authority to deal with Mr. Walker, including terminating him (this resolution was later made public). The resolution itself is evidence that there was doubt as to whom Mr. Walker worked for; if the issue was clear, there would be no need for such a resolution.

Authority was given to the president to remove and replace Mr. Walker without ever having a discussion about discipline or offering any other remedy for his e-mail message. Mr. Holladay called Mr. Walker that same evening—Wednesday, June 16—and informed him of a Council request for him to go to Cincinnati for a meeting with them. But Mr. Holladay did not discuss

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termination with him on the phone nor anything about the Council resolution, even though Mr. Holladay knew that Mr. Walker was leaving the next day on a trip to South America.

Mr. Walker wrote to the Council on June 17 about his conversation with Mr. Holladay the night before: "...what is the basis for meeting with the Council? The Council has never communicated with me any concerns. Furthermore, the Council is not the administration. The Council is not my supervisor. I am responsible to answer to the president [in a spirit of cooperation, and in an advisory capacity but not line authority as explained above and in the Rules of Association Article 4-140] and did so on Tuesday. Mr. Holladay did not ask to speak with me once again. In fact, he said he was merely passing on to me the Council's request. Since there is no basis for the Council to make such a request I saw no reason to cancel the trip." Mr. Walker had met with the president and believed that all of the issues had been thoroughly discussed and resolved on Tuesday. He stated to Mr. Holladay on Wednesday that he was leaving for South America in only a few hours and that he would meet with the Council upon his return. Mr. Walker left for his trip on Thursday, June 17, with plans to meet with the Council upon returning to the U.S.

Mr. Holladay wrote a letter to Mr. Walker on Sunday, June 20, demanding his return to the U.S. The request required Mr. Walker to respond in writing by 5:00 PM on Monday, June 21, 2010 or face termination. On June 22 Mr. Walker was sent a letter removing him as director of the Spanish work and demanding that he return to the U.S. or his employment with UCG would be in jeopardy. Mr. Walker did not return and he was subsequently terminated from employment as well.

Mr. Walker was an employee of the Church for 50 years, yet he was removed from employment within a matter of days without following the approved process for terminations or removals (the UCG process for suspension and removal is available on request). The Council treated Mr. Walker far differently from employees in the past where time was taken to work with an individual to resolve differences. Countless times meetings have been rescheduled in order to accommodate someone's schedule, setting a moral and a legal precedent for dealing with employees in similar situations.

Over the years the leadership of the church has been very tolerant when scheduling meetings with employees. The apostle Paul understood that there are reasons why schedules need to be changed ("Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to come to you with the brethren, but he was quite unwilling to come at this time; however, he will come when he has a convenient time," 1 Corinthians 16:12). Mr. Walker was given no previous warnings nor did he have any previous record of poor work performance. The process for removal has the expectation of a warning and possible suspension prior to actual removal. None of this was done according to proper procedures for terminating an employee. Mr. Walker was removed from employment after 50 years with no severance, no offer of retirement and he has no Social Security. Mr. Walker is 74 years old.

Response of the Latin ministry

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On June 21, the elders in Latin America wrote a letter to the Council and interim president stating that they did not agree with the impending removal of Mr. Walker (officially removed on June 22) and asked that this be reversed and that they be given a say in who should be their regional director. This is their right in accordance with the Rules of Association (Article 1-130). As mentioned above, most international areas have this right written into their governing documents (Germany, Italy, England, Australia, South Africa, etc.). All the pastors in Latin America signed the appeal.

The Council of Elders met in a special session on Wednesday, June 23 and Thursday, June 24, 2010, to select the next president of UCG. Several Council members were unaware that Mario Seiglie was already en route to Chile until it was noted that Mr. Seiglie was not present in Cincinnati for these meetings.

The situation in Chile

On the afternoon of Thursday, June 24, 2010, President Dennis Luker, newly elected that same day, signed a document removing Saul Langarica as pastor of the Santiago congregation. Why was Mr. Langarica removed, but not the other pastors? The only area with a substantial bank account in Latin America and also the owners of a church building was Santiago. Mr. Seiglie made contact with a church member in Santiago who was also a lawyer and was familiar with the Chilean legal documents. The documents gave authority to the Spanish Regional Director for naming the pastor in Santiago. Upon replacing Mr. Holladay on Thursday morning, Mr. Luker also took on the title of regional director. That afternoon he signed the document removing Mr. Langarica as pastor. This action also removed Mr. Langarica as the president of UCG, Chile—a legal entity and charity in Chile. Mr. Langarica was not spoken to about this and no one explained why he was being removed (this is contrary to the approved policy of UCG). He received an attachment to an e-mail informing him of his removal, but still without any explanation as to cause. It was reported on Wednesday that Mr. Langarica was planning a meeting to change the legal documents to prevent Mr. Seiglie from gaining control of the assets, but this charge was not true. There was a congregational meeting in Santiago on Thursday evening but it was to inform the brethren about Mr. Walker, not to change any documents. Mr. Langarica was removed based on false information.

The removal of Mr. Langarica from his pastoral responsibilities and his employment in this manner is again contrary to the accepted practices and procedures of the United Church of God—as well as common decency.

Mr. Seiglie, acting on behalf of Mr. Luker, appointed Jaime Gallardo to be the pastor over Chile. A small group of members, who had months earlier been suspended for cause from the Santiago congregation by Mr. Langarica, was reinstated (this was the second suspension for three of them). All of them were members of Mr. Seiglie's extended family. This group and their supporters were designated by Mr. Seiglie as the official congregation of the United Church of

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God in Chile. This small group of members (80 to 100 out of a congregation of 350) tried to gain control of all assets based on the reading of the legal documents. Mr. Luker never spoke with Mr. Langarica about this matter, which is again contrary to due process for removing an elder. Our documents require a spiritual reason for such a removal. The reason in this case was physical, in order to gain control of assets. Mr. Langarica, along with all the pastors in Latin America signed a letter of appeal for Mr. Walker, but only Mr. Langarica and Larry Roybal (who went to Santiago in support of Mr. Langarica) were terminated from employment and decredited from the GCE at that time. Why? The only apparent reason was so that the newly formed “UCG” group in Chile could gain control of the Chilean assets.

Dealing with the Latin Ministry

In the meantime, the names of the Latin ministers who signed this appeal were removed from the UCG Web site as contacts in their countries, and, more importantly, the financial subsidies were immediately cut to all of these areas. Nearly all of the countries in Latin America are unable to be financially self-sufficient, and they depend heavily on these subsidies (which amount to approximately \$700,000 annually). These subsidies, which pay for hall rentals, church expenses, member assistance and ministerial salaries, were cut off with *no warning* to the ministers or members.

It wasn't until six months later, November 30, 2010, that the remaining ministers in Latin America had their credentials removed. For almost six months the Council and administration violated the Rules of Association by their actions in Latin America. The Constitution of the United Church of God states that any congregation pastored by a recognized (credited) elder of the UCG is an official congregation of the UCG (Article 3.2.2.2). Since the credentials of the remaining ministers were not revoked (only those of Mr. Langarica and Mr. Roybal), their congregations were *official* congregations of the UCG and they were still elders in good standing of the UCG. Mr. Seiglie ignored this fact and set up alternative services throughout Latin America and established alternative Feast sites. With credited ministers of the UCG and legitimate UCG congregations already in existence, it was actually Mr. Seiglie and the administration that were violating the Rules of Association. Even though this was pointed out on numerous occasions to those on the Council and in the administration, nothing was done about this problem for almost six months.

Communications to the church

On July 1, 2010, Messrs. Rhodes, Luker, Holladay and Kubik published a 16-page document for the entire church titled, “Background to the Situation with Leon Walker and Latin America.” This was done to discredit Mr. Walker and support the case for his removal. It has not been the church's practice in the past to attack an individual publicly, who is being removed from his

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employment, his ministry and the church. The publishing of this kind of document was unprecedented.

Due to increasing concern about the situation, on August 3, 2010, 166 elders sent a private appeal to the Council and president urging that steps be taken to effect reconciliation with Mr. Walker and the Latin ministry. The response of the Council and president was swift and unnecessarily harsh. A letter on August 4 from Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes to the entire church, questioned the motives behind this appeal among other things, claiming that the authors were manipulating people and supporting a breakaway organization, likening it to a “political caucus,” and characterizing the appeal as an attempt to undermine the governance of the church. This was a very unfair and highly confrontational position to take against the 166 elders who signed this statement.

Mr. Luker then followed this with an August 6, 2010 15-page document sent again to the entire church titled, “Update on the Situation in Latin America and with Leon Walker.” In these two documents, totaling 31 pages, Mr. Walker is variously described as disingenuous, defiant, rebellious (four times), untruthful, inflicting harm to the membership, not a truly caring shepherd, hostile, likened to Diotrephes, a slanderer, defying leadership, disdainful, insubordinate (three times), nefarious (evil), deceptive and manipulative. His statements are also called fiction, fabricated, prejudicial, one-sided, anti-Council spin, “(to be charitable) inaccurate” and highly damaging.

It is difficult to state strongly enough how uncharitable, unchristian, unusual and improper this action was.

It is very clear that far more effort was being put into attempting to publicly discredit and humiliate Mr. Walker than in trying to effect any kind of reconciliation. The atmosphere created by these documents further alienated not only the Latin ministry, but many other ministers and members.

Developments with Eduardo Hernandez

Although Mr. Luker was now the appointed regional director, he never personally contacted the Latin ministers (except for Eduardo Hernandez), choosing instead to have Mr. Seiglie as his emissary even though all the pastors speak English. From the beginning Mr. Luker had been advised by several men knowledgeable of the Latin ministry that it was not wise to have Mr. Seiglie in this role, for numerous reasons—including first and foremost, an obvious conflict of interest. In a July 23, 2010, letter to the Council, Eduardo Hernandez, the sole elder over seven churches in Colombia and Ecuador, appealed to the Council not to send Mr. Seiglie to this task (letter available on request).

Despite his concerns and objections, Mr. Hernandez pursued every avenue of reconciliation and was invited to come to Cincinnati in September to meet with the administration. During that

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meeting Mr. Hernandez was assured that the other pastors in Latin America would also be invited to come to the home office after the Feast of Tabernacles, and he later conveyed this message to them (that they would receive an invitation).

But nothing happened after the Feast of Tabernacles for almost six weeks—there was no communication from the administration to either Mr. Hernandez or the other Latin ministers. It has been stated that “one minister in Latin America was asked to be an independent emissary and extend an offer for each of the ministers in Latin America to meet one-on-one at the home office.” But this is not what was communicated to Mr. Hernandez. Even if Mr. Luker thought it had been understood that way, why, after not hearing from any of the pastors, wouldn’t Mr. Luker, as the regional director who has the primary responsibility, reach out to them or at least communicate further to follow up? Finally, on November 11 Mr. Luker sent a letter to all the Latin ministers (Mr. Hernandez excluded), who were still elders in good standing. It was not a letter reaching out in a conciliatory manner. Rather, it gave them an ultimatum of accepting Mr. Luker as their regional director or being removed as elders of the GCE and the United Church of God. This letter also confirms that UCG was in violation of the Rules of Association by having two legal entities in the same geographical area.

Mr. Hernandez was given a copy, though, and was thoroughly disillusioned. He subsequently submitted his resignation letter from the UCG, stating in it, “That letter has nothing to do with what you, the President of the Church and the Council, had told me and had given me to believe would happen regarding Latin America. In fact, it goes completely against everything we supposedly agreed to during my visit to the home office on September 13-15 of this year.” He further wrote, “Today I finally know that no process of reconciliation is possible because there is no desire on the part of the Council and the administration for that to occur.” (This letter is available on request).

The remaining Latin ministers, by this point several months later, were totally estranged and disillusioned by all the previous actions taken, and chose to disregard Mr. Luker’s ultimatum.

Final consequences

The result of all this is the loss of 1700 brethren and 15 elders and pastors in Latin America. They have been removed from membership in UCG and now function as an independent body having chosen not to form another organization (they are already legal entities in the five regions). Why did all this happen? Here are the primary reasons:

1. Anger over actions by Mr. Walker. In our recent history, other elders have been talked with and reprimanded for actions similar to those of which Mr. Walker was accused. Over the past few years, an elder was reprimanded for speaking at another Feast site in spite of a direct order from the president not to do so; another elder was reprimanded for an attempt at bloc voting (he admitted sending his letter to 25 or so elders). None of these men suffered the severity of discipline that Mr. Walker did. Mr. Walker, an employee of

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more than 50 years, was removed from his job, had his credentials revoked and was no longer employed by United within a matter of days. His removal did not follow proper procedure and is unprecedented in the history of United.

2. Quick action to remove Mr. Langarica was apparently motivated by a desire to secure physical assets and had nothing to do with the performance of his ministerial responsibilities.
3. The remaining men were removed because they supported Mr. Walker, which is their right under the Rules of Association (Rule 1-130). They would not sign the ultimatum letter accepting Mr. Luker as the regional director over Latin America under these highly strained and unusual circumstances, especially since they were never consulted.

The end result of these actions is confusion, anger and unrest throughout the United Church of God. Over a period of six months Mr. Luker (the regional director) never initiated contact with any of the ministers in Latin America (except Eduardo Hernandez). There was never an official invitation given to any of the men to come in and talk, even though this was later claimed by the administration. The chairman of the Council never contacted any of these men (except Eduardo Hernandez). As the agent for Mr. Luker, Mario Seiglie did make contact with some of the men, but because of their feelings about him, his conflict of interest and his actions in Chile, they chose not to talk with him, which was their right under the Rules of Association. There was no substantive, genuine effort made for reconciliation during a six-month period of time (June through November). This is confirmed by the men in Latin America.

In summary, the handling of Latin America has brought the United Church of God to a crisis. Nothing like this has ever happened in the history of United and the outrage from the ministry and membership is growing. The administration and Council must resolve to sit down and discuss the matter with those who have been so adversely affected. As the leaders of the Church it is their responsibility to practice the biblical and Christian principles of love, humility and reconciliation that have been spoken of—not by a generic “We hope they know they can call us,” but by truly reaching out to those ministers and brethren who have been so devastated by their actions.