

Staff letter from Minneapolis / Saint Paul Church 3-12-2003

From: The ministry staff of the Minneapolis/ St Paul Church of Christ
To All Members
March 12, 2003

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Over the past few weeks, we have all been through a series of events beginning with the distribution of the Henry Kriete letter and the various small group meetings that we have had. As a staff, our hearts have been very sobered and deeply cut as so many people have openly expressed the hurts and wounds that they feel. Initially, there was a lack of understanding and we felt out of touch with what people felt. With each passing talk that lack of understanding has been replaced with deepening sorrow, conviction and tears. Our hearts have been deeply convicted by our individual sins and the sins and failures of the system we have been a part of. During these last five years we have tried to steer away from some of the unbiblical practices of the past. Although progress has been made it has become apparent that our efforts have fallen far short of what they needed to be. We should have exposed and condemned these practices previously and do so now. We want to address several items below that need to change, why they need to change, and identify our sin in each of them.

Church Governance

In the past, the leadership role for churches in the ICOC has been handled primarily by the church leader or evangelist with little consideration given to God's plan for the eldership. We believe that this neglect has led to many of the issues we are faced with today in the ICOC. Under the system, the evangelist felt he needed to be an expert in all areas, which is impossible for any man. This "one man" leadership model is unbiblical and will be changed immediately. Please forgive the pride and arrogance that has caused many of you to feel distant and devalued in the church. The effect of this sin has been to cause many people to feel like it is hard to communicate with the leaders and that they are difficult to approach. Please forgive this sin. There are many wise and mature men here in the Minneapolis church that should have been included in the leadership of the church and haven't been. Within the next few weeks we need, as a church, to choose an oversight group comprised of non-staff members to assist in leading the church.

Church Autonomy

The New Testament model for governing the church is one where elders and other spiritually qualified individuals make decisions for a local congregation. This group works with the evangelist of the congregation to set the course of the teaching, evangelism, and finances. Each local church has been designed by God to be able to manage its own affairs and make its own decisions. Sadly, that has not been the case here. The past has been one of pressure and control from outside individuals. Often decisions have been made which were not in the best interests of the church in Minneapolis. People have been asked to move even though it wasn't in their best interest and it weakened the local church. Although this has not happened during our time in the

China/Northwest world sector it has happened in the past and needs to be clearly condemned. Over the years the Minneapolis church has not had true control over its own finances. Large sums of money have been required each year in the special contribution with no accountability regarding how it was spent. We sincerely ask for your forgiveness in allowing this to happen as it has hurt many of you individually and the church collectively. We discontinued this practice in November of 2002 and since January 1st no money has been sent to Seattle. We believe that it is important to remain committed to a brotherhood of the churches. Our unity needs to be based on true Christian love and respect and not a system or hierarchy of churches or individuals.

One True Church

The Bible clearly teaches that there is one church (Col 1:18, 1 Cor 12:12-13, Eph 4:4-6). For some time, however, we (ICOC) have held the belief that we are the one true church and that only members of the ICOC are saved. We have allowed for the concept that other disciples may exist elsewhere. We've asserted, however, that they would need to join our fellowship upon finding the ICOC, in order to be "right" with God. This teaching is wrong and arrogant. It is wrong and arrogant to assume that anyone who is not a part of the ICOC fellowship is not saved. It is wrong because there is no way for us to know another person's heart. It is arrogant because only God knows who is and who is not a part of His church: "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). The Bible's plan of salvation remains clear: a person must hear the message, believe it, repent, make Jesus Lord, and be baptized. We will continue to teach God's plan and call people to follow it. The one church, however, belongs to God. Outside of the biblical teachings on salvation, it is a matter for God to decide who is saved, not us. Whether or not a person is part of our specific fellowship is irrelevant. We therefore reject this thinking and this arrogance. We are deeply sorry for allowing this spirit of pride and self-righteousness to exist in our church. This teaching and our subsequent pride has damaged relationships, turned seekers away, and wounded the faith of some in our fellowship. It has alienated some of our families and friends. We are sorry and repent of this sin.

Discipling Relationships

The Bible teaches us to have close "one another" (Jn 13:34-35) relationships; that means, to have people in our lives who know us and have spiritual convictions to help us in our times of need (Ro 15:14). While there are many verses on having close relationships, the Bible says little about the formal structure within the church for those relationships. In an attempt to be unified, to accomplish the great commission, and to genuinely help people on a deeper 'heart' level, the church adopted a practice of establishing discipleship partners FOR people. We've allowed this system of discipleship to overstep the bounds of authority that God gives the church. What started out with good intentions has become a vehicle for control and invasiveness into member's lives. In these church-chosen relationships, people have been put, at times, in artificial relationships. Also, a necessary part of this system became establishing a culture where one was "over another in the Lord". This practice became uncomfortable at best. It was especially awkward in instances where there was not a person with clear spiritual maturity. At it's worst, this practice often became oppressive and at times, even abusive. This practice contributed to the

arrogance of the disciplers and the insecurity of the people being disciplined. Additionally, we allowed a discipler's "advice" to become permission. And as advice became permission, this practice became a leader's mechanism for controlling people. In these ways and more, this practice is sinful and must be eliminated. We will no longer have church-assigned discipling partners. There will no longer be 'discipling-trees'. We want to encourage everyone to seek out "one-another" peer relationships that will help us grow to be more Christ-like. The Bible urges us to have these relationships in order that we seek the advice of others (Pr 15:22) and to be open with each other (Ja 5:16), as well as many more "one-another" passages in the Bible. Jesus commands the young and newly baptized to be mentored in the Lord (Matt 28:18-20). We encourage all new Christians to be involved in a "mentoring" relationship in order to receive this help and training in walking as Jesus walked. The church will not assign discipleship partners (and therefore Bible Talks). Yet we'll continue to stress the value of the small group, as these groups help foster family. Organizing ourselves into small neighborhood groups for the sake of our families and for the sake of the lost remains a lasting goal.

Matt 28:18-20 is not the 'greatest command'

Matthew 28:18-20 is Bible. It is a command. But, it is not the greatest command. Yet it has remained the most discussed and 'discipled' topic in the ICOC since 1979. Certainly the making of disciples through the preaching of the Gospel is God's desire, but not to the neglect of so many other aspects of our relationship with God.

This overemphasis is wrong and has created a dysfunctional perspective on how disciples relate to God. The Great Commissioner has become a measuring stick on where we stand with God based on; how many people we invite, how many visitors we bring, how many people with whom we are studying the Bible, and how many people we have been personally involved in seeing baptized. The over-emphasis on our work of the Great Commission has been felt from the pulpit, in Midweek Classes, in discipleship-times, and in our personal conversations, as well as in our quiet times with God. This has produced anxious hearts, guilty hearts, and conflicted hearts as many of us have viewed non-Christian friends and relatives as numbers rather than as people in need of unconditional love.

Several bad practices developed as a result of this obsession with numbers, one was 'pruning' the other was our doctrine of 'reliability'.

Pruning was a practice of asking people who were deemed unrepentant to leave the church. Many were asked to leave 5+ years ago and some have been asked more recently. While the Bible does talk about church discipline for the certain unrepentant sins (Mt 18), it also says to accept those whose faith is weak (Ro 14:2) and to bear with the failings of the weak (Ro 15:1). Separating out the weak from the unrepentant became a task God did not necessarily mean for us to do as Jesus tells us in the parable in the Weeds and the Wheat in Mt 13:24-30. We did ask people to leave, in some cases, to help the church grow and not be weighed down. This is a complete lack of love for our brothers and sisters who were weak and desiring to be a part of the brotherhood. We will, with your help in contacting them, take all possible steps to ask for their forgiveness and to ask them to consider returning to our fellowship.

In an effort to build a strong, and to our shame – “attractive” church, we talked about entrusting the Gospel to “reliable men” who would be able to teach others. At face value, this is a right principle but in context the scripture is talking about whom timothy should appoint to train & equip the Christians. The RSV states it as “...entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others...” This passage is not to be used as a standard for conversion. In our pride, we used this scripture to narrow our focus on who we would study with; “reliable” and “sharp” were synonyms. This is a worldly view of people and not the view of Christ. 1 Cor 12:22-23 says, “On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.” We repent of this sinful view of people.

Growth had become a goal we’ve strived for, over and above the needs of our own spiritual family. We are sorry for our sinful priorities as Paul tells us to do good to all men but especially for the fellow Christians (Gal 6:10). We are sorry for creating any disillusionment in your own relationship with God as a result of this wrong focus. We recognize the difference between our ‘purpose’, which is to glorify God through loving Him first, and our ‘mission’, which is to seek and save the lost. Confusing these terms has created a legalistic righteousness that is sinful and will be repented of.

Financial Giving

The Bible commands that each person should decide what they want to give to God and then do it cheerfully and not under compulsion. Often times in the past this passage has been sinfully ignored and people have been compelled to give. This has caused many people heartache and sorrow and caused some to leave the church. These practices are being strongly condemned and will never be repeated. This kind of compulsion has taken the form of excessive accountability during the special contribution. People were required to call in nightly regarding their progress in raising their special contribution. This was a sinful act and should never have been done. People fell away as a result of this and those people need to be apologized to and helped to return. People were required to fill out weekly pledge cards as well as special contribution pledge cards. This was a form of control and will never be repeated. There have been times in the past where the special contribution was given and then a second effort was made to try and meet the goal. This should never have been done and amounted to forcing people to give. There have been times where comments have been made to the group which caused needless guilt as a result of not making a goal. This should not have been done and will never be repeated. We have at times tracked people’s contribution to monitor giving. This is a form of compulsion and will never be repeated. We have at times given contribution by Bible Talk. This put people in the position of being pressured to give. This was sinful and never should have been done. Each year we were given a special contribution goal by Seattle and were not involved in deciding for ourselves what we should give. This won’t ever be repeated. All of the above practices were manipulative and controlling. They caused people to stumble and feel compelled to give. We are very sorry that they ever happened and hope you will forgive us for our involvement in them.

At this time Gary Hedman is preparing a report of our local expenditures. This will be a detailed account of how our money was spent locally. This information should have been provided earlier and it reflects a lack of sensitivity on our part in not providing a more detailed account. A detailed analysis of staff salaries will be provided.

We have requested that the church in Seattle provide for us a specific accounting of how our special contribution has been spent. They have committed to sending someone to Minneapolis on either March 26th or April 2 to give a financial presentation regarding these matters. We would comment further on these matters but we are unsure regarding the specific information. A more detailed account of these matters should have been provided at an earlier date.

Conclusion:

We have attempted to address the most obvious sins and errors that have been exposed in these past few weeks. In no way is this an exhaustive list and we know more hurts and feelings will come out in the weeks ahead. Please talk with any of the staff, or anyone on the soon-to-be appointed Oversight Group, on an individual basis. We are committed to do whatever is needed to bring healing of relationships between individuals as well as in the whole church.

It is our prayer that we all grow to be more like Jesus through listening to one another, extending forgiveness to each other, and to become like Christ through a greater dependence on God. We are grateful for God's discipline as He calls us to repentance and greater righteousness. We believe He is overseeing this process to bring Himself even greater glory in His church.

Jer 31:9 "They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father..."