

To the Christians in the Orlando Church,

From the Elders, Evangelists, and Ministry Staff of the Church:

Many of you have read Henry Kriete's open letter documenting very significant systemic sins that have plagued our congregations around the world. Throughout the church's history here in Orlando, we have been guilty of many of these same sins. Late in 2002, we began giving serious consideration to the writings of some who had left the International Church Of Christ because of these abusive practices. Those thoughts, as well as the more recent ones in Henry's letter, your sharing in our open forums, and the prodding of God's Spirit in our hearts, have led us to some very deep convictions about the ways that we and other leaders spanning a 15 year period – from the reconstruction of 1988 to the present – have sinned against many individuals here, and indeed, against Christ's church itself.

These are not entirely new revelations. Beginning with the appointment of Alex Hull and Mike Morris as elders in June of 2001, we abandoned the notion of the lead evangelist as the leader of the church in favor of a consensus leadership of evangelists and elders, exemplified by the model seen in Acts 15 and the teachings of Ephesians 4:11-13. Shortly thereafter, we gave up the practice of using statistics as a means to motivate on every level, from the staff to the Bible Talk Leaders and other members. We opted instead to simply produce a list of names so that we could be focused in prayer. In January of 2003, we moved the regular giving of contribution to Sundays and have now abandoned the tracking of individual contributions. **Although we view these as positive changes, we now believe that these changes did not address the root sins and that many abuses still remain, especially those associated with the practice of 'one over another' discipling relationships.**

Given this history, we want to confess to all of you our collective leadership sins. Our 'town hall' meetings have softened our hearts and caused us to shed many tears for all the ways that so many of you have been devastated over the years. This is not in any way an exhaustive list, and we know that many individual conversations still need to occur for healing to continue. We also know that there may be other ways we have sinned against you, and we humbly ask your help in understanding those things. We have spoken with many of the past leaders of this congregation, who have read this letter and are committed to personal repentance and apology in regard to the issues listed below.

**We have failed to appoint additional Biblically qualified leaders**, especially deacons and additional elders. Instead, we have created many extra-biblical levels of leadership, and have elevated young disciples too quickly; we have then done an inadequate job of training and preparing those leaders for the work we have asked them to do. That in turn has led to many of the problems we have had.

**We have fostered a culture of control** through harsh “one over another” relationships. Though we deeply believe in the plan of Jesus for maturing the body, we have allowed that plan to degenerate into relationships that are intolerant, judgmental, harsh, and abusive. Advice has been viewed as law, leading to untold interference in many personal areas of your lives, from dating to finances to living situations and much, much more.

**We have been guilty of cowardice.** This has become clear in many ways. Over the years, we have allowed the plundering of our church by other congregations, though we felt in our hearts that it was wrong. Though we are very happy to have sent young men and women into the mission field, other requests should not have been heeded. These practices have caused many of you to lose heart, as we have devalued the building of long-term friendships. In addition, we have gone along with large missions multiples for many years without asking the specific, line-item budget questions we needed to. We have followed the directives over people we viewed as over us without deep study and consideration of the impact on the congregation here.

**We have been arrogant.** As pride is such a deep and pernicious sin, we know that we do not see all of the elements of it up front. However, we do want to discuss those that have become obvious to us.

1. Improper teaching about the one Church – Jesus has only one Church. But we have been arrogant in our teaching about His church. We have used exclusive phrases over the years, talking about the “remnant,” “God’s modern-day movement,” “the one true church,” etc. While we cannot compromise the biblical teachings regarding salvation, we repudiate any thought that we are the only Christians. Salvation is about what’s right, not who’s right, and we are happy to let God make those determinations. We now see that this arrogance has closed many doors and created many attitudes.
2. We have micromanaged statistics. For many years, we were guilty of an over-emphasis on evangelistic statistics, utilizing them to determine a person’s worth and impact. We have exalted above all the evangelistic definition of ‘fruit’ to the neglect of other biblically accurate aspects of fruitfulness, such as those associated with the fruits of the Spirit. Numerous abuses emerged from this practice.
3. We have dismissed as irrelevant the valid observations of our critics. Many people have left the church because they were hurt and devastated by many of the above-mentioned abuses. People have been labeled “fall-aways” because they have not agreed with us on all aspects of our terminology and practices. We request your help in contacting many of these people so that we can humbly apologize and request their forgiveness.

4. We have not listened humbly to you. We often ignored or minimized your valid ideas and observations. We did not provide a safe environment of expression; even worse, we have at times viewed individuals as rebellious because they voiced these convictions.
5. We have not valued your talents and gifts, nor allowed them to be used to the fullest in service to God. We have viewed our own talents as being superior and more important.
6. We have made value judgments on appearance, such as weight, and have made some members to feel devalued and disrespected. We have shown favoritism in choosing leaders, and in our evangelistic focus, based on outward appearances rather than what is in the heart.
7. We have used the authority of leadership and the threat of being kicked out of what we called the "One True Church" to threaten your security with God. If you did not do what we thought you should do, regardless of the impact on you, you were made to feel unspiritual, in defiance of God. Also, since the church was taught as the only church, if you were asked to leave or left for any other reason, you were made to feel that you were leaving God. This created great spiritual insecurity.

**We have failed to demand humility and repentance from abusive leaders.**

The reconstruction of 1988 utilized the unbiblical practice of requiring members to prove their spirituality before they were allowed to be a part of the reconstructed church rather than practicing Matt 18 in dealing with sin. After that reconstruction, other practices were introduced into the congregation that created an atmosphere of intimidation, fear, and insecurity. In 1993, the church went through what was called the "D-talks." It was an unbiblical 'pruning' of the church, a time when Christ's Church was ravaged. Instead of "letting the wheat and tares grow together until the harvest," we took upon ourselves the judgment that belongs to Christ alone. Untold misery resulted from these meetings. While we were aware that many were hurt at these times, we have minimized the pain and allowed some of those who were the most guilty to go unchallenged.

**We have demanded financial giving.** In the weekly and Special Missions contributions, we have insisted upon the giving of money, rather than allowing money to be given from the heart and not under compulsion. While we hold to the biblical principles of financial sacrifice and giving to the poor, we now pledge to give this area over to God. We renounce the tracking of individual contributions, trusting you as mature disciples to make honest, informed, and sacrificial decisions regarding your own giving. In addition to this, members were pressured to volunteer and raise additional funds for HOPE Worldwide.

**We have failed to teach the Scriptures responsibly.** Over the years, we have conducted our midweek services as pep rallies, and our Sunday services have at times been shallow and non-worshipful. Though we are very excited about 2003 being “the year of digging deeper,” and about the renewed emphasis on worshipping God in our Lord’s day meetings, these changes came about far too late, and we know that many of you have been starved spiritually. While all of us agreed to follow the Berean example before we were baptized, we as leaders have not done our part to “prepare the saints for works of service,” as the scriptures teach. We commit to you, through deeper personal study, more adequate training of our ministry staff, and consistent expository teaching and preaching, to teach to you “the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).”

Unquestionably, this brief letter is inadequate to express the incredible depth of pain that many of you have felt as a result of these sins. As mentioned earlier, we know that this is not in any way an exhaustive list. We confess, apologize and express our sorrow for these sins that we have committed. We beg your forgiveness and patience with us. We will prove our repentance by our deeds. In addition, we will seek out your input to search the scriptures and discover more biblical ways to obey the many scriptures regarding discipleship, relationships, evangelism, and many other topics. Because these things have been so deeply entrenched here, we know that we will need to be careful, prayerful, and thoughtful as we seek new ways to obey the Lord.