

From the Elders, Evangelists and Ministry Staff of the South Florida Church of Christ

To All Members

March 9, 2003

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Over the past few weeks, we have all been through a series of events beginning with the distribution of Henry Kriete's letter and the subsequent town meetings which have been held in Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach County. The elders have met with several people, both inside and outside of the church, and have had our own hearts cut and convicted by what we have heard. During this time, we have shed tears and been greatly sobered by the hurts that so many have expressed. For several years now in South Florida, we have worked to remove unbiblical practices of the past, including harsh accountability. In August of 2000, we read an apology to the church regarding these sins against many of our members which occurred between 1992 and 1998. It has become apparent to us however that our efforts have fallen far short of what they needed to be. In the last few weeks, it has become clear that our own repentance was not complete and therefore the measures we took were inadequate. Our hearts had become hardened and de-sensitized to many of these sins which we knew about but did not act on to expose and change.

One of our charges is to proclaim the word with "great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim 4:2). We have neither used great patience, nor been careful. One sister had the following criticism – "we try to fix things and move on, but we don't ever go back and open the bible and teach and explain what is wrong that is being corrected, and what is the right thing". For this, we are sorry. We want to address several items below that need to change, why they need to change, and identify our sin.

The One True Church teaching

The bible teaches that there is one church (Col 1:18, 1 Cor 12:12-13, Eph. 4:4-6). However, the International Churches of Christ has taught from the early days of our existence that there is a "remnant", a true church. The conclusion that was also taught was that we (the ICOC) were that remnant, and therefore the true church, and therefore the only ones who were saved. Therefore if you were not part of the ICOC, you were not saved. Attempts were made to recognize the possibility of other disciples outside of the borders of the ICOC which we were not aware of, but if some were found, they would need to join the ICOC to be unified with God. There are two basic problems with this teaching. First, it is an indefensible statement to say that there is no one saved outside of the ICOC, since we cannot know the heart of every person on earth. We cannot know the hearts of everyone inside of the ICOC for that matter. But the second and bigger problem with it is that it is arrogant. We reject this teaching and will not uphold it any longer. This teaching has driven many away who were honestly seeking God but could

not reconcile with the sin they saw in it. It has alienated many of our relatives and friends. Our prayer is that God will allow us the time in our lives to reconcile with as many as possible and tear down the high walls that have been put up. The beliefs that we have always held in the plan of salvation (hear the word, believe it, repent of our sins, confess Jesus as Lord, be baptized) remain the same. Simply stated, it means that there is one church, and God knows who is in it. This matter is for God to decide and not us. Our job is to present the biblical plan of salvation to people and call them to follow it. Whether or not they are in the South Florida Church of Christ or have followed God's plan in another church is not relevant. The immediate sin on our part is arrogance. Isaiah 2:17 teaches that the arrogance of man will be brought low. This is what God is doing with us at this point because of his love for us. However, the long term sin that we feel the most cut about at this point is cowardice. Many of us privately have not held this view for years and would not teach it. But we did not take the appropriate steps to publicly refute and denounce it. To our shame, this was because of our fear of retribution by other leaders who upheld this viewpoint. For this we are deeply sorry.

One Over Another Discipling

We remain committed to the biblical teaching of discipleship. Jesus teaches in Matt. 28:18-20 to go and make disciples of all nations. 1 John 2:6 teaches that whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. We are in a constant lifetime effort of discovery and changing our lives to conform to the walk of Jesus. We are constantly "discipled" or called higher by the bible or others in our life to live like Jesus. However, in our zeal to see this carried out for everyone, we have established and upheld a hierarchical structure in which those who were "more mature" in our estimation would "disciple" those who were less mature. The right thing to do would have been to carefully teach the many "one another" scriptures in the bible which contain everything that we need to equip us for every good work (2 Tim 3:17). Instead, what has been fostered is a church structure where the "advice" of the "discipler" frequently became law. Because of the perception of someone being more mature because of their assigned position in the "discipling tree", their input was given more weight and obeyed if it did not directly conflict with the bible. Many times, no consideration was given to the faith level of the person being taught or their own feelings. Once again, the primary sin here is arrogance. We wanted to "insure" that everyone received proper training and that our fellowship remained pure, but failed to use what God already had in place through the many one another scriptures, as well as the principles of confrontation of sin in Matt. 18:15-17. In fact, Jesus teaches that we are to allow the wheat and the weeds to grow together so that in our zeal to pull up weeds, we don't tear out the wheat with it. This does not rule out occasional church discipline, which we will cover in future times of teaching. Effective immediately, we are ending the practice of a discipleship tree, or one over another discipling. We are also ending the practice of assigning discipleship partners. What we are encouraging everyone in the church to become involved in are one-another relationships. Our deepest desire is to make sure that everyone in the church is taken care of and has close personal relationships. We will encourage and teach and promote this. 1 Peter 5:8 teaches us that Satan is a hungry lion, patrolling the

outskirts of the herd, looking for the weak and the young so that he can devour them. One of our greatest means of preventing this is the relationship we have with one another. (Hebrews 3:13) We encourage all members to be involved in several peer one-another relationships. These are regular times of friendship, teaching, personal accountability, or whatever the relevant need is between the participants. We encourage those who are young and newly baptized in the Lord to be involved in at least one "mentoring" relationship in order to receive help and training in walking as Jesus walked as well as peer relationships. We want to put it on the hearts of all members to pay special attention to the young and help them to establish these relationships so that they will be safe. Gal 5:1 teaches us that we have freedom in Christ. In verse 13, however, it warns us to not use that freedom to indulge the sinful nature. When we are choosing our one-another "partners", we should make a wise decision. Some of those relationships may be for great personal friendships. Others may be because we know we need someone in our life who will challenge us in an area that we are weak in. Romans 12:3 teaches us that we must have a sober view of our own strengths and weaknesses.

Special Missions

On October 29th of 2002, as a result of requests by the elders, evangelists, and board of directors for greater accountability from the Central and South American World Sector Headquarters in California as to where special missions contribution money collected here in South Florida was being spent, it came to light that two of our missions multiples were being used for ministries and special projects within the Los Angeles Church. We have discussed this in detail in the town meetings that many here attended. Needless to say, we were alarmed and concerned to find this out. We were assured at that time that this had been corrected and would not be repeated. The definition of the word "missions" in applying the money had become loose to the extent that it was being used to bolster programs that were specific to the LA Church and not CSA missions. We want to apologize on behalf of the elders here and the South Florida Church board in not demanding a full accountability from the start. Many of you have asked us "What will be done to insure that this will not happen again?" We greatly feel the burden of responsibility to take care of our foreign churches. In fact, at this hour, many of our foreign missionaries in other parts of the world are being forced to return to the United States because of an interruption of support money directly correlated to these revelations about improperly used money. To correct this situation and eliminate its potential for recurring, we want to announce today that going forward, all missions money collected here in South Florida for foreign churches will be handled within South Florida by the South Florida administration and dispensed directly to the churches we are supporting. We will need to assume direct responsibility for the financial oversight (or in larger foreign churches a percentage of the oversight) along with other churches in the Southeast for our Central and South American brothers and sisters. Last year, we made a decision, which we stuck by, that we would not try to pressure members to give the multiple to insure that our missions goal would be met. In the past, to our shame, we have upheld a practice of pressuring people to give more in order to meet the goal. Our fear is that even last year, some people may have felt this pressure in the church. This is in direct violation of 2 Cor 9:7. We want to apologize for not dealing with this as

completely as we should have. Instead, the spirit that needs to be cultivated in the church is found in 2 Cor 8:11-15. If everyone gives what they are able to give (for some that is much, and for others that is little) then everyone's needs will be met. Incidentally, the South Florida Church responded in a tremendous way in 2002, giving almost the full original goal amount. This year, in addition to 100% local oversight of the money, we are also announcing that we will not be targeting a specific multiple (number of multiples of the weekly contribution). Instead, we are calling for an offering to support the churches that will be under our financial direction and will give a full accounting of exactly how the money will be spent. We will provide this accounting in advance of the special contribution date as well as after.

Weekly Contribution

The Bible teaches us that we are to give and to sacrifice for God, but not under compulsion. People have been forced to give, make up for other people's contribution, as well as other practices that are not biblical. We humbly ask for your forgiveness in doing this and are calling for the end to these practices throughout the church. As a church, we will need to track a total contribution figure in order to accurately set and manage our own operating budget. Our outside CPA firm conducts an annual audit to make sure that our financial affairs are in order and above reproach in the eyes of the law. In order to certify our affairs, our auditing firm requires "Primary Source Documentation" of all revenue. This means detail records are required to prove the source of revenue. These records were frequently used as a tool to follow up with members for the purposes of "making budget" in the individual sectors. Again, because of 2 Cor. 9:7, we are ceasing the practice of using these records for the purpose of individual follow up.

We are planning a series of financial meetings in order to appoint a committee to evaluate the financial affairs of the church and individual concerns such as staff salaries. The committee members will not be staff members or on the Board of Directors.

Elders and Deacons

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. Because of cowardice on the part of the elders, prior to the last few months we have not insisted on a proper consideration of the Elder's role. In Titus 1:5, the apostle Paul considered the elders so vital that he instructed Titus the evangelist to appoint elders in every town. The elder is to be a shepherd and overseer of the flock. (1 Tim 3:1, 5:17) The strength of his years of wisdom and spiritual training in many life situations are to be held in high regard by the evangelist, staff, and church members. In the past few years, there has been an increase in the regard of this role here in South Florida, but not to the extent that God explains it in the New Testament passages. We believe that this neglect has led to many of the issues we are faced with today in the ICOC. The evangelist is forced into a role of being an expert in all areas, which is impossible for any man. This "one man leadership" model is a weak one. Some wiser leaders have sought the input of a group of trusted advisors, but more is called for. We

still have much study to do on this matter, but moving forward, we want to inform everyone that church decisions are being made and will continue to be made by the Brushes, Porters, and Kuhns in consensus with each other along with input from the staff, members of the board and various members of the church. We will proceed with all possible speed in the training and appointment of additional qualified men to be non-staff elders, as well as studying out and appointing qualified men to serve as deacons throughout the church. We are asking for the membership to submit recommendations to the elders for any men who possess the qualifications to be appointed as deacons which are outlined in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 as soon as possible so we can proceed quickly. These deacons will be the beginning of a representative group of individuals that will review and help decide on the direction of the church and the use of the finances.

Dating Rules

Within the ICOC and the South Florida Church, traditionally dating among singles and college students has been a troublesome experience. This is because over the years, in the interests of maintaining purity in relationships, many rules were stated at various times including not spending time together alone, not traveling in a car together alone, etc. It is difficult to address all of them because there have been many. We reject and refute these types of rules which are an attempt to “legislate” morality and wisdom. The governing of dating relationships needs to come from our own hearts and a deep desire to remain pure before God. This is fully explained in Gal. 5:1-15. We have freedom in Christ and should not let ourselves be burdened again by a yolk of slavery. However in verse 13, we are not to use our freedom to indulge the sinful nature. The bible should be the only thing that governs how we conduct ourselves in dating. Our desire should be to avoid even a hint of sexual immorality (Eph. 5:3). There needs to be much additional teaching done on this subject within the church for our singles, campus and teens.

Study Series

The study series that we use to teach others how to become a Christian has been a useful tool and framework over the years for teaching the plan of salvation. However, elements of it have perpetuated some of the false doctrine we have refuted above. It will need to be examined and re-written as necessary. This is not and will not be in place to be taken as “law”, but is provided as a framework to study the bible with for those we lead to Christ. We will be appointing a group of men throughout the church to re-examine the series and re-write it as necessary.

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 worked with the evangelist of the congregation to set the course of the teaching, evangelism and finances. To our shame, that has not been the case. The past has been one of pressure and control from outside individuals. We sincerely ask your forgiveness for allowing this as it has hurt many of you individually as well as the church collectively. We have allowed other churches and needs dictate many of our decisions as to the direction of the South Florida Church. Many people have been hurt by disrupting their

lives by asking them to move and go to another church to meet its needs and the church here has been hurt by the resulting lack of people who could help guide and shepherd other Christians. Since November, the elders have been autonomous in their decisions regarding the direction of the church. No one and no church, Los Angeles or otherwise, has been directing or commanding any decisions as to staff, use of money, goals, the day to day ministry or any other activity of the church. This includes the hiring of John and Barbara Porter or John and Silvia Reus to come from churches in South America. We are still committed to a brotherhood of the churches and will follow the biblical admonitions as to advice and wisdom for the sake of biblical unity and love. Our unity will be based on true Christian love and respect and not a system or hierarchy of churches or individuals. We are committed to the evangelization of the world with our specific focus on the churches in South America.

In -Depth Teaching

As we made reference to above, one of our charges is to teach with careful instruction. 2 Timothy 2:15 teaches that we must correctly handle the word of truth. Eph. 4:12 teaches that God's people are to be prepared for works of service. The ministry staff and elders are to feed the members with in-depth Bible study in sermons, midweek lessons and other times of Bible exposition and teaching. In order for these things to happen, there must be in-depth teaching for the staff in an on-going basis. We are also encouraging members of the congregation to study out biblical themes and topics in order to teach others in the church. The elders and staff of the church are committing to providing an atmosphere and plan for this to happen as we move into the future. This in no way is an exhaustive list of the repentance and changes needed here in South Florida. There will be more times needed to express whatever hurts and concerns there are. We urge everyone to talk to leaders, elders and ministry staff, on an individual basis if there are specific apologies needed or sins confronted. (Matthew 18: 15) We, as elders, are committed to do whatever is needed to bring the healing of relationships between individuals as well as in the whole church. We pray that God will bring a great healing and sense of wonder because of his love and mercy through all of this.

Joel 2 – A collective call to repentance and responsibility

NIV Joel 2:1 Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come. 3 Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste—nothing escapes them. 4 They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. 5 With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. 6 At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. 7 They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. 8 They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead. They plunge through defenses without breaking ranks. 9 They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they

enter through the windows. 10 Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. 11 The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? **12 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'** 13 **Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.** 14 **Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing-- grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.** 15 **Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.** 16 **Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast.** Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. 17 Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, 'Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God?"' 18 **Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people.** 19 **The LORD will reply {18,19 Or LORD was jealous...and took pity... 19 The LORD replied} to them: 'I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.'**

We believe that the above passage in Joel 2 is showing us exactly where we are. The Lord has brought this day upon us. This is not a victory of Satan, but a victory of God. It is better to come under God's judgement now rather than the judgement day. We want to bring this before all of the members of the South Florida Church today and declare a holy fast. For ourselves, we are declaring this coming week to be a week of prayer and fasting for those of us who are elders and full time staff. At various times during the week, we will be involved in times of prayer, mourning, and fasting over our sins. We are declaring Wednesday, March 12th to be a day of prayer and fasting throughout the South Florida Church. This will be a time for all of us who participated in the sins and practices discussed in this letter to go before God and ask his forgiveness whether on staff or as a member. It will be a plea for the healing of God to come to our souls and the forgiveness needed to be given and to receive for the church to grow and mature. This will also be a time to pray and fast for the future of our brotherhood around the world and the challenges it faces as we enter a new era.