

# The Road Ahead!

## An Open Letter from the Staff to the Members of the San Francisco Church of Christ June 15, 2003

*[The following text was copied from that posted to the Delphi ICC Discussion Forum on Monday, June 16, 2003. The poster retyped it from a paper copy of an open letter distributed during Sunday Services the day before. A photocopy is on its way to me, and I will check the text of this and update it if necessary when I receive the photocopy.]*

*[Any comments within the text will be in a sans-serif font, italicized and enclosed in square brackets. Everything else is the text as I received it. -- Catherine Hampton.]*

O LORD my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me, or they will tear me like a lion and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me. O LORD my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands if I have done evil to him who is at peace with me or without cause have robbed my foe then let my enemy pursue and overtake me; let him trample my life to the ground and make me sleep in the dust.

Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. Let the assembled peoples gather around you. Rule over them from on high; let the LORD judge the peoples. Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High.

-- Psalm 7:1-8

These are difficult days for the International Churches of Christ. There are ever deepening divisions finding fertile ground in the weary hearts worn down by the emotional distress of unresolved conflict. Here is the San Francisco Church of Christ many of us have gone unaffected by the global crisis that exists in the fellowship of our churches; because we have remained strengthened in our resolve to keep the unity of the spirit. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to make you aware of the truth about our fellowship of churches. What was initially trumpeted as a time of freedom in Christ is beginning to be exposed as a devastatingly unspiritual time of rebellion, compromise and an unwillingness to forgive. Hundreds of former full time staff members have been fired, chased out or resigned from the churches where they once served. Entire churches full of faithful disciples have been dismantled leaving everyone to find their doctrine, direction, and destiny. While a solid number of churches remain intact, the future of our fellowship is unclear. Communication is distressingly unreliable as more and more disciples get their information from rumors on the Internet, gossip through email, and the slander induced by bitterness toward those who have not jumped headlong into the waters of this alleged revival. Let us pray that God will again make the righteous secure.

My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day. If he does not relent, he will sharpen his sword; he will bend and string his bow. He has prepared his deadly weapons; he makes ready his flaming arrows. He who is pregnant with evil and conceives trouble gives birth to

disillusionment. He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head. I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High.

*-- Psalm 7:10-17*

Let there be no confusion about the fact that the current state is the result of sin. There has been sin in the pulpit and sin in the pew. What has widely been viewed as a corruption of the leadership has certainly morphed into a corruption of the fellowship. Unspiritual leadership has produced unspiritual fellowship resulting in a collapse of all that we have previously knows. There is no question that the adulterous affair between an idolatrous fellowship and an arrogant leadership has produced a pregnancy of evil. The evil has manifested itself in massive levels of distrust, personal attacks and a culture where the power of oppression no longer finds its origins in the unspiritual pulpit but is now propagated by an unspiritual pew. These words will be greeted by some as long overdue, while others will become incensed and feel this is more evidence of a controlling leadership unwilling to hear the voice of the people. Let us be clear when we say that as a leadership our love for the people is great, but it is not nearly as great as our love for God and his word. We therefore find it impossible to join those in leadership who hide in caves and thickets unwilling to speak until they have tested the air with their finger to find out which way the winds of opinion are flowing. It is imperative that we seek God and follow his word for our guidance, and together with our great brothers and sisters move forward with unity to see God's will done.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

*-- John 17:20-23*

The hope of the world's 7 billion people in dimmer today than any time in the last 20 years, as our association of ICOC churches could offer no contradiction to the spiritual obituary in a Boston newspaper reporting our fallen leadership, deep divisions and collapsed churches. God has had the world speak to us a truth we cannot bring ourselves to face and that is that currently we are failing to fulfill the prayer of Jesus that we would be completely unified so that the world would know that he had been sent by God. We have been reduced to the punch line of a joke about a group that laid a foundation, but was unable to finish (Luke 14:29-30). No matter the excuse. No matter the reason or rationale. A world at war with terror and disease has been told to wait until the sick saints decide to get better. Some have compared our collapse to the tragedy of September 11th, but when they say and think these things they are revealing a tremendous loss of spiritual awareness. If anything 9-11 should have served as a 911 call to disciples around the world reminding them that Satan is filled with fury. The call was made, but we failed to answer, and now we find ourselves trying to explain away our complete failure angry with anyone who

would attempt to say the spiritual cure applied to our ailments may well be worse than the disease.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

*-- Matthew 7:15-20*

We empathize with those who would rather not talk about all of this, because it makes us feel fearful as well. We feel a tightening of the throat, and butterflies in our stomachs with each word we read. Nevertheless it has become clear to each one of us that we cannot widen the road that Jesus has made narrow. We cannot force God's word to fit us, but we must instead call ourselves to fit God's word. Our comfort in the face of the scriptural standards is that we recognize that we are on the right road by looking at the fruit of our lives. While some of us are worried or concerned about what is going on in the global community of ICOC churches it is important to understand that there is a paradigm shift from God that must be respected. With the dissolution of the world sector leaders group God was unleashing the local churches from a centralized authority so that each leader and disciple could dedicate themselves to evangelizing their city. At the same time it seems clear that God was also trying to communicate to us that each church in every city was different. The needs, interests, personalities and passions of the various cultures, races and nations represented in our global fellowship required specific attention and focus in order to build churches God could use to finish the job of evangelizing a lost world. Therefore it is crucial that we look in the mirror of God's word to see what we look like, inspect the fruit of our lives and work together in our fellowship to build our local church to fulfill God's dreams for the Bay Area. It is also important that our brothers and sisters around the world do the same. Unfortunately some people their time attempting to do what the world sector leaders would do, and that is dictate to each church how they need to build and operate. This mistake made by the world sector leaders is largely responsible for the firestorm of criticism hurled toward leadership, so we cannot in this new day make the same mistake of insisting that everyone follow some cookie cutter method of church building. We must mature spiritually so that we can be respectful of our creative differences in building churches, and not allow distrust to cause us to malign and attack each other based on the assumption that anyone not following the party line is failing to repent or change. The only way to truly be sure that a church is building correctly is by looking at the fruit of their efforts not the comfort of their expectations.

We feel confident and secure with the good fruit that God is producing in the San Francisco Church of Christ. It is not our intention to boast of anything except what God has been able to do with our weak flesh and sinful failings. The recent Shoreline service was an overwhelming success as we celebrated our tenth anniversary there with a wonderful time of fun, food, fellowship and the fruitful harvest of multiple baptisms into Christ. The peaceful and intimate fellowship of our unified body marked time as having been good to us and affirmed the fact that

our unwillingness to abandon the sound doctrine of imitating Jesus, discipling one another, and seeking and saving the lost has allowed us to keep the hope alive.

God has provided us with another ringing endorsement as devastating economic times and turbulent spiritual conditions were not able to defeat the faith of disciples in our church as June 1st marked another special contribution where we gave beyond the goal. With a goal of 10 times the church gave 11.6 times for a total of 1.1 million dollars. We stand in awe of God and each one of you as a sent message that you still believe. Once again it is the fruit of our lives that makes us recognizable as being with Jesus, not the arguments or debates that we put forward. Thank you for your faith in God, expression of trust toward our leadership, and the endorsement of the Bible by the lives that each one of you are living. Know that you are an encouragement to hundreds of thousands of disciples around the world. Recently we had a visit from one full time couple in the kingdom who shared with many of us that it was such an encouragement to be in San Francisco to realize that the dream was not dead, people could still love each other, and that trust was not simply a relic of the past. Another non-fulltime couple came to San Francisco on a job interview and upon seeing the stability of the church and the commitment to the fundamentals of the Bible decided that they wanted to move to better insure that their children would grow up to be faithful disciples. There are stories like this being reported everyday and they stand as another fruit filled sign of God's blessing on each of you for your hearts of faith and obedience to his word.

At this point it would seem important to address the direction of the church going forward. What are we going to do? What does it mean to restore New Testament Christianity? Will we ever get to the point where we can put all of this behind us? When can we feel the serenity of a unified kingdom? There are many questions and many answers, but they all depend upon our willingness to focus on God and become serious about our faith and personal convictions. Here are some basic points that will help us on the road ahead.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

*-- John 6:60-69*

Jesus often taught messages. That reminded his disciples of his mission. John 6:60-69 was one of those times, and we can see that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Jesus was undeterred by these defections, and turned to the twelve to make sure they didn't want

to leave as well. He wanted to find out how serious they were about changing things. You see, Jesus was different! Jesus changed things!

Though the International Churches of Christ fellowship of churches with which we have been affiliated is only a shell of its former self we can still look to Jesus. Hebrews 13:8 is still true when it says “Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever.” We can no longer count on our human organization’s ability to unify, but must repent and return to an all consuming love for Jesus Christ and his word and through our relationship with him overcome the organizational dysfunction that currently plagues our global fellowship. Rather than being swept up in the intrigues of men let us refocus on Jesus so that the future is better than the past. Jesus was different! Jesus changed things!

The entire religious and political structure of the world changed when Jesus came on the scene. Jesus was not willing to limit himself to the organized religious effort to fix things. He couldn’t content himself with making things better. He really changed things. He rocked the status quo with such force that they killed him, because the pain of the change he called for was too great for so many. He didn’t die because he was an evil man, but rather he died because he was a different man.

We pause to pose the question for each one of us at this hour. Is Jesus still walking the earth today? What we mean is that the church is supposed to be the body of Christ, so the only way that Jesus can be walking the earth is if there are churches filled with people who want to be like him. It can’t be limited to the full time ministry staff or the non-full time ministry staff. We can’t put this responsibility on the elders and evangelist alone. This cannot be for the men and not for the women. No one is too young or too old, and your socioeconomic condition doesn’t limit your ability to be like Jesus. Jesus can walk the earth when every single person in the fellowship is committed to being like Him with a hunger and thirst for the type of friendship accountability that makes this dream a reality one change at a time.

Living here in San Francisco we know something about change. From the innovations of Silicon Valley to the social movements of Berkeley and Oakland we change things. When all around the country move in one direction, those of us in San Francisco have always been willing to call that direction into question and if necessary march to the beat of a different drummer. Interestingly enough we may find ourselves in a similar state of being as a church, and that would make some sense given where we live. God has blessed us with a relatively spiritual peace as we have dealt with our leadership sins, your forgiveness, and all our responsibility to call one another to imitate Jesus.

The comparative calm of our church has made many think that we are not making any changes. Some have unceasingly encouraged rebellion in disciples that are part of our church in the hope that they would force an unrepentant leadership to change. This is a sad state of affairs, because we can assure you that there is no leadership in the kingdom more committed and determined to reassess, reframe, redefine or reinvent the church until we get it right.

## SPIRITUAL REASSESSMENT

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

*-- Acts 20:25-31*

The spiritual reassessment of our church has made clear to us that we had to relieve the strain on the few and share the strain among many. One of the best developments born from this evaluative time is the application of what we consider to be a Biblically innovative model of spiritual leadership in the San Francisco Church of Christ. We have continued to have our elders and evangelists leading as a team based on our desire to remove the burden from one man and share it among many. This has led to a greater involvement by a varied number of elders and evangelists in helping the church within the Net World Sector as well as regions throughout the San Francisco Church. Many of you can attest to hearing from and connecting with a great many leaders which has taken the focus off man and put it on God as so many have respectfully and humbly accepted help from new faces and relationships rather than having to have the one man. We are grateful for your help and confident that you have seen the huge difference in our public efforts, which are really an expression of our private leadership style.

The spiritual leadership of the church has also expanded beyond the offices of elder and evangelist. We have empowered a new set of house church leaders with more decision-making involvement than ever before. While we are still in the learning stages it is exciting to see house church leaders expressing their opinions as well as the opinions and perspectives of the members of their house churches. We anticipate radical growth in the church as we make use of the great depth of faith and talent in the church because we rely more and more on the house church as the central fellowship component of the church.

In addition to the house church leaders is our recent appointment of a brand new set of deacons who have willingly put themselves forward to serve the church in meeting the varied needs of disciples. We look forward to them developing plans and programs to meet the specific needs of the disciples, and allow the quality of all our lives to be greatly improved.

These faithful brothers and sisters have provided much needed support and friendship for those of us in the full time ministry, and increased our awareness of where the church is at emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. One of the reasons that we are communicating this lesson and message in printed form is because of the influence of these great men and women.

## REFRAMING COMMITMENT

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

-- *Titus 1:5-11*

One of the things that all of the input received has done for us is made it clear that we need to reframe what commitment means in our fellowship. The conviction that we have is that every single member needs to be a disciple, and be willing to obey the scriptures. The aforementioned turbulence in the kingdom has provided us with a great opportunity to repent with regard to our letter of apology from earlier this year. We expressed a deep resolve to repent of our compromised church building that was rooted in an attempt to keep our numbers large. While we feel we have done a good job opening up lines of communication through talks, appointments and the transformed leadership model, there is no question that we are far behind in the area of expecting every single member to be a disciple. We have received significant complaints from the San Jose region of the church in particular and so we want to make some things patently clear.

1. Hebrews 13:17 calls everyone to make the work of those that watch over their souls a joy. The Bible calls each disciple to submit to and obey the Bible and that requires a unity with the local leadership of the church. We recognize the right of every human being and disciple to make their own choices. We are making the direction of the church clear so that people can decide what they want to do with regard to being part of the church. Some have chosen to move to other church because they felt there was a better fit, and others have simply decided to leave the church. We respect both of these groups, and applaud them for making a decision. This avoids the past reputation the churches in our fellowship have had for forcing people to stay. Part of our reframing is that we do not want to have to ever feel like we have to make someone stay in the church again. This is why we have encouraged these decisions, and we are very sincere about it,
2. There is a situation in San Jose involving some members that is troubling to us. In Matthew 18:15-17, the Bible says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and

if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” We have failed to obey this scripture in dealing with certain members of the church in this area, and so after 5 years of trying to resolve, unify, and reconcile with several of these individuals we want to apologize to all the disciples in San Jose for not making it painfully clear that the divisiveness of these individuals can no longer be tolerated. We have met with them and apologized for various sins and misunderstandings. We have confronted them on their divisiveness on multiple occasions throughout this 5-year period. We have changed leaders constantly in an attempt to find a compatible fit for these people, often ignoring the concerns of the majority for this small but vocal minority. At the end of the day we can no longer tolerate their slander, factious rebellion, deceit, and false claims of approval from outside church leaders. In multiple cases it has been claimed that an elder of the Los Angeles church condoned what they were doing but after the elders in San Francisco made contact to clarify these claims it turned out that this was a completely fabricated bit of rumor and gossip created to make it look as though these individuals were not in rebellion and sin. The result of this deceit was that some members were misled into thinking that a June 1st service of about 30 members, held by this group, was a part of the church. This is most certainly what Paul was talking about when he said that the divisive men of Crete were ruining whole households. It is important that you be aware that these individuals made a decision to leave by their own will and volition. We did not ask them to leave. We are not disfellowshipping them. We are simply acknowledging the fact that they made a choice that they have not been honest about. They chose to start their own church, miss our special contribution Sunday, and met in groups to organize their opposition, but insist that they have not left the church. They have left the San Francisco church. If they would like to publicly repent, apologize and get unified then we gladly welcome them in the fellowship with the love that motivated us to make 5 years of effort to keep them faithful, but anything less than this will not heal the damage done to so many.

3. We want everyone to be part of God’s church, but it is not possible to have a healthy church when people don’t take responsibility for their choices. We have repented of our desire to have a large church for the sake of having a large church. We simply want to have a church of disciples that are committed to each other in love, and determined to live like Jesus as they save this dark and dying world from the destructive hand of Satan’s fury.

Perhaps there is no better way to close than to acknowledge the fact that there is no man or group to blame for the condition of our fellowship of churches. The powers of darkness will always be aligned against God’s church, and we must humble ourselves and accept the fact that we are in a spiritual battle not a human one. This is why the month of June we are calling on every disciple to devote themselves to prayer that we might tap into God’s power igniting a revival of faith, hope and love as we travel down the road ahead. Even now church leaders, non- full time leaders, and disciples around the world are turning to God as they find their footing on the road ahead. Here in San Francisco we are excited. We have longed for a time of redefinition and reinvention, because we believe that this is a new day. There are many mistakes we have made in the past that alienated people in the world, and we want to change those. There are too many occasions where we have not tapped into the diverse body of believers here in our church to serve the community in vital ways. We look toward the future with the confidence that we can

**SAN FRANCISCO CHURCH OF CHRIST  
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take this tragedy and through redefinition and reinvention change ourselves into a body of believers suited for the job of evangelizing the world in the 21st century.