

Missions Support Report For ICOC Fellowship of Churches

Andy Fleming -- Los Angeles, California

February 7, 2006

Editor's Note: *Andy and Tammy Fleming have served God boldly for many years. They led the church planting of young disciples to Moscow that God grew into over 10,000 disciples throughout Eurasia. God has blessed their substantial, joyful sacrifices as they always have shown a heart for him, his people and for the lost. Andy now serves as missionary for Middle East Missions while also traveling and strengthening churches in Eurasia and Europe. At the request of many brothers, he coordinated and wrote the following report on the current status of missions support among the International Churches of Christ.*

MISSIONS' SUPPORT UPDATE *for the worldwide fellowship of the* **International Churches of Christ (ICOC)**

When asked what the greatest commandment in the Law was, Jesus replied:

*'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commands. **Matthew 22:37-40***

Within these two commandments Jesus also described the necessary heart for both our purpose and our mission as his disciples. We were created for an eternal relationship of love with God and that alone is our highest purpose – to love him with everything we have. Secondly, we are to love our fellowman with the same kind of love that Jesus demonstrated to us, and within that love a mission is born – the mission to seek and save that which was lost. Both our purpose and our mission affect how we live in this present age, and I pray that we never forget these clear and simple priorities of Jesus. Although this report contains a lot of information, I pray that more than anything else God moves our hearts to continue to take the gospel across the fence, across the street, across town, across the country ... around the world.

The following report is based on the most currently available information regarding missions support among our fellowship of churches. We gathered it from websites, church bulletins, numerous emails and phone conversations. Many thanks to all those who helped gather this information and cooperated in the formulation of this article. This study will be divided into five sections dealing first with some historical background to our mission efforts, then some thoughts regarding differing financial situations worldwide, then a discussion on our present organizational structures, followed by the details of our current levels of financial contribution and then a final word about the ongoing call for world evangelism.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:

The worldwide family of churches that has come to be known as the International Churches of Christ has always been focused on Jesus' mission to seek and to save the lost. This clear sense of mission led to a rapidly growing movement that planted an amazing number of congregations in most of the major countries of the world within a very short time. Since our worldwide structure has been greatly reduced over the past few years with a significant amount of decentralization, the continuity and stability of our mission work has also been profoundly affected.

In order to understand the current situation of mission support among our congregations, it would probably be useful to review some of the history leading up to the present time. In 1988, Kip McKean along with other recognized leaders in the Boston Movement of the Churches of Christ, agreed upon and implemented a plan to formally group local congregations into affiliated associations (i.e., World Sectors) for the express purpose of coordinating mission efforts and implementing consistent church growth strategies.

After a number of transitions and realignments, this plan resulted in the formation of eight distinct Geographic World Sectors (*ACES, British Commonwealth, Central South America [CSA], China, Middle East [MEWS], New England / European Mainland [NEEM], Northern Federation and Pac Rim*), as well as four auxiliary World Sectors (*Administration, HOPE worldwide, Media/Law and the NET*). In 1992, another corporate entity was created as an umbrella organization for the established World Sectors and was called 'The International Churches of Christ' (ICOC) which resulted in the following organizational paradigm: individual supporting congregations were charter members of the World Sector organizations, and all the World Sectors were charter members of the ICOC. Financially, the World Sectors (and the ICOC organization) were supported through revenue from annual special contributions from the supporting congregations. This background information is important since the coordination of our worldwide mission efforts was being directed through the World Sector organizations, and destabilization of those organizations would also have a direct effect on the stability of our mission efforts.

In November 2002 at an International Leaders meeting in Long Beach, the World Sector Leaders announced the dissolution of the World Sector Leader Group (which also functioned as the ICOC Ecclesiastical Council), to allow for the reformation of a new worldwide leadership structure within the ICOC. To make the next step in this process, it was also decided to schedule a 'transitional' council meeting for May 2003 in order to discuss the principles for defining a representative leadership group in place of the former World Sector Leaders group.

These decisions also opened the door for each World Sector to begin to reevaluate their own leadership paradigms, and it became clear that a number of World Sector leadership groups had already developed some serious, unresolved conflict issues. Unexpectedly, these decisions also destabilized the leadership positions of a number of Geographic Sector Leaders (the next level of regional leadership within the World Sectors) since their respective leadership groups also felt that it was time for reorganization and change – the most notable situation was probably that in London, England involving the whole United Kingdom Geographic Sector.

Generally speaking, the clear communication of these intentions and efforts for change were either too slow (or even nonexistent in some cases), and before this process had time to move forward in an orderly fashion, a wave of distrust and discontent was incited among our worldwide membership through some widely publicized and overstated accusations. The informational vacuum was now filled with an incredible amount of negative details (some true, some not) and much emotion (some sinful, some not), and to varying degrees, the already weakened structures of the World Sectors collapsed and disintegrated.

Although, most people would agree that many good things have come about through this time of testing and reevaluation like 'greatly increased communication and accountability of the church leadership to the membership' and 'more respect being shown to the membership with more influence and attention being given

to non-fulltime ministry roles', there has also been a negative impact on our mission work since the changes (especially the decrease in financial support) have caused both insecurity and operational difficulties through staff reductions, program cutbacks and a breakdown in much-needed mentoring (especially in the younger mission congregations). This weakening of spiritual support was primarily the result of the lay-offs and resignations of many ministers and administrators previously responsible for regional 'evangelistic' efforts and leadership training. Although there was initially a significant amount of confusion and a loss of direction, the situation is beginning to slowly improve with a number of reconfigured World Sector organizations and newly-formed Mission Societies soliciting the help of their supporting congregations to spiritually encourage and strengthen their respective mission congregations – not to mention the direct adoption of some mission congregations by groups of first world congregations in certain situations. It has also been encouraging to see national leadership in larger non-U.S. congregations rising to the challenge and continuing to guide their congregations to maturity as well as support smaller congregations in their geographic areas. Unlike their first world counterparts, many third world Geographic Sectors have remained much more in tact and the reality of some measure of regional leadership among these congregations is still seen by many as an asset and important for the further development and evangelization of their respective regions.

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF FINANCIAL STRENGTH:

At the end of 2002, the ICOC statistical database gave the following data:

Jan. 1 2003	# of Congregations	% of TOTAL	Membership	% of TOTAL
Group 1	170	38.7%	66,021	48.9%
Group 2	15	3.4%	1,437	1.1%
Group 3	254	57.9%	67,588	50.0%
TOTAL:	439	100.0%	135,046	100.0%
Congregations in 162 countries				

Originally these groupings represented the economic conditions of the respective countries, (i.e., first world, second world, third world), and in principle these designations meant that *Group 1* congregations were expected to become Special Missions contributors after 2 years of existence (receiving initial support at the time of planting), *Group 2* congregations had more flexibility due to a lower economic level (but generally treated as *Group 1*) and *Group 3* congregations were always 'receiving congregations' by simple definition. As we move forward in world evangelism it may be more useful to adapt this categorization somewhat to indicate the economic position of each congregation based on their financial resources and numerical size (it would seem that the age of a congregation is of minor significance when compared to actual numerical size, and also that the second world delineation is not really that useful). The new categories are as follows and would be loosely based on some simple guidelines:¹

¹ I've received some feedback that <100 (U.S., Canada) might actually be more appropriate.

Category	National Economy	Numerical Size
Group A	first world	<50 (U.S., Canada); <100 (others)
Group 1	first world	>50 (U.S., Canada); >100 (others)
Group 2	non-first world	>500
Group 3	non-first world	<500

This chart would then assume the following working definitions:

- *Group A* – small first world congregations working to become self-supporting but still needing help;
- *Group 1* – first world congregations that are self-supporting and contributing to missions;
- *Group 2* - mostly self-supporting congregations and contributing to missions;
- *Group 3* - mostly dependent on outside missions support.

Such thinking would promote a more mature (and more benevolent) attitude towards small first world congregations who may still need to be considered ‘mission congregations’ and receive financial support, and also raise the bar of expectation for larger third world congregations to begin to help in financing the evangelization of their own countries and world regions. At the moment we have:

Group A and Group 1 Churches

64 congregations outside the U.S. and Canada,
 3 congregations of 1,000–2,000 members,
 15 congregations of 100–400 members,
 12 congregations of 50–100 members, and
 34 congregations of less than 50 members.

Two of our largest congregations, Hong Kong (2,000 members) and Singapore (1,000 members), gave \$347,750 and \$90,000 respectively to missions. As far as I am able to understand, the other 16 congregations with more than 100 members gave about \$80,000 collectively, and most should probably be considered *Group A* congregations. With great sensitivity and respect for these existing congregations (some of which are more than 15 years old), I do believe that other mature and capable congregations (or even individual disciples) need to step up and offer to help. We do not currently have any Mission Societies focused on either the U.K or Australia, but I know from personal experience that a number of these 28 congregations (20 in the U.K., 8 in Australia) would greatly appreciate more outside involvement for spiritual training, encouragement and in some cases, even financial help. My final comment regarding these *Group A* congregations is one of commendation to 19 of these small congregations who gave more than \$50,000 to missions collectively (with probably another \$20,000 pledged but not as yet confirmed) – what a great example of sacrifice and mission-mindedness!

It should also be noted that although I have used this new ‘*Group 2*’ designation in this report, the significant decrease in mission funding over the past three years has forced many of our larger non-first world congregations to apply their annual special contributions to fund these reductions locally. This situation will improve and I know that many of these congregations are very excited about moving towards full self-supporting status as well as funding regional mission work in their part of the world.

Group 2 Churches

24 congregations
 2 congregations over 3,000 members (Mexico City, Manila),
 4 congregations of 2,000-3,000 members (Kiev, Moscow, Lagos, Abidjan),
 5 congregations of 1,000-2,000 (Jakarta, Sao Paulo, Nairobi, Seoul, Bangalore),
 12 congregations of 500-1,000 (Novosibirsk, Chennai, Guatemala City, Kingston, Monterrey, St. Petersburg, Santo Domingo, Kinshasa, Taipei, Bogotá, San Pedro Sula, New Delhi).

I have also categorized the Kuala Lumpur congregation as *Group 2* although it only has 355 members because it has become self-supporting and collected \$26,067 for missions in 2005 – again, a great example of sacrifice and mission-mindedness!

According to the most current information found at [Disciples Today](#) and [icocinfo.org](#)² (together with the results of my own survey in recent months) the number of congregations has now increased by 108 to 546, and we currently have membership data for 512 (93%) of these. Considering that the remaining 35 congregations do not have more than 1,000 disciples collectively, the data gathered for this report is about 99% complete from a ‘total membership’ perspective although it is based mostly on 2004 year-end reports and awaits new data from 2005. Using this revised categorization, here is an updated breakdown of our congregations worldwide:

Jan. 1 2006	# of Congregations	% of TOTAL	Membership	% of TOTAL	Average Congregation Size
Group A	72	13.2%	3,110	3.0%	43
Group 1	142	26.0%	48,373	46.8%	341
Group 2	24	4.4%	31,412	30.4%	1309
Group 3	308	56.4%	20,444	19.8%	66
TOTAL:	546	100.0%	103,339	100.0%	189
Congregations in 160 countries					

Although a few new congregations have been planted, most of this increase in the number of congregations is probably due to certain congregations that previously included multiple cities having now recognized their various satellite regions, sectors and/or family groups as separate congregations, as well as a few single-city congregations recognizing former regions or sectors as separate congregations (i.e., London, Washington D.C., Atlanta, etc.). At the same time only a very small number of congregations have actually disappeared³ and a few have merged with larger ones nearby. The current membership of the ICOC is estimated to be about 105,000 and is currently found in 160 different countries. (It should also be noted that we are still supporting 30 underground congregations in 12 different countries and for their safety will not mention those countries explicitly throughout this report).

RECENT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS:

Although it is true that most of the historic alliances have been maintained between the various groups of supporting congregations and their corresponding mission congregations, the way in which this support is now gathered and distributed varies greatly among the former World Sectors. Whereas there once were eight Geographic World Sectors, most of these have been dissolved, reconstituted and replaced (except for MEWS which continues to function as a simple mission society). The remaining seven World Sectors have either been

² Thanks to Kelcy Hahn for his tireless, servant spirit in maintaining this website. Thanks also to Roger Lamb who has agreed for Disciples Today to take over this crucial responsibility.

³ In the last 20 years there have actually been 22 plantings that failed to take root (not counting those that we were able to successfully replant later), and 9 of those were our only congregation in that particular country – needless to say, these are in some of the most dangerous and difficult mission fields of our generation. Also at this point, I am only aware of one small non-U.S. congregation that has specifically requested to no longer be counted as part of our worldwide fellowship – the great majority of ICOC congregations share the common conviction that we need to continue to work together and build each other up in the faith.

replaced with one or more newly created Mission Societies⁴ or have partnered up the former supporting congregations (individually or by group) with specific mission congregations (also individually or by group). The specific changes by former World Sector are as follows:

1. The **ACES WS** has been replaced with one Mission Society (located in South Africa) and a few congregational pairings:
 - a. it would appear that at least 12 of the former ACES congregations (*New York City Church of Christ, Triangle Church, The Charlotte Church, Columbia Church of Christ, San Antonio Intl. Church of Christ, The Fayetteville Church, Central New York Church of Christ, Charleston Church of Christ, The Chattanooga Church of Christ, Greenville Church of Christ and Buffalo Church of Christ*) and a number of former regions of the Atlanta congregation are sending their support directly to the *African Mission Fund* (Johannesburg, South Africa) from which it is distributed throughout the Sub-Saharan countries;
 - b. the *New York City Church of Christ*, one former region of the Atlanta congregation (and possibly some others) are directly supporting mission points in the Caribbean.
2. The **British Commonwealth WS** has been replaced with 12 church (or church group) pairings:
 - a. *Indianapolis / Fort Wayne, IN* (INDIA - Bombay Group)
 - b. *Baltimore / Montgomery, MD* (INDIA - Bangalore Group)
 - c. *Detroit / Grand Rapids, MI* (INDIA - Cochin Group, PAPUA NEW GUINEA)
 - d. *Philadelphia, PA* (INDIA - Delhi Group, Calcutta Group)
 - e. *Charlottesville / Norfolk / Richmond, VA* (INDIA - Hyderabad, Madras, Colombo, Pondy, Trichy)
 - f. *Washington, D.C.* (FIJI)
 - g. *Newark, DE* (INDONESIA - Yogyakarta)
 - h. *Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Toledo, OH* (INDONESIA - Jakarta)
 - i. *Harrisburg, PA; Singapore, SINGAPORE* (INDONESIA / MALAYSIA – Bali, Lapung, Nias, Kuala Lumpur)
 - j. *Pittsburg, PA* (MALAYSIA - Johor Bahru, Kota Kinabalu, Penang)
 - k. *Virginia, Northern VA* (INDONESIA - Bandung, Bogor, Surabaya, Manado, Batam, Medan)
 - l. *Melbourne, AUSTRALIA; Sydney, AUSTRALIA; Brisbane, AUSTRALIA* (PAPUA NEW GUINEA)
3. The **China WS** has been replaced with a single Mission Society:
 - a. the **Crouching Tiger Fund** (Chicago, IL) and is supported by ten congregations (*Seattle, WA; Spokane, WA; Boise, ID; Missoula, MO; Anchorage, AK; Hong Kong, HONG KONG; Taipei, TAIWAN; and in CANADA: Vancouver, BC; Calgary, AL; Edmonton, AL, CANADA*).
4. The **Central & South American WS (CSA)** has been replaced with two Mission Societies and a congregational pairing:
 - a. **Mexico & Central America Missions** (Irvine, CA) supported by four *Regions of the Los Angeles International Church of Christ (AMS, East, Orange County, South)*;
 - b. **Florida Missions Council** (Miami, FL) focused on southern South America and supported by seven congregations (*South Florida Church of Christ, The Orlando Church, The Tallahassee Church, Jacksonville Church of Christ, Tampa Bay Church, Gainesville Christian Church, Ft. Myers-Naples Church*); the *Nashville Church of Christ* (Nashville, TN) and the *Lexington Church* (Lexington, KY) supporting mission work in northern South America.
5. The **Middle East Word Sector (MEWS)** is:
 - a. directly supported by:
 - i. two *Regions of the Los Angeles International Church of Christ (West and Inland Empire)*;

⁴ Although I am referring to all of these organizations as “Missions Societies” (since that is their basic function), at least one is technically defined simply as an “association of churches.”

- ii. eight other congregations (*San Diego Church of Christ, Phoenix Valley Church of Christ, Austin Intl. Church of Christ, Las Vegas Church of Christ, Albuquerque Church of Christ, Great Land Christian Church (AK), Bristol Intl. Church of Christ, England; Cardiff Church of Christ, Wales*); indirectly by the *Central Jersey Church of Christ* that currently sends its support directly to Israel.
6. The **New England and Europe WS (NEEM)** has been replaced with a single Mission Society:

The [International Missions Society](#) which focuses on Continental Europe and is supported by nine congregations (*the Boston Church of Christ, Groton/New London Intl. Church of Christ, Hartford Church of Christ, Springfield Church of Christ (MA), Worcester County Church of Christ, Rhode Island Church of Christ, Granite State Church of Christ, Burlington Church of Christ, Portland (Maine) Church of Christ*).
 7. The **Northern Federation WS** has been replaced with two Mission Societies:
 - a. the [Baltic-Nordic Missions Alliance](#) (Milwaukee, WI) supported by two *Regions of the Los Angeles International Church of Christ (Central, North)*, and two congregations (*Antelope Valley Church of Christ, Milwaukee Church of Christ*);
 - b. the [Eurasian Mission Society](#) (Chicago, IL) also supported by two *Regions of the Los Angeles International Church of Christ (Central, North)*, and fifteen congregations (*Chicago Church of Christ, Dallas Fort Worth Church of Christ, Greater Houston Church, St. Louis Church of Christ, Toronto Church of Christ, Wichita Church of Christ, Madison Church of Christ, Oklahoma City Intl. Church of Christ, Kansas City Church of Christ, Springfield Church of Christ(IL), Columbia Church of Christ, Bloomington Church of Christ, Springfield Intl. Church of Christ (MO), Lawrence Church of Christ, College Station Church of Christ*).
 8. The **Pacific Rim WS** has been replaced with the following congregational pairings:
 - a. *Denver, Colorado Springs, Cheyenne* (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam);
 - b. *Japan family of churches* (Cambodia);
 - c. *Hawaii family of churches* (Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines);
 - d. *Phoenix, Las Vegas, Colorado Springs, Denver* (Philippines).

As this information clearly demonstrates, the greater part of our fellowship of churches remains strongly committed to supporting missions and should be highly commended for their ongoing sacrifice and generosity. In 2005, 86.2% of our *Group 1* membership committed financially to help support the above mentioned mission endeavors, and so far I have been able to confirm that more than 90% has been collected and distributed. The sum total of these contributions was just slightly over \$7 million (there will be more specific details in the next section). It would also appear that about 13.8% of our current *Group 1* membership (53 congregations with 6,818 members) have either maintained previous associations with foreign mission efforts or realigned themselves with an alternative program. Most of these congregations are young and small (between 50 and 100 members), and obviously working hard on their own immediate challenges for stability and forward momentum. (One noteworthy exception to this observation is the San Francisco Church of Christ, which accounts for almost 25% of this number (2000 members) and have not specifically collected ‘foreign missions’ contribution in recent years – I feel compelled to make this observation because it is the former Pac Rim mission efforts, which they previously supported, that have been the hardest hit by financial difficulties during these past few years).

CURRENT MISSIONS SUPPORT LEVELS:

As mentioned earlier, last year our congregations reported a total Missions support of over \$7,000,000 and it seems unlikely that the funds remaining to be verified would increase this amount by more than 5% (i.e., \$350,000) due to the size and ability of those additional congregations.⁵ Although this number is very significant

⁵ It should also be mentioned that some of the Mission Societies (and even ‘mission congregations’) receive direct contributions from *Group 1* church members without it necessarily being accounted for as Special Missions contributions – dependent on the wishes of the donor. I would estimate that as much as an additional 5% (\$350,000) is given each year by

and represents continued sacrifice on the part of many disciples, it must also be noted that just three years ago (2002) our direct Missions support (including an administrative overhead of about 15%) was closer to \$18,000,000 worldwide. **This means that while over the past three years our Group A & Group 1 membership has declined by 23%, at the same time our Missions support has decreased by almost 60%.** It is imperative that those overseeing the mission efforts communicate clearly about the specific needs of our missions programs and plantings, and equally important that we all continue to grow in our generosity in giving, remembering the words of Paul: *“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and who sows generously will also reap generously” (2 Corinthians 9:6).*

The current breakdown of support by Geographic Mission Region is as follows:

Geographic Mission Region	# of Supporting Churches & Regions (Group 1)	Membership of Supporting Churches (Group 1)	AMOUNT COLLECTED IN 2005	# of 'Group A' Churches	Membership of 'Group A' Churches	# of Mission Churches (Groups 2&3)	Membership of Mission Churches (Groups 2&3)
EURASIA	17	6,853	\$ 1,209,014	0	0	36	9,574
AFRICA	14	5,704	\$ 936,317	0	0	60	9,536
SOUTH AMERICA	11	3,886	\$ 670,737	0	0	26	4,484
MIDDLE EAST World Sector	11	3,732	\$ 714,591	0	0	16	443
Crouching Tiger Fund	8	3,242	\$ 459,776	0	0	19	1,249
INDIA	15	3,055	\$ 632,111	0	0	53	5,061
International Missions Society	9	3,377	\$ 791,904	15	1,255	18	651
INDONESIA	12	2,716	\$ 473,022	0	0	19	3,328
Mexico & Central America	4	2,128	\$ 552,000	0	0	33	8,054
PHILIPPINES	3	496	\$ 78,500	0	0	16	4,774
CARIBBEAN	2	1,439	\$ 226,309	0	0	19	2,466
SOUTH ASIAN CONTINENT	10	1,486	\$ 231,126	0	0	13	1,960
Baltic Nordic Missions Alliance	4	779	\$ 228,000	6	325	4	276
Commitments to be confirmed...	23	3,909	\$ -	0	0	0	0
Currently Unassociated	51	6,689	\$ -	33	858	0	0
	194	49,490	\$ 7,203,407	54	2,438	332	51,856

A few observations regarding the data on this table:

- This analysis treats the 19 regions of the Atlanta and Los Angeles congregations like individual groups because they are committed to different mission works and are financially independent. Also, 15 of these *Group 1* congregations/regions gave to two different mission funds in 2005 so this also adds to the number of groups, and one *Group 2* congregation actually gave significantly (as well as one Group 3) so are both counted in the giving side and receiving side. Therefore the number of groups is 580 (34 more than the actual number of congregations), and the overall membership is skewed slightly (445 more members than the actual number because of the two congregations being counted in both categories).
- 19 of the *Group A* congregations are actually counted together with *Group 1* congregations because they are contributing to one of these particular mission efforts;
- It would appear that all our *Group 3* congregations are at least affiliated with some sort of support network (either Mission Society or congregational pairing);
- There are significant differences (organization, financial, etc.) between how these 13 Geographic Mission Regions are operating, and would be very beneficial to increase the level of communication and reporting among them so that successful strategies and encouraging news could be shared.

this means. Such information would be available from the individual mission society's (or mission church's) financial reporting.

Since most people are not yet familiar with seeing our Missions efforts divided into these 13 geographic regions, I have recalculated the 2005 amounts according to their former World Sector affiliations:

MISSION FUNDING NEEDS

<u>Former World Sectors</u>	<u>AMOUNT COLLECTED IN 2005</u>
Northern Federation	\$ 1,437,014
CSA	\$ 1,222,737
ACES	\$ 1,162,626
British Commonwealth	\$ 1,105,133
NEEM	\$ 791,904
MEWS	\$ 714,591
China	\$ 459,776
PAC RIM	\$ 309,626
TOTAL:	\$ 7,203,407

Probably the most striking details in this analysis are the low level of funding for both China and the Pac Rim. As far as China is concerned, the situation is actually working reasonably well because the original investment of building up the Hong Kong congregation has now led to its ability to help support the ongoing mission work in their own geographic region—although it should be noted the need in China is huge and more funding would undoubtedly expand China missions more rapidly.

As for the Pac Rim, it has probably been the hardest hit of all of our mission areas and I would strongly encourage any congregations without a designated mission focus to consider their needs (especially the Philippines). Clearly this reduction in funding has had significant impact on all our mission work. All of the mission congregations with whom I have communicated over the past 18 months have expressed their gratitude to the faithfulness and generosity of their brothers and sisters in the supporting congregations – they praise God for the grace God has shown us all. At the same time, many of the these congregations affirm that their staffing, hall rentals and training programs for further plantings have been reduced to the bare minimums and more funding would really help them to move forward more powerfully and regain momentum. In the training of new ministers it is very important to have the ability to give them small groups initially with lots of opportunity for growth and learning, rather than give them responsibility for large groups prematurely and frustrate both the intern leaders and the members. In many cases there has been much, much less contact with other outside congregations because of the financial challenges inherent in traveling and communication – this is also dangerous for the proper development and maturation of our foreign church plantings.

There are a number of situations (i.e., in the Middle East, Central Asia) where the only hope of ever becoming an officially recognized congregation in a particular country will require the purchase of some kind of modest property as an official meeting place. Although this could be as cheap as \$50,000 for a simple facility – there is presently not the funding available to even remotely consider these kinds of strategic decisions. There is also an incredible need for ongoing training for congregational leaderships (both fulltime and non-fulltime) in both professional and theological fields to promote growth in the congregation, but the lack of funding makes facilitating these plans difficult as well. We all must continue to wrestle with the needs of our mission

congregations and own our responsibility as disciples living in materially-blessed countries to do our best to meet those needs.

Finally, I think it would be appropriate to commend the ten congregations that most significantly contributed to the 2005 missions contribution:

<u>Congregation Name</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>State / Province</u>	<u>Total SMC Given</u>
Los Angeles International Church of Christ	USA	CALIFORNIA	\$1,308,584
New York City Church of Christ	USA	NEW YORK	\$613,309
Boston Church of Christ	USA	MASSACHUSETTS	\$572,041
Chicago Church of Christ	USA	ILLINOIS	\$461,580
Hong Kong	China	HONG KONG	\$347,750
South Florida Church of Christ	USA	FLORIDA	\$265,000
Denver Church of Christ	USA	COLORADO	\$206,126
Philadelphia Church of Christ	USA	PENNSYLVANIA	\$186,000
San Diego Church of Christ	USA	CALIFORNIA	\$169,020
DFW Church of Christ	USA	TEXAS	\$150,000
Total:			\$4,279,410

We know from Jesus' commendation of the 'widow giving her two copper coins' that the heart of giving is much more than simply the measure of quantity offered. We also learn from Paul that the example of others can be a great way of examining our own hearts and motives (**2 Corinthians 9:1-5**). During the past few years, every congregation has faced the challenge of remaining sacrificial to missions while dealing with their own domestic issues and challenges. I know that in many cases, although there were layoffs and other serious program cutbacks, the call to give was still sounded and many brothers and sisters responded with generous and joyful hearts. All of these ten congregations have faced incredible financial challenges in recent years but have still held their commitment to world missions nevertheless. Although these congregations account for 45% of our first world membership, they together gave 60% of our total mission contribution – in other words, if all first world congregations gave at these same levels our total contribution for 2005 would have been closer to \$9,500,000.⁶

MOVING FORWARD FROM HERE:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid." **Matthew 5:15**

As we seek to please God and continue to spread the good news about Jesus further among the nations, it is important to realize where we are and how we got here. Although the struggles of recent years have given some of our critics a heyday and empowered their voice to discourage us from building the wall any further, I truly believe that we have enjoyed many rich blessings from God over the past few decades and that he has graciously worked powerfully through the sacrifice, love and lives of many faithful disciples. God has the right to test our faith and purify our hearts, and he has been doing just that. Although our short history as a movement is also marked by human failure and sin (a fact that will never completely change despite our best efforts), God

⁶ There was also one group of 540 disciples that gave \$268,500 to missions in 2005. This was accomplished through a magnificent group effort, and if all our first world congregations gave at such a level, the total contribution would have been almost \$25,000,000 last year.

has still allowed us in his mercy to be a light set on a hill for many lost in this dark world. Although we have been knocked down (or in some cases just simply stumbled), God wants us to get back up and keep going – to persevere in faithfulness and hope till the very end.

As we discuss the future of our mission work together, it is important to learn as much as we can from our past experiences (both positive and negative), and accept the fact that in the day of testing the quality of each man's work has been shown for what it is – and those of us who are leaders must accept the weightier part of this judgment. I believe that in the early days of Boston (as well as in other discipling ministries), the focus of the majority was truly centered on the Lordship of Jesus and the message of the cross. Although we dreamed of great things and congregations of thousands, in truth we were but a handful of disciples forced by the reality of our human frailty, sin and insignificance to remain humble and dependent on God. The three distinctive elements that really stood out to me when I first met the Boston congregation in 1982 were the call to discipleship, emphasis on missions (both foreign and domestic), and the power of dynamic, small groups. Ambition is similar to jealousy and anger, in that it has the possibility of being righteous in a meek and humble heart, but it more often than not slips towards the dark side when human interests and vanity go unchecked – even when it is the ambition to do something great for God!

I believe that our visionary plan for world missions got seriously bogged down in a parallel effort to build a 'worldwide organization', and the political, economic and positional dimensions of the World Sector organizations became more important to some than the original objective of evangelizing the world.⁷ Some have overreacted to these excesses by stating that we don't need any organization or even cooperation, but I personally believe that God truly wants us to have a coherent plan for world evangelism and a sincere commitment to working together. We are all part of one body and we need each other (**1 Corinthians 12:12-26**). Despite our sin and failings, God has allowed us to see miracles and wonders! Brother and sisters, we desperately need more dreams and visions – and new plans to commit to God!

Our current situation provides us with an amazing opportunity because we have many different models of congregational cooperation working at the same time (i.e., Mission Societies with employees, Mission Societies without employees, single congregational pairings, groups of congregations paired together, member missions programs, evangelistic campaigns, etc.). This diversity should provide us with a broader understanding of how to proceed in the future as we try new things and share the results with each other. Evangelizing the world is not going to happen simply because a contribution is taken up; it requires much, much more. We need the power that only prayer can provide. We need people to make special sacrifices. We need to be fully committed to encouraging and supporting those with the gifts and heart to serve in this kind of ministry. **Much more than the support of finances, what we really need is the support of family – God's family.** The individual needs of our mission congregations are already far greater than one person could ever comprehend, but I truly believe that we already have the foundation of relationships in place to help strengthen and encourage our mission congregations. Let's work harder to communicate better the progress in this great work that God has given us to do!

⁷ Sadly, it seems to me that *selfish ambition* also took its toll on the other two distinctive elements: 1) the shift in focus from small group participation to Sunday service attendance was motivated by the desire to measure our growth (i.e., success) in comparison to other Christian groups, and; 2) leadership roles based more on position than experience/maturity also subtly worked to undermine the call to discipleship, actually promoting dependence, immaturity and eventual exasperation.

Although it is true that our worldwide fellowship presently has congregations in 160 countries – the mission is far from completed. In fact, only 57 of these countries have more than 100 members, and only 16 of those 57 countries have more than 1,000 members – 80% of our membership is concentrated in just 16 countries. God is not finished with us yet, and the Great Commission has yet to be fulfilled. We must make every effort to seek God's will and Paul gave us some great direction as to how to do that in **Romans 12:1-2**:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

This scripture fits well with the passage that we examined at the beginning – when we love God completely and are willing to sacrifice and be transformed, we will fully know his will. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost, and for that very reason he's left us here until he comes to take us home to our eternal reward!

Your Brother in Christ,
 Andy Fleming
andy_fleming@icoc.org

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.
Ephesians 3:20-21

Country	Total Membership
USA	41,139
Mexico	6,052
Russia	5,211
Philippines	4,774
India	4,471
Ukraine	3,670
Indonesia	2,770
Nigeria	2,699
China	2,691
Brazil	2,094
Cote d'Ivoire	2,046
South Africa	2,029
Canada	1,676
Kenya	1,437
South Korea	1,355
England	1,126
TOTAL:	85,240