

United Church of God *an International Association*

Robert Dick
Chairman

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Dear Fellow Elders and Wives,

The great rhetorical question posed at the General Conference of Elders, based on John 2:17, was this: “Has zeal for Your house eaten us up?” Such zeal drove Jesus Christ to purge the spiritual pollutants from the physical temple, to build His Church, to finish His work, and will eventually establish His kingdom (Isaiah 9:7). How critical is it, therefore, for the success of the Church as His spiritual temple today?

Furthermore, to move this from the rhetorical to the practical, at the GCE each of us was asked to deeply search ourselves to answer this question posed to the presidential nominees: “What will I do to instill zeal and a sense of urgency in the Church?” The Council of Elders has identified this as a primary need for the Church at this time, and we all share this load to one degree or another. In looking back over the last decade, we know that God has mercifully been with us in spite of our mistakes, we have survived, we have grown and we have been blessed in many ways. But as Richard Pinelli noted in his report to the GCE, while it is wonderful to have contentment and comfort, complacency is the enemy that slinks closely behind. On the other hand, we know that God will bless the efforts of a people filled with zeal, who “rise up and build” and “set their hands to do this good work” (Nehemiah 2:18). Anything short of having the same zeal as Jesus Christ means that we have to first rise and build spiritually in order to accomplish the work God commissioned to us.

The GCE addresses were by no means the “end all” statements on the matter. They were only a first step of casting the vision, with the intent that all of us would lead our respective congregations in an in-depth examination of the zeal that leads to repentance, renewal and reviving. Judging from the outpouring of support from you and members around the world, the call for a church-wide fast on or around June 4 is resonating strongly, giving us a golden opportunity, and a God-given responsibility, to stir and be stirred spiritually. It has been a long time since we have had a church-wide time of fasting, and while we are not in a time of overt crisis or trial, the Council’s discernment is that for us to really move forward we must reach a higher plane of zeal and passion for seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

I am writing now to follow up on what was said at the GCE, and also to answer some who have asked whether and/or how they should narrow their focus on any particular sermon subjects in the coming weeks. Obviously, the scope of this is huge. A study of zeal—how it works, where it comes from, what stirs it, what drains it, etc.—leads to other issues such as prayer and fasting, God’s response to genuine repentance, recapturing first love, our spiritual responsibilities, the lessons from personal examples (both good and bad) in the Bible, and so on.

However, all roads of study need to lead back to three targets: a) our individual responsibility, b) our congregational responsibility, and c) our collective responsibility. Add to this

a sincere fast, according to the guidelines of Isaiah 58, and our heart's desire to apply the lessons we learn in all three of these areas will be deeply intensified.

Individually, as ministers we must consider first our personal responsibility, then each individual's within our sphere of influence. Why start with self? Because we can only rise as high as what lies within us, and the capacity to inspire others will depend on our own spiritual condition. Nehemiah is one among many examples, but he is a particularly effective study in godly leadership and its impact on people. He didn't set out to fix the blame, but to fix the problem, and he started with deep personal self-examination and repentance. God will respond to us as we follow in the spirit of Nehemiah, and He will then use us to stir others. Whether in public preaching or private counseling, we will have the conviction and depth that will impact lives! We need to beseech God as His ministry to grant us insight and wisdom, the spirit of sacrifice, service, courage and commitment. As the Feast of Pentecost approaches, we need to ask Him to inspire our preaching as never before, to be able to speak with deeper understanding and conviction, to know how to hit the right buttons that will compel others. When each of us shoulders the individual responsibility to take a few hours in prayer and meditation (the Nehemiah 5:7 principle: "after serious thought...") to answer the question, "what will I do to instill zeal and a sense of urgency in the Church?" then God will bless that effort and help us inspire others to stir up the gift of God's Spirit that is in them. Nehemiah 3 lists each individual and how his household committed to taking care of repairing their part of the wall. God gave Nehemiah the capacity to see problems and solutions, and then to stir individuals to action, to help them shed their fears and complacency, to rouse each one to tackle his particular task. We can't tell each individual what to do to build his or her spiritual wall, but God can give us the power to encourage, convince and convict everyone to really seek Him first.

As congregations, it is primarily on the local church level that "by this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). We must have healthy spiritual relationships among ourselves, not just for our own well-being, but for the new people who we want to see walk through the doors of Sabbath services for the first time. They must come to congregations that demonstrate a fervent love for one another, warmth, hospitality and spiritual maturity, so that they find not only the place that teaches true doctrine, but people who truly live the teachings. This season of fasting, framed by Passover/Unleavened Bread and Pentecost, is prime time to lead our congregations in thought and discussion about the level of zeal we have for one another, for reconciling where we have had problems with others, for getting serious about practicing the principles of Matthew 5:23-24, 18:15-17, Galatians 6:1-2, and all other verses that hold us to the highest standards of behavior in our relationships with others. We have a congregational responsibility to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24). Just as Paul's epistles deal primarily with addressing the needs and responsibilities of particular congregations, we need to focus on helping each local congregational "family" rise to a higher level of spiritual growth and health.

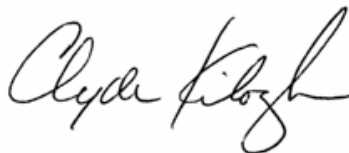
Finally, our collective responsibility. Keeping our sights on the great work to which we have been called is critical. We cannot lose track of the fact that God did not call us at this time primarily for individual salvation, or for focusing on our local congregational interests, but to be a part of something much larger than ourselves, the body that is bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God to the world. To that end, we have so much to pray about it's hard to know where to begin. One crying need stands out today, however, and we can draw on the words of Christ to address it: we need laborers! "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore," He commanded, "pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). "Lift up your eyes and look at the fields," He told the disciples, "for they are already white for

harvest” (John 4:35). This immediately followed His statement that “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.” It is vital for us to collectively focus on this area and make sure we are praying specifically for this help. The doors of technology are swinging wide open, providing opportunities for preaching the gospel that were unimaginable not all that long ago. But we need laborers. We are not limited by means, but we are by manpower—by any measurement on human scales, our strength is small, and we are therefore truly reliant on God to help us. But if Christ said to pray about this, isn’t it reasonable to expect that God will answer by sending those laborers, especially when individuals are stirred and congregations are healthy? Christ’s command to pray for laborers was motivated by a genuine zeal for the welfare of others. “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” When we share the same compassion and motivation, and consistently pray for God to help people hear and respond to His way, He will answer! We want to share the rejoicing that comes from seeing sinners repent, seeing people’s lives change through learning the truth, being forgiven and overcoming. God works those miracles, but He does use humans as tools. “Others have labored, and you have entered into their labors” (John 4:38). We need to use this time specifically to stir every member of the Church to respond to Christ’s words, and begin praying persistently to the Lord of the harvest, that He will send more laborers to join us.

A study of the early Church in Acts shows how God worked in all three of these arenas—individually, congregationally and collectively—to build His Church and spread the gospel. As we near Pentecost and we focus on the power of God’s Spirit to work mightily in His people, we should fast with faith and expectation that He will help each one of us to raise our level of spiritual performance, and with it will come His blessings on all of our efforts. He will open doors, He will bring in laborers, He will help us improve on what we set our hands to do, He will help us work in an increasingly unified way.

I know you could add a thousand thoughts and scriptures to all this, and I know God will inspire each of you to much more than could ever be conveyed in a brief letter. I trust that this sharpens our collective focus, however. Again, sincere thanks to all of you for the labor of love you have given in your ministry, and for such a positive response to the conference theme of seizing the vision as we move into the next decade and beyond. Good fruits are going to come from this!

In Christ’s name,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Clyde Kilough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Clyde" being more prominent than the last name "Kilough".

Clyde Kilough