

United Church of God *an International Association*

Clyde Kilough
Chairman

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President

Letter From the Chairman April 23, 2004

Dear Fellow Elders and Wives,

Anticipation is mounting! As of two days ago 197 elders and 152 spouses had registered to be in Cincinnati next weekend for the 2004 Annual Meeting of the General Conference of Elders. I know everyone so highly treasures this time together, and we just wish everyone could be there.

This letter comes from a different perspective than usual. I'm stepping out of the role as a Council representative and into that as chairman of the GCE to address an important conference issue. I offer these thoughts with utmost respect for you as elders and wives, along with utmost respect for our governing documents that were formed in light of the monumental events that brought the UCG into existence.

While recently reviewing the Constitution articles dealing with our responsibilities as the GCE, one phrase really grabbed my attention, perhaps because of its repeated emphasis. It carries the weight of a governing edict, and we should view it as one of the most important matters we consider regarding this conference. Moreover, it is a spiritual duty, an undertaking more essential than anything else we will do in our meetings, because it will greatly influence our approach to all decisions and actions. Ultimately, it will play a huge role in determining God's blessing on all of our proceedings. What is that phrase?

Let's first review the sections from the Constitution where you will see these words embedded.

3.2 FUNCTIONS WITHIN THE CHURCH

3.2.2.3 General Conference of Elders

Every ordained minister in good standing of the United Church of God, *an International Association* (UCG), is an elder of the UCG and is a member of the General Conference of Elders. The general assembly of all such elders is the "General Conference of Elders." God has established the office of elder to provide care and oversight to the congregations. Thus, the General Conference of Elders is responsible to God to ensure that His people are served and their needs attended to. The General Conference of Elders shall, with prayer and fasting, set apart from among themselves, a Council of Elders consisting of twelve (12) elders. The General Conference of Elders shall have such other specific duties and responsibilities as are enumerated in Article 4 of this Constitution. The General Conference shall conduct itself in accordance with Scripture, this Constitution, the duly adopted corporate bylaws, the Rules of Association of the UCG and applicable law.

4.1 DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The General Conference of Elders (General Conference) hereby recognizes its responsibility:

- (1) To approve changes in the doctrine of the Church.
- (2) To ratify the annual strategic plan, operating plan and a balanced budget that pertains to those plans.
- (3) To nominate and elect the Council of Elders, with prayer and fasting.
- (4) To approve all amendments to the Articles of Incorporation.
- (5) To approve any amendments to this Constitution and the duly approved bylaws of the Corporation or to repeal this Constitution and the duly approved bylaws.
- (6) To approve all official relationships with other religious organizations.
- (7) To ratify the Rules of Association.

4.2 MANAGEMENT WITHIN THE CHURCH—DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY

The General Conference of Elders (General Conference), after prayer and fasting, shall set apart from among its members a Council of Elders (Council) and entrust them with the responsibility and authority to establish policy, to enable management to implement that policy, and to provide direction and oversight to ensure the proper management of the day-to-day affairs of the Corporation, the United Church of God, *an International Association*. In addition, the Council shall propose for approval by the General Conference, the annual strategic plan, the annual operating plan and an annual balanced budget for the Church.

“Prayer and fasting” is the operative phrase. In those early formative days of United when we were crafting our Constitution, why did we deem it necessary to mandate, then *twice* repeat, that we must “pray and fast” before we select the Council? I believe this emphasis on fasting and prayer resulted from a sense of the times we were in. As we prepare now for another annual meeting, nearly eight and a half years after we ratified that Constitution in December 1995, we would do well to revisit those early formative days, not to rehash war stories, but to call to mind the attitude and rationale behind that repeated call for fasting and prayer.

Remember how it was? We were flattened, trying to recover from the turmoil of the previous years and understand what God wanted us to do next. With more humility and lowliness than we had collectively ever had before, we believed that we had survived by the grace of God. We knew we were thin in number. We carried in our hearts a commitment to continue the work of God, but as we counted up our miniscule physical resources, we were keenly aware that the enormity of that task could be done only through His power. We were willing to move forward with faith and high hopes, but we also knew we were vulnerable. Our limited abilities and God’s unlimited power stood in contrast as never before, and we knew we needed to diligently pray and fast. We sensed that need so deeply that we fixed it in our Constitution with the legislative force of a command!

Was not this emphasis on prayer and fasting a confession to God, and a reminder to ourselves, that we had little strength to direct our steps? It echoed Solomon’s sentiment when he told God, “...but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?” (1 Kings 3:7-9).

God blesses anyone of that mind-set, as He did Solomon. Later, when Solomon dedicated the temple, God appeared to him in the night and revealed the way He relates to His people:

“...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes shall be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place. For now I have chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there forever; and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually” (2 Chronicles 7:14-16).

God’s eyes, ears and heart are now upon His spiritual temple and, just like then, those who are called by His name must stay centered on God. To that end we fast and pray. Fasting cultivates a humble mind and prayerful heart, and not only does it bring us back to God when things are going badly, it keeps us from drifting away from Him when things go well. Thus, in good times or bad, His people need to regularly pray and fast.

This is so critical to our strength as a church. The true power of God’s people has never been rooted in how many we are, or in our human ability. It is derived foremost from the depth of our relationship with Him, and measured by how effectively we reflect the fruits of His Spirit. Scores of scriptures remind us that it is God’s strength that delivers His people in times of trouble, and it is in the strength of our closeness to Him that we avoid slipping into trouble!

Therefore, this constitutional mandate will never be outdated or obsolete. It’s not that we fast because the Constitution requires it, but that document serves us well as a reminder of what we must hold constant within—a servant’s heart, humble, yet confident in God. Ezra reflected this when he wrote, “So we fasted and prayed to our God for good. And He was pleased to hear us” (8:23, Modern King James Version).

Come Monday evening, May 3, when all is said and done, the result that really counts is whether God was “pleased to hear us.” How important is prayer and fasting for that? Well, the more we tune into God’s thoughts, the more like-minded we will be. And where we may differ on issues (as 400 people are bound to do), through prayer and fasting we can at least secure like-minded attitudes, akin to what Paul described in 1 Corinthians 1:10: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Note the intent of these verses, as explained in *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*:

“The apostle here evidently desires that they should be united in feeling; that every member of the church should occupy his appropriate place, as every member of a well proportioned body, or part of a machine has its appropriate place and use; see his wishes more fully expressed in 1 Co. 12:12-31.

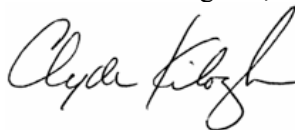
“**In the same mind**—see Rom. 15:5. This cannot mean that they were to be united in precisely the same shades of opinion, which is impossible—but that their minds were to be disposed toward each other with mutual good will, and that they should live in harmony. The word here rendered ‘mind,’ denotes not merely the intellect itself, but that which is in the mind—the thoughts, counsels, plans; Rom. 11:34; Rom. 14:5; 1 Co. 2:16; Col. 2:18.

“**And in the same judgment**—*gnome*. This word properly denotes science, or knowledge; opinion, or sentiment; and sometimes, as here, the purpose of the mind, or will. The sentiment of the whole is, that in their understandings and their volitions, they should be united and kindly disposed toward each other. Union of feeling is possible even where people differ much in their views of things. They may love each other much, even where they do not see alike. They may give each other credit for honesty and sincerity, and may be willing to suppose that others ‘may be right,’ and ‘are honest’ even where their own views differ. The foundation of Christian union is not so much laid in uniformity of intellectual perception as in right feelings of the heart. And the proper way to produce union in the church of God, is not to begin by attempting to equalize all intellects . . . but to produce supreme love to God, and elevated and pure Christian love to all who bear the image and the name of the Redeemer.”

Well said. Reflecting back on 1995, I believe God inspired us to place the phrase “with prayer and fasting” three times in the Constitution as one way to help us keep our spiritual needs highly visible so that we would unitedly rely on Him for right decisions with right attitudes. While those three references specify selecting the Council members, it is logical as well to also lay before God all other matters, great and small.

Our issues this year are not the same as they were in 1995, or what they will be in 2005, but our needs will always be just as great. So, regardless of whether or not you will be able to attend physically, let us all unite spiritually in dedicating time for the most important preparation of all—heartfelt prayer and fasting. In so doing we can be confident that God will bless us with a most profitable conference. Take care, travel safely and may God be with us all.

With warmest regards,



Clyde Kilough