

**United Church of God, *an International Association***  
**Council of Elders Meeting Report**  
**Aug. 6, 2007–Cincinnati, Ohio**

Robert Dick opened the meeting at 9 a.m. For most of the day he led the Council in a discussion on the subject of strategic planning.

In opening comments Mr. Dick stated that a major focus of the Council's efforts for the coming year will be to engage in the strategic planning process. He stated that strategic planning isn't new to the Council. Many hours of effort went into preparing the Strategic Plan that was first written in 1996 and 1997. Since then it has been tweaked from year to year, but has not been extensively revised.

Council members' comments in a recent organizational assessment survey made it clear that they agree it is important to move forward in this area. But in his presentation today Mr. Dick emphasized that the task of writing an effective and meaningful strategic plan is challenging and requires the full commitment of the Council and staff. The primary purpose of the presentation today was to focus the Council on one specific question: "Are we prepared to take on the task of strategic planning?"

The discussion was built around a BoardSource PowerPoint presentation designed to lead a nonprofit organization's board of directors into the process of strategic planning. Mr. Dick modified many of the points to apply to the United Church of God's circumstances, environment and culture.

At the outset Mr. Dick summarized that a strategic plan focuses an organization on its major goals, not just a task list. The strategic plan isn't an end in itself, but having a plan demonstrates that the leaders of an organization have given thought to a blueprint for the future. A strategic plan requires an organization to clarify its vision, mission and critical issues. Just planning isn't enough—the planning needs to be strategic: intelligent, creative approaches to accomplishing the mission.

Mr. Dick engaged the Council in the discussion of a number of questions based on the BoardSource presentation. He pointed out that some of the questions are not specifically applicable to our organization.

For the balance of this report, each question is listed and is followed by a summary of the Council members' comments. Note that this discussion was a "freeform, brainstorming" format. The summaries are intended to give an overview of the flow of discussion and comments. They should not be considered the definitive, final Council statement or decision.

Question: *Is the organization clear about its primary purpose?*

Council: As a church our primary purpose is twofold: to preach the gospel as a witness and to prepare a people. What we have not clarified is how to allocate effort and resources to each. It was also pointed out that the twofold purposes can't be separated; they are in effect one purpose.

Question: *Are new strategic approaches needed for implementing the mission?*

Council: We tend to continue to model ourselves after old methods. We need to consider whether we are “preaching the gospel” and “preparing a people” in the most effective way. There are communication technologies that exist today that couldn't even have been imagined in 1986 when Herbert Armstrong was alive—and for that matter, even within the last five years. For that reason a strategic plan must be dynamic. It may be necessary to review the plan at each quarterly Council meeting, not just once a year. On the other hand, it was also pointed out that while tools and tactics change with technological advancements, the strategies themselves remain constant. It is important to understand and define terms and use them consistently—such as “strategies,” “objectives,” “tactics,” “outputs,” “outcomes,” etc. We should also always remember that as we do our strategic planning, God is the one who will open and close doors for the advancement of the work of the Church.

Question: *Can existing strategies be implemented in a more effective way?*

Council: The key words are “implemented” and “effective” Our literature is a high quality product. As a rule, our publications do an excellent job of presenting information and educating, but not as good a job of challenging people to action. The way we present our message is informational, but can be improved by being more transformational.

Question: *Are organizational goals and outcomes clear?*

Council: Our goals may be clear, but we have fallen short in measuring the outcomes. It is difficult to measure “effectiveness.” Outcomes are clear if we determine what we want to accomplish and effectively measure the result of the efforts, but measurement and assessment are difficult. Our current strategic plan includes broad strategies that we probably won't change when we write a new plan. But it mixes strategies and objectives and doesn't include a method of measuring our outcomes—whether we are producing the desired results.

Question: *Should any of our major programs be eliminated?*

Council: We need to define what are our “major programs” and then analyze their effectiveness. It's possible that some could be merged and consolidated to make them more effective.

Question: *Is there a need for new programs and services?*

Council: There is more likely a need to prioritize, blend, coordinate and streamline existing programs and, after careful consideration, possibly even eliminate some. However, we can't shut the door on the possibility of the need for new programs in the future. The ministerial training program is a good example of a successful new program that was developed based on a legitimate need.

Question: *Is it necessary to consider a totally new approach to our mission?*

Council: We have a clear mission statement. But we should evaluate whether we as an organization have a unified perspective of what the work of the Church is. We need to work together and have a stronger sense of unity of mission.

Question: *Should we consider a merger or collaboration?*

Council: The United Church of God acknowledges that there are converted people in other Church of God groups. We have an obligation to reach out to others and to be willing to work toward unity.

The next question the Council was asked to consider was, "Are we ready to plan?" The answer comes from another series of questions that examine the Church organization, the Council and the Council's ability and willingness to support a planning process.

- Is the Church organization stable?
- What are the Council's expectations of a new strategic plan?
- Have key strategies been identified?
- Are time and funding available for planning?
- Is it necessary to hire a consultant to facilitate the development of the plan?

Question: *Is the Church organization stable?*

Council: The decision to move the home office has caused some unrest among members, elders and home office staff, but the Church is not unstable. Efforts to develop a strategic plan should help resolve the situation. A thorough strategic planning effort would indicate the need for additional facilities, and we would reach the same conclusions about the home office relocation. There will likely always be some issues and distractions. Stability has to do with how disagreements are handled. Mr. Dick emphasized that the question is not a matter of whether the Council feels that the Church is stable, but rather a question of whether the Church is stable enough for the Council to focus their concentration on developing a strategic plan. He concluded and the Council agreed that there is no stability issue that would distract the Council from the strategic planning process.

Question: *What are the Council's expectations of a new strategic plan?*

Council: The plan needs to be highly specific and should include measurable outcomes for every strategy. It should be comprehensive, simple and brief, clearly identifying priorities from which the annual Operation Plan can be developed.

Question: *Have key strategies been identified?*

Council: As mentioned before, the Church's broad strategies are identified in the current plan. The Council and administration should work together in a collaborative effort to develop the key strategies as they should be expressed in a new plan.

Question: *Are time and funding available for planning?*

Council: Mr. Dick commented that customarily it takes an organization six to nine months to gather data, research, analyze and synthesize the plans. Since we already have a clear vision of our mission, it should not take us as long as an organization starting with a blank page. Through our budgeting process funding is available for developing and implementing a strategic plan. But the Council needs to consider the level of effort and commitment required to complete the task. The administration must also assume "ownership" of the process and be closely involved in the development of the strategic plan because they are the ones who will operationally carry out the plan.

Question: *Is it necessary to hire a consultant to facilitate the development of the plan?*

Council: Mr. Dick emphasized that the facilitator must be detached from the plan and be willing to push the Council to answer difficult questions. Council members expressed the opinion that it would be better to hire a consultant to facilitate the process than to use someone within the organization.

Mr. Dick's final point in the presentation was that if the Council wants to pursue the development of a strategic plan, there is a need for "a plan to plan." The Council needs to decide what process it will use to develop a plan, list key tasks and who will perform them, determine a timeframe and plan the implementation of strategies. He acknowledged that the Council would need time to digest today's discussion. He proposed that the discussion be continued Tuesday afternoon (Aug. 7) and that the Council reach its conclusions on the matter before the conclusion of this series of meetings.

The Council spent the last two hours of the day meeting in executive session.

Don Henson

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