

United Church of God, an International Association
Council of Elders Meeting Report
Dec. 16, 2008 (part 1)—Milford, Ohio

Today's meeting was devoted to how the Council will assess and monitor the Strategic Plan. Jim Fograscher of Leadership Strategies facilitated the discussion. He had worked with the Council this past year and just recently with the administration in October. Clyde Kilough also gave a further detailed President's Report using the template of the Strategic Plan.

The Strategic Plan Assessment

In his opening remarks, Mr. Fograscher said the purpose of the meeting was to educate the Council on how to effectively monitor the Strategic Plan. He also reviewed strategies, reassessing objectives and their priorities, and understanding the roles and responsibilities in the monitoring process.

Strategic planning emphasizes the core values—guiding principles by which an organization will live and the direction where it wants to be within three to five years. Objectives and goals are set to help motivate and measure progress. The planning helps to create a long-view guide for any short-view priority and resource decisions such as budgeting and staffing decisions, but all is guided by the long-term Strategic Plan.

The Vision Statement directs the Church, and the Strategic Plan (SP) helps us to get to the vision. The Council has to now assess the objectives to see if we are on course. (A copy of the Vision Statement and SP is on pages 8 and 9 in the June issue of the *United News* at <http://www.ucg.org/un/un0806/un0806.pdf>).

Mr. Fograscher asked the Council and staff what things pleased them about the SP. Various comments included:

- It gives structure, focus and staff involvement.
- We can see some tangible results.
- There is the potential for accountability.
- We have committed to stay with the plan.
- It is a transition to an outcomes-based thinking.
- Everything is listed on one page so we don't get off on tangents.
- Even though there are many departments, it helps bring them together in unity.

Mr. Kilough said that this is a new planning style, and it takes organizational discipline to make this work. In looking at how the administration took broad-based ownership of the plan, Robert Dick remarked that the effects of it are good. Mr. Fograscher also commented that it often takes years to see this type of planning embedded in an organization.

He then moved to the monitoring roles of the administration and the Council. The Council is to lead, provide direction and ask the questions: “What is the result?” and “Why does it matter?” The president is to manage the “how, who, where and when” from day to day. The Council asks whether we are on target and whether it is working, and the president provides status and progress reports.

Victor Kubik mentioned that sometimes there are misunderstandings of “who does what” until the specifics are delineated. Mr. Fograscher said the Council leads and the administration manages, and the better that one does in playing his position, the better it is for the team. We have to be careful not to get into each other’s realm, not to be another cook in the kitchen. We have to accept our roles, and then stay out of each other’s way.

In monitoring the SP, Mr. Fograscher said the administration deals at the tactical level with deliverables and actions plans. The Council should avoid asking about the tactical efforts, but ask how close we are to being on track with the objectives. Richard Thompson commented that as Church pastors, we try to make things work and we have to make things happen. However, as Council members, we have to back off and let the administration do its job. This is a different way of thinking and it is a different role than being a pastor. Mr. Dick also said the Council only grades objectives. The administration provides the data for the Council to review.

Another point Mr. Fograscher presented was the payoff of the SP in that it provides stability so we don’t overreact—we are not “blown about by the wind.” The SP allows a culture to form that gives consistency through times of attrition and churn. In the corporate world, the “churn” rate of CEOs is about 18 months, but the companies still continue. That is by design. The plan gives single direction focus and is proactive versus reactive. It also provides alignment in a unified effort and insulates an organization from fads, fears and distractions.

Mr. Fograscher also noted that the Church is early in the process and one doesn’t throw out the game plan after the first quarter of a game. He emphasized again that leaders lead and managers manage. One has to keep an eye on the big picture with a strategic view. It will take perseverance to stay for the long haul. We can prepare for lifecycle changes as long as we don’t compromise with the core guiding principles. No matter how things go on in the world around us, the core beliefs remain the same. The SP forces us to look down the long road. The plan can be reviewed every three years or so, and adjusted as needed, but not every quarter. The Council was cautioned of the tendency to get down into the administrative details of action plans.

Darris McNeely asked if the objectives are not being met, do we keep tweaking the strategies and at what point do we change the objectives? Mr. Fograscher responded that an objective may have been set too high to begin with, or maybe there was a lack of information when the objective was set. Mr. Holladay said one of the weaknesses was that we put the plan together too quickly and we didn’t have a lot of data on which to base some decisions. He asked if it would be logical to say we didn’t know enough at the

time. Did we set the objectives too quickly and do we even have the right objectives? He also said that he doesn't see the Council going through things so quickly in the future.

President's Report

Mr. Kilough proceeded to review each of the objectives for Public Proclamation, Congregational Care and Organization. He said this still has been a work in progress as we establish where we are and where we want to go from baseline figures. The following template of reporting is a sample of the style for future President's Reports.

In the goal of **Public Proclamation**, there are five objectives and each will be listed with results and expectations:

1. Increase Web visitor loyalty: We have now established the baseline as 27 percent return visitors. So our year-one target now is to add 15 percent to that 27 percent baseline, which is a goal of 42 percent of visitors returning to our Web sites.
2. Increase number of first-time Web visitors: We expect to have 4 million first-time visitors this year. New content being added, such as Frequently Asked Questions, and improvements in search engine optimization will produce better results.
3. Increase percentage of students that complete the *Bible Study Course*: The current baseline is now established at 10 percent of the hard copy student list.
4. Increase subscriber renewal rates: This objective still a work in process.
5. Achieve target number of subscribers to:

Good News: We have now implemented a new renewal process, going from renewing every two years to every year, in order to more quickly verify committed subscribers. This will decrease subscribers, of course, but will reduce waste and save money. Some of that decrease in subscribers will be offset by the current *Reader's Digest* ad response.

Vertical Thought: With 23,500 subscribers, we have already surpassed our first-year goal.

World News and Prophecy: With 62,200 subscribers, with organic increase only and no special advertizing, we have already surpassed our first-year goal.

Bible Study Course (Lesson One per year): To achieve our goal we need to average 5,400 per quarter. We are under that target now (3,086 first quarter) but approximately 50 percent of our subscribers come in response to a special letter offer, which is yet to come.

The above objectives are supported by eight strategies and each will be listed with results and expectations.

- Strategy: Establish media mix to achieve our targets:
We are currently evaluating our past effectiveness in all areas, and developing tools for analyzing cost effectiveness. All of this is preliminary to presenting to the Council a media mix proposal for the long term.
- Strategy: Develop interactive Web sites to increase visitor loyalty:
Our quarter one targets have been completed: implementing Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds and “Share This” viral tools. We have also already added, in quarter two, the “Frequently Asked Bible Questions” section that will help with search engine optimization (SEO) and increase interest.
- Strategy: Develop Web marketing plan to attract first-time Web site visitors:
The Web Development Team was created and the outline of phase one was completed, which includes research into SEO principles and improving search engine marketing (SEM) efficiency.
- Strategy: Hire skilled people, retain professional contractors and use volunteers to develop an effective Web presence that will increase visitor loyalty and attract first-time Web visitors:
Mike Bennett was reassigned to become the Web content manager, and Liz Cannon was hired to take his place in *United News* production. We also posted a job opening position for a Web designer and are currently accepting applications.
- Strategy: Train media staff to highlight the uniqueness of the true gospel message and thus explain and emphasize the life-changing benefits of God’s way:
Media staff has held ongoing meetings to define the unique elements and benefits, which leads to producing a vision document for our writers. We are also planning and scheduling writing workshops and classes.
- Strategy: Implement annual (instead of biennial) renewal for periodicals to verify the commitment of readers and more efficiently use our resources:
The annual renewal is now underway for all *Good News* subscribers.
- Strategy: Rewrite *BSC* to improve content and add interactivity to increase completion percentage:
The *BSC* task force is reviewing content and the staff is developing an online format with interactivity and tracking.
- Strategy: Communicate who we are and what we do to increase audience awareness of the benefits of God’s way:
This strategy requires brand development that is dependent on several other strategies. This is a critical task but should not be rushed. Ongoing discussions are centering on how to tie all our products together. Branding also requires further development of the key elements of the uniqueness of our message.

After the report on this section, Mr. Fograscher asked for comments, and the Council noted they were satisfied with the level of information provided. Mr. Salyer mentioned that the strategies required a lot of “think tank” work during the first quarter, which will lead to more tangible information. Referring to Mr. Fograscher’s earlier analogy about a football game plan, Mr. Kilough said we have just kicked off at the start of the game. The Council then graded these objectives as meeting expectations.

(end part one of Tuesday, Dec. 16, report)

John Foster
Council Reporter

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