

March 11, 2006

The following document is a plan for united cooperation submitted by the Unity Proposal Group to church leaders around the world after six months of prayer, study, counsel and discussion. A "Question and Answer" document is available as well to help answer the most frequently asked questions. Please feel free to submit any questions you may have at Unity@chnts.net.

We are asking each church leadership to prayerfully consider ratifying this plan after discussing it with their members. For ratification, send an email to Unity@chnts.net. Beginning April 3rd, we will publish a continually updating list of churches that affirm this Plan for United Cooperation.

We are also asking all disciples and churches to pray and fast on Wednesday, March 29th for a day of unity, repentance, forgiveness and renewal. Please join us so that together we can allow our light to shine brightly before men so that they may see our good deeds and glorify our father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

PREFACE

The purpose of the following paper is to affirm and enhance the unity of the family of churches known, since 1992, as the International Churches of Christ. In early September of 2005, during a forum organized by the 2005 International Leadership Conference coordinators in Seattle, we, a group of nine brothers, were elected by ballot to serve as a Unity Proposal Group. We left Seattle with a clear charge from commended brothers to present a proposal to our churches that would further cooperation, unity and missions throughout our fellowship.

As a group, we believe that it has been very beneficial for the nine of us to have experienced first-hand a significant cross section of our churches and leadership roles. Four of us have served as elders and evangelists (Mike Fontenot, Sam Powell, Steve Staten, and Bruce Williams). Three are non-American evangelists (Andy Fleming with 17 years in Northern Europe, former Soviet Union, and Middle East and Phil Lam and John Louis serving for decades in Asia). Two other evangelists have extensive experience outside the USA as well (Scott Green 10 years in China, Mike Taliaferro 16 years in Africa and South America). Two currently serve as teachers (Andy Fleming and Steve Staten). Almost every one of us has been a disciple for over 25 years.

We have worked on the Plan For United Cooperation for about six months. For the first eight weeks, we collected and reviewed about 40 proposals and submissions on the topic of unity from disciples throughout our worldwide fellowship. We are very grateful to all who took the time to study God's Word, formulate their thoughts and submit them to us. We also studied Scriptures, sought other advice from in and outside our fellowship, and read various books on church government including one entitled *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, describing in detail how other conscientious religious leaders in the past wrestled with similar issues. It was helpful to see that we were not the first to wrestle with issues of church government, but rather a part of a long list of many who have struggled with these very same things for centuries. We then met on November 14-17 to pray and discuss the various submissions and then develop a comprehensive plan to represent our churches, one based on sound biblical principles and the perceived needs within our fellowship.

While it is not our intention to create a document that will last for centuries, we have made every effort to write something that meets the need for the present and the near future. As a proposal, this has been shown in various forms to over 200 evangelists, elders, teachers, administrators, and members from a host of countries. Christians from six continents gave us valuable insight and wisdom. The proposal group held countless meetings and conference calls with church leaders from around the world. We do not feel alone in this endeavor. Indeed, we wish to thank all those who wrote, called, and gave us feedback on this document. Without your help, we would never have completed the task. We also wish to thank our home congregations who patiently allowed us to focus our efforts on this proposal. Our thanks also go to the thousands of disciples who prayed and fasted for the success of this effort. Finally, we wish to thank our God, who makes everything possible.

We have no desire with this process to formulate judgments about any of those in other fellowships. We agree that, "We are not the only Christians but are Christians only". The design of this plan is to strengthen the bonds between some 500 churches that share a common history and heritage so that we might continue on our journey together in faithfulness to God on the way to heaven. Additionally, we originally thought the document might be somewhat shorter, but became convinced during the process that the present length was necessary for clarity and fullness.

Since September, our prayer has been to have "complete unity" among our brotherhood—the kind of unity Jesus described in John 17:23. However, we have also been praying for revival and a return to the mission Jesus entrusted to us upon his departure. We recognize that commitment to our unity and mission may not still be shared by every church and that there may be some churches that share our commitment to both but decide not to accept this plan. It would be inappropriate for anyone to make hasty judgments based on that kind of decision. Our goal all along was to prayerfully discern how our fellowship could faithfully, humbly and powerfully move forward, learning from past mistakes without over-reacting to them and, at the same time, maintaining faithfulness to biblical principles.

With humble thanks,

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John Louis, (Evangelist, Singapore)
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A PLAN FOR UNITED COOPERATION

Our life with God on this earth is a journey, and our destination is heaven. Our aim is to love God and others as God has loved us and to take as many with us as possible on the journey. The Lord has already blessed us with a remarkable family of churches composed of disciples of Jesus from nations, cultures and races throughout the world.

In order to strengthen the bonds between our churches, we are asking you to consider four areas, each of which entails specific convictions. First, we must continue to be *a people belonging to God*. Secondly, as God's family, we must recognize and properly respond with *course corrections* to the major events that have occurred in recent years. Thirdly, we see the need for *strengthening the churches* "so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . and become mature. . ." (Ephesians 4:12-13). Lastly, there is a *concluding vision*, which includes a call to repentance. To summarize, then, this proposal is a series of calls we ask you to prayerfully consider:

- A Call to Humility
- A Call to Sound Shared Beliefs
- A Call to Healthy Interdependence Everywhere
- A Call to Dynamic "One-Another" Relationships at a Regional Level
- A Call to Effective Local Leadership Dynamics
- A Call to Strengthen the Churches Worldwide
- A Call to Revival—Conviction, Mature Discipling and the Great Commission

I. A PEOPLE BELONGING TO GOD

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Galatians 3:26-27

We believe the spiritual characteristics that should represent a family fellowship of God's people are the following anchors—our Humility and our Shared Beliefs.

Humility

We wish to remind the reader that our collective humility must precede any objective, no matter how noble, in order for God to bless it.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1-3

In our commitment to follow Jesus, each of us has accepted the responsibility of being "completely humble"—a key for unity and peace:

- Humility to God and his Word.
- Humility that accepts others when our opinions differ (Romans 14, 15).
- Humility to retract what we may have once written or said after reflection.
- Humility that is satisfied by the confession of our sin only, without making reference to or blaming the sins of others.
- Humility to forgive all forms of sin just as we have been forgiven of all sin.
- Humility to be a doorkeeper in God's house, whether we are an unknown servant, a well-known disciple or a person who held a prominent role in the past.
- Humility to identify what God is teaching us personally in difficult times.

Without humility, no plan can facilitate unity. Perhaps the greatest connection of humility and unity in the Bible comes from comparing the story of Babel to the epic event of Pentecost just days after Christ ascended to heaven. One of those who submitted their thoughts to the unity proposal process observed:

As an example, in Genesis 11, God divided the people of the “plain of Shinar” (later to become Babylonia) because they wanted to reach heaven by human effort and make a name for themselves. In a single day, he scattered them by confusing their languages. They lost unity because of pride. They could no longer be unified because God caused a complete communication breakdown. Even if they wanted unity it would not have been possible. God authored their division. The good news is that God also reversed the curse of Shinar, disunity and babble on a single day. In spite of language barriers and cultural differences, he united his people on the day of Pentecost. Pride led to confusion and division in Genesis 11. However, in Acts 2, humility preceded clarity and unity because God had blessed them.

In the early days of the church, the message of the crucified Christ served as an equalizer. Aside from the apostles who had been with Jesus, there was no sense of position or title of greater worth than simply being a disciple of Jesus—a *Christian*. This humble sense of community occurred before innovative methods, bigger-than-life dreams, lengthy papers, cool websites or any other human achievements ever began to compete for the true glory owed solely to God. That said, the message of the cross should prompt, renew and bring God’s blessings on all such methods, expressions and human efforts. Everything worth doing begins when each individual is “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37) by the message of the cross (1 Corinthians 2:2). The gospel of the death, burial and resurrection is still of first importance as it was in the first century, and as when we first responded to the gospel.

We would be the first to tell you that the following plan is not perfect. We are certain that there will be things that will stand out to you that you would have put in or left out or that you wish we could change or have said a little differently. At some point, we must put our trust that the Lord is answering our prayers and leading us with this effort and begin to rebuild. After hundreds of hours of prayer, study, reading, discussions, and edits as well as soliciting many ideas and much counsel, we can honestly tell you that this plan is our very best effort. The arrangement within this plan is what seems best for now, but we understand that we are all a work in progress who will be led by God as we proceed and learn. But for God to lead us individually or collectively, we believe it is best for us to already be moving in the direction that we now view to be most functional at this stage in our journey.

Shared Beliefs

As a family of churches, we already share a theological unity on the nature of Christ and our salvation, but we lack a framework and a summary. No devoted member in our churches would doubt that we stand on solid ground on what is of *first importance—the gospel*, as stated in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, the *promise of salvation* espoused in the earliest gospel sermon of Acts 2 or the *essential doctrines* of Ephesians 4:4-6. These passages and others take us to Christ, through his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

The earliest Christians formed principle statements based on *inspired* texts such as Philippians 2:5-11, 1 Timothy 3:16 and 1 Peter 3:18-22. They used these statements to convey truths at baptism, to instruct new converts, to write strengthening letters, to put together theological treatises, to prepare communion meditations and to create defenses against heresy.

The maze-like proliferation of creeds in church history should not make us hesitant in our own day to make meaningful expressions of core truths—truths we want to defend. We will use this opportunity to assert our long-shared convictions in this proposal but will not introduce new core beliefs or develop a creed. It is important to acknowledge that some among us have philosophical aversions to all statements of faith, even if they are exact expressions of Scripture. (For more on this matter see the [Questions and Answers](#))

As brothers and sisters brought together by the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we aspire to love, honor and obey God. Out of our belief that the Bible is God’s inspired Word, and in our desire to please the Lord, we wish to find a unity in Christ that comes from him. In order to best communicate our beliefs, we are striving both to articulate the theological framework of “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) and to reaffirm those truths and emphases that have particularly shaped our branch of God’s movement, from the campus ministry days until now. This outline signals the order of importance and process—*GOD*, his *GOSPEL*, the *INDIVIDUAL*, and the *CHURCH COMMUNITY*.

STATEMENT OF SHARED BELIEFS

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” John 17:23 NIV

The following longstanding biblical doctrines and cooperative ideals have already guided us well on our journey thus far. These statements begin with the highest historical Christian essentials and move toward our common aspirations to be well-connected in Christ.

GOD: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

We believe in and we surrender our lives to the one God who made the heavens and earth and who breathed life into humanity. We worship and praise the Father who spoke the world into existence. We worship and praise Jesus, the Son, who died upon the cross to redeem us from sin. We worship and praise the Holy Spirit who is the seal of our salvation.

1. **Our eternal purpose** is to know God and to glorify him as God, and let our life shine so others will see God. Our devotion and ultimate loyalties are to the Father, who is over all and in all and through all; to Jesus the Son, who has been declared both Lord and Christ; and to the Holy Spirit, who lives in us and empowers us to overcome the workings of the sinful nature (Acts 2:22-36, Romans 8:12-28).
2. **The cornerstone** of our faith is our belief in Jesus Christ. Everything we hold dear in our faith originates from his words and his way of life (John 3:16, John 12:47-48, 1 John 2:5-6).
3. **The Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God.** It is sharp, powerful, effective, challenging, exposing, and encouraging when it is revered, studied, preached, taught, and obeyed because it is from our Creator and therefore relevant for all generations. (1 Timothy 4:13, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 4:1-5, Hebrews 4:12-13)

GOSPEL: the work of God

The culminating event of the Christian faith occurred between the time of the Passover and Pentecost at the end of the Gospels through early Acts. The death, burial and resurrection of the perfect Lamb of God are the substance of our faith. What the first twenty chapters of Exodus are to the Jews (as God rescued and brought them to Sinai to hear the law) is very much what the events in Jerusalem were for disciples. Many were eyewitnesses to events of the atonement, the risen Jesus as “both Lord and Christ”, and heard the promise that was for everyone, even “those who are far off”.

4. **Our salvation** totally depends on the work of God, prompted by his own mercy and grace, not our good deeds. That work redeems those who hear, believe and obey the Gospel message through baptism into Christ through their faith in God’s power and continue to remain faithful unto death. (Romans 2:7, Acts 2:22-37, Ephesians 2:8-10, Colossians 2:12, Hebrews 10:32-39, James 1:12).
5. **Our earthly mission** involves every member’s participation in the **Great Commission** to “Seek and save what was lost,” in bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to all parts of the world. As we go about this mission, our testimony must be consistent with a Christ-like life of doing good deeds and supporting and encouraging other Christians and churches around the world. In imitation of Jesus’ mission, we are committed to remembering the poor by demonstrating compassion to those who suffer by regularly doing whatever we can to lessen their burdens and supporting group benevolent efforts through international agencies such as *HOPE worldwide and others*. (Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 10:37-38, Colossians 3:1-6, Luke 19:10, Galatians 2:10, James 1:27).
6. **Our motivation** to love God, love each other and love the lost is prompted by God’s love for us, demonstrated in its greatest form by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on a cross for our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:14-21, 1 John 3:16, Luke 10:27).

The INDIVIDUAL Response: the surrender of God’s children

As disciples of Jesus, we surrender our lives to his Lordship. We rejoice in our adoption as God’s children, and each accepts the call to be holy and follow the example of Jesus.

7. **Our conversion** begins with belief in Jesus as God’s Son, and in his death and resurrection from the dead. Subsequent steps must include unmistakable repentance of sin, embracing discipleship, and confession that

“Jesus is Lord.” Finally, we become Christians at the miracle of rebirth with our immersion in water for the forgiveness of our sins and the promise that God will give us the gift of the Holy Spirit. (John 20:31, Luke 14:25-33, Acts 2:38-41, Romans 10:9, Titus 3:3-5)

8. **Our personal discipleship** to Christ begins with our *total commitment* to the Father, who is over all and through all and in all. It involves an understanding of and a commitment to his terms of surrender to his Lordship, a daily decision to deny self and persevere to the very end. (Luke 9:23ff; 14:33, Romans 2:7, Galatians 6:9).
9. **Our holiness** in daily living is a command from God. From baptism we are called to be set apart from the world and the ways of the world (sanctified) and live as saints of God (Ephesians 1:1, Ephesians 2:1-4, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, 1 John 2:15-17). With holiness in mind, **the romantic and marriage** relationships of Christians are to be pursued with only those who “belong to the Lord” as defined by Scriptures (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, 1 Corinthians 7:39).

THE CHURCH COMMUNITY: sharing in fellowship and strengthening

As members of the body, we are bonded by our immersion in water that united us with Christ’s death and brought with it the promise of absolute forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and a new life; our hope of heaven and the gift of eternal life; the church body and our devotion to being members of the family of God—a community that helps its members grow to be like Jesus..

10. **Our membership** in each congregation constitutes baptized disciples, men and women who have pledged to live their lives as saints of God in the holiness he requires. Our members agree to strive to be devoted, not only to their Maker, but to the body life of the church. This includes making wholehearted efforts, for example, to attend each applicable meeting of the body, and pursuing joyful, watchful, challenging, and encouraging **“one another” relationships** in which we spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Acts 2:42, Romans 12:10, Hebrews 3:12-13; 10:24-25).
11. **Our community worship** includes our devotion to God’s Word, prayer, fellowship, and **the Lord’s Supper** as a weekly sharing in the presence of Christ as a sacred event—breaking the bread and drinking the fruit of the vine together. As a community imitating the first century disciples, we give a **willing sacrifice** to God as a fragrant offering and a sign of our thankfulness. Since everything we enjoy in life is a gift from God, we agree to cheerfully and sacrificially contribute of our finances to the church so that the ministry of Jesus will advance throughout our communities and around the world (Acts 2:42-47, 1 Corinthians 10:17-34, 1 Corinthians 9:7-14, Philippians 4:14-19).
12. **We believe in the church supporting women** as they serve a vital ministry role in evangelizing, baptizing, teaching, counseling, and training other women. In addition, we recognize the value and significant influence that all sisters can have in the lives of the brothers (1 Corinthians 9:5, Titus 2:3-4, Acts 18:24-26, Romans 16:1-15).
13. **The decision-making** responsibilities of established congregations belong to the individual congregation. We are also resolved to pursue and maintain our congregation’s links with other congregations and individual Christians—soliciting, giving and receiving input and godly influence from those outside our local congregation (1 Peter 5:5).
14. **Our communication** within the church and outside of our brotherhood should always be genuine, respectful and never deliberately antagonistic. We affirm the authority of exemplary leadership—including the twin shepherding responsibilities to build up the church according to her needs and discipline the church in order to protect her. (1 Peter 2:17).
15. **Mature conflict resolution** is a priority to our churches and may sometimes require help from outside our own congregation. We agree to obey the scriptures that insist on godly conflict resolution, renouncing gossip and slander (1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:1-8, Philemon).

II. COURSE CORRECTIONS

We praise God for the incredible way our family of churches has stayed together. He deserves our many thanks, and countless Christians are to be commended for their perseverance in remaining committed to God and to each other. For many years, we publicly and privately proclaimed that we would repent and adhere to Scripture whenever we found ourselves straying from it. Praise God for loving us and for disciplining us as our Father. We

are so grateful to those who have listened to his training and are seeking the harvest of righteousness and peace (Hebrews 12).

The crisis and recovery of the past three years and its resolutions have created many reactions and many opportunities. One conflict management expert told the leadership of one of our larger congregations that we 'have an enviable opportunity to rethink and redevelop a church culture before the recent status quo becomes a new system. By the time five years have passed, it will be too late.' We agree with his assessment as it also relates to our larger fellowship. The appointment of the Unity Proposal Group demonstrated that most of our churches believe there is a need to study, pray, reflect, decide and act *before the reactions among us define us*. The arrangement within this proposal is what seems best for now, but we understand that we are a work in progress who will be led by God to make adjustments as we proceed and learn. But for God to lead us individually or collectively, we should best be moving already in the directions that we now view to be most functional at this stage in our journey.

Much commentary on the past has occurred and over time further reflection will be valuable. Right now we have a unique opportunity to define ourselves by what we stand for instead of what we stand against. Some of the most apparent shifts have to do with correcting the current trend of radical independence, overcoming the vagueness of congregational objectives, moving to stronger ligaments in our geographical regions and improving our local team-leadership dynamics.

Abandoning Independence for Interdependence

Perhaps the most visible shift in our fellowship in the last three years is a radical change in our church-to-church relationships. We suddenly transformed from a fully developed institution with a clear, established and global ecclesiastical structure into a fragmented fellowship of churches with many levels of spiritual health, leadership models and productive independence. To address this matter in light of the example of the New Testament church, we released an auxiliary article, [Hyper-Autonomy](#) on January 30, 2006, in which the following observation was made.

We know that unity is largely about humility and relationships, not just a set of beliefs. In the New Testament, we see the strong bond which existed between the congregations and reputed leaders for solving problems when an impasse existed (1 Corinthians 4:14-21, 2 Corinthians 13:1-3), answering trans-congregational issues (Acts 15:1-5) or cooperating on widespread needs (Romans 15:25-29). This is commonly called "connectionalism" or interdependence.

Many changes were indeed necessary, but we suffered a great loss of many of our connections during the duress by abrupt responses. This loss was largely rooted in the clash of human nature with disappointing disclosures, misinformation and long surfacing of tensions that had been suppressed by the strong parental control of the institution. Hindsight reveals how this eventually led to leaders of some churches proudly declaring their independence from other figures, and then the people they led proudly declared their own independence from such leaders. This "freedom" led to license that too often repeated the Galatian mindset Paul rebuked (Galatians 5:13). There is a need to reclaim a biblical freedom—one that seeks wisdom and considers the implications of our choices on other Christians and other churches.

Clarifying Our Objectives

The popular confusion over the mission and purpose of the church is not ours alone. Contemporary Christianity has tended to overemphasize experience or worship. Our fellowship tended to make no distinction between mission and purpose, and to over-emphasize evangelism and under-value spiritual growth, shepherding, etc. In this time of reevaluation, some of our churches have become lost in the maze of contemporary church trends, popular thinking and the calls of human culture. Without a clear sense of identity and mission, we increasingly take our cues from our godless environment without realizing it.

Throughout the ages, God has constantly called his people to return to him and to his will for them. Defining our God-given purpose and mission from Scripture will lead us to a healthier church family. Our *eternal purpose* and *earthly mission* are distinguished under Statement of Shared Beliefs. The main distinction is that our purpose is about our knowing God and exemplifying a life of that learning, whereas the mission is about our participation with various aspects of the gospel of Jesus. It is of particular importance that we review our local priorities regularly to make sure the latest philosophy does not take us captive (Colossians 2:6-8) because our best perspective comes from the experience of living within the will of God. As our churches are properly "rooted and built up in him"

(Colossians 2:6), others will say, "... all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." Colossians 1:6

Regional Partnership in the Church

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers..." (1 Corinthians 12:27-28). God described the church universal as a family and as a body. We must therefore see the church and not just our individual congregation as a body that is growing and maturing to bring honor to God. What, then, should this greater body of Christ look like in basic cooperation and function? We can know at least that it should be true to the scriptural metaphors of Family and Body.

Seen this way, the principles and commands that nurture disciples **within** a local congregation are just as true and vital **between** congregations. In times past, a hierarchy often thwarting congregational maturity obscured this truth. Now this truth has more recently been blocked by the reactions of some to our former structure—to various degrees of defensive isolation from each other. Both extremes fail to recognize what most members sense—that the church could meet our universal need for objective insight and input from outside of ourselves. That applies to our personal lives **and** our congregations. We need each other, both within congregational fellowships and between congregations, to become more like Christ (1 Corinthians 12, 13; Ephesians 4; Hebrews 3:12-13).

Just as in a healthy family, each congregation should be born, raised and matured to become responsible for its decisions. However, just as in a healthy family, no congregation should proudly say, "I don't need you!" (1 Corinthians 12:21) no matter how old or mature. On the contrary, the combined strengths and gifts of the Body should know no borders, especially for Christians with historical ligament-connection. In this spirit of both Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12, **each congregation should ultimately be self-responsible for its own maturity and decisions, yet never, ever self-sufficient.** Therefore, we commit to, at least, the following:

1. Leaders and leadership groups of our congregations (including elders, evangelists, deacons, etc) agree to humbly and regularly reach out to leaderships of other churches in either their geographical region or historical/relational circle to practice biblical, mature discipleship; to encourage one another (Hebrews 3:13); to sharpen one another (Proverbs 27:17) and to spur one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). Many geographic families of churches have already emerged over the past several years with others in the process of being developed. Moreover, each congregation agrees to encourage fellowship with other congregations within their region or relational circle through regional events and by inviting other leaders into their churches for counsel and input.
2. Some needs transcend even regional discussion. When such needs arise, geographical regions shall send representatives (2 Corinthians 8:23) to service relevant needs (such as our annual leadership conference, missions support, etc.).

Measures for Regionalization

Because we understand that the one Body of Christ consists of more than just one congregation and that we are commanded to "*be completely humble*" (Ephesians 4:2) and "*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*" (Ephesians 4:3), we commit ourselves to mutual discipling and accountability with other church leaderships in the spirit of obeying the "one another" Scriptures. We recognize that there are already numerous church leaderships that either presently have or have had some historical roots of working together in the past. There are also numerous church leaderships that are connected to a certain region of churches within the U.S. because of monetary and spiritual support that they may receive.

While each congregation is encouraged to strongly consider becoming part of a regional group in their geographical area, every church leadership has the freedom to decide which one, based on the relationships that will spur them on. Although most churches would consider the benefits of connecting with other leaderships that are in the same proximity to be significant, there may be legitimate or appropriate reasons for a church leadership to join a regional group outside of one's geographic area. At present, there seems to be 29 specific church "families" functioning together for mutual encouragement:

(A chart of either established or potential geographic regions is on the following page. This has been compiled to the very best of our ability based on the most current information that we have in our possession. Please do not look upon this as any more than a reference point. There is no intention here to dictate to what regional group a church must be connected.)

Geographic Region	# of Churches:	Membership:
SW U.S./ Korea / Mongolia / Hawaii	23	10413
Mexico/Central America	33	8054
Philippines/Rocky Mountains	20	5594
Southeast Asia	35	5460
India	51	4931
Southeast U.S.	16	4518
South America	26	4484
South U.S.	13	4477
New York	7	4589
Ukraine / Central Europe	19	4323
West Russia / Caucauses / Central Asia	14	4030
American Commonwealth	23	3900
French West Africa	20	3478
New England U.S.	9	3377
West Africa	16	3327
China	20	3298
Midwest U.S.	8	3199
Southern Africa	18	2857
Caribbean	19	2466
Texas U.S.	12	2179
Continental Europe	31	1955
East Russia / Urals	14	1742
NW U.S. / West Canada	15	1725
East Africa	8	1644
Central / Eastern Canada	10	1357
United Kingdom	21	1245
Heartland U.S.	12	1220
Australia	12	815
Middle East	16	443
Undeclared	5	2279

In order for us to begin moving forward together, we recommend that the leadership group of every congregation will become a part of one of these 29 current regional discipleship groups, trusting that God will lead us to make any changes that we need to make in the future. A congregational leadership's ratification of this proposal means that they agree to become an active part of one of these groups. Several of these groups have already found it beneficial to meet together once or twice a year. In addition to having consistent and regular communication, we recommend that church leaderships make the effort to meet together in these regional groups one to two times a year for mutual edification, leadership training and assistance, and maintaining unity.

Over time, it is certainly possible that some current groups may change and some groups may even choose to consolidate with other groups. For the sake of stabilizing continuity in decision-making, it seems best at this time to limit the total number of nominating groups for such an international session to the present 29. Any new emerging groups would then cooperate with one of the twenty-nine larger regions to nominate delegates.

Dynamic Leadership Teams

At the congregational level, as we study and sort out the roles and offices of biblical leadership, we must take care, while conscientiously straining out past mistakes, to avoid inadvertently embracing basic leadership ineffectiveness. Whatever the leadership model, the church **must** be *effectively and victoriously* led. And this effectiveness necessarily implies a church that is growing, in the end, in both maturity and numbers.

To accomplish this, our models, dynamics and titles must not exasperate the best use of the various gifts God has bestowed upon our memberships and leaderships (Romans 12:3-8). If we miss this point, then no configuration of titles and no configuration of elders, evangelists, deacons, teachers or other leaders will bring the church to health and victory.

As the world changes and as we grow as a fellowship, the elements of this proposal need to be continually reexamined and matured according to what God reveals to us in the future through the Scriptures. The shifts in our culture are not always predictable, but regional connection and effective leadership teams will help us navigate them together. (See the auxiliary article, [Effective Leadership](#))

III. STRENGTHENING OF THE CHURCHES

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Ephesians 4:11-13

The Scriptures give a strong example for the *strengthening of the churches* through Christians from other places (Acts 14:22, 15:32, 15:41, 16:5, 18:23). The apostles were not the only ones who met these needs. Would humility lead us to believe that we do not have the same needs today that existed in the first century? We also need faithful people who can meet these needs. Additionally, there exists a great need to more formally coordinate and strengthen our mission efforts. Also, the revitalization of our youth, campus and singles ministries will be crucial to the future of our fellowship.

Regional Representatives

Who or what will help strengthen our churches? In most areas of the world, many of our churches are currently being helped by respected and mature Christians who show respect and are commended by their spiritual character, moral authority and talents. They are serving much like “Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas” of Acts 15:22, Barnabas, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Titus and others. Of course, they would not be holding positional authority but natural commendation of the churches, usually by region.

Who will represent those same congregations in coordinating affairs that relate to the rest of our international family of churches? Just as large families designate representatives to plan family gatherings, etc., only a limited number of people can represent our churches. Regionalization helps us accomplish this. Regional representatives will meet, perhaps once a year, to help our fellowship with common needs. Many of those needs came up in the unity proposal process, including the following:

- Mission plantings and funding
- Continued education/training for evangelists, elders, missionaries
- Reconciliation and conflict resolution
- Internet communication standards
- Advice for hurting or weak churches
- Standards for administration
- Helping churches without ministers and ministers without churches
- More efforts with our youth, campus and singles
- Helping the poor, disaster relief, coordination with HOPE *worldwide* and other relief initiatives
- Possible name change for our fellowship
- Further studies on church discipline, etc.

These matters can be facilitated by selecting task forces of qualified and commended people to sort them out and provide recommended solutions. Most of these topics were beyond the scope of this unity proposal group.

When the need arises to discuss a trans-regional issue, an international session could be called, decided by a simple majority of the number of groups. If such an assembly is convened, each regional group could send a representative delegation of two per group. Those groups that represent a collective membership over 2000 shall have the option to send an additional representative per 1000 members. (This would mean 87 international representatives, with two thirds of these from outside the United States.)

Missions Coordination Conference

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies our confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else” (2 Corinthians 9:13). Without question, one of the most encouraging aspects of our short history is our whole-hearted devotion to missions. We praise God that even through the hardships and transitions of recent years, the majority of our churches have kept their mission focus sharp and clear, and have continued to give to help support the ongoing evangelization of the world.

We are currently supporting mission work in more than 160 countries through the dedicated operation of eight mission societies, as well as the direct pairing of certain supporting churches with specific groups of mission churches. Considering the importance for strong relationships and mutual understanding between the supporting churches and supported churches, we would like to propose that one full day preceding our annual International Leadership Conference be devoted to missions—sharing valuable reports (good news and struggles), biblical instruction and synergistic fellowship.

With an increasing involvement on the side of our supporting congregations, it would be incredibly beneficial and productive to commit this time to learning about successful ongoing programs, the exchanging of new ideas and inspiring greater vision for saving the lost around the world.

CONCLUDING VISION

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” Hebrews 12:11

God has blessed our congregations. He has shown his love for us by preserving our family of churches, disciplining us as his children and maturing us by allowing the fire to test us. The devil took advantage of the moment but will not be the victor in the end. We have much to be thankful for during these times. God promised he would honor our response of repentance with a harvest of righteousness.

Tens of thousands of saints have persevered and remained true to Christ’s name under the most extraordinary circumstances. Most of our older leaders have owned their mistakes, publicly repented and remain among us serving diligently. During the storm, many newer leaders stood in the gap and received the accusations for things that others did. Many Christians of various roles repented immediately and thoroughly—even when it was not “safe” to admit wrongs during the firestorms. Of course, for others it has taken more time. Heroic missionaries returned to their native countries, often with little or no funds to begin their new life. Newly formed elderships and many non-staff leaders carried such an enormous load for the sake of Christ and his church during these times. Numerous other moves, ministry overhauls and transitions suddenly occurred, testing the character and hearts of our churches. All Christian men and women who provided stabilizing voices during these pendulum-swinging years deserve our commendation and will one day receive their praise from God. Prayerfully, we will see many of those who were misplaced by the drama of the upheaval return or be restored once again to our fellowship.

The recent storm is past. We acknowledge God’s discipline and prayerfully we have become wiser for future storms. Just as those still helping with the tsunami and the hurricanes, now we must go forward and rebuild. The Holy Spirit’s bond of peace unites us and motivates us to make every effort. One way to ensure that we keep our bond tight is by each of us striving to live in obedience to the *one Lord*. The same is true for the congregations.

Further Repentance

This Unity Proposal is not just a call to deepen the relationships between our churches and between disciples. It is also a time for us as a fellowship of churches to recognize the need for on-going repentance. As long as the Spirit is transforming us into the image of Christ, we will be changing.

One of the most obvious ways we need to grow and mature is in the area of seeking and saving the lost. Our Lord said that he himself *“came to seek and save what was lost”* (Luke 10:10). How can we imitate him without imitating his passion and mission? Even a cursory glance at our membership figures from DisciplesToday.net shows that our churches have become less and less evangelistic for almost a decade. Many churches have not grown numerically in seven or eight years. While it is crucial to experience Christ in our daily walk, it is equally crucial to proclaim him as well. Both maturity and mission matter. We cannot just know God, but we must make

him known as well. That is both the command and the example of Jesus. That is certainly the example of the first century church. Surely, lack of numerical growth is not a sign of maturity.

It is true that in many places there may have been too much reliance on accountability and too much focus on numbers and statistics, rather than developing a compassionate heart and a greater focus on loving motivation, equipping and inspiration. This is not to say that there is not a place for appraisal and record-keeping. There are numerous Scriptures that indicate how a congregation or region is progressing numerically. But it cannot go back to being used as a prime motivational tool instead of the cross of Christ. As we correct our course, we must boldly face the fact that, today, we have come to a virtual standstill evangelistically. Many of our churches are dangerously close to becoming lukewarm and stagnant in the mission. While there are some churches that are growing, the vast majority are not. This must change. Let us face head-on the issue of seeking and saving the lost in every congregation, and let us as a movement return to the biblical example of every disciple being a fisher of men and women. As mature churches, let us not just baptize people, but let us teach them and help them mature in the faith, bearing fruit of the Holy Spirit.

We propose an immediate return to cross-driven, love-empowered proclamation of his word. One brother summed it up this way: "We began as God-centered, then we became man-centered, and we ended up self-centered!" Let us remember the things we did at first and repent. (Revelation 2:5) When we truly center on the cross, we will experience a depth of gratitude, grace, forgiveness and love that we have yet to see. Let us seize this moment as a family of churches to do away with all bitterness and malice, extending forgiveness as freely as we have been forgiven by God himself. Let us not experience a moment of repentance, but build a culture of repentance.

We have made huge changes in the past three years. We have repented of things quickly as a family of churches. Let us once again pray, fast, repent, forgive and recommit to making Christ known to our world. We propose Wednesday, MARCH 29, 2006, as a worldwide day of fasting and prayer for our repentance, forgiveness, unity and progress. There will be no unity without repentance and our "bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). Then we can enjoy the promised refreshment that repentance brings to our souls and to those whom God can save because we have repented (Acts 3:19).

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5-6

Paul's words to the Christians in Rome serve as a reminder that *only God gives us authentic unity*. Our job is to make every effort to maintain the unity he has given us. Every person wants unity in his or her family. But not everyone is always willing to humble himself, focus on and repent of his own sin, and completely forgive just as freely as he has been forgiven. May each of us be humbly grateful for our adoption into God's family. As a people of God, may we recommit to each other our humility and openness. And may we demonstrate a determination to respond spiritually to the changes that occur among us. We should continually strengthen each other so that we, like those who helped us, can effectively and powerfully reach out to this lost world with the good news of Jesus Christ, until we all finish the journey and spend eternity together in heaven.

--- See [Questions and Answers](#) for further help in understanding the proposal.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds, *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005)