



Rise Up, O Sleeper

A call for the emergence of a real
renewal movement & deconstruction
of our institutionalization in the
Churches of God, General Conference

February 2009

Copyright Fran Leeman

This document is available online at:
www.yourlifespring.org

You can share comments with Fran or order free printed
copies by emailing him at lifespringfran@hotmail.com.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

1. John Winebrenner: In the spirit of a radical
2. How movements become institutionalized
3. A church in need of re-centering
4. Primitive and Apostolic
5. Three Bullets in the Chamber
6. Why our planting and renewal strategies don't work
7. The status quo will have to go
8. The call to those on the front lines
9. The call to our denominational staff, and our council and commission leaders
10. Imagine if you will...

Introduction

I was not raised in the Churches of God. I came into this group fifteen years ago as I was beginning to plant a new church. I had been a part of a church with no group affiliation, and was looking for a place to belong. The Churches of God welcomed me in. There were a few bumps in the process—I came from a charismatic background, I was unsure whether footwashing belonged in the same category with baptism and the Lord's Supper—but I came to appreciate that the majority of the leaders in what was then the Illinois Conference were flexible enough to look past these issues and see the heart of a young man who wanted to plant a good and Jesus-centered church. Not being raised in the Churches of God, I do not have the sense of heritage about it that many of you do, nor is it part of my identity in the same way. If your roots do run deep into the soil of the Churches of God, that will be both a help and a hindrance as you read what I have written, because these pages contain both a call to return to the original spirit of the Churches of God and a call to leave behind some present day things we think of as being Churches of God.

Despite not being raised in the CGGC, I have come to love many people within her who have become my good friends along the way. There are so many good men and women in the Churches of God, and the relationships between them are precious. And yet, if we are honest, the Churches of God, the once vibrant and spontaneously multiplying movement of John Winebrenner, is gasping for breath. It saddens me to think that this association filled with precious relationships, built on faith in Jesus, could one day disappear. You may be reading this and thinking, "The CGGC is fine, what are you talking about?" But this is the reality:

- The Churches of God is in numerical decline.
- Other than Eastern Region, which has had some church planting success, our regions are planting virtually no new churches at present.

- We have been largely unsuccessful at renewing existing churches.
- There is no sense of clear vision about what to do.

But there are things which can be done, new places to go, and in the following pages I will be suggesting some very specific things. Without doubt I am not the most qualified person to do this, but I am an astute observer of the movements of people and organizations, and apparently I am the one who feels compelled to write these things. I believe it is the Spirit which has moved me to do so.

My own progression to the point of writing these thoughts has been interesting. In my early days in the CGGC, I was just glad to belong. I became a team player and served on the Christian Education and Church Development Commissions of my conference. I voted for Regionalization and got to know our new Regional Director. I had close relationships with two of our successive national Church Planting Associates. Along the way, though, I noticed that not much was working. And some of my pastor friends noticed it too. I started to feel confused. Despite large amounts of money being spent, we weren't getting new churches planted or existing ones renewed. And there seemed to be those who wanted to ask fresh questions and look for better directions, but also those who wanted to do things as they had always been done (or at least as they had been done for a very long time).

So I got frustrated. And I pushed for change. I pushed for fresh vision and direction. And some of my friends pushed with me. We pushed our commissions, we pushed our Regional Director, and we pushed each other. Despite our frustration, not all the pushing was negative. We tried to create new commissions with fresh vision that would inspire others to want to be more. What we heard back from denominational leaders were words that sounded like they wanted fresh vision, but which were accompanied by virtually no action.

Then I got mad. I've been mad for awhile. About a year ago, through intersections I still don't quite understand, I started to become good friends with our new Director, Ed Rosenberry. I

hadn't really been friends with previous directors, and it has been a treat and a privilege. When Ed got to know me, I was mad. To his credit, he listened, and in some ways it was his listening that has softened my spirit.

The other thing that has softened me through this journey from confusion to frustration to anger is simply that some friends and I took our own advice in terms of the things we were saying about the Kingdom of God, the community of Jesus, and the mission he started. Over the last three or four years, our churches have been deeply changed. It is not an exaggeration to say that my church, LifeSpring Community Church (Plainfield, Illinois), has undergone a transformation. We have re-centered ourselves in the spirit of the Jesus of the Gospels and in his message about the Kingdom of God, we have begun to "think and do" discipleship differently, we have rediscovered the joy and freedom of simply being in Him, and we have embraced the (seemingly) risky adventure of loving the world and the nations with Him.

Now I am not mad. I am at rest... at rest in this wild, beautiful, mysterious God who has come to us in the person of Jesus, and I am loving the journey of leading my church community as we go where the Holy Spirit leads us. I do not need the Churches of God to find its way out of its present malaise for me or for my church, because I am fine, and my church is on a joyous and fruitful path. In this sense, despite all of the strong convictions I will express in these pages, there is nothing at stake for me. But I feel there is much at stake for others: for leaders and pastors whose course would be better with a fresh vision, for churches that might be truly reinvigorated if their pastor grabbed onto the Kingdom of God, for the Kingdom itself if what remains of the Churches of God became a focused and potent movement for the sake of the Kingdom. What if, instead of continuing its decline, twenty years from now the CGGC was twice its current size, not because we found a new denominational planting strategy (more on that later), but because hearts were awakening and Jesus-communities were multiplying in a way that no one was really orchestrating from Findlay? What if instead of our publications reporting on the latest carry-in supper, they could barely keep track of the missional fires breaking out in

different places? What if lots of lost people (I mean lots) found a new life and an indestructible hope?

Those things aren't happening now, at least not in significant measure. The question is whether they are worth it, whether it is worth asking the hard questions that would take us those kinds of places, not for ourselves, but for the sake of others. Would it be worth changing? That's the word they say scares everyone: change. Well, the truth is that it's change or die, and anyone who says otherwise has his head in the sand. But more importantly, if we do not change, then we are choosing not to become a movement through which human beings made in the *Imago Dei* find the life that is truly life.

I am calling the group of churches I have come to appreciate and love to change, not for yourselves, but for others, for the world. That's what Jesus did—he set aside his rights and desires, and laid down his life for others. We are called to do the same. The changes that need to be made will be different for pastors on the front lines, in local churches, than they will be for denominational leaders, but if the CGGC is to become something truly dynamic and powerful once again, both kinds of changes will be necessary. The wind of the Holy Spirit is beginning to blow across the hearts of some leaders in our denomination... I can feel it... it's time to raise the sails and set the compass.

1. John Winebrenner: In the spirit of a radical

If John Winebrenner were in the Churches of God today, I think he would most likely leave. Oh sure, the Churches of God still holds his views on baptism, feetwashing, and free moral agency, but as an entity, the Churches of God no longer thinks like Winebrenner did. While many of us are busy protecting what we think is the “Churches of God way”, Winebrenner by contrast was busy searching for a more authentic relationship with Jesus, a more authentic way to carry out the ministry, and a more authentic paradigm for what it means to be the church of Jesus. Many of us want to change nothing about how we think. Over the course of his life, Winebrenner changed almost everything he thought. And he was radical enough to leave some things behind and chase the places his convictions and his God led him.

It's funny that Winebrenner is now thought of by most among us as the founder of our stable and predictable paradigm for being the church, our “Churches of God way”. Winebrenner was anything but stable or predictable. Even before he was locked out of his German Reformed Church in Harrisburg, he had begun to take new approaches to things that made some people nervous. Winebrenner sensed that the polite and courteous faith that dominated in his German Reformed circles was not the kind of faith that makes new men and women out of us. He embraced the kind of personal faith and revivalist preaching often associated with Charles Finney and “the new measures”. He supported the idea of prayer meetings in homes, and meetings where people knelt and prayed at the “anxious seat” for a true and deep conversion. Because he did not think one church could own the faith, and that all who preached an authentic faith were kindred spirits, Winebrenner would invite preachers of other denominations (particularly Methodist) to fill his Harrisburg pulpit. I am not trying to give a history lesson here, or even explain the exact causes of Winebrenner's break with the Harrisburg church vestry or the German Reformed Synod (which, as Richard Kern has pointed out, are complex), but simply trying to point out that Winebrenner went where his convictions took him, and that he often made people nervous—people who preferred to

maintain the status quo of their present faith and their present approach to church.

The question we would need to ask ourselves if we wanted to know if we are still following Jesus in the spirit of John Winebrenner is whether we have any leaders who are making us nervous with their pioneering thinking and their insistence that we ask one more time if there is anything else we should do to increase the authenticity of our Christian path. Winebrenner has been called a “19th century reformer” because he brought reformation to the church of his day, awakening men and women to a deeper faith and calling the church to return to her New Testament roots. He had specific ideas about the mission of the church which he called “the New Testament plan”. He broke with the German Reformed paradigm (after they broke with him) of top-down denominational legislation and control and established a group of independent churches that could both profit and bear fruit through a mutual cooperation. In this he broke with the status quo.

If Winebrenner were in the Churches of God today, he’d be happy to see that we still baptize by immersion, still wash feet, and that most of us have not become five-point Calvinists. But I am convinced he would be aghast at the lack of ongoing reform of our faith and of our paradigm for being the church. Most notably, I think he would wonder at our incessant attempts to generate momentum for the mission of the church out of denominational commissions and staff persons, because it is the exact opposite of his own strategy. Winebrenner knew that authentic gospel work found its genesis in hearts that had come alive to God and in people who grasped the vision of extending that life to others. Realizing this, he turned the local church and her preachers loose to go preach revivals, plant new churches, and establish new missions. In this, the Churches of God was birthed as a grass roots movement. Winebrenner created something different than he had known because A) It more resembled the movement of the church he saw in the New Testament, and B) It was more effective in reaching people in the culture of his day.

Let me go beyond calling John Winebrenner a “reformer”. He was that, to be sure, but if we search the list of leadership callings in the New Testament for the term which best fits him, Winebrenner

was an apostle (my friend Bill Sloat has pointed out that Winebrenner was clearly an evangelist, which is absolutely correct, but this is almost always a corollary characteristic of apostles). Now I realize that many get nervous about the term apostle either because they have been taught that only the early church had apostles or because they have seen self-aggrandizing preachers who love to give themselves this appellation. But we do the church of Jesus a great disservice when we dismiss the idea of apostleship and the need for it, because it is the apostles among us who are called to pioneer the direction of the church and challenge other leaders to live fully for the mission of Jesus (see Ephesians 4:11-13... last time I looked these verse were still in the New Testament). In his book *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch has recently delineated the role of the apostle in a very helpful way. Essentially, Hirsch says that:

1. The apostle brings forth a fresh articulation of the gospel and the mission of Jesus, establishing a specific DNA, so to speak, of what it looks like to follow Jesus and live his mission, a DNA which is clearly different from other thinking permeating the people of that time and place.
2. The apostle embeds this DNA (his “brand” of the gospel and the mission—think of Paul’s use of the term “my gospel”) in leaders around and under him who find themselves ignited by it and choose to align themselves with the apostle and his way of thinking and living. They take on his way of thinking about things.
3. The apostle guards the DNA he has embedded in other leaders and churches from dilution or corruption that will erode either it’s truthfulness or effectiveness (again, think of Paul’s words: “Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel other than the one we preached to you...” Galatians 1:8).

This is exactly what Winebrenner did. He brought forth a fresh articulation, a fresh take on the gospel, the church, and the mission of Jesus, poured it into other leaders who spread it further, and guarded

it (think Winebrenner's twenty-seven points). So much did he do these things that the term "Winebrennarians" came into being.

Now we find our group of churches struggling to find direction and momentum. I would suggest that one way of thinking about what we need would be to say that we need to recapture the spirit of John Winebrenner. Let me be clear, though—I am not suggesting what some seem to long for, which is a return to thinking about every little thing exactly as Winebrenner did. If Winebrenner were in our midst today, I have no doubt that he would articulate yet another fresh DNA of gospel, church and mission contextualized to postmodern western culture (a culture he could not have envisioned in his day for all the tea in China). It is not as much Winebrenner's thoughts that we need (though many are fantastic and should remain at the core of our group), but rather Winebrenner's heart and mindset, a heart that longed to live a deep and passionate Christian faith, and a mindset that allowed him to question the way things were being thought about by those around him, and consequently the way things were being done.

John Winebrenner wanted to be part of a church as alive and effective as the one he read about in the New Testament, and if people branded him a radical for chasing that dream, so be it. He held fast to those things he perceived to be at the heart of what Jesus was after in the church and the world, and let all other convention and tradition fall by the wayside. In so doing, he radically reinvented the church of his day. If he were here, he would do the same again. It is my firm contention that to honor the Spirit of our founder and submit to his leadership legacy, then, is not to protect the package of various organizational paradigms we consider to be the "Churches of God way", but to embark on the quest for a fresh DNA of gospel, church and mission, and on what some will perceive as the rather risky adventure of actually going where that DNA takes us, no matter how it looks different from where we've been or where we are at present. If you invited brother John to join you on that journey, I'm quite certain he'd say, "I'm in."

2. How movements become institutionalized

The Churches of God is different today than it was a hundred and fifty years ago. The most obvious symptom of the differences is simply that it does not have the same momentum. In the mid-1800's the Churches of God were multiplying spontaneously. Today the Churches of God is treading water at best. How does a group go from being a vibrant grass roots movement with a flat leadership structure to a more sedate and formal organization with highly designed structures and processes? The answer is one step at a time, and it happens to all movements as time passes. Have you ever wondered how the grass roots movement of Jesus and the apostles eventually became a hierarchical organization with its headquarters in Rome? Or how American car companies became such cumbersome giants that they could not adapt to the changing markets and were outgunned by their foreign competitors? Or why the NAACP, the greatest organizational champion of civil rights, after being around for a hundred years, is considered by many to be increasingly irrelevant? In all these cases, things changed, and often for good reasons. But underneath, occurring simultaneously with the journey of organizational development, the culture of the organization was changing. It happens so slowly and subtly that almost no one at any one stage of things perceives a serious threat. And then one day someone looks back (maybe to a John Winebrenner) and notes to his colleagues that "we don't smell much like that anymore."

But at one time we did smell like that. Hirsch writes, "Most transformational organizations, religious or otherwise, are launched with a certain ethos and energy that starts with a seminal vision/idea and swells like a wave to impact society around it" (The Forgotten Ways, chapter 7). Eventually all movements realize they need to get more organized. This is not a bad thing, but it is what opens the door to the loss of movement and the change to a more institutional culture.

The subtle move from mission to preservation

One of the first things movements do as the wild ride unfolds is try to define what makes the group "us" as opposed to "them".

This is done by articulating a common set of principles or ideas that everyone who has signed on generally shares. In the 1840's Winebrenner wrote his twenty-seven points which he called "the avowed principles of the Church of God in the United States." His avowed principles were a mixture of doctrine, practice (like defining the ordinances), mission (referencing sabbath schools, the religious press, missionaries, etc.), and stands on social issues (most notably slavery). It was a set of articulated convictions that those in the new movement could look at and say, "Yes, that's what we believe and what we want to live for." Defining such common convictions often serves to do two things: It galvanizes the group and it protects the group's convictions from those who would erode them (again I suggest that Winebrenner was guarding the DNA he had embedded as an apostolic leader). In the same way, the pre-Constantinian church began to define the trinity and other doctrinal issues as less orthodox doctrines emerged around them. This was a good thing, in that it made it possible to define who was believing the truth the community of Jesus was centered in, and who was moving away from that truth.

But a strange thing happens once we define in words and statements what our group believes and is committed to. What happens is that some people in the group, without perceiving it represents a shift at all, begin to think that the purpose of being an "us" is to defend the set of principles which has now been articulated, rather than seeing the principles as helpful markers as the group stays committed to the mission for which it originally came into existence. Let me cut to the chase: It's like thinking that what makes you "Churches of God" is that you defend footwashing or Arminian theology rather than that you live for the mission of seeing people find life in Jesus Christ. Once we have begun to think the mission is to preserve "us" and our principles, it becomes easier and easier to lose sight of the original mission. Knowing and articulating our common principles is good, but thinking that they are the point is disastrous. The point is always the lean mission of Jesus to manifest the Kingdom of God in the world. Institutions are always looking back; movements are always looking forward. People preserving and defending build walls; people on a mission to the world build bridges.

How cooperation drifts into loss of momentum

One of the things that makes a movement a movement is that the members have a sense that they can accomplish more together than they can alone. So, as the mission unfolds, everyone wonders, "How can we help each other do this better?" It's a good question, an honorable question, usually born of the desire to see the mission unfold more effectively. And once we see the fruit of a little cooperation, we are often attracted to more and more cooperation. In denominations this takes the form of standardizing doctrine, creating Bible colleges and seminaries, creating a standard credentialing process, creating a centralized missions program, and legislating the expected amount of each church's financial contribution to the organization. Let me be clear: none of these is an inherently bad thing. They help the organization uphold certain standards and they allow us to pool resources and labor together for the parts of the mission we share.

But if we are not paying attention, they also change the culture of the movement, specifically by removing ownership of the mission of Jesus from the local church and transplanting it to the denominational office. It becomes no longer the local church's responsibility to raise up and train leaders, but the denomination's. It is no longer the local five-fold minister who decides who is ready to be a pastor, church planter, or missionary (even though he is the one who knows the emerging leader the best), but the denomination (who knows the candidate not at all, and rarely evaluates based on the depth of the candidate's spiritual life or his passion for the mission, but rather on the basis of whether he agrees with organizations shared principles and doctrines). And the local church and its leaders no longer feel responsible for planting churches and reaching the nations, but defer to the "experts" who work at denominational headquarters. Now... be careful not to mishear me here—I meant what I said, that none of these forms of cooperation is bad. But they do open the door to "outsourcing" those things which ought to be the primary business of the local church and local leader, and once these primary elements of the mission have been outsourced, it is easy for the local church leader to see his role not as a change agent in the world, but as the one who tries to preach decent sermons and visit sister Louise in the hospital. His mission has become smaller.

The ironic twist

Once we begin to have a more centralized mindset about the leadership of Jesus' mission, and we ask a few denominational staff members to manage specific elements for the whole group, they begin to do just that: manage. And managers are, by nature, not pioneering types of leaders. So, ironically, just as local church leaders agree to give up their leadership of the mission, denominational leaders follow that with trading the mission for merely "running things". As the sense of how to manage the organization and what it means to "maintain things" solidifies, a whole host of other cultural changes set in: decision making is entrusted to committees who have conformity and preservation as prime values (rather than mission); the organization stops looking for apostolic, pioneering leaders to work at headquarters simply because it no longer feels like they are needed; the organization and its leaders stop taking significant risks because it is a great mission that calls for risk, not the maintenance of an organization. In the end, programming and administration replace vision and mission as the driving forces.

This is the process by which dynamic movements become ineffective institutions. Hirsch notes that he has never seen a denomination recover its movement ethos once it has become institutionalized. I'd love to see the Churches of God be the first, but both our local church leaders and our denominational staff better take that observation very seriously. In essence, no group has ever done what I am asking us to do, to risk enough change to see a movement emerge from within a denomination that isn't a movement anymore. Rather, what almost always happens is that those who are chafing for a fresh movement are kept at arms length by the managers of the denomination until they finally leave and create an entirely new movement (which the denomination has then lost the joy of sharing in). As I write this, there are many among us chafing to see the Churches of God become the vibrant movement it once was, no longer shrinking, but thriving and growing and spreading. This will require many things of us, not least of which is pushing the responsibility for depth, vibrancy, and mission away from headquarters and back out to the local church. But before we get there, it may be time for a little theology.

3. A church in need of re-centering

There is a difference between subscribing to something and truly believing it. This explains why in western culture today we have vast numbers of people who go by "Christian" but whose lives are not significantly different (deeper, more centered, less fearful, more moral, less materialistic, more sacrificial, more joyful, etc.) from the lives of the non-Christians around them. The work and message of Jesus is radically freeing and transforming—not that each person will be completely changed overnight, but if we actually embrace what Jesus taught we will become very different human beings than we have been. But that is not where the church in the west, by and large, finds itself, which raises the question, "Why not?" And even more than that I find myself wondering, "Why until only very recently have so few in the church even seemed to notice or comment on the fact that so few seem to actually be living in the way of Jesus?" All of this matters to this discussion of the future of the Churches of God so much because if we have Christians who have not found and entered the life Jesus spoke of, then we have churches which are religious but not transformational for the culture around them.

The answer to the question lies, at least in part, in understanding the way the gospel has been understood and preached in the modern period of western culture. I would submit to you that the church in modern culture has had what we might call a partial or incomplete gospel, and to the extent this is true in the Churches of God, it is only symptomatic of the larger evangelical church. So my thoughts in this chapter are really directed at the larger evangelical church, of which the CGGC finds itself a part. Some will find it surprising that I would dare suggest that the church of our day may not have the gospel quite right, but it's really worse than that, because I am suggesting that we have left out the most important part.

The evangelical church of our day has largely framed the gospel as a message about how a person can make sure they get into heaven after they die. There have been sub-topics to this gospel, such as the need to live morally, how Jesus can help you with your various life-problems, why you should vote republican, etc. But the main gist has been that you are going to hell and because Jesus died

and paid for your sins, there is a “get into heaven free” card available—you just need to pick it up by saying a prayer acknowledging your acceptance of him. This is the very reason why so many have seen “accepting Jesus” as a destination, rather than a beginning. We have all kinds of people who have picked up the card, but gone nowhere new since.

One way of framing this conversation that I have found helpful is to distinguish between the message about Jesus and the message of Jesus. The church in our day has largely focused on the message about Jesus, that Jesus died for our sins and that this changes something significant for us. The message about Jesus is crucially important, because in his death and resurrection he has accomplished for us (both with regard to our sins and our dead condition) what we could not accomplish for ourselves. It is the heart of the gospel as it has to do with our justification and redemption.

But up until that last Passover with his friends, it is not what Jesus mostly talked about. Go and read the Gospels and track how many times Jesus equates salvation primarily with going to heaven after we die. Not very many. Because what happens after we die isn't important? No, because what happens right now is even more important, because the main issue now and later is what we become as human beings. It is telling that we now use the phrase “eternal life” almost exclusively as a reference to “life with God after we die”. But when we read the places this phrase flows from Jesus' lips, it is almost always a reference to a different kind of life available to us now.

What we are in need of is to revisit the message of Jesus, what he himself announced as the good news that could change everything. And as Brian McLaren has said, “... it is tragic for anyone, especially anyone affiliated with the religion named after Jesus, not to be clear about what Jesus' message actually was” (The Secret Message of Jesus). So what did Jesus go around saying?

The Kingdom is here now...

In Matthew 4:17, Matthew sums up for us the message Jesus preached as he went from village to village: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near.” We need to know three things to grasp what Jesus meant by this. First, as Dallas Willard points out, the

phrase in the original is almost always “the Kingdom of the Heavens”, carrying the implication that the Kingdom is not “far away in heaven” but surrounding us as the very air surrounds us (I highly recommend Willard's book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, and his elaboration of the Kingdom, which space does not allow me to share here). Second, while “repent” always carries the connotation of turning from sin, the primary way the word was used in first century Jewish culture carried more the sense of “turn away from your agenda and embrace mine” (see N.T. Wright's *The Challenge of Jesus*). And third, we must understand that Jesus did not introduce all this talk about the Kingdom of God into his culture (incidentally, the phrases Kingdom of heaven and Kingdom of God are virtually interchangeable in the Gospels). Everyone in Israel was talking about the Kingdom of God, by which they meant the deliverance of Israel from Roman occupation and the restoration of Israel's primacy in the world as God's chosen nation. And everyone was talking about when the Kingdom would come, when these things would happen. There were multiple answers being offered to the question of how the Kingdom would come (By living more holy lives? By slitting the throats of Roman soldiers? By cooperating with the Romans until God moved? By retreating to the desert to pray?), but everyone agreed that the signs of the Kingdom coming would be political and probably military. Then Jesus shows up and in essence says, “Your waiting for the wrong thing—the Kingdom is available now.” And he adds, “So trade in your agenda for mine”. Or as we might put it: “Change what you're living for.”

Later, Jesus tells his disciples that the very first thing they are to say when they enter a village is “The Kingdom of God is near!” In Luke 9:2 it says that he told them to go out and “preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick.” When the disciples ask him to teach them how to pray, the core of the model prayer he gives them is “May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, and the implication is clearly that the Kingdom might be manifest in the earth now. If we read carefully, we will discover that Jesus speaks of the Kingdom in multiple ways: It is the source we need to live from (“the Kingdom of God is within you” Luke 17:21), it is the restoration of good in the earth we need to live for, and it is what the world will be when good has triumphed over evil once and for all. It is also

interesting to note that Acts is replete with this phrase as a description of the apostolic preaching. In Acts 8:12 Philip “preached the good new of the Kingdom of God”. In Acts 19:8 we read, “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” And at the very end of Acts we hear these words about Paul, now under house arrest: “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God.” I do not have space to go on and on about the Kingdom here, but we must face the fact that the church of our day has preached much about getting your free pass to heaven, and almost not at all about the Kingdom of God or what a life captivated with and transformed by the Kingdom looks like.

The primary need is not assenting, but awakening...

The church of our day seems to think that the primary thing people need is to assent to the right beliefs, about Jesus and other corollary and important things. So we tell them what to believe. I completely agree that what we believe is terribly important. But we seem to have forgotten that Jesus never wrote up a doctrinal statement and asked people to agree with it. He took a very different approach: He told stories (we call them parables), and usually did not explain them, but left people (at least those who were curious and willing) leaning in and wondering what it was they were not seeing.

In fact, at one point (you can read this in Matthew 13) the disciples get so frustrated with Jesus’ unexplained stories that they pull him aside and say, “Why do you do this?” The clear inference in their question is, “Why don’t you just say it plainly?” Jesus’ answer is that he’s telling secrets. Why? Because people are blind, deaf, under a spell (so to speak) from which they must awaken if they are to enter the life of God. We are blind to the Kingdom, to the life of God, to reality as it really is (as opposed to how everyone around us perceives it), and simply knowing the right things to believe, or even that we ought to believe in Jesus, is not enough... we must awaken, we must begin to actually see. This is hard to describe, because it is something that happens within the depths of a person, but everyone to whom it happens knows it. The telling thing is simply this: you wouldn’t have to tell a story to get anyone to understand the gospel as we have, for the most part, been preaching it. We tell people, “Believe in Jesus, go

to church, be good.” It sounds like “Do your homework, clean your room, be home by ten.” Jesus says, “Lean in, listen close, wonder what it is that you are not seeing.” Most people, he tells us, are always looking but never seeing, always listening but never hearing. He has secrets he wants to tell us, and when we begin to see what he sees, we won’t be mere little church Christians, but new creatures filled with wonder and living life from and for a whole new picture... The Kingdom of God.

Does it bother us that that we think so little in terms of people’s need to awaken? What I am suggesting is that the gospel is not just an invitation to have our sins forgiven or get into heaven, but to see and enter into an alternate reality to which most of the world is oblivious, and that the real joy and freedom is found in actually, personally awakening to this reality. It is what Jesus gave most of his preaching time to, because he wanted us to find “the treasure hidden in a field”, the treasure so captivating that in our “great joy” at seeing it, we would sell off all we have called life up to this point to possess it.

Come follow me...

I believe in the concept of conversion, a point in a person’s life where they cross the line from not believing in Jesus to believing in Jesus. Sometimes it’s more of a process than a “moment” for people, but it is conversion nonetheless. But I am concerned that so much emphasis has been put on the destination of “accepting Jesus” that we have defined believing primarily in terms of that initial embracing of Christ. But Jesus defines believing as following him. He is unequivocal about this, telling us that those who say “Lord, Lord,” but do not live his way will not enter the Kingdom, but “only those who do the will of my father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Jesus never said, “Hey, just believe that I’m the Savior and accept the idea that I died for you, and that’s all you need to do.” What he said was, “You let the dead bury their own dead, and you come follow me.”

I do not object to the language of “believing”, but I am convinced that we have reduced “believing” to something less than following in the minds of most people. We have created a whole generation of “Christians” who are glad they’re going to heaven and grateful for the comfort and assistance a personal faith brings, but

who not seen the Kingdom, become more free, or launched into a life lived for higher things as a result. So strong was Jesus' insistence that believing in him leads to a new way of living that he tells us, point blank, in Matthew 25, that if we do not feed the hungry or clothe the naked, we can forget about picking up the keys to our mansion. "You are my friends if you do what I command" (John 15:14). Jesus isn't saying this to us like, "You better do these things or else!" He's saying, "If you get it, if you see it and then come walk with me, this is where it leads." Read First Corinthians 13, read James, read First John... those guys got it... where it leads is love. The followers of Jesus are to love their enemies, their friends, and the world like Jesus does... blessing, helping, teaching, serving. We must begin to think and talk more in terms of following in the church today. When we talk like this, some fear that this will make the Christian life all work and no joy. Exactly the opposite is true, as John says: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome..." (First John 5:3). They are not burdensome, he tells us, because as those awakened, reborn by the kiss of God upon our lives, we have "overcome the world"... in other words, we have become free enough to live the life of love. How might the church impact the world if we were really seeing people become the followers of Jesus?

Our need to be re-centered specifically in Jesus

A friend of mine who had been raised Catholic, but who had recently begun trying out evangelical churches, made this observation to me: "It seems you hear a lot more from Paul in evangelical sermons than you do from Jesus." I think this is true. In fact, it has been true at times in my own preaching. By repeating this story I do not mean to place Paul and Jesus at odds with one another (as some like to do), because I think they say the same things, but they do say them in different ways, owing at least in part to the fact that Paul is a Hellenized Jew (Jewish in faith, but thinking and speaking more in the paradigm of a Greek philosopher). We like the way Paul explains things, how he unpacks salvation and breaks things down for us. But when we read Paul more than Jesus, we often take his more didactic approach to mean that "right beliefs" and "proper understandings" are what matter most. That is not what Paul says, not anywhere, but it

is what we often infer from his way of explaining. In the wake of the Reformation, Paul became our champion of how to think about right beliefs, particularly on the topic of grace, but on many other things as well, and all our denominations found it important to discover and articulate all of the exactly true doctrines. Somewhere along that path, we began to forget that Jesus was inviting us primarily to the journey of becoming new creatures, restored human beings, a journey made possible by the finished work of Jesus (the message about Jesus), begun by personal awakening from the spell of our fallenness, and undertaken by a decision to learn his new Way of living and then following him (the message of Jesus). If the church is to be what God desires her to be, we must emphatically return to thinking about Christianity more as a Way (the earliest name given to his followers, by the way), and less as a set of beliefs to be ascribed to. What I am suggesting is that while we continue to chat with brother Paul, we might consider hearing him through the way Jesus talks about things (rather than the reverse, which is, I suspect, what most of us have been doing). A good place to start is the Sermon On the Mount. As our friend Bob Roberts likes to point out, when Jesus said to go make disciples, it was against the backdrop of how he had shaped those first disciples over those three years, which means that rather than suggesting we go find converts, he was telling us to go give away what we had found, namely the life elaborated in the Sermon On the Mount. He was saying, "Go help people enter into that life, the real living"

What I have tried to articulate here is what is missing from the gospel of the modern evangelical church. Undoubtedly, if any of our Winebrenner professors read this, none of what I have said will come as a surprise to them, and they probably have better insights even than mine into these things. But at the local church level in the Churches of God, as in the broader evangelical church, the message of the Kingdom, the need for actual awakening rather than mere assent, and the wholistic call to follow Jesus and become people who live the Way is hard to find. I have had the privilege over the years to work with our national church planting associates, and more recently to be in conversations at the highest level of the CGGC about how to be more effective and fruitful as a denomination. Perhaps what has troubled me most has been that all the talk is always about strategy

(like making plans to plant X number of churches in the next X number of years), and virtually none of the conversation has been about the content of the message we hope to see those churches promulgate. We are like men dreaming of producing thousands of units of a car that has problems with the design of its engine—more churches preaching a partial gospel will not be fruitful, nor worth our effort. So let us sit at Jesus' feet and listen to his words, and create Jesus-communities that sound, smell and look like the Jesus of the Gospels.

4. Primitive and Apostolic

In his *History of the Church of God*, self-published in 1849, John Winebrenner wrote,

“...as the views of the writer of this article had undergone a material change, as to church ordinances and the organization of churches, he united with others in adopting the apostolic plan, as taught in the New Testament, and established free, and independent churches, consisting of believers or Christians only, without an human name, or creed, or laws, etc.”

Commenting on this very quote, Richard Kern had this to say: “As the above passage indicates, the underlying or motivating principle in the establishment of these independent churches was the restoration of primitive or Biblical Christianity, that is, what Winebrenner and his followers conceived of as being ‘the apostolic plan, as taught in the New Testament.’” Those two words capture for me much of what guided Winebrenner in the formation of his new association of churches: The approach was primitive in that it represented a return to being an association of “free and independent churches” (like the early church), and it was apostolic in that there were both local church leaders and leaders who traveled and served the church at large. It was also certainly apostolic in the sense that this was a pioneering movement. While we see some 350 Churches of God today, there were thousands planted in our history. Today I hear people talk about planting churches so the denomination doesn't die—that thought never entered Winebrenner's mind—he and his fellow ministers were planting churches because there were people to be reached, because the gospel must spread. If they were not pioneering, they would have wondered why they existed.

Winebrenner did eventually begin to form elderships to help the churches be more connected, but as his own words (quoted on the cover of this booklet) remind us, “Co-operation and not legislation is the main object of these meetings: and this is, on the itinerant and stationary plan, combined. Thus it was originally” (*Church of God*, 1844). His own description (in the same document) of the freedom of churches and ministers, and of the variety of ways the mission was carried out is telling: “Whilst some were stationed, others itinerated, in given districts; whilst others again missionated, or

travelled at large. This plan the Church of God finds to be the most rational, scriptural, and efficient, and therefore, she has adopted and pursues the same.” So we find in the early Churches of God very free and independent churches, connected together for encouragement and cooperative ministry (rather than for large amounts of legislative oversight by the eldership), and we find every minister pursuing the mission of Jesus as God has called him to do, leading to a tremendously varied landscape. I was once told by one of our denominational staff members that the Churches of God was never meant to be a association of free churches, but rather one church submitting to a common approach to all things. Really? Winebrenner’s words suggest exactly the opposite.

At this point, we simply need to ask to what degree our group of churches today is primitive and apostolic. I have broken this into four characteristics.

Free and independent churches?

Individual Churches of God congregations are still quite free and independent, and in most cases free to structure their church polity, their worship, and their mission as they choose. This is good, because it means that a Churches of God congregation is free to contextualize its worship and mission to it’s culture and community. Unfortunately, that contextualization is the very thing we see many of our longstanding churches failing to do, because churches, just like larger organizations, eventually drift toward institutionalization. So many of our churches are free, but stuck—stuck in a different decade, stuck in their fear of change, and stuck in having traded the mission of Jesus to the world for the mission of preserving what they perceive to be “the Churches of God way” (which, as we have seen, may bear little resemblance to the mindset of our founder, whom these churches undoubtedly revere). If you are leading a church that is stuck, let me suggest that your primary job is to get it unstuck. Freedom is of no value if you never freely go anywhere.

Connected for cooperation?

At least in the region I minister in, there is very little connectedness (I cannot speak to that in other regions, but I suspect in many it is the same). I hear fellow-ministers say they would really

like more connection, but it doesn’t really seem to happen. Some of that is geography (churches not being near each other), but I would suggest that most of it is the lack of a vital sense that we are fellow-laborers on a crucially important shared mission. We all lead churches, but we usually seem less galvanized, as a group, than a group of people working for a political campaign, or a group promoting animal rights. At our regional conferences, for example, we do the business of the region, we hear (sometimes) a good speaker, but it usually feels like a bunch of people going through the events who are “sort of glad to be there” (and some not glad at all, or frustrated). And rarely at those gatherings, in the hallway or over the dinner table, do I hear passionate conversations about the mission in which we are engaged, whether conversations about how to do something better, or how to overcome an obstacle we have encountered, or about the risks and rewards of some missional adventure we have undertaken.

There is some good cooperation in the area of missions, both financially and with sister-churches and work teams, but this is really the bright spot on our “cooperation horizon”, and I credit this largely to present and past leadership of the cooperative cross cultural ministry effort. Between our local church leaders, there is not a synergy of hearts around our beautiful faith in Jesus or the amazing mission to which he calls us. Why? I think in part because we do not have what I would call a “shared ethos”. Ethos is the character, nature, sentiment, or convictions that distinguish a certain person or organization—it is what binds them together. But it is not merely a set of things they all agree to, it is the sentiments or convictions or strategies they share that make them want to stand up and shout “YES!!!” Do we really think that Winebrenner’s twenty-seven avowed principles were regarded by his fellow-ministers as merely a doctrinal statement to subscribe to? There was stuff in there about how they did the mission, there was stuff about the slavery issue—these were “the hills they were prepared to die on”. The malaise which has crept upon us over time is that when a person asks to be credentialed, we go, “Have you read *We Believe?* You agree with it?... Okay, we’ll take you.” When we should be asking how they think about the good news of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, the mission of Jesus, and what they want to live and die for, and how much it really

matters to them. Of course, to ask what makes their heart beat fast and their adrenaline flow assumes we are asking that question of ourselves. And I suspect that many of our ministers are not asking that—no one told them their heart was supposed to beat fast, they are just managing their churches and preaching nice sermons as their institutional leaders suggested was their job.

When we find what makes our hearts beat fast together, we will have an ethos, a set of sentiments that run deep in our beings that become the fuel for more synergy in our conversations, shared prayers, and actions. Then we will find ways to cooperate, to share the journey, that are truly encouraging and powerful and which multiply our fruit. To go there, our hearts, yours and mine, must come alive to a few things we both care deeply about. I will be suggesting what some of those things might be. I dream of seeing our free and independent churches, when our leaders gather, experience the dynamic of a shared ethos. Then our conversations and prayers and planning of shared ministry will explode out of our shared convictions about what it is that really matters in this world.

Apostolic in pioneering new territory?

As I have already said, the early Churches of God movement was by nature a pioneering movement. Churches multiplied rapidly, and as Churches of God members moved west, pioneering leaders followed them and used those Churches of God families as the base from which to reach out in new communities, forming new churches as people came to faith. We talk about pioneering new churches these days, but I see three differences between our mindset and that of those early pioneers.

First, the typical minister and local church no longer think that pioneering is their job. They think it is the job of the denomination (and the denomination has accepted that role and allowed the local movement of Jesus to abdicate its place on the front lines). So removed was the “pioneering” from the top leaders in the early Churches of God movement that Kern describes how “In 1850, he (Winebrenner) made a trip west as far as Iowa to visit the newly formed churches in that region.” A trip? One? Yep. Pioneering was the job of Christians and their ministers, not the denomination (though elderships may have worked to facilitate and help).

Second, we often frame our ideas about the pioneering efforts in a “vocational ministry” paradigm. We’ve come to believe that pioneering belongs to properly educated and ordained ministers, and preferably ones who are full-time (meaning that they make their main income from the ministry). Listen to Winebrenner’s own description of who the pioneers were in the early days: “From among the young converts, in these newly planted churches, it pleased God to raise up several able men, to take upon them the solemn and responsible office of the gospel ministry” (History of the Church of God). The pioneers were raised up right in the new churches, and then ordained to the gospel ministry and sent out to preach, plant more new churches, etc. I am not arguing against formal higher education for ministers, but I am suggesting that over the course of time the general “professionalization” of the clergy in western culture has tricked us into thinking that the Kingdom of God is spread by professionals. But it’s supposed to be spread by Christians. I have heard fellow CGGC pastors argue that we should not plant churches with people raised up in our local churches and trained for the ministry in our local churches. Well, since most of our seminary grads in America are not strongly bent in pioneering directions, we have a problem. I guess we can’t pioneer much of anything. Unless of course, we go back to Winebrenner’s mindset, which was also that of the early church.

Third, we have become averse to risk. One of our national core values reads, “We value dependence on and confidence in God’s ability to do more than we ask or imagine; we are willing to take risks and expect God to surprise us.” That’s fantastic, but it is mostly words at this point; I see it being lived out in our churches and our organization very little. We live in a risk-averse culture. We live in a time when we can find church planters if we can promise them a couple hundred thousand dollars to fund the venture and make the adventure safe for them personally over the first couple of years. That mindset comes from the values of comfort and safety that flourish in the prosperous periods of a society. Pioneering is by nature risky. We may fail. We may find ourselves over and over again at points where we do not know where the resources will come from. Others may criticize our methods. It requires a radical trust in God. But what we seem to have forgotten is that God is faithful. We

have forgotten how invigorating it is to our faith to find ourselves at the edge of the cliff with no rope or parachute in sight, and to find, as we choose to fall into the air, that God catches us and does what we could never have done. How sad to be the one who remains on that ledge, quoting verses about how God can be trusted, but never discovering that it is true!

So then pioneering new territory will require local leaders to own the job again, denominational leadership to be encourage home-grown leadership, and those who would pioneer to learn the joy of falling off cliffs.

Apostolic in leadership?

I do not know how far Winebrenner's thoughts about apostolic leadership developed. What is clear is that he was enamored with the missional apostolic ethos that flowed back and forth between the leaders and churches he read about in Acts and the epistles. It is also clear that he himself was an apostolic leader in nature. In the institutionalized churches of modern western culture (not just the CGGC by any means), apostolic leadership has been replaced by committee leadership. As I elaborated earlier, the apostle articulates a take on the gospel, the church, and the mission of Jesus that has a fresh and distinctive flavor, and which other leaders around him find compelling. This creates a momentum as they charge off in pursuit of the life of God and the mission of Jesus, fueled by these perspectives that run deep in them. This is exactly what took place in the Winebrennarian movement. It is not in the nature of committees to fly up the kinds of visionary flags that catalyze and energize fresh movement. Committees have management to do (and often rightly so—I am not denigrating this role). Committees lean toward consensus, while the rantings of visionaries often leave them standing on the hilltop alone (think of those places where Paul essentially says that doesn't care what some other group of people think, this is the truth and the way it is). Committees have their place in the structure of a good organization, but if we have committees and no apostolic leadership, we are a ship without a horizon.

Here is the blunt truth: If you stand at the level of the local church in the CGGC, and look up through the ranks of denominational structure and staff, through the region and on up to

national HQ, and you ask who stands out as an apostolic type of leader, who the leader is that is painting a fresh and gripping picture of gospel, church and mission that inflames our hearts, catalyzes our ranks, and makes us want to live and die for the Kingdom of God, you cannot find this person. I would suggest that we need them terribly. I would suggest that we comb the CGGC for them and beg them to give leadership. They must be biblical, they must have integrity, they must be proven leaders, they must be humble—all of these, yes—but most of all they must speak of God and the life of God, and His mission in the world in away that makes our hearts burn.

5. Three bullets in the chamber

If I have sounded too negative to you in some of my assessments of our current state, it is only because I think that just as in our personal lives, we must be very self-honest if we are to change. And truthfully, I have seen far more denial of our stagnancy than honesty about it among denominational leaders. Yet I am, by nature, an optimist and a visionary. My nature is to think that if we can see a picture, we can go there, despite present obstacles. This has often gotten me into trouble, but it has also helped me climb mountains some said could not be scaled. So as I have pondered what happens to the Churches of God from here, I have wondered this: “What remains in the Churches of God, at this moment, that is good and can be leveraged in a way that helps to renew us?” We’ve lost a lot of our bullets, and a few we fired into the air and hit nothing, but I think we have three left in the chamber that can do us some good.

1. A dynamic cross cultural ministry

I have already said it, and I will say it again: Our cross cultural leadership has done a very good job of energizing churches to reach out to the nations. Don Dennison and the various mission staff continue to take the CGGC into new mission fields, like the work that has exploded in Brazil. It is interesting that we still see in our international outreach some of the pioneering that has all but dried up among our churches here in the U.S. Unfortunately, if the CGGC continues its present decline, a day will come when there isn’t much of a church left here in the States to support and engage in this global effort.

Our cross cultural ministry is something which can be leveraged for renewal in two ways. First, it models for us internationally the pioneering spirit we need to recapture locally. We should hold up the cross cultural work not just as a great thing to participate in, but as a model of the pioneering and risk-taking spirit we need in our own backyards. Second, it continues to provide a place where we can actually take people on an adventure for Jesus, by taking them (literally) to Brazil or Haiti or India. People who go on adventures get outside their comfort zones, they realize it’s a big world, and they start to ask new questions and are open to new directions. One of

the most invigorating things for our church has been taking people across the sea—going there has changed us here.

If there are weak spots in our cross cultural work today, I think they are mostly tied back to the weakness of the church here in the U.S. For example, in the last few years we have had a hard time finding staff for the CGGC ministry in Haiti. With 350 churches in the U.S., we should be trying to figure out which of the ten or twenty candidates applying for that role we want to accept. It is our closest mission field—easiest to travel to, and open to our involvement. But we do not have churches with many adventurers for Jesus and his Kingdom. And I would bet that most pastors, if they are aware of the struggle to find missions staff, are more likely to pray “that Don will be able to find them” than to wonder who in their own church God might be calling to Haiti.

The other weakness is that at this point it is almost exclusively our official denominational cross cultural office pioneering new efforts. Again, this goes back to the fact that local churches no longer see themselves as the pioneers. A few years ago, a non-CGGC guy who has been somewhat of a mentor to a few of us CGGC local-church pastors, said to us, “Find someplace hard in the world and go work there for a long time.” You go... go find a place, go build relationships with people who look and talk differently from you, go love them, go manifest the Kingdom of God among them. So we did. Three of our churches asked the Holy Spirit to lead us, went to the opposite end of Haiti from where the CGGC works, to a remote river valley, made friends, and got to work. We founded something called New Life for Haiti, raised our own money (over \$200,000 in the first three years), and have built a clinic and two schools, helped to bring medical care, loaned beans for planting to starving farmers, and built up the Haitian church. As of this point, the whole thing is completely unaffiliated with the cooperative CGGC cross cultural ministry program. We caught some flack for that, because we didn’t ask permission, because some perceived it as rebellious (which it was not in our hearts). Winebrenner would have said we were “free and independent churches” living out the “apostolic New Testament plan”. Wouldn’t it be great if even fifty churches across the CGGC in the U.S. decided to own a specific place in the world like that, and they didn’t ask for

permission and they didn't care who liked it as long as Jesus was pleased with their hearts and their work? And it would be great if they linked it to the main CGGC cross cultural effort, but it would also be great if they found it more efficient or effective to create new cooperative efforts (like our Haiti partnership).

2. Various leaders ready to step up

I see three sets of leaders ready to step up and do what they can to see the Churches of God return to being a vibrant movement. The first is not a set, but a person, our new Director Ed Rosenberry. I'm not sure why, but Ed has allowed me to get to know him well in the last year, and has expended surprising effort to make our meetings possible. I know that some of you who are chafing for change do not feel Ed has really made his own voice heard across the denomination concerning the need for change. This is true, and the reasons for this I cannot speak to. I know that Ed has a concern for all of our churches and does not want the call for renewal to be any more divisive than is necessary, and so perhaps this has played into his sense of what "the right time" is to voice new ideas abroad. What I know about Ed is that he truly desires to see the Churches of God become a movement again. He has applauded the efforts of my church and other churches in our church planting efforts and our Haiti adventure even when others criticized or stood at a distance. He has said to me, "We need more of that!" I do not think Ed will be what we might call "the primary apostolic voice" leading the way into change (although Ed, feel free to prove me wrong), but that his gifting is going to be as a bridge-builder between those who lead the renewal (if there is one) and those who are open to it but also skeptical. With those who are completely opposed to all change, no bridge can be built. I also think Ed will need, as one who really does see a new vision, to use his office and position to publicly bless and give public venue to the voices of renewal. The other gift Ed can give to a renewal movement is by being the primary advocate, at the national level, for decentralizing the mission and pushing the responsibility for vitality and mission back out to the local church leaders.

3. Financial Resources

It's always crass to talk about the money, isn't it? What we Christians usually do is try to couch all the discussions of financial resources in spiritual terms so we don't look like we just want the money. Right now we still have a significant group of churches giving into the big pot, and we have a big pot that has accumulated again for planting and renewal efforts. The renewal will need that money, at least some of it. So I'll say it: I want the money... well, not me personally... I want us to spend it well and judiciously on the right things. The national Church Development Commission has created a grant process to disburse those funds, rather than hiring another planting or development associate and letting them do as they will with the money. This is a good move, provided the Commission keeps the scope of what it can be spent on very narrow. Spending it to give a new church plant some help is good; spending it to cover the mileage and hotel expenses of a regional church development commission is bad. These funds must be leveraged to the front lines, and if they are used to fund staff positions (for what we have called "Field Directors"), these must be pioneering leaders. Let me suggest that we need to put these funds into guys that make some denominationally-minded people a little nervous. These Field Directors need to be people who would have tried to get churches planted and renewed even if you didn't fund them (the funding is just a helpful tool). They must be leaders of men, culturally aware, passionate about Jesus and the Kingdom, innovative, and determined. They must be more aggressive than passive. We can use the funds we have to do better things than we have done, things that encourage fires of faith and mission to burn brightly and slightly out of control. Money is not the key to the renewal or expansion of the church (the key is hearts aflame for God and His Kingdom), but we should use the resources we have in ways that supply the missional adventures that will bear fruit in hearts, lives, communities, and nations.

6. Why our planting and renewal strategies don't work

Over the years I have been in the Churches of God, I have watched as various renewal and planting programs were rolled out. National staff for these programs have come and gone. A very small handful of churches have been renewed, a few more new churches have been planted, but we are still losing ground, both in the spirit of our churches and numerically. What we've been doing isn't working. Thankfully, as I have sat in the meetings of our national Church Development Commission, I have heard its members voicing exactly that. That's why that commission is trying some new things, like the grant process. But of course, knowing what hasn't worked, and knowing what to do, are two different things, so I think it's worth exploring why some of the past strategies have not worked.

Our strategies have been commission-driven

I have been saying all along that our local churches have handed off responsibility for many components of the mission of Jesus to an institution that has been all too happy to try and take over the job. But here I am getting at something a step deeper even than this: We have made the mistake of thinking that the energy for the mission could be found in a committee, rather than in individual people.

So we get a handful of people together in a room, often the majority of whom do not burn internally for the particular mission on the table, and we ask, "So how do we plant some churches?" (or renew them, or...). The room is quiet, then someone says, "Well, we could try to find some church planters." "No," another pipes up, "We tried that before and we just haven't been able to find any." "We could ask Findlay for help," someone suggests, "they've got a guy on staff who's focused on this." "Yes," someone responds, "but he's focused on churches being planted out of his office, not necessarily through the regions." After a little more conversation the chairman suggests they set a date for another meeting in three or four months, and they adjourn to the Cracker Barrel for lunch. Don't tell me this isn't reflective of reality, I've not only been in those meetings,

I've chaired a few of them. I'm not trying to be overly critical, but what should have been suggested was that the group find someone who cares enough about seeing new churches born that they will just die if it doesn't happen, and they needed to admit that this person might not be sitting in their commission meeting.

Committees can help missional efforts in supportive ways, but God uses hearts aflame for the mission to instigate the mission. To expect commissions to be the primary driving force behind planting and renewal has been a costly mistake. Churches and regions should find someone who wants to lead these efforts and is clearly shaped by God to do so, and let them do it. If you have several people who are passionate about it, you could indeed have a passionate commission, but this has usually not been the case, and we have not been honest enough to just say that commissions without the passion or gifting will never make it happen.

The key to renewal is the local pastor/leader

The culture of denominational dependence that has been created over the years tempts the pastor who see the need for his church to be renewed to look toward Findlay and ask, "Can you renew us?" So the denomination says, "Boy, we have all these churches in need of renewal, we better have a guy for this, and a program..." But really, the question that needs to be asked of that pastor is, "Are you the kind of guy God can use to renew this church?" Because one of the greatest keys to renewing a church is that key local pastor/leader.

What kind of leader is needed for the adventure of renewal? First, one who is himself renewed, whose heart is alive in joy and rest in the life of God. One who is becoming more and more the man or woman they were made to be. One who sees possibilities to be chased more than obstacles to be feared. In other words, he has enough of the life of God rolling around in him that he can afford to give a bunch of it away. And he must be relational, and a listener, and a good thinker, and a student of human nature and relationships. He must understand the process of change. I don't have to tell you all this here—there are tons of good books on all this. The point is that outside helps can help, but not without the right "inside man". So if the denomination is going to provide staff or help the renewal

process, they should focus it on that leader (or leaders), because it is they who will do the work of renewal, rather than trying to come in and work a program of renewal on the church as outsiders. In other words: Shape the leader who will shape the church.

The church growth movement of the past twenty years has taught us to think that renewal is primarily about things like our style of worship. So pastors trying to renew their churches have thought, “If only I could add a contemporary service.” And indeed, sometimes we have to make style changes because they fit the changing cultural context. But it isn’t one-size-fits all. The renewal pastor and his core in the church must become students of their context (the community where they live) and discover what will help the church be more relevant to that context. However, we must not make a god out of relevance, because renewal is not just about reaching outsiders. In fact, real renewal starts with the renewal of the faith of those inside the church, and some of what renews a church does not appear to be immediately relevant to those outside the church. For example, I live in the Chicago suburbs, where consumerism reigns supreme. You aren’t really living here if you don’t have a big screen TV. In the last four years I began to preach strongly against the consumerism that dominates our cultural context, and call people to stop chasing possessions and sacrifice for the poor. At first glance, this is not culturally relevant, yet for those who have shifted their mindset in these ways, and changed how they relate to their money and possessions, it has been freeing and renewing. When we look at churches in need of renewal, we often make the mistake of assuming that the people already in that church are fine, we just need to figure out how to reach new people. Instead, we must ask what it might look like for the people in that church to return to their first love, to discover fresh community with each other, and to live their lives with Jesus as Lord of it all. If that kind of renewal begins to happen, then they will have something of substance—the very life of God—to extend to new people who come in. If it doesn’t happen, all they’ll be able to say is, “Hey, do you like our contemporary service?”

We have been ignoring our disease

Over and over again we have asked, “Why don’t our efforts at planting and renewal bear more fruit?” We find it mystifying. We have acted as if all that has eluded us is the right strategy. At a recent meeting of leaders in Findlay, my friend Glenn Smith got a bunch of people up in front of the group and told them that what he needed them to do was go from where they were standing to the other end of the room. But there was one catch: none of them could get there the same way. We laughed as one after another they invented new ways of traversing the distance—one walked backwards, one hopped on two legs, one hopped on one leg, one ran, another hopped backwards, and a few invented crawls I have never seen before. When all had crossed the room, and the laughter subsided, Glenn made a simple observation: If you have the will, you’ll find a way.

It isn’t just the right strategy that has eluded us, it is the deep desire to do the things we give lip service to. We simply do not have enough leaders who burn for the mission, and our churches, whose responsibility it really is to birth new churches, do not do so because there is not enough of the life of God rolling around in many of them to spill out into the harvest field. We are like the man who has blockage in the arteries around his heart who wonders if the reason he can’t run is because he hasn’t found the right running shoes. It is terrifying to face this deeper reason for our lack of pioneering momentum, because it is far easier to try a new strategy than to heal the disease. But here is where we discover that planting and renewal are inextricably linked. The more churches we have brimming with the life of God, the more new churches we can plant out of our existing ones. So let’s face the fact that most of our churches are not where they need to be and start inspiring and shaping a new kind of pastor/leader for those churches.

We do not naturally attract the kind of leaders we need

The chicken-and-egg cycle we are in is that we need an influx of new pioneering leaders in the Churches of God, ones who agree with our “avowed principles” and have passion for the mission of the Kingdom. But these kinds of leaders tend not to be attracted to our group because they do not see enough leaders already among us who are forward thinking, visionary, and pioneering. When they peer in at us from the outside, perhaps considering “joining up”, they see a

group of nice ministers, a few of whom are pretty passionate, but who for the most part seem to lack a common, focused, passionate vision. They do not sense that Kingdom ethos and synergy they crave, and they do not see many (if any) leaders that they feel could inspire and mentor them as they live out their call.

And yet, we do have at least some of those kinds of leaders. But at present they are scattered and disconnected from one another, leaving the outsider peering in unable to spot them very easily. We need to bring our forward thinking and pioneering leaders together, connecting them and letting them, in that connected state, be visible across the denomination, so that good leaders who decide to check us out (potential planters, for example) see a tribe they want to run with. I do not know exactly how we begin to do this, but I see that it must happen. If we could do this, I think there would also be other pastors/leaders within the CGGC who would see that coalesced tribe and be inspired to come hang out with them and chase what they are chasing.

7. The status quo will have to go

status quo ~ n. “the existing condition or state of affairs”

As a group traverses from movement to organization to institution, things are increasingly standardized and ordered to make everything easier to maintain. Policies, staff positions, committees, and procedures are all put in place. And over time, a sense develops within the institution that “this is how we do it.” Along with this, a set of expectations develops, a sense of what we do and do not expect from the various positions and people within the organization. Once things go along this way for awhile, this becomes simply the way things are, and organizations can go a long time without anyone questioning whether this status quo is really the way things ought to be. Here I am not talking about the status quo in our own spiritual lives, or within churches, but specifically within the organization, which comprises all the ways the members of the group are connected together and how they carry out their common work. For the Churches of God, this means the ways we are connected as leaders and churches, and the way we do the “together things” that we do, particularly through our denominational structures and channels.

What almost always happens to groups organized around a common purpose, given enough time, is that a status quo develops that seems to have forgotten (and is at odds with) the original movement and ethos of the group. So the question we must ask is, “Where is the status quo in the Churches of God (our existing condition or state of affairs) at odds with the original movement and ethos of our group?” And since it is clear that our group was originally a dynamic and spontaneously spreading movement we can ask the question this way: “Where is the status quo in the Churches of God impeding us from once again being a dynamic and spontaneously spreading movement?” that is, a movement like the primitive and apostolic church Winebrenner discovered in the pages of his New Testament. Here are some places I observe that our present status quo is at odds with us being that kind of movement...

We think it's perfectly acceptable that most of our denominational staff are not visionary, missional leaders.

The simple reality is that the vast majority of people in our official key leadership positions are not pioneering, missional people. They are managers and administrators. They also do some of what I would call “shepherding”—nurturing relationships, going to the funeral of a longstanding CGGC pastor, helping one of our historic churches celebrate its anniversary, etc. These shepherding activities are good, in and of themselves, but we have become a group whose key roles are filled primarily by shepherds and not by apostles. The inevitable result of this is that the people the majority of our ministers look to for leadership (regional directors, commission chairpersons, perhaps even some General Conference staff) cannot, and hence do not, provide the leadership that they need to be fruitful leaders in their local churches. The primary need of the ministers in our group is to be inspired with a compelling take on gospel, church, and mission. Their secondary need is help in understanding how they can embed a rich sense of the gospel, the church, and the mission of Jesus into the local communities they lead. How can they live and preach a gospel that makes the hearts of their followers burn hot? How can they build a community in their local church that flows deep with the life of God? How can they help their people move from the pews to the neighborhoods and nations to manifest the Kingdom and help others find the life?

The majority of our current denominational staff and leadership neither make hearts burn with their sense of gospel, church, and mission, nor have any of the perspective and skills for equipping the local church leaders who look to them for help. Let me be blunt, brothers and sisters: We are virtually leaderless. Instead, our status quo is to spend lots of money on manager/administrator positions. In fact, few people in the CGGC seem to even ask why the key roles are administrative rather than apostolic (and by apostolic here, I am describing leaders who are deep thinkers, so that they can shape theological perspectives that inspire, and pioneering men and women of action who can model the new kinds of places we need to go).

I would insist to you that key staff roles should be apostolic in nature, that the people in those roles should be deep thinking and missional men and women. Supporting them should be a group of people handle the maintaining and organization of our shared work.

These roles that support the mission would be everything from Bob Stephenson managing the money at the General Conference level, to the administrative assistant of a primary missional leader, to a commission that handles “leg work” for a missional leader in a region.

Some have suggested to me that perhaps we could leave all the current structure, roles, and staff persons of our organization intact, and just develop other missional leadership in addition to what already exists. Since real renewal movements must always develop “from the bottom up” (and not merely by making policy, procedure, or staff changes in the institution), this is exactly how things will have to be for a short while.

But if renewal begins to occur, it will by nature call into question the unrenewed and unfruitful structures and roles of the organization. An inevitable tension and conflict will arise between the maintenance leadership of the institution and the movement leadership, in part because the institutional leadership would feel their influence and perhaps their jobs and paychecks threatened. At that point the issue will be laid on the table: Who leads the churches of God?

The other issue at that point is that if renewal begins to sweep across the denomination, and the institutional leaders are not at the fore of that renewal but on the sidelines, the local church pastors/leaders will begin to voice their confusion: “Who’s leading us, the people who administrate from the regional office or the people who seem to be taking us somewhere?” If a renewed CGGC emerges, there will come a point (and in not long, I hope) where it will be unacceptable for denominational staff or commissions to try to preserve the status quo, or to try to preserve their positions or jobs where they are obstacles to forward movement. If you have no idea what I am talking about here, go read the book of Acts and Paul’s letters and ask what kind of leaders gave inspiration, shape, and pioneering leadership to the early Christian movement.

We stick with the same structures and procedures whether they bear fruit or not.

There is some wind of change in this area at the national level with the recent decisions of the Church Development Commission not to hire a national staff person and to make grants available for

clearly missional endeavors, but in general we have been an organization that will continue the same commission structures and approaches to things year after year whether they bear fruit or not. Albert Einstein said this was the definition of insanity, doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. More likely it is the definition of stupidity. We should do anything but the same thing—we should pray, ponder converse, argue, attempt, explore—and then risk doing something that makes more sense than what we’ve been doing. I do not know the other regions, only the one I am in. But as an example: The region I am in has had the same commission structure since we were regionalized, and that structure is very similar to what we had in our Illinois Conference before then. I would respectfully observe that our commissions bear relatively little Kingdom fruit. At present, despite the fact that we have pastors in our region who burn for planting and renewal, and who have offered their leadership in these areas, our region’s website lists the members of our Church Development Commission as “Team members and Chairman to be announced” (and has for a year and a half). Why? I have no idea, because there is no real communication in the region, but then, no one ever suggests that we need a new way to connect and communicate either.

Do you want to know how to have people in your region bear cooperative fruit for the kingdom? Stand up at the next conference meeting and say, “Okay, everyone who really gives a rip about church planting (or missions, or whatever), and is convinced you have some leadership to bring to the table, we’re having a meeting in ten minutes in the lobby—and if you don’t burn for this stuff, then please don’t come.” Then make those people a team, and let them get out of control to get something done for Jesus. Instead, we see these roles as “posts” to be filled by nice ministers and lay people willing to serve on a commission and do their duty for God and region. You have to have the right leaders, with the right passions, leading the right things. It’s not that complicated... but it is different from our status quo.

We think it is enough that we all agree on We Believe.

I’ll say it again, Winebrenner’s twenty-seven “avowed principles” were not merely a doctrinal statement, they were a manifesto for a movement, a fact he himself asserts:

"The Church of God has no authoritative constitution, ritual, creed, catechism, book of discipline, or church standard, but the Bible. The Bible she believes to be the only creed, discipline, church standard, the test-book, which God ever intended his church to have. Nevertheless, it may not be inexpedient, *pro bono publico*, to exhibit a short manifesto, or declaration, showing her views, as to what may be called leading matters of faith, experience and practice."

I’m all for documents like We Believe that express the beliefs we hold in common. I think they should be lean, rather than exhaustive, so that our group can include people who are passionate about Jesus and the reality and mission of Kingdom of God, even though they do not all agree on every little thing. But (dare I say) there is something more important than We Believe, and that is whether we have a conception (personally and corporately) of the gospel, community and mission of Jesus that rests upon us with such depth, clarity, and heat that we can do no other than to live it and spread it. Perhaps that is what I am trying to pen here, and I will try in the end to sum it up with brevity and clarity—a manifesto for the Churches of God that if embraced might wake us from our present slumber and point in what direction we should run with all the strength we can gather. We need more than agreement on beliefs, we need a manifesto of convictions and direction. If you know what those might be, then by all means write them, and gather some people, and go somewhere.

It might be circumspect to observe that for organizations which have settled into a stagnant status quo, the normal behavior is to resist those who try to challenge it. We often suppress the emerging leaders who stand out from the crowd. We may feel threatened by those who would lead us places we have not been, places which are unfamiliar and risky. But if we do not go new places, the only places left are those to which we have already been.

Initially, renewed leadership will have to come from wherever it rises up from our ranks. But eventually, if a renewal movement is successful, those in denominational positions of authority who are Kingdom-minded and who desire the CGGC to be a vibrant movement will have to add their voices to those calling for an end to the status quo,

no matter what structure or position it calls into question. In particular, I would think that the General Conference Director would face the choice between the movement and the status quo, and his choice would be obvious to all.

8. The call to those on the front lines

I am a guy on the front lines. I lead a local church. I have no denominational position or authority. These words are to those of you in the same place—exercising some kind of leadership in a local church day in and day out—who desire to be more fruitful and to be part of a tremendously fruitful movement. The very first thing you need to understand is that what needs to be done in the Churches of God is not primarily the job of our denominational leaders. Ironically (and this is where the fingers all point back at those of us voicing our frustrations), you don't get a movement by complaining, or by asking your institutional leaders to create one (if they could do that, they wouldn't be institutional leaders). Movements begin and spread from the bottom up.

First you...

So where's the bottom? In the local church? No, in you. We can never expect to have a church or a movement more alive than we ourselves are. If we want a movement of churches bearing great fruit, we ourselves must be deeply rooted in, and tremendously inflamed with the life of God. This is personal. Forget that you're a pastor (or whatever you are), forget the issues of the church... how's your thing with Jesus? When was the last time you felt the presence of the Holy Spirit? When was the last time you faced your heart, obeyed the Spirit, and let God change something inside you? When was the last time the vision of God's goodness or beauty so permeated your thoughts that you glimpsed the restoration of all Creation, and found yourself freshly invigorated for the mission of the Kingdom? It begins in us.

Then your church...

And from this place of being rooted in the life of God, of being joyfully captivated by the Kingdom and broken for all that is broken, we lead in the church. And if we are not swimming in the river ourselves, then we have nothing to splash on our brothers and sisters. And the need today, clearly, is to shape churches (whether freshly birthed or existing ones) which have a wholistic and deep gospel, a rich take on what it means to be the community of Jesus,

and a radical commitment to his mission. If we do not intend to shape churches like this, then it is time to be quiet about what the denomination ought to become. The action is not in Findlay or wherever your regional office is—it's in your backyard.

If you do not know how to begin to shape a church like this, I would suggest that it starts with your thinking (assuming you are personally swimming in the life of God). Read good thinkers about the gospel, the church, and the mission. Read some Dallas Willard, some N.T. Wright, some Brian McLaren, some Reggie MacNeal, some Bob Roberts, some Henri Nouwen—I don't even care if you agree with everything they say (I don't agree with everything they say)—but read people who make you think deeper and clearer thoughts, people who say what they say in a way that makes your beat faster. And most of all, read your Bible, and especially the Gospels. Read the Gospels until you've been with Jesus so much that your wife can smell him on the collar of your shirt.

And if you still don't know what to do after that, come hang out with those of us running these same directions. We've been trying to gather people to talk about these things and help each other find the way. Get off your butt and come be with us. We are going in good directions and we have started to live these out in and with our church communities. What you want to see is good things happening within your church community and through your church community. Your church needs to be renewed by the life of God, where people are finding new life as they connect with the One who is life itself. As this happens, they'll be finding hope and joy and clarity and purpose. Only as they drink deeply from the river of God will they find the richest and deepest kind of fellowship and connection with each other, but as they find it, help them be the community of Jesus—in prayer and conversation and feasting around the table. And as they sense through this life and community that God himself is dwelling in their midst, lead them out into the community and the nations to let the Kingdom flow through them to others. Feed the poor, create an after-school kids program, help some pregnant girls or single parents, adopt a village in a foreign country and ask what it would like to have real friends there and manifest the Kingdom among them (which might mean

strengthening the church there, building a school for a village, or both).

If you are leading a church that needs serious renewal, or a serious change in nature and direction, taking your church the places I have just described may not be easy. God will have to lead through the whole process, and your leadership will be the biggest key. You will have to paint new pictures and gather people around them. Some will not want to go new places, and you'll have to find the balance between patiently working for change and calling people to throw away their idols of tradition, position, stability, and institutionalization. To lead a church through renewal is risky, but it can be done. But if you are afraid of losing your job or too afraid of people's disapproval, you will not be free enough to do it.

In the end, the only truly relevant question is, "What does God want this church to be?" That is the question you must answer, and whatever the answer is, that is what you must lead your Jesus-community toward. So while we dream of something fresh emerging in the CGGC, get busy with something fresh in your own backyard.

If you get renewed, and as a result the hearts of people around you are awakened and inflamed, and your church starts to live radical love and trust in God (the life of the Kingdom flowing in and out), and then we all dance together as those kinds of leaders... hmmm... movement.

Then the CGGC, the shared movement...

For those of us on the front lines, assuming we are chasing what we need to in our own walks with God and the churches we lead, there are four things that we can do to help our own increasingly vibrant churches become a movement which strengthens one another and multiplies our impact in the world.

First, we need to come together. There is too much disconnection between us as pastors and leaders in the Churches of God. And I am not just talking about coming to your region's annual conference. I am saying that as those local church leaders who care about one another and about seeing a renewal movement emerge we must gather and throw gas on the fire. So when you hear of gatherings taking place that will help you, where you can help others, and where together we can fan the flames of renewal and shared mission, come to them. If

there are opportunities (and I hope we will be creating more and more), and you don't come, then your isolation is self-imposed.

Second, we need to think like movement people no matter how others (or the institution collectively) think. This means that we follow Jesus, shape strong churches, learn from each other, build alliances around church planting or missional adventures, and dream dreams together of how the Kingdom can invade both us and the world more and more. What I am saying is that you absolutely must not wait for the denomination or its leaders to approve of a more radical pursuit of the Kingdom OR for them to lead the way before you decide to go there.

Third, we need to be the voice of discontent with the status quo. I cannot tell you how many pastors in my region have voiced questions to me about how our region and denomination do things that they would never voice in public. Well, brothers, the time has come. It must be done with respect and humility, but also relentlessly. We must ask questions like:

- Why do we spend our money the way we do?
- Why do we not know what some of our leaders even do?
- Why are some of our regions stagnant?
- Why are people in charge of things who aren't very good at those things?
- What is our vision anyway?

Where do we raise these questions? With each other, with fellow leaders, in commission meetings, and to denominational leaders themselves.

Fourth, if and when we are invited, we need to give input into the process of reworking the organization. This is how Ed tricked me into our friendship (just kidding, Ed)—I was a voice of discontent with the status quo, and Ed invited me to the discussion table. And I realized that if I was not willing to have the conversations, then I really had no business complaining. Honestly, I do not know if we will make it as far as the “official CGGC” inviting us to help rework (deconstruct and rebuild) the organizational

structures, channels and leadership roles. But if we do make it that far, and they are serious about change, we should show up for the conversation when invited.

How can I say again to you that the emergence of a real Jesus-movement out of what remains of the CGGC will not come from headquarters, or through denominational channels, but from us? The factories did not create the unions, and the U.S. government did not insist on civil rights for black people. Movements start from the grass roots. They start with us.

And I am calling you, my brothers and sisters who lead in local churches, to reject the status quo in your own spiritual lives, in your acceptance of the modern half-gospel, in our shirking of the mission of the Kingdom, and the status quo in the Churches of God you are a part of, to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).

9. The call to our denominational staff, and our council and commission leaders

Those of you who serve in “official capacities” in the Churches of God these days are in perhaps the toughest place of all. If you see the need for serious change and renewal, you yourself are at odds with the status quo of the organization you serve. If you see the need for serious change and renewal, but don’t know how to lead us toward it, it raises the question of whether you are relevant in your position. If you disagree with me completely about the need for serious change and renewal, then you are in denial. I envy none of these three predicaments.

My greatest appeal to you is that what I advocate, namely a return from our present institutionalization to a fluid and flexible movement, rooted in the soil of God’s burning love, led by people of apostolic nature and calling, and cooperating not for legislation but for mutual strengthening and greater fruitfulness is precisely in the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, Paul the apostle, and John Winebrenner. I hear Winebrenner quoted and spoken of in fond and loving terms all the time in Churches of God circles... well let’s go with him. Respectfully but forthrightly, I am calling you to the following things...

First, to face up to the present state of things in the Churches of God. I have heard some of our key leaders say again and again that things aren’t that bad. Are you kidding? We have no shared vision, a widespread sense of disconnection, are planting almost no new churches, and have scores of aging congregations which will cease to exist over the next couple of decades. The CGGC has been warned by multiple consultants they hired in recent decades that change is needed or demise will come. Yet little has changed, and we have not turned the corner. Denial will get us nowhere... do we smell like a vibrant Jesus-movement to you?

Second, recognize that more talk of strategy is only helpful if we are simultaneously addressing the weaknesses of how we have thought of the gospel, the church, and the mission. Don’t just ask, “How can we plant more churches?” Ask if we have a message and a life that can change the world.

Third, face your fears of what might be lost in the process of change, and focus on what might be gained. I tore the roof off my attic with a chain saw a few years ago. It was terrifying. But every night when I lay in my bed and look at the stars through the skylight of the new bedroom I think, “That chain saw thing was a really good idea.” To have the courage to create space for a movement and to dismantle the unhelpful structures and policies, you will have to be able to envision a CGGC far more beautiful and powerful and fruitful than the one we have now. Envision that, salivate for it.

Fourth, identify the pioneering, visionary, apostolic leaders among us. I submit we might not have many, but we have some, and they are the ones, by virtue of their nature and calling, who will articulate a fresh and compelling take on gospel, church and mission, and without that, without a fresh manifesto of the Kingdom among us, there is nothing for a movement to coalesce around. Apostles comes first in the list of the five-fold ministries in Scripture. As Hirsch says, this is because the role of apostle creates the environment in which all the other ministries operate, simply because it articulates and holds forth the picture (DNA) that the other ministries are bringing people into (the prophet is keeping us true to it, the evangelist is casting it abroad, the shepherd is shepherding people’s hearts and lives into it, and the teacher is helping us understand it deeply). Do not confuse apostolic leadership with dictatorial leadership, as some have done (and this has created many fears)—apostolic leadership is simultaneously humble and bold. Look for these qualities in those you would trust.

Our stated CGGC core value concerning leadership reads, “We value trained, committed, competent leaders.” Take a good look at those adjectives: trained, committed, competent. They are all great characteristics, and needed, but can you spot what’s missing? They are the particular characteristics of leaders that fit well with a stable organization, but missing from the list are the leadership characteristics that take an organization into new and fruitful territory (like being forward-thinking, questioning, creative, risk-taking).

Ed, may I suggest that you personally call a convocation of pioneering, visionary leaders for the purpose of searching for our manifesto? The meeting will need a little framework, but a loose agenda. Do not bring in a special speaker or an outside expert. This

needs to come from within us. Maybe I should not write this here, but as I keep telling people how much you are in favor of making this journey back from institutionalization to movement, they keep saying to me, “Fran, I hear you saying that, but I don’t hear Ed saying that.” You need to say it, and one way to say it would be for you to host the most significant “movement conversation” to date.

Fifth, affirm those leaders, bless them publicly, and give their voices public venues. If you are a denominational leader who wants to see a beautiful and powerful Jesus-movement emerge within the CGGC, you cannot be a closet supporter. I am not saying you have to make all the organizational changes overnight (How could you? We don’t even know what they are yet), but you must publicly stand with those who are forward-thinking. And if you really want a return to movement, then if there are any articulate pioneering, visionary leaders among us, you should give their voices some public venues. Ask the regional conferences to give us time to speak. Create new communication tools that are easy for people across the denomination to find. Whatever our manifesto, our DNA, is to be, it must be disseminated. What the Spirit is saying must be heard by the church.

Sixth, begin to take your own stands against the status quo where you find structures and staff that impede Kingdom movement. When those of us outside the denominational office question the things that are “really set”, sometimes no one wants to listen. After all, we don’t work inside the infrastructure of the institution, what do we know? But if you who are “inside” raise questions about the effectiveness of this or that structure, role, person, or policy, perhaps it will be heard more.

I would suggest to you if the pioneering leaders among us do not hear something different from the denominational leaders among us in the next year, they will conclude that in fact those leaders are not willing to challenge the status quo. Some have suggested to me that even the present good conversations which have been taking place are only being garnered for the purpose of keeping those of us who are discontent “in” the denomination, but that none of our denominational leaders really intend to be part of a change process. I pray such is not the case.

And I would call all of us to pray. We are not a civic organization, or merely a benevolent non-profit, we are the Church of the Living God... emphasis on the “living” part, and what we need most to be what He desires is his life to flow in and among us.

10. Imagine if you will...

Early on I referenced Alan Hirsch's observation that he has never seen a group that lost its "movement ethos" regain it. So here's my question: Want to be the first? Seriously, I'm asking... do you want to? Frankly, the price tag is probably higher than you can imagine, because a movement doesn't look anything like what we have now.

Would it be worth it? What if a decade from now there were 500 Churches of God churches in the U.S.? More than that, what if they had a more whole gospel of the Kingdom, and as a result their worship, their community, and their missional adventures were alive and multiplying in way the CGGC hasn't seen in a long time?

What if it was organized, but also a little chaotic, with churches being started before anyone in official positions really knew what they were up to? What if we had local church leaders who were so apostolic that they just kept raising up leaders and expanding the kingdom through new churches and missions? What if they created their own training centers for leaders and pastors, sometimes ordaining them without asking anyone about it? (Feel free to resource those training centers, Winebrenner guys—you might help them ensure good theological depth).

What if our churches were known not just for gaining converts, but for people finding healing and a new way of living with Jesus, and for standing with the poor and oppressed?

What if our organization was willing to rearrange structures and staff positions and policies whenever they weren't really bearing fruit or they were getting in the way of the good things of the Kingdom?

What if when our pastors and leaders gathered there were so many stories to tell of God's moving that we just couldn't contain it?

What if flowing in us, between us, around us, and through us, was a take on the gospel, the church, and mission that we wanted to live and die for?

And what if that manifesto of the kingdom was clear and vibrant enough that other pioneering leaders and church planters perceived it when they peeked in our door, and it made them want to run with our tribe, making us even more fruitful?

And what if twenty years from now a few of us were sitting on a beach somewhere, looking back on the whole adventure and talking, and saying to one another how glad we were that as we stood on the edge of the cliff, with a struggling CGGC in our hands, we trusted God, abandoned our fears, opened our arms, and fell into the wind of the Spirit, who caught us and taught us to soar with him.

And so I say to all of us, brethren:
"Wake up, O sleeper, and rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."
(Ephesians 5:14).

He does the shining,
but the waking up is up to us.

Elements for a Future Manifesto

In addition to the shared beliefs expressed in We Believe, I would suggest that we, the Churches of God, need to become a movement marked by the following convictions and actions. We must also keep in mind that “core values” only bear fruit if we actually value and live them. This is not meant to be an exhaustive statement, just a list of what we need in our tank in addition to what we already have...

❖ We value the Word of God, not simply in the sense of valuing or defending the Bible, but out of a deep desire to hear the message of God spoken to our lives, which we understand not as simply a set of truths spread across the pages of Scripture, but as the message of Jesus about the kind of men and women he made us to be, the kind of life he made us to live, and how to take the journey toward these.

❖ We recognize that human beings do not merely need to give assent to a set of religious truths, but to actually awaken to all that is real, to let the deception in which the world is shrouded be peeled back from our eyes, so that we can see, enter, and spread the Kingdom of God, becoming more whole ourselves, both for our own sakes and for the sake of others.

❖ Understanding that the Kingdom is the rule and reign of God in the earth, and that where the Kingdom is made manifest, things become the way God made them to be, we take a wholistic approach to our ministry in our culture and the world, bringing healing to broken people, justice to the oppressed, hope to those who have lost it, and blessing to the poor and the nations.

❖ We will help people become disciples of Jesus Christ, not merely in the sense of learning Bible knowledge, but by apprenticing them in Jesus' way of seeing, being and living. We recognize that we can only lead people into the life of God as far as we ourselves have entered it.

❖ We believe that the responsibility for the mission of Jesus and the Kingdom of God belongs primarily to followers of Jesus and their immediate leaders, rather than to organizational entities such as

denominations. As such, we seek to cultivate, recognize, and credential the kinds of five-fold leaders who can help take the local church forward in her mission by virtue of their passion, gifting and sense of calling.

❖ As a fellowship of free churches, we will encourage local church leaders to raise up and train men and women for the mission of Jesus Christ in this world, and we will not stand in the way of those God calls and sends.

❖ As a fellowship of free churches, we will encourage our churches to develop healthy missional partnerships with each other as God leads them for the purpose of planting churches and impacting the world.

❖ We will take risks to reach people with the transforming message of Jesus and the Kingdom of God, and will be vigilant in resisting a status quo that consists primarily of stability, safety, and predictability. In the General Conference and our Regions, we will evaluate our leadership structures and processes as often as necessary to ensure that we retain (or recover) our effectiveness as an organization.