

April 7, 2017

Dear Brethren in the Bay Area,

As I write to you, I am in route to Ivory Coast. I will be remembering the Sabbath Day and observing the Passover with about 45 brethren in the commercial hub of the country, Abidjan. Ivory Coast was once a relatively prosperous country with the third largest coffee production in the world and GDP growth for decades in excess of 10% annually – at the time this growth in prosperity was called the “Ivorian Miracle” and you can see on the internet a lovely picture of the President of Ivory Coast being received at the White House by John F. Kennedy in 1962. Unfortunately for the past nearly 20 years, the country has been plagued with political instability leading to a series of civil wars. Today, the average life expectancy in Ivory Coast is 53, a quarter of the country lives on less than \$1.25 per day, and the population suffers from high rates of HIV infection and illiteracy.

In this challenging place, there are four UCG congregations with whom we lost contact in 2010 due to a civil war that was raging at the time of the upheaval in the Church. Two years later in 2012, one of the local church leaders saw that other French-speaking African countries had United Church of God mailing addresses listed in our Bonnes Nouvelles Magazine. Church leaders were surprised to see this as they thought that the United Church of God was no longer present in the region. I then received a letter from a local congregation shortly before the Feast in 2012, and in 2013 Mark Michelson traveled to visit them. Since that time, most people within those congregations are now part of the United Church of God again and are supported by our elder in Cameroon who travels to see them regularly. Truly, their journey has been physically and spiritually treacherous.

In just a few days, we will reaffirm our commitment to and belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ who gave himself willingly that we might live in newness of life (Romans 6:4). We too can become separated from our spiritual home as the spiritual battle rages around us threatening our health and well-being. In the past weeks, we saw the grisly brutality of war as chemical weapons were deployed in Syria and terrorist attacks struck St. Petersburg, London and Paris. But we have hope, a hope that we have been called for a purpose – to be the “first fruits” of God’s Kingdom, being lights in our communities with a true peace that comes from, as it has been said, “letting go and letting God” direct our lives. I would not have chosen to transition to this new role or to travel to Africa, just as many of you may not have chosen the circumstances in your lives, but we trust that God’s will is done as we keep our focus on God’s coming kingdom of peace. As you de-leavened this year, I hope you considered the consequences of holding on to sinful ways of thinking for they surely lead to spiritual disease and ultimately death. These ways of thinking must be expunged and replaced with the wisdom that comes from our Father above (James 3:17). Please use the remaining hours before the Passover to think on these things.

I wish you a joyous and meaningful Passover, Night to be Much Observed and beginning of the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Your fellow servant

Tim Pebworth

Pastor, UCG Oakland and Petaluma CA Congregations