May 5, 2016

Dear Brethren,

The Days of Unleavened Bread are behind us, and we are now looking forward to the Feast of Pentecost. Sharron and I very much enjoyed our visit with the congregations in Maryland and southern Pennsylvania for the last holy day and following Sabbath, and we hope you also had a wonderful festival season.

At the time of writing this letter we don’t have the final reports from either of the two holy days, but the preliminary reports have been very encouraging. Our U.S. attendance has been steady, with approximately 5,000 on the first holy day, and the offering was outstanding, breaking all previous records. I want to sincerely thank all of you for your support and generosity.

Graduation for Foundation Institute (FI) is scheduled for Sunday, May 15, and it will mark the completion of our fourth year of classes. It seems like only yesterday that I was writing to you about the beginning of Foundation Institute, but here we are, almost four years later. In those four years our class size has varied from 15 to 21 students, but as we now prepare for our fifth year we already have 28 applications. And if this year goes according to the previous ones, we expect even more applications over the course of the summer.

That is very good news, but it’s also another reminder of a dilemma we are facing throughout our office facility. We want to accept anyone who meets our qualifications and desires to spend nine months in a classroom studying the Bible, but local fire codes limit our classroom to only 25 students. As you can see, we have a problem that we must address—we are out of space! This situation with FI is only the latest example of the problem we are facing daily with everything we do here at the office.

Let’s put this in a historical context. In July of 2011 the elders in the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, selected the first Ministerial Board of Directors (MBOD), which, in turn, approved the first administration. For almost a year prior, the organization was managed by an interim leadership team of 10 individuals—five board members and five administrators—with our official address a post office box in Orlando, Florida. You can well imagine the challenge of getting work done with 10 people in 10 different locations! After a few months, we were all convinced that we needed a permanent home, a central location for managing the work of the Church.

In December of 2011 the MBOD selected the Dallas/Fort Worth area as our future home. In February 2012 an agent presented us with 10 locations to review for leasing office space, and from those we chose a suite of offices at 1301 Central Expressway South in the city of Allen, Texas, a suburb about 25 miles north of downtown Dallas.
We opened the office on March 6, 2012, with four employees in 5,590 square feet of space, and a few months later added 2,594 square feet of space upstairs for the new FI classroom, giving us a total of 8,184 square feet. For this space, we pay a monthly lease of $12,700. The cost of utilities brings the total closer to $14,000 per month. In total, it comes to $168,000 per year, or $504,000 for three years. After completing the first three years of our lease, we are currently in the first year of a two-year extension that we signed in June of 2015. This new lease, which expires in June of 2017, allows us to exercise an option to continue another year, through June of 2018, at the same price. If we stayed the full three years of this second lease, the expenses for our six years here would total approximately $1,008,000.

From the four original employees, we have grown to 24, with 22 working in the office on a regular basis. Four of those employees work out of cubicles, and two others share an office. This summer another off-site employee plans to move here from Ohio, and we are hard-pressed to find a work space for him. We’ve also outgrown our studio, creating serious difficulties, since nearly all of our recording work is done there—sermons, Bible studies, FI Online, Friday Night Live, ministerial classes, webinars and other special video productions. And recently Eduardo Hernandez, Saul Langarica and Larry Roybal, church pastors from Latin America, have begun traveling to Allen to record material for the Spanish website. We also have a very small mail room, forcing us to rent a storage unit nearby just to keep up with our literature inventory.

All of this is exciting, but we need a solution for our space problem! We must upgrade the studio, classroom and mail room if we are to expand the work we are doing, to say nothing of additional office space for new employees we will need for the growing work we are doing. So what should we do? Here in the office we have been discussing this for months and recently decided to engage an agent to help us sort through the options. We interviewed three companies in the Dallas area over the past three months before signing an agreement with a company called CBRE, one of the largest real estate and land development companies in the world.

After going over the facts with CBRE, we have identified three viable options within our budget: (1) Lease a new facility that has adequate space for future expansion. There is no additional space to lease in our current building, and we anticipate needing an additional 5,000 to 10,000 square feet of space in the near future. (2) Purchase an existing building and retrofit it to suit our needs. It would need to be 15,000 to 25,000 square feet to provide room for growth. (3) Buy land to build our own office building. In general, we need a modest two-story office building with about 12,000 square feet on each floor, for a total of 24,000 square feet when completed. This size would give us room to grow.

If we chose the third option, the office is our first priority, but we could also consider purchasing enough property to allow for future expansion, and a home for the local congregation. This would, of course, depend on location, cost and land availability. We have been very open with CBRE as to the amount of money we have available, and they have assured us they can find a solution to our space problem within our budget and will do so by the end of this year (December 2016).

We plan to stay in this general area since most of our employees are here, so we have instructed CBRE to look in the three cities of Allen, McKinney and Plano. These cities are all north of downtown Dallas and are among the fastest growing cities in the U.S. The city of McKinney was named No. 1 in Money Magazine’s Best Places to Live in America list in 2014.
So, why am I taking so much time to explain all this? We believe that whatever option we choose will affect the Church and our ability to do the work. We began as a new organization in December of 2010 not because we wanted to, but because we felt forced to. Some may have different views of our beginning, but those who were directly involved know the truth of what happened. Once it was clear that we could not continue with our previous association, we set out to do what the Church has always done—preach the gospel to the world and care for the brethren. To do that, we have been circumspect in our use of funds since our beginning, always living within our means.

The gospel message is a positive message of hope, but it also contains a warning and a call for repentance (Matthew 28:19-20; 24:14). From the beginning, we focused on the Internet as the vehicle for achieving this goal, while making sure the congregations were cared for. Each year since our beginning, we have committed a large percentage of our income, between 15 and 20 percent, to caring for the brethren outside the United States. We have been aggressive in training new and younger men for the ministry and investing funds in local congregations for hall rentals, church programs and ministers. Our goal has always been to provide a pastor for each congregation.

Because of our conservative financial approach, we have saved enough cash to either purchase land to construct our own building or to make a down payment on an already constructed building. That said, with a lease there is no upfront cost for the Church, meaning we would have more money to immediately invest in doing the work and hiring new employees, which makes this option attractive as well. But in the long term, is that the wisest use of funds—more than a million dollars every six years?

Brethren, I am writing to all of you to explain our current situation and ask for your prayers for God’s guidance, wisdom and oversight in this entire process. We will carefully investigate all three options (lease, purchase or build) over the next several months with the goal of putting forward a proposed solution to the MBOD in December of this year, but we want to go about this with God’s direction and involvement.

We will keep you informed as to our progress. Due to God’s blessings, we are currently financially sound and able to take this next step on behalf of the Church, but we want to be sure we take the right step—either to lease a new place or to purchase an existing building or to construct our own building. As always, we ask for your support and continued prayers that the best decision will be made.

Sincerely, your brother in Christ,

Jim Franks