“Shepherding the elect of God”

In his opening remarks, Doug Horchak, Ministerial Services operation manager, acknowledged the deaths of three elders and two wives of elders, which had occurred in the last several months: Wanda Cunningham (wife of Merle Cunningham of the Pensacola, Florida congregation), Elwanda Head (wife of Alton Head of the Fort Worth, Texas, congregation), Howard Wills (elder in Miami, Florida), David Rambsel (elder in Athens, Ohio) and Kingsley Mather (pastor in the Bahamas).

Mr. Horchak also noted that COGWA Sabbath attendance in the United States is about 5,300 per week in 111 congregations, served by 47 full-time pastors and 100 elders. The worldwide total of pastors and elders is 191.

Mr. Horchak urged the ministry to see the opportunities ahead in a positive light, focusing on what we have learned from experience and the opportunity to impart those lessons to the next generation of leaders and members.

Reading from 2 Timothy 2:1-4, he suggested that at the time Paul wrote this epistle he may have been about the age of a typical pastor in the Church today. And he was urging the younger minister Timothy to be a “good soldier” of Jesus Christ—to be worthy, virtuous and honest and to be focused on and dedicated to the mission of preaching the gospel.

Mr. Horchak pointed out that conditions and circumstances in the Church today aren’t what we expected 15 or 20 years ago. But now, with the maturity and wisdom we have gained from what we have experienced, we can see the opportunity we have to impart what we have learned to the next generation of members and Church leaders.

Focusing on the need for training and preparing the next generation of pastors, Mr. Horchak read an excerpt from a coworker letter written by Herbert Armstrong in September 1947 in which he commented, “I need help—trained, qualified, honest, called servants—and there have been none!” Shortly after this letter, Mr. Armstrong addressed this need by founding Ambassador College.

He then summarized the need we have now to identify, encourage and train men who show evidence that God is calling them into the ministry. And we must present the ministry in a positive light as a rewarding, viable choice for those who receive that calling. Foundation Institute will play an integral role in that training.

Mr. Horchak turned the emphasis to the positive impact that pastors have in fulfilling their ministry—“workers for your joy” (2 Corinthians 1:23-24) and shepherds of the Church that Jesus purchased with His blood (Acts 20:27-38). He also cited Hebrews 13:17 and reminded the audience that pastors will someday have to give an account of their efforts—we will be judged for what we have done with the opportunities we have had.

He concluded by exhorting pastors and elders not to see our responsibility to the Church just in the
light of the difficulties of the past 20 years, but to focus on the honor it is to serve God’s people and to view our role within the larger context of the work of God’s servants in the last 2,000 years. The service of the ministry to the people of God is not an effort or sacrifice made in vain.

**Treasurer’s report**

Church treasurer Jason Lovelady gave a brief report summarizing the current financial circumstances. He explained that the Church’s finances are strong, especially considering that we started with nothing just a year and a half ago.

The budget for 2012 was established in the final months of 2011, projecting an anticipated income of $8.2 million. After the first five months of 2012, the income is significantly stronger than was budgeted and is projected to be $9 to $9.5 million by the end of the year. At the same time, expenses are running slightly higher than budgeted, due largely to start-up costs and higher than anticipated health insurance costs.

Even though the Constitution and Bylaws do not require it, the MBOD decided that the Church should undergo an independent audit each year. The audit for 2011 was completed in May, and a favorable report is expected by the end of this month.

**The gospel shall be preached—but how do we reach the world?**

Mr. Kilough introduced William Beech, the recently appointed director of web management. Mr. Kilough pointed out that even the best website would be of little value if people don’t know it’s available. Mr. Beech’s responsibility is to increase awareness of the Church’s presence on the Internet.

Mr. Beech reviewed two essential concepts necessary for LifeHopeandTruth.com to be effective: search engine optimization (SEO)—that is, optimizing the visibility of our new website to users of search engines—and social media optimization (SMO)—using social media to spread interest and drive traffic to our new website.

Mr. Beech summarized the four steps of an Internet search. The search engine (such as Google or Bing):

1. “Crawls” each web page and the architecture of each website to read all the content and determine what each page on a given website is about.
2. “Builds an index” of each page with indexing information like:
   a. Title of the page.
   b. Publisher of the page (website).
   c. Category of information (blog, e-commerce, maps, images, etc.).
   d. Primary keyword for each page (i.e. “who is God”).
   e. Location (URL address).
3. “Calculates page rank” to determine—based on the keyword—how each page is ranked.
4. “Deliver the results” to a results page (also known as SERP).

Every day millions of people make tens of millions of Internet searches. According to comScore’s published search results report from March 2012, the total searches for January 2012 were 20 billion. The average Internet user makes from five to 20-plus searches every day. For example, there are 74,000 searches every month on the question “What is the meaning of life?” and over 18,000 on the question “Is there life after death?” The Church’s goal is for LifeHopeandTruth to be at the top of the
results list for these kinds of searches.

Mr. Beech also reviewed five components that are necessary to reach that goal. The website must:

1. Have engaging and quality content and be easy to navigate.
2. Have links—connectors from one page to another, directing readers to a related topic for more information.
3. Provide a social presence—an opportunity to use social media to share information and opinions.
4. Be chosen from the search page. The more often a LifeHopeandTruth link is chosen from a search page, the more popular the site becomes and the more likely the search engine is to list it.
5. Be a pleasant, captivating, challenging site where people want to spend time.

A LifeHopeandTruth start page (the first page that appears on the screen when a browser is opened) is being developed that will enable anyone with Internet access to help increase the presence of the website. The start page will be introduced soon and will allow anyone (regardless of age, technical experience or location) to directly impact search results.

Closing comments

In wrapping up the day’s meetings, Mr. Franks commented that for several months a great deal of effort has gone into preparing for this conference.

The major emphasis of the conference is to report on media development—using the resource of the Internet as our primary tool for preaching the gospel. But it is also intended to inform and to inspire and to give the ministry exciting news and enthusiasm to take home to share with the members.

—Don Henson