**South African eyewitness chronicles church changes**

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By Geoff Neilson

The writer is an Ambassador College alumnus (Bricket Wood, 1964-67) and former personal-correspondence writer for the Worldwide Church of God who has worked for two decades in the editorial departments of several South African national magazines.  
  
Mr. Nielson said he wrote the following overview to "provide a definitive outline of what has happened in the South African church from the viewpoint of an eyewitness and participant from the beginning."

**JOHANNESBURG, South Africa -**Regional director **Andre van Belkum** became the eighth minister of the Worldwide Church of God in southern Africa to resign in a little over a year when he did so just before the Feast of Tabernacles last year and joined the United Church of God.  
  
Few WCG members have followed him; he left quietly, never publicly differing with Pasadena while in office.  
  
In an unprecedented move, his successor in the WCG, acting regional director Bob Klynsmith, appeared for three hours as a guest on Radio 702's program *Believe It or Not*, with Kate Turkington as host, last Nov. 26. The broadcast in talk-show format reflected in microcosm the state of the scattered church here.  
  
Callers fell into three main categories: WCG members who supported the WCG's doctrinal changes; ex-members who didn't; and members of the public who believe church doctrine is flawed unless it echoes Protestant or Catholic theology.  
  
The Johannesburg office of the Radio Church of God and its mother congregation, Johannesburg Central, were started by evangelist Gerald D. Waterhouse shortly before Passover 1963. The office moved to Cape Town in 1985 on the recommendation of the regional director at that time, Dr. Roy McCarthy.  
  
At the height of its operation, more than 350,000 free copies of The Plain Truth were being distributed monthly, making it one of the largest-circulation magazines in southern Africa.

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| |  | | --- | | The World Tomorrow was broadcast on national television each week. About 3,500 people attended the Feast of Tabernacles in South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mauritius.  Today The Plain Truth has dwindled to below 8,000. About 2,000 subscribers pay a subscription price. The WCG sponsors no TV broadcast and provides no Bible correspondence course.  A total of 2,113 people attended the WCG's South African Feast in 1995. According to a WCG source, the income in southern Africa dropped 30 percent in 1994 and a further 50 percent in 1995.  Twelve of the original 22 ministers who remain with the WCG are said to support the doctrinal changes that have resulted in these decreases.  Replying to a caller's question on Believe It or Not, "What justifies the existence of the Worldwide Church of God when one could join the Catholic, Methodist or Anglican faith?", Mr. Klynsmith-seemingly unaware of the irony of his answer-stated that one of the best indications of a Christian organization was its fruits.  **Leaking ship**  Mr. Klynsmith claimed that 80,000 people are still baptized members of the Worldwide Church of God. (The pastor general, **Joseph Tkach Jr.**, has stated that 75,000 members have left the church in recent years.) Mr. Klynsmith suggested he held a deep commitment to the WCG's new teachings, yet at times appealed to Old Testament laws and the need for society to obey them.  The British-born Miss Turkington seemed astonished at one stage when she thought Mr. Klynsmith had said he observed "the Feast of Crumpets." In commenting that "probably everyone's heard of The Plain Truth around the world," she revealed the extent of the familiarity in this part of the world with the name Herbert W. Armstrong.  **Heavy emphasis on church government profoundly influenced the South African church.**  Neither Mr. Klynsmith nor his assistants-media officer **Peter Hawkins**, pastor **John White** and minister's wife Wendy Holladay-seemed able to persuade any caller why he should attend the WCG or change his doctrinal viewpoints on heaven, hell, the resurrection, abortion, the death penalty or homosexual rights.  A Catholic caller said she found Mr. Klynsmith's explanations of WCG doctrine of the latter three issues to be "very wishy-washy." In general, Mr. Klynsmith tended to defend Pasadena's position with public-relations prose, deflecting specific hard questions with vague answers.  Mr. White apparently found himself unable to persuade his own East London congregation of his new theology when it recently left him to keep the Feast of Tabernacles with the United Church of God. He now claims that he believed in 1980 what the Messrs. Tkach later taught about the New Covenant.  Yet, long after Mr. Armstrong died, in 1986, Mr. White publicly stated: "I tend to be somewhat of a stickler for the law," and "True Christians keep the Ten Commandments." He also has asserted that he was the most conservative of the South African ministers. Many members have said Mr. White's contradictory signals have unsettled them.  A tape from a former World Tomorrow presenter proved to be the catalyst that convinced the East London congregation to sever ties with the Worldwide Church of God. East London members said they felt the tape, by WCG spokesman and Ambassador faculty member David Albert of Big Sandy, Texas, to be an unprofessional attempt to minimize past doctrinal teachings of the church.  On the Radio 702 talk show, Mr. Hawkins claimed that many of Mr. Armstrong's booklets concerned side issues that were blown out of proportion and became main issues.  Mr. Klynsmith said on the program that the younger Mr. Tkach had been appointed his late father's successor by a democratic process involving the WCG council of elders. Miss Turkington commented that the appointment sounded "more like nepotism" to her.  In what host Turkington described as an articulate, heartfelt and poignant comment, a caller named Mike stated that two generations of youngsters had grown up in the WCG believing that they had the truth.  "But, now that the church has moved away from its teachings, I have no clue what the truth is and question Christianity and the existence of God. We went from the plain truth to what is truth, and personally now I wonder is there truth?"  Mike suggested the WCG ministry was responsible for the state of affairs. He questioned the objectivity of ministers who remained on the payroll while accepting draconian changes to the doctrines they had taught for decades, the teachings that had brought most members into the church.  Miss Turkington commented to Mr. Klynsmith, "Cynics might say you're just blowing with the wind because you don't want to go under."  He disagreed, asserting that the WCG's leadership was intellectually honest. He attributed the many changes in doctrine to extensive research, seeming to imply that Mr. Armstrong's research methods and understanding of the Bible were suspect.  Another caller, 19-year old Miranda, said she was happy with the WCG. "With all the changes we are almost free to do anything."  Gerald, a member of the WCG for 20 years, said, "The church is a different church from what it ever was." He called it a "totally different organization from 18 months ago."  Claude, who came into the WCG in 1978, said he believed that adherents to Islam and other non-Christian religions could be part of the Body of Christ.  Beverly felt Mr. Tkach had been courageous in making the changes.  Mr. Hawkins confirmed that he believed the new WCG doctrines adhere more closely to the Bible than do those of any other group.  Jacko felt the WCG had surreptitiously changed its doctrines. Jacko's views were supported by Koen, who called for more forthrightness from the Worldwide Church of God's ministry.  Mr. Klynsmith noted that the WCG "respected those who wanted to focus on Christ during Christmas," and Mr. Hawkins praised two Dutch Reformed ministers for their doctrinal changes.  A caller who never came on the air asked Miss Turkington to ask why a former WCG minister-who was said to have been dismissed for immorality and told he would never again be a minister-was being allowed to preach again. This caller brought up an issue some in the region feel strongly about and could lead to further division.  During the Radio 702 program, two witnesses phoned in to report what some subsequently dubbed "Klynsmith's Comet," a green orb flashing across the night sky for 10 seconds, and wondered whether it was an omen of things to come.  **Mr. Hawkins suspended**  Four months ago, on March 25, a better-known comet, Hyakutake, was at its most prominent on the day Mr. Hawkins was suspended from his ministerial duties. In the exactly 17 weeks between these two events, Mr. Hawkins apparently reached the point he could no longer preach the doctrines he had endorsed on Radio 702.  A month after Mr. Hawkins' suspension, on April 21, WCG executives **Randall Dick**, assistant director of church administration, and **Michael Feazell**, Plain Truth Ministries executive, convened a regional conference to address the WCG's South African ministry, partly as a result of a memo Mr. Hawkins had sent his fellow ministers about his doctrinal stance.  Mr. Dick and Mr. Feazell chose this 70th anniversary of the birth of Queen Elizabeth II to announce to the British-born Hawkins that he would be expelled from the ministry and his office-related job of 25 years.  **Sinking ship**  Signs of a downward trend in income, attendance and enthusiasm have long been evident among WCG members in Southern Africa. In his first sermon as regional director to the Johannesburg Central church, Mr. van Belkum had warned about "a Laodicean attitude" already prevalent. In a watershed sermon here in 1993, the longest-standing business manager, Bryan Mathie (now retired), stated that income had begun to slide from 1992. He spoke of the South African operations of the WCG as on the verge of bankruptcy: "Unless we turn the ship around we'll sink . . . We're in a crisis situation . . . Twenty-five percent of heads of household have not made a single contribution in the year ending November 1992."  The later severe hail damage to many of the ministers' and staffers' cars at the church's summer camp was seen by some as a warning from God.  Around Passover 1994, **Jonathan McNair**, pastor of the Port Elizabeth and East London congregations, publicly declared his objections to the way Pasadena WCG headquarters was drifting doctrinally, which led to his dismissal.  About that same time minister **Frank Nelte** was suspended and later dismissed from his job as minister in the Cape Town area. He has continued actively to minister to many around the world via the Internet, writing articles on his doctrinal views.  **Syd Hull, John Bartholomew, Neil Becker, Pieter van der Bijl** and **Mr. van Belkum** all likewise left the WCG ministry, citing the church's drift into apostasy. Malcolm Lee left for reasons still ambiguous.  Johannesburg Central lost its long-held and beautiful location, the German High School hall. In the wake of Mr. Tkach's New Covenant video, recorded Dec. 24, 1994, it lost both its ministers, two of its four deacons and most of its sermonette men.  On June 24, 1995-the day the World Cup final, which South Africa won, was played-only 77 people attended Sabbath services. Thirty-two years earlier this congregation had started with 33 in attendance.  Mr. Waterhouse's heavy emphasis on church government had profoundly influenced the South African church. Reinforcement of this doctrine by the subsequent regional directors, **Ernest Williams, Bob Fahey, Roy McCarthy, Les McCullough** and Mr. van Belkum, led the South African operation to be considered by some the most loyal to Pasadena.  However, the glue of church government is what still holds many in the Worldwide Church of God, even though they no longer agree with many of the doctrines. Mr. Waterhouse himself now says he places obedience to God's truth above loyalty to superiors who pervert that truth.  The tendency of the regional directors, in the name of love, to refrain from revealing the extent of Pasadena's problems over the years has led to a double shock for those who found out the truth later, and in some cases it has led to utter disillusionment.  **Lifeboats launched**  On Nov. 21, 1993, the writer of this article delivered a speech in the Johannesburg Graduate Club that seemed to stir deep feelings. It was the first time anyone in the area publicly and formally proposed that holding fast to God's truth is more important than obedience to church government that abandons that truth.  The church speech club consisted of many of the men in the Johannesburg Central congregation at the time. Half of these men left the WCG about a year later over this very issue, after the implications of Mr. Tkach's New Covenant teachings became clear to them.  Most came to associate with other members who had been meeting in the homes of**Mr. and Mrs. Roger Herbert, Tony Levy and Brian Cochrane** - forming the nucleus of the United Church of God in South Africa, which officially began Aug. 19, 1995, three months after a group of American ex-WCG ministers met and organized the UCG in Indianapolis, Ind.  In his sermon on the first day of Unleavened Bread 1995, the pastor of Johannesburg Central, Mr. Bartholomew-a former Mirage-jet fighter and Boeing 707 pilot-stated that he wasn't looking for religion when God called him. He couldn't preach what he didn't believe and understand.  He reminded the congregation that, if its leaders did not speak according to the law and testimony, it was because there was no light in them.  Mr. Bartholomew was relieved of his speaking duties of 25 years without a hearing, left the WCG and became the key minister involved in the formation of the South African United Church of God. He organized the UCG Feast in 1995, which was attended by 168 including guest speaker Brian Orchard. David Hulme and Roy Holladay, both members of the UCG's California-based council of elders, visited just before the Feast, taking questions from any interested party.  **Configuration of churches**  Mr. Becker serves the East London congregation as a minister (average attendance 37). Mr. van Belkum has been assigned the Durban area (attendance 41).  Mr. Hull, now heading the Global Church of God's operation from Johannesburg, left the WCG in 1994. "I told the then regional director I was not prepared to go along with the apostasy and preach heresy as it would violate my conscience and be harmful to God's people," Mr. Hull says. "I love the people of Worldwide. I didn't want to leave or stop being a minister. But I felt great relief when I got out of its new church administration. I had no motive other than adhering to God's truth."  The people in Global came here because of their own decision, Mr. Hull says. "Originally we distributed magazines to WCG members because we felt we had a duty to give them a witness. We sow the seed. God calls. Now we're concentrating on preaching the gospel to the world. I'm just astounded at the response we're getting."  Eighty-eight people attended Global's Feast in 1995, including evangelist Carl McNair. Mr. van der Bijl pastors Global's Cape Town congregation.  Former WCG deacon and now local elder Mike Venish is the leading local figure in the Philadelphia Church of God, which has churches in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Ron Fraser, head of the PCG's British office, oversees its South African arm and was guest speaker at the Feast in George in 1995, with 140 attending. On two days a direct satellite link captured two of Pastor General Gerald Flurry's sermons from the PCG in America. About 30 have left the PCG since then, some disfellowshipped.  Because of their view that they have a mission to warn the WCG and its daughters, the PCG has sent many in those associations their literature. It has also placed several advertisements in national magazines.  Gordon Terblanche, who left the ministry of the WCG many years ago, still observes the Feast and most of what the church used to teach. He recently started advertising again and says he believes he has a responsibility to reach Afrikaans speakers with the gospel. About 25 attended the Feast in Plettenberg Bay with him in 1995.  Science teacher, and until recently longtime member of the WCG, Steven Thomas startled other members throughout the country by sending them an issue of his Why magazine, which discusses matters previously left to the ministry.  Mr. Klynsmith outlined the "care group" idea to Worldwide congregations some months ago, a concept meant to reach and show love to nonmembers. Since many of the people who have stopped attending the Worldwide Church of God-whom I've spoken to since then-have never received a phone call from their minister, the WCG's commitment seems questionable.  The Worldwide Church of God in southern Africa has lost at least a third of those who attended its services. Considering that 27 percent (almost 1,000) of God's people in southern Africa didn't go to the Feast of Tabernacles this past year, few ministers seem to be leaving the 99 to seek those they consider to be lost sheep.  As the first person Mr. Waterhouse employed in the South African office of the Radio Church of God, I know that if he could see the trauma that has befallen his beloved people here he would weep. A few here can testify with me that in the early years he warned time and time again of the condition we now endure: Because of lawlessness, the love of many has grown cold. | |