

Brief History of the Church of God, Big Sandy

by Bernie Monsalvo

By the Winter of 1995 there was a general discontent among God's people in the Big Sandy area with the new doctrines coming out of the Pasadena Headquarters of the *Worldwide Church of God* (WCG). Many of these people had been members and associated with the WCG for more than 30 or 40 years. Teachings such as the "Nature of God," a newly-revised "born again understanding" and the "new Passover" or "Lord's Supper" doctrines were gaining new converts as well as new entrenched opposition from those who understood what the WCG taught before, and what it was teaching in 1995.

Many vaguely recognized that the new understanding of, say, "born again," or "born from above" were changing. Few could articulate what the Church taught for more than four decades, or what it was teaching ca. 1995. Many knew that it was being changed from what it was to a new way. Many were not sure what was being changed, or could not articulate the newer explanations. But it certainly was a deviation from what the old booklets used to teach. Many of the old booklets were no longer to be used as they were not stating "accurately" the new teachings.

By this time in Big Sandy a paper written by Frank W. Nelte, a minister from South Africa, was circulating widely. The paper was titled "*Contra Stavriniades*" and it clearly showed step-by-step what was being taught by Dr. Stavriniades. The bottom line for many of us was that Jesus Christ did not die on the cross as a member of God's divine family. The "Christ" part was divine and therefore it could not die. The "Jesus" part was merely human and it was the only part that was subject to death. Because of this artificial division and misunderstanding of the nature of God, what died on the cross was a human being devoid of divinity. It doesn't matter how "good" a human being could be, a single human would be incapable of paying for the penalty of sin of anybody else. This "new" understanding, dating back to the Council of Nicea around 300 AD's, was denying that Jesus came in the flesh to reconcile us to God. In essence, it was a doctrine of the Anti-Christ. Mr. Nelte's paper was influential in that it corroborated in our minds that the WCG could no longer be trusted to teach what the Bible says. The ministry of the WCG was embarking on a new doctrinal course. Not all ministers or regional pastors were on board with the new doctrines, and because many of them could not agree with headquarters, they had been systematically pruned from the ranks.

Looking for a proper Passover service

Of concern for many of us here in the Big Sandy area was the approaching date for the ceremony of the Passover. This concern came about because rumors were circulating that "people from Pasadena" were going to come to Big Sandy and conduct a "New

Covenant Passover” or “Lord’s Supper” service instead of the usual traditional New Testament Passover ceremony.

The Passover was — and it still is — very, very important for us. It had to be kept properly and it had to be conducted properly. The date for the Passover was to be on the evening of April 13, 1995. Many of us were looking for a minister to conduct a proper Passover service. Dave Havir had been quoted as saying, “If I conduct the Passover service, it will a traditional Passover ceremony.”

A key date was April 1st, 1995. By the afternoon Sabbath service, it was announced that Dave Havir, pastor of the WCG Big Sandy AM congregation had been disfellowshipped from the Church. Russell Duke had been appointed pastor, as he was in total agreement with Pasadena’s changes of doctrines. Many of us knew then that with Dave Havir out of the congregation, we would not be having a proper Passover service at the Field House of Ambassador College Big Sandy. Many of us also knew that we would not be going back to services with the Worldwide Church of God ever again. We had made the decision to sever our relationship with the church we had been members, and a part of, for over 20 years.

We are incorporated

By the date of the Passover, many of us had been contacted about a Passover service to be held at the warehouse of the AgPro company in Big Sandy. AgPro was owned by Don and Michelle Mischnick of Big Sandy. By the time of the Passover service, many of us went to the AgPro warehouse. We were relieved to see Dave Havir and Doug Winnail seated at the table. More and more people were coming to the service. Approximately 150 of us kept the first Passover we ever kept outside of WCG services. After services, we were happy that we had complied with God’s requirements and that there were many with our same shared beliefs. Next evening we kept the Night Much to be Observed. Services on the First Day of Unleavened Bread on Sabbath April 15, 1995 were kept in a hotel ballroom at the Holiday Inn, in Longview, Texas. Attendance at both services on that day were about 280, and by then we knew that we had to do something to provide a church home for so many people leaving the WCG.

During the course of the following week Don Mischnick of Hawkins filed paperwork with the Texas Secretary of State forming a Texas corporation to be named *United Church of God, Big Sandy, Inc* (UCGBS) – a non-profit organization – to be based in the East Texas area. A corporate charter was received within a few days afterwards.

Trip to Houston

The following week, on April 17 and 18, 1995, George Crow, an attorney and minister, from Katy, Texas, organized a two-day conference in Houston, Texas to talk about setting up a corporation to be named *Worldwide Church of God, Texas* (WCGT). Several people from the Big Sandy area attended this meeting, among them Dale Baughman, Floyd Spears, Bernie Monsalvo and Dave Havir. Other people attended from other parts of the country, among them Rodger Sandsmark, Don Hooser, Bob Peoples, Steve, Norm and Dave Myers. Various topics were discussed pertaining to the

dynamics of the change we were contemplating. We knew that a lot of people were unhappy where they were, but were unsure as to how attractive an alternative would be. There were presentations by Ellis LaRavia, George Crow, Dave Myers, Don Hooser, Steve Myers, Jim Franks and others. Jim Franks briefed us about his resignation on Sunday, April 16, 1995 after 23 years of service. The initial idea was to meet separately keeping the foundational differences and beliefs as we have always had them. But, this would not be permitted. The only course of action would be to peacefully depart. To plan for a new course, a conference had been scheduled at Indianapolis, Indiana beginning with a service on the Sabbath of April 29, 1995.

The Last Day of Unleavened Bread was kept on Friday April 21, 1995 again at the Holiday Inn in Longview, Texas. Attendance at both services were about 370, although we never kept attendance figures.

Indianapolis Trip

A group of ex- and current Regional Pastors of the WCG organized a meeting in Indianapolis beginning on the afternoon of Sunday April 30, 1995. There would be two days of meetings on May 1-2, 1995. Several people from the Big Sandy area attended this meeting, among them Tom Clark, Roger Daniels, Dave Havir, Bernie Monsalvo and Doug Winnail – somebody rented a van and we drove all Saturday night to make it to the afternoon meeting at the Jonathan Birds cafeteria in Indianapolis, IN. The initial hall rented for the meeting could not contain all of those that had shown up. Other people from the Big Sandy area were also at the Indianapolis meetings, such as Ellis Stewart and Floyd Spears. All of us had traveled a long time, both metaphorically and literally. At this meeting there were many faithful unemployed people. Various topics were discussed during the subsequent days, we heard many presentations from people such as Victor Kubik, Bob Dick, David Hulme, Dennis Luker, Dean Wilson, Ellis Laravia, Gerald Waterhouse, Ray Wooten, Doug Horchack, Bill Jacobs and Roy Holladay.

By the end of the conference, David Hulme was named president of a new corporation to be formed in Arcadia, California to be named *United Church of God, an International Association* (UCG-aia). We heard presentations by a number of people, in which suggestions were made to collect local funds, to establish locally-incorporated churches and to administer the financial affairs of the local churches. UCG-aia would be providing pastors for the newly-formed corporations, the rationale was that the new organization would be in a better position to provide health insurance, administer salaries, and careers of ministers serving in the field.

Sometime during June, 1995 Dave Havir was hired by UCG-aia to be the pastor of the UCGBS local church. The following holy day on the yearly schedule would be Pentecost on Sunday, June 4, 1995. The offerings to be collected at the Day of Pentecost service had been designated in Indianapolis as a special offering to be sent to UCG-aia to kick start-up operations in Arcadia, California.

Our local church is organized

The UCG Big Sandy form of government consisted of seven board members with the local pastor, Dave Havir, being the Chairman of the Board. From the beginning it

was determined that none of the board members would be ministers or would be compensated financially. The initial term of the temporary board members was set to expire within the year. The congregation would be nominating people to serve on the board. After the nomination of a number of people, two people would appear on the ballot for each board member to be replaced. Existing board member could be re-appointed to serve on the board. The initial board members were Bob Fisk, Angela Kelley, Steve McNeely, Don Mischnick, Bernie Monsalvo, Greg Smith, and Floyd Spears. Dave Havir was the chairman of the board.

Plans to build a building to house our congregation began almost immediately. We knew that we had to have a place to meet, instead of hopping from place to place – from the Rodeo grounds in Gladewater to the Winona senior citizen’s recreation center. There were not too many places that could be used to hold weekly Sabbath Services.

Dave Havir’s employment with UCG-aia had began in June 1995. His employment with UCG-aia would end abruptly in May 1998 for reasons that were never disclosed.

Financial Crisis

During this time UCG-aia had its ups and downs. At some point in time there came “a crisis.” After years of saving money to buy land on which to build our building, Dave Havir received an order via e-mail that stated that due to “a critical situation,” the UCGBS could keep \$50.00 per attendee in the local account and remit the rest to UCG-aia in Arcadia, Ca. The board denied the request on the grounds that the money was to be used for the construction of a local church building. On May 3, 1998, Dave Havir received a fax message in his house stating that services on May 9, 1998 were to be conducted by Roy Holladay, who had been appointed the new pastor of the UCGBS. Dixon Cartwright wrote in *The Journal* as follows: “The church area had been abuzz for a day with rumors and recycled reports about the letter church pastor Dave Havir had received May 3 telling him he was no longer pastor and that another man, Roy Holladay, would be taking his place. Mr. Havir says that, contrary to rumors, he has not been fired, even though his removal as Big Sandy pastor was the obvious intent of the letter he received from Richard Pinelli, director of ministerial services for the UCG-aia.”

A new pastor is coming

“Fifty or so people sat in the audience the evening of May 4 to observe the meeting of the congregation’s seven-member board of trustees. Several of them commented during the hour or so preceding the official business meeting. Mr. Havir, pastor since the *United Church of God Big Sandy* organized in April 1995 (predating the UCG-aia by about three weeks), was one of those commenting. He announced that Mr. Pinelli had called him earlier in the day and apologized for the letter.” The UCGBS board did not accept the appointment of Roy Holladay, then followed a short discussion of the mechanics of conducting Sabbath services. The board members agreed that Sabbath services would take place as normally scheduled, at 1:00 PM on the Hawkins High School campus, with Dave Havir conducting services.

Some go a different way

Many frantic phone calls were made to different people during the week. The very next Sabbath of May 16, 1998, UCG-aia started services in Gilmer, Texas at 1:00 PM. People either attended UCGBS or UCG-aia. People now had to make a choice on where to attend this day. Although many would have preferred to attend both congregations initially, and because services were in two different places at the same time, many quit attending services with UCGBS. Nobody was disfellowshipped or marked in any way. Richard Nickels wrote about this situation in chapter XVI of his book as follows: "Shortly thereafter, almost to demonstrate that United did have Church Government, Dave Havir, pastor of the largest United congregation, in Big Sandy, Texas, was thrown out of *United* because he was too independent. The *Big Sandy Church* has incorporated before United was formed, and many members there resented the rough treatment of Havir. There seemed to be a continual frittering away of congregations from United, and their numbers appeared to be somewhat down from their peak, but hopefully were settling down as the 1990s ended."

Another board member, John Warren was quoted in *The Journal* newspaper as follows: "I think," he said, "that there is a major philosophical difference between people's understanding of what the church [the UCG-AIA] was going to be about. In Indianapolis the people from Big Sandy felt like we had a new organization with a fresh start. We thought we would be open and above board, and it wouldn't be anything like what we were used to in the past. In the past a bad minister could stay in an area and the people just had to put up with it, or a good minister could be transferred out just on the whim of ministerial services. Combine that with the situation here in Big Sandy where we're sending out tapes for people who can't attend church services. And we're building a local church building, which some people find offensive, mostly because they don't understand the reasons behind it and the need for it. It all comes down to feeling that Big Sandy is rebelling against the home office or the council of elders, when all we're trying to do in Big Sandy is serve the needs of the people. By doing what we're doing it's like we're not under the control of ministerial services or the home office. That's a philosophical problem. There's some people who are so used to the decisions being dictated throughout the ministry they just can't understand how we can be reacting this way in Big Sandy."

A building is built

Since May 1998, the UCGBS decided to be known as the Church of God Big Sandy, although legally the name of the corporations is still the *United Church of God, Big Sandy*. The Big Sandy church congregation had been working on plans and finances for a couple of years. The UCGBS board had in due course replaced some of the original trustees, and others had been nominated and elected to serve for a minimum period of three years. The trustees learned to work with each other to accomplish service goals. The UCGBS board initially used the *Statements of Belief* of the UCG-aia which was an adaptation of an early *WCG Statements of Beliefs*.

In time, our *Statement of Beliefs* was condensed to a couple of pages. No changes were made to what we believe. To check our Corporate by-laws and the *Statement of Beliefs* check our website at, <http://www.churchofgodbigsandy.com/>

The congregation built a building and it started to be used beginning with the opening service of the Day of Atonement 1998. The sermon was given by Mr. C. Wayne Cole who, during the sermon, offered a prayer that the building would be used for the glory of God, to preach the Gospel and to house the people of God. Even though, the floor was raw concrete and the folding metal chairs were uncomfortable the Day of Atonement and our first Feast of Tabernacles in our own building was kept in peace and harmony.

To attend services in Big Sandy it is not necessarily a requirement to agree on all points of the *Statement of Beliefs*, although most who attend agree with the document. The acceptance of the *Statement of Beliefs* is only required of those individuals who are presently, or would be nominated to be future trustees of the Big Sandy Church. The individual to serve must agree wholeheartedly with our beliefs. From time to time, sermons cover various topics of our beliefs as well as Christian living subjects.

Outreach today

The Church of God Big Sandy continues to grow in hospitality and in becoming a friendly church — with open doors to all who want to come and worship God in peace. Many activities have taken place within the walls of its building, from monthly pot-lucks, yearly seminars, talent shows, community events, Women's conferences to weekly Sabbath services and Feast services. Today, weekly and Holy day services are broadcast via audio and video streaming from our web site on the internet, thousands of audio cassettes, video tapes, DVDs and MP3 CDs have been sent around the world.

We don't put a price on what produce or send out to people. We strive for quality in all we do. We have received many blessings from God over the years, including the privilege of serving you.

It is our prayer that God may continue to honor us with His blessings, as we strive to serve His people wherever they might be.
