

Date: November 15, 2010
Memo to: UBF senior staff
From: Joe Schafer
Regarding: Some UBF members' concerns about the current state of the ministry

During the 1980's and 1990's, I could honestly say that most of the UBF members that I knew were joyful, enthusiastic, and proud to be in UBF. Many were engaged in the ministry with excitement and zeal. But I do not see that happening now. Yes, there are still some growing disciples in UBF, some happy people, a few bright spots. But to my eyes, the overall spiritual atmosphere in UBF looks unlike anything I have ever seen, even during those periods when our ministry was under vigorous attack.

Over the last three years, external criticism of UBF seems to have died down. Many Christian leaders have befriended, accepted and defended us, and anti-UBF websites are becoming less active. Yet my impression is that morale among many UBF members is extremely low.

At a personal level, I am very happy with the way that my own life has been going. In 2010, God worked powerfully in my life, more than in any other year since I dedicated my life to Christ. He has brought me through a time of emotional and spiritual crisis which began in 2004, the year of my mother's death. I had never really grieved over her, and that started a period of emotional turmoil and disconnectedness that lasted about five years. But this year, through a painful process of realizing my weaknesses and then exposing them to others, I have been experiencing the reality of the gospel and the living presence of Jesus Christ in my life as I never had before. Some longstanding problems in my character, various kinds of emotional immaturity, are starting to be addressed. My personal ambitions and drive for achievement are vanishing. Out of my brokenness, my arrogance and pride are starting to dry up. For the first time in my life, I feel genuine love for God and genuine love for people flowing through my veins. I want to be with God. I have been praying through the Psalms, not because I think I should but because I actually want to. For the first time in 20+ years of marriage, my wife feels genuinely loved. My children are starting to feel genuinely loved. I am developing friendships and starting to connect to people, both Christians and non-Christians, in ways that I never have before. I have finally left the dry land of ideas and begun to swim in the vast ocean of relationships. My knowledge of God is no longer just doctrinal; now it is personal. I have a very, very long way to go. But God has been doing remarkable things for me, and for that I want to give him thanks. Glory be to God.

But since last year's retreat in Delaware, numerous UBF members have confided in me that they are unhappy with the way that UBF is going. Being deeply concerned about what I was seeing and hearing, I wrote to about fifty UBF members in my social network of various ages and backgrounds. I asked them to answer five questions.

Question 1: What are the messages – the vision, direction, prayer topics, values, attitudes, etc. – that are actually being presented to you by UBF senior leaders? What are they trying to get you to do?

Question 2: How do you feel about these messages? Do they inspire you?

Question 3: What kind of message coming from senior leaders would truly inspire you, making you enthusiastic, happy, and truly wanting to remain in UBF for the foreseeable future?

Question 4: What would it take to make UBF a place that you are proud of, a place to which you could enthusiastically invite Christian and non-Christian friends to come and see without hesitation, reservation or apology?

Question 5: If there were a message that you could communicate to UBF's General Director and the leaders of North American UBF (or European UBF, or wherever you are), what would it be?

Thus far, approximately half of those who were contacted responded to my message, and more responses are still coming in.

This research is qualitative. I do not claim that the people who responded are representative of the entire UBF. They are people whom I personally know, admire and trust. They are not people who can just keep chugging along, doing the same things over and over as always. They are thinking about UBF and evaluating UBF, and they are deeply concerned about what is happening.

These are not troublemakers whose opinions might be written off because they “became difficult” and left our ministry. These are current members who have dedicated a great deal of their lives to building, supporting and defending UBF. Our local UBF chapters are built upon their prayers, labor and financial support. Most of these people have kept quiet over the years and have never said anything in public against UBF or its leaders. They are reasonable, thoughtful, sincere Christians whom any pastor would be thrilled to have in his church. Some are chapter directors. Others are family members and close coworkers of UBF senior leaders. Many are actively engaged in student evangelism and discipleship. They are smart, talented, spiritually minded people who exhibit good character. Many have graduate and professional training. They include some of the best and brightest of our young Americans and second gens. These are the very kind of people that Dr. Samuel Lee would have sought to win over and inspire with a hope and vision that would capture their imagination.

These are people whom UBF cannot afford to lose.

Essentially everyone who responded to my questions expressed disillusionment and dissatisfaction about the overall direction and leadership of UBF. Some were resigned to the status quo, saying, “Well, no church is perfect.” Some were quite positive about their own local chapters and fellowships, but said that they are intentionally protecting their disciples from the wider UBF culture and staying away from regional and national events. One director wrote:

We tend to ignore as many invitations from [regional] UBF as possible and quietly try and get on with things. For me that looks like trying to love my wife, enjoy my kids and enjoy bible study. We have a small band of brothers here and it makes for quite a fun time...

Some are enduring because of their relationships with UBF members but are uncomfortable with UBF’s official activities and public persona:

Group meetings do not usually inspire me. I am inspired however by relationships formed within UBF and bible studies... I endure conferences and larger meetings (I do get things out of these meetings as well, but they are not comfortable for me). The other reason I can endure is because I have hope that things will change and I will be very proud of my ministry in every way some day. I believe this struggle is God’s refining fire for my character. I am very aware of group energy and awkwardness. I hate feeling awkward, but at UBF I have to feel that way all of the time.

Others have been hoping and praying for change over the last decade but are growing weary, because promises by leaders of greater openness and change have failed to materialize:

I am someone who feels committed to UBF. It's true that it's partially because my sheer existence is a product of UBF, and my 25 years of growth as a person and Christian has been so heavily influenced and shaped by UBF. It's also because I see that God has done some truly incredible work through UBF for the past 50 years, and I believe that he can and wants to work through us in the future. But I do not want to spend the rest of my life in a UBF that looks the same in 30 years as it does today.... I'm not sure I want to raise children in UBF... I am tired of UBF pretending that it is the same organization that it was 30 or 40 years ago.

Some have been unhappy for years, yet are still holding on. The wife of a chapter director says:

I am personally discouraged. Though I feel like our chapter is struggling to live before God and is overcoming some of these errors in teachings, there is still an influence from [the larger UBF chapter nearby]. And that influence is legalistic. Personally, I have wanted to leave ubf many times. However, my husband feels called to the ministry, so I absolutely want to support him. Second, my children have grown up in ubf and my teenager has built some strong friendships. I want to help [my teenager] to worship with his friends, which [my teenager] does in ubf. I saw the good influence of our hbf ministry on [my teenager] last summer when [my teenager] stood up and made a commitment to follow Jesus. Also, I met Jesus in ubf, so I know I can't just ignore that fact.

And some are ready to give up:

Drastic changes need to occur in the foundational thought of this ministry or I truly believe this ministry's days are numbered. I can say in all honesty, if changes are not instantiated quickly and decidedly, my family, and numerous other families I am close to, will leave this ministry and not look back. Many of us feel like we are not serving God anymore and are very unhappy. There is no amount of Bible teaching, testimony writing, or repentance that will bring us back (as we have been told) as this is a ministry issue.

In my communications with these members, I heard no talk whatsoever of splitting UBF. No one is stirring up trouble, forming factions or lining up behind any human leader. For various reasons, they are just unhappy with the status quo.

It is impossible to predict how many people are going leave UBF, or when they are going to leave. My best guess is that, if members perceive little change when the next General Director is announced next year, an exodus will begin. When valued members leave us, there is real or perceived betrayal. Significant relationships are broken, producing a great deal of pain and conflict; morale drops further, which may lead to even more departures.

Why is this happening?

Using these members' own words, I will attempt to summarize why they say they are unhappy with the current state and direction of UBF.

Some of this material will be painful to read. I was tempted to surround the negative quotations with lots of happy, positive messages, because I did not want anyone to think that I was complaining, bitter, angry or disrespectful. But I decided not to do that, because God's servants ought to be willing to hear blunt messages and process them carefully and objectively. I hope that you will read this document with an open mind and prayerful heart to see if there is any truth in what these people are saying.

And as I relate these UBF members' comments to you, please understand *that I am not necessarily endorsing or agreeing with everything that they have said*. These are their own words, expressing their own thoughts and feelings. I will present my own views later.

Wherever you see an ellipsis (...) in the quotations below, it is because I have omitted words, phrases or sentences that are irrelevant or might compromise the writer's identity. I am not trying to mischaracterize people's beliefs by taking their words out of context. You will have to trust me on that.

Stated reason #1: UBF messages do not inspire them.

Many who attend UBF events are feeling apathetic, embarrassed, discouraged, and even angered by what they see and hear. One young leader who himself has been a main speaker at UBF conferences said this:

I am decidedly not inspired by messages at UBF... I constantly pick and choose what to accept from UBF messages and interpret what I think the speakers mean, forming my own conclusions. Often, I have to ignore offensive or insensitive comments, forgiving the speaker (because I like and respect him) and immediately preparing excuses for any non-UBFer who might have heard them.

Many do not like how UBF messages sound. The speakers' intonation, gestures and emotional expressions are unnatural, stilted, and forced. Some are still willing to give UBF messengers the benefit of the doubt and ascribe the awkwardness to differences in culture communication style, but others are not. Either way, this reveals a continued lack of awareness and sensitivity about how UBF messages are perceived by postmodern American audiences. Note that the strongest negative reactions are evoked not by Korean speakers (who are understandably from a different culture) but by North Americans (who should have no excuse). One young person wrote:

We use the same phrases a lot, which to a new person or someone who has not had these "visions" revealed to them yet they feels plastic. "May North America become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" is a good example. I hated saying this in church as a new Christian... I especially hated it when [my pastor] would make people say it. I had no idea what it meant and I didn't have conviction about it. I was terrified at the end of every service that he would ask me to say it and I would have to tell him no. Thankfully he does not do that anymore and he never called on my when I felt this way... With the practice of the "repeat after me" or saying the same thing together all of the time it feels like they are trying to indoctrinate me with their ideas and ways before I necessarily believe them myself. I think this is part of what feels "cultish" about UBF to some people... I know that their intentions are good but I still don't like it for the sake of others.

That person went on to say:

I really don't like it when messengers impersonate people in the passage, when they tell us to repeat after them a lot or ask, "what is the title of my message?" or "what is the title of part 1?" To me it takes away from the seriousness of the word of God and makes us feel like children in kindergarten with an animated teacher. I have heard this feedback from almost everyone my age. I also dislike how messengers are trained to speak in the UBF way. I really, really don't like this. I struggle with it so much. I wish they would help young messengers find their own voice and to speak from their own hearts.

Another person said:

Honestly new attendees are often scared or feel uncomfortable. When I first came, I remember feeling insulted because it sounded like the messenger was speaking to me as if I were a child. I understand there may be a large part of the audience that appreciates clear articulation and slow speech, but there should be some kind of assessment and happy medium... Also, I think having people turn to their neighbor and say something, like "Jesus forgives your sins" during a message is weird.

Others find UBF messages amateurish, condescending, and sometimes offensive:

i think that the ubf rhetoric is divisive and irresponsible. I do not feel comfortable bringing friends to ubf functions knowing i will have to apologize for offensive things that are said. I also do not find many of the programs intellectually stimulating and feel talked down to. I was disturbed to hear american non christians described as babies learning to walk or to use a spoon. i see an attitude of cultural superiority and dismissiveness. i personally think christians need to understand and respect the often thoughtful beliefs of postmodern college students. I feel like the analysis of postmodern and american culture is not a result of thinking critically or thinking at

all, its just something people have always said and continue to say. the anti american rhetoric is often childish and offensive. also, the oversimplification of controversial issues for messages turns me off and I'm sure any other people who are really seeking answers. mentions of male headship and homosexuality i have often noticed are presented tactlessly.

A fruitful and faithful UBF leader wrote this:

I do not say this to be disrespectful, but let me be honest. These days it is quite rare that I am ever inspired by the actual content of a message coming from any of our UBF senior leadership. Maybe this is more of a reflection of my spiritual callousness or immaturity. But frankly, I often have to turn to non-UBF Christian messages, both ancient and contemporary—for a higher level of inspiration. What does inspire me is the “content” of the messenger—their lifestyle, their spirit, their personal commitment to Christ, the sacrificial decisions they have made in life, their utter spiritual nobility when it comes to radical commitment to Christ. And so I am often placed in a situation where I politely listen to a message from a UBF senior leader and try really hard to get myself inspired because I feel guilty that I'm not feeling inspired by a message from such a great servant of God... If such an uninspiring message came from a leader that I don't personally respect anyway, then it wouldn't be a problem because I would outright dismiss it and move on...

When a spiritually inspiring message comes from a spiritually uninspiring life, I call that hypocrisy. But when a spiritually uninspiring message comes from a spiritually inspiring life, I call that a communication barrier. There is a great communication barrier facing UBF leadership and the younger generation today that goes beyond simple language or cultural issues.

And a house church director wrote:

These messages are driving away many sensible people from UBF; not only so, we are losing many opportunities to plant the love of God in their hearts. Over time, these messages dry our blood and bone.

Many have admitted that they are mentally reinterpreting and translating material being presented to make it more acceptable. For example, when listening to a presentation by Missionary XYZ, they may be thinking, “What Missionary XYZ just said sounds strange, and I don't really agree with it. But I know Missionary XYZ, and I respect him, and I like him. I know that he is a dedicated servant of God, and I know that he means well. What he *said* is [something], but what he *really means* is [something else].” Sometimes they laugh to cover up the awkwardness of hearing messages they truly disagree with:

I was aware that sometimes when a missionary says something that I consider ridiculous or totally wrong some Americans just laugh very loud to somehow try to minimize what the missionary said. But I always found that was a form of avoiding the fact that what the missionary (or shepherd for that matter) was saying was very wrong.

Thus they continually apologize and cover for UBF speakers, laughing about them and reading between the lines to infer positive messages that were not actually being said.

Yet they do not openly voice their dissatisfaction, because the UBF culture discourages them from saying what they really think:

Any negative comments are rarely if ever viewed constructively, but as being critical or as complaining. So I don't think I can recall anyone ever giving a bad message at our conferences, because all our messages are wonderful.

Stated reason #2: The gospel is being assumed more than it is being proclaimed.

UBF leaders believe that this ministry is all preaching the gospel. However, some of our members no longer see the gospel at the front and center of our public messages and persona.

Yes, we still talk *about* the gospel. For example, at recent staff conference, we shouted, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." But is a rich, multifaceted gospel message still being preached in UBF with fresh understanding, inspiration, and passion?

Some do not think so. They perceive UBF messages as moralistic, full of exhortations and imperatives to do something, rather than conveying God's unconditional grace and gospel love. One person wrote:

The gospel is definitely assumed. We're told to preach the gospel, but how can we do that if we've never heard it properly preached and modeled? We're told to preach a message of grace, but the way in which that message is communicated to us is one of lawful imperative, i.e., you must preach this message of grace. That's hard to do when a graceful message is communicated in an ungraceful way...

Too many imperatives for my taste. Must, must, must. Should, should, should...

I'm easy to please--I'd like to hear a careful, thoughtful exposition of the biblical text, and a clear gospel message preached every Sunday with almost no imperatives (maybe just one).

A young person says:

I knew about Jesus and salvation and what not, but then the ACTUAL gospel itself was never clearly presented to me. What is the gospel? Do we all agree on what it is and why it is so important? Are we more about advancing the gospel or about the gospel itself? So sermons are heavily loaded with HOW to do it or that this is God's purpose for man. How am I supposed to participate in sharing the gospel when I Don't know what it is, why its so important and why its the good news?

Another says:

Show me how to preach the gospel, don't tell me to do it. In A Christmas Carol all the ghosts had to do was show Scrooge his avaricious life and how it hurt people and he was changed. They didn't have to say, "You must stop being a selfish, greedy old man." They showed him. Show me.

And another:

[UBF] is focused on mission and human relationships-in the name of the gospel, but not by the power of the gospel. It is focused on human leadership, obedience—especially to elders, discipline... but not by the power of God. We say we are a gospel ministry, but in practice we mostly assume the gospel. I have made incredible friends through UBF... But in the end, human relationships cannot trump the gospel of Jesus...

Gospel ministry must be about the gospel – about Christ – not human relationships or human behavior. For many years, the strong bonds I have had with UBF leaders, shepherds, etc. enabled me to overlook the shortcomings and crazy stuff that goes on in our ministry. Our works-based ministry trained me well. My mind has been saturated with God's word—which is good. But, I am working to build a new foundation in my heart - only on Christ – not on human activities or relationships. You asked what kind of messages I want to hear. I am encouraged by gospel-focused messages —thinking only about all that Christ has done. Any mention of what I

can/should do must be framed simply as my response to our gracious and loving Redeemer and King....

One concrete example I can share happened at the [regional] summer conference, in particular, during the life testimony sharing of the gospel. Each sharer was helped and prepared by a UBF leader. I was really bothered when I listened because each one shared how their lives changed significantly for the better since studying the Bible—grades improved, life improved, began fishing and teaching the Bible. It was implied that this change came about because of the gospel, but in fact, there was no mention of Christ or His work done. To me, this was a clear assumption of the gospel—but anyone listening to their story would assume it was the Bible study, shepherd, or human discipline that did it. Not surprisingly, many people were 'moved' by the testimonies because of the dramatic stories. But, to my ears, many of the things that they said clearly indicated that they had very little understanding of Christ's work done for them.

And another:

It seems like we teach the Bible as though we must do in order to get, rather than showing how much we already have in Christ, so that the doing is only a grateful response to grace, not a "means" to success and blessing in ministry and life...

[Young people] are not inspired because they are not hearing about the gospel of what God has done for us by his mercy and grace. Instead, they are primarily hearing what they should do, must do, repent, decide, etc. Apart from the gospel of grace, nothing in the Christian life is sustainable.

And another:

I believe there is an emphasis on "doing things" that surpasses anything else in this ministry. I believe that it is out of proportion with the Bible verses that talk about the things we do vs. the things God does... I believe this emphasis not only places our hope on acts, and our understanding of strength on ourselves, it actually hurts people who are in different life frames (ie. parenthood, depression, and so on) by secluding them, making them feel worthless, piling guilt (to the point of paralysis) on their spirit. Because of these expectations, our ministry lacks the joy that should come from being a Christian - not from anything else other than having faith in God.... I find that those who do not hold this "acts based faith" are considered lazy and unrepentant, no matter what their heart is.

And finally:

I pray that the point of our ubf sermons and messages may be about the gospel, which is about what God has done for us in Christ, so that our hearts may be moved by the gospel of grace. So far, at every major conference or ubf event, the point or thrust doesn't seem to be Jesus, but some business prayer topic: kingdom of priests and a holy nation, shepherd nation, 12 disciples, 1 Abraham of faith, be self-supporting, double the number, go fishing, feed sheep, etc.

Stated reason #3: UBF is self-absorbed and inwardly focused, lifting itself up while ignoring the greater message of God's kingdom and unity with the larger Body of Christ.

One young leader says:

I get a lot of UBF-centered messages: doubling our ministry, drawing sheep, attending meetings, strengthening missionaries, raising leaders, establishing house churches... I have to make the addendum in my own head: "For the glory of God... to please Christ... because he commanded us to do it... for God's kingdom... so that these people may be regenerated and healthy, etc." I

have to remind myself WHY we want all these things. Often, they are presented as ends unto themselves (and that is not inspiring).

Another says:

I think our ministry's tendency to focus on our own distinctiveness and how this makes us better than other churches is unhealthy and in conflict with the way Jesus, Paul, and the NT generally conceive of the church... My honest view is that it should not particularly matter to us whether UBF as an organization continues to exist, as long as the people in the ministry follow Jesus with all their hearts. The church of Jesus is one, and no part of it is perfect, AND there is much that we can learn from the other parts of Jesus' body...

I feel like it is a deep problem in our ministry that people focus so much on the ministry itself - the number of attendants to this or that - and as a result our lives become centered on building up this organization rather than on God. For a lot of people I think the two things are hardly distinguished. Doing the work of God = expanding UBF. As a result, the real relational element of Christian life - deep intimate fellowship and communion with God and each other which seems to be at the very core of what the Bible actually teaches - is largely absent / neglected.

Public prayers at worship services are heavily focused on the blessing and expansion of UBF rather than simple glorification of Christ:

What are we praying for? When I see prayer topics on the website or I hear prayers uttered at worship service at the UBF headquarters here in [my chapter], it sounds like a big list of requests. Sometimes, I hear the pray-er telling God something that is going on (such as a conference). Would this make any sense to someone who isn't a Christian, or to someone who is simply visiting? Hardly do I hear the name of Christ simply lifted up. Hardly do I hear any indicatives about God's Sovereignty, holiness, power, and wisdom. The three prayer servants pray too long in [my chapter's Sunday worship service]. The way they pray is unrecognizable from any biblical model that I've ever read. In short, our prayers are not worshipful and deaden my worship on the Sabbath.

A young person says:

I'm proud of our ministry but it's hard for me to say that about UBF as a whole. I'm afraid to bring my friends to YDC because of how heavily UBF it is, more than it might be a Christian environment....

We can learn SO much from other ministries and I'm sure vice versa. I think we're worshipping UBF if we're obsessed with maintaining our heritage rather than recognizing the need to maintain what Jesus wanted us to.

Leaders, members, and publications speak of UBF in unrealistically positive, glowing terms. One chapter director wrote:

Still many people take strong pride in UBF ministry as the "best and largest student ministry" which sent most missionaries and lose sight of the objective view.

Another director wrote:

...the glorification of UBF stuff leaves me cold... i was discussing this with my wife about an hour ago from reading a 50th year celebration thing. It's the glory of man and methods not Jesus and his work.

UBF leaders are said to be “global leaders” when in fact their lives seem narrowly focused on expanding UBF:

I believe as long as people just remain in the frame of UBF they cannot be global leaders. Global leaders are those who work more than for organizational cause, those who have the global mind of God.

A house church director says:

Our vision is based on our leader(s) personal desires or goals. Our ministry direction is to increase our kingdom. We are building our own kingdom by using God for our own benefit. When we pray to make the USA a K of P and H N, the perception is political. In doing this, we twisted the scripture for the sake of our own prayer topic. We lost our family values in UBF. We are arrogant and we do not have a learning mind.

Another person sees the creation of UBF Press as further glorification of UBF:

I asked if UBF has a plan to use other publishing companies for publishing books or articles written by UBF leaders. The answer was No. The reason was otherwise, UBF press cannot be built up. Why could we not use other existing presses and publishing companies for publishing some materials? I hope UBF leaders will be more humble in acknowledging and learning God's good work in other churches and organizations and be more connected to other members of the body of Christ.

Stated reason #4: Heavy focus on increasing UBF numbers and participating in certain outward activities as the primary measure of fruitfulness and spiritual growth.

One young leader wrote:

I believe I really do have a connection with our leaders on a lot of points regarding our ministry, but I would go about some things in a much different way than they do. For example I would never motivate people to invite other to a conference or teach the bible with numbers or competition. To me that is de-motivating. It makes me feel terrible. Rather I would focus on connecting people with Jesus, meditate on how wonderful Jesus is, and make the meetings, conferences and worship services something our church members feel confident inviting people to. If people are right with God and our church is working towards reaching our specific demographics, mission will flow freely from that. I do realize this is all a lot easier said than done and I will say that the tactic of numbers has been drastically reduced at the center, but I do hope to see it continually move in that direction until it is eliminated from all public meetings. I think it is OK to talk about numbers among leaders, but I don't like it when my bible students hear it.

A student wrote:

Throughout the [UBF event] and while in my own UBF ministry environment, I often sense an unhealthy obsession with productivity in ministry... I felt very uncomfortable when I saw a respected leader in the church tell a Bible student that casually attends their SWS that he is “praying for him to give a testimony to grow spiritually”. This leader made absolutely no attempt to understand what is going on in this student's life and made “giving a testimony” to be the clearest sign of spiritual growth. Similarly, as the only male college aged member of my ministry I feel unhealthy amounts of pressure to lead Bible studies, preside, feed sheep, start a club at my university and become a model for newcomers. I am asked to dress a specific way, rethink my doctrine, become more involved, etc. The final outcome of all this is that I am often sickened at the thought of ministry.

From another young leader:

Maybe a lot of this can be summed up by the main prayer topic that keeps getting emphasized: Double our ministry. My honest response to this is - why should we care about doubling something if we don't care about the quality of what the thing getting doubled actually is. There are many areas we need to improve and discuss... and I think meeting the need of ensuring our communities are genuinely following Christ is vastly more important than just trying to grow these communities. I am sure that if we focus on loving Christ and each other, and making our communities truly Christ-centered and Christ-like, that God himself will take care of increasing numbers. This kind of emphasis on numerical prayer topics is something I haven't said too much about, but which seems on reflection pretty wrong-headed.

And a chapter director says:

I remember many fellowship leaders in Chicago feeling restless and burdened on Saturday and Sunday because they had to count the number of worshipers. Some leaders were found counting the number during the worship service. If we remove all the numbers from public prayers in UBF meetings, prayer could amount to almost nothing. Number gives people specific goals and a sense of achievement but the Holy Spirit works between numbers and beyond numbers. This is a sign of the immaturity of UBF ministry...

I hate hearing the prayer topic for double ministry. Without clearly explaining the meaning of this prayer topic, it has been repeated at so many meetings and conferences. It only gives an impression that leaders are only interested in promoting UBF goals for the sake of UBF expansion, not addressing what God really wants and desires. Have the leaders even counted how far we have come for this prayer topic? Without reviewing and checking the current status, we just pray for double ministry by 2010. Now less than two months are left. I am curious what will the prayer topic in 2011. A leader should make a vision very clear based on the Scripture and God's will.

Stated reason #5: Obedience to human leaders in UBF is still expected and demanded, and discussion of problematic aspects of UBF is still not tolerated.

One leader writes:

We have almost a papal view of leaders that is very disturbing to me and to many others I know....

Those who do exactly as they are told - achieve some sort of status that seems to be "holier" and more devoted to God. They are visibly favored by leaders, even to the point where there is a multitude of silent communication going on between leaders and others through the acts toward the "good ones". While "the good ones" are so infatuated with pleasing others and looking good (under the guise of pleasing God), that their true intentions are quite transparent to others. Our ministry rewards compliance - and calls it humility. These are NOT the same thing.

Another writes:

UBF doesn't seem to be a place where people can be themselves. If they don't change into what we want them to be, they're seen as problematic.

And another:

God has and will continue to do great things through this ministry. But we must also balance this with healthy self-criticism and an honest acknowledgment of our mistakes. Authority gets abused. Wounds are inflicted. Even great and mature servants of God have their vices. We venerate people for being "exemplary" servants of God by emphasizing their good points and covering up their bad ones. But in order to foster a healthy environment for holistic growth, we need to encourage honesty and humility, beginning with the leadership. Today's generation craves authenticity and is suspicious of over-marketed ideas and people. They smell superficiality. The one place you DON'T want them to smell it is in church.

And despite recent promises of more open communication, discussion of organizational problems isn't happening:

I long for more transparency and honesty when dealing with our church problems. What I mean is this: everyone would agree that UBF is not a perfect church. I assume that senior leaders would agree with that. And yet, I haven't heard a single time a UBF leader openly and honestly talking about what is not perfect in our church. Never ever did I hear them truly putting their fingers into the painful wounds of the church in order to change issues. And every attempt to bring such things up [is] interpreted as an assault at the UBF authority and as disloyalty and disobedience. A truly inspiring message in my eyes from senior leaders would be to willingly to openly and honestly discuss our mistakes in the past and to discuss strategies on how to deal with these faults and to work on our weak points.

Stated reason #6: In many ways, UBF still operates as a Korean church, maintaining a cultural climate that makes Americans uncomfortable.

America is an open-minded and pluralistic country, and Americans in UBF have long accommodated themselves to Korean-style practices and values. But after 30 years in North America, UBF continues to hold on to cultural practices that violate American sensibilities. About our communication style, one American writes:

... even though we are an American ministry, we serve a large Korean and other than American community (those who are visiting and an array of bible students who are international students). I don't know if it is realistic to expect an American style of communication since so much of our congregation are not young Americans but it is frustrating because those are the people our leaders are telling me to bring.

The primary message this person wants to communicate to UBF leadership:

To N. American leaders: Let American UBF become American.

Many of the respondents mentioned that they wish we would stop attaching honorific titles to members' names (Dr., Missionary, Shepherd) because it sets up a hierarchy of persons; this still goes on in most fellowships and chapters. They continue to hear anti-American stereotypes in private conversations and even in public meetings:

Because America is a superpower nation, many people who don't identify themselves as American have no qualms pointing out its flaws... What they don't realize is that... when Christians make comments such as, "Americans are lazy," it is... passing judgment and bringing condemnation. I identify myself as American (not [my ethnic group]-American or [my racial group]-American) but 100% American and derogatory comments against my people--true or untrue, and from people who say they love and want to serve me--are just simply hurtful. The church is RESPONSIBLE for being culturally sensitive and welcoming to all people.

Another leader says:

Recently, when an American told a missionary that he likes American food rather than Korean food, he was regarded as "racist" against Koreans. When another American did not accept the Korean bride recommended to him, the comment was, "So, you don't like Koreans?" This is surely our beloved missionaries' cultural blind spot, or cultural superiority.

And another longtime member writes:

I NEVER considered myself a racist, but these days as our Korean brothers and sisters in Christ reveal their true selves and thinking about us, it becomes harder to bear and hold them in high regard. If I made the comment: "Everyone knows that Koreans can't drive well," I wonder how I would be perceived.

This person goes on to say that the unusual spectacle of American UBF members acting like Koreans was a major reason why the ministry didn't grow:

No one can doubt that we studied the Bible with many students over the last 18 years and only I remained. Why? I believe one reason was because we were Americans trying to bring people to Jesus AND into our Korean style church. We were Americans, acting like Koreans...

Although a few Americans are considered to be national leaders, it appears that major decisions in North American UBF remain firmly in the hands of a Korean director and elders. Other Americans who have been in UBF for a long time (those who are roughly 30-45 years old) feel that they are being passed over and ignored. Meanwhile, younger Korean-American second gens are being groomed for leadership positions, because they seem more obedient and senior leaders are more comfortable working with them:

I have a question: What was the purpose of raising American shepherds in the US, if we are simply maintaining Korean style ministry and leadership? When I think about [the Schafers], the Wards, the Vucekovich's, the Albrights', the Rabchuk's, what purpose was there? Was it to simply put an American face on the UBF ministry in the US? When I had a discussion with [one American woman in UBF] a few years ago about my sense of abandonment by our ministry (that the focus went from raising disciples to raising the 2nd gens) she made the statement: "Our generation in this ministry was told to sit down and just obey." This is so true. I have enormous respect for these families mentioned because you all have remained faithfully for many years and I believe that God used it. But leadership must listen to the cries of our hearts; we long to do good. We long to please Jesus and do what is right for this next generation of Americans. We long to see the preciousness of serving students with Bible study and in fellowship with them to thrive. We want to be open to the Holy Spirit's leading and not be stifled by methods or codes of leadership. I do not believe that it is only Americans who want to be free to serve; it is the human longing and desire; God's image in us.

Reason #7: UBF leaders continue to expect members to press on with fishing, one-to-one Bible study, and campus ministry, ignoring the demographic realities of who the members actually are, and ignoring other important ways of serving God.

There are many contradictions on display at UBF public events and worship services. The ministry is supposedly about students, but the audience to which speakers are playing is often the missionaries. One young person wrote:

...because we have a college student ministry students are the most valuable and cared for people at the cost of other members. this is also paradoxical because i feel that all of the messages we receive are catered to missionaries not students. at various conferences and the harvest festival i wonder why students are invited at all when the program is clearly for the missionaries.

Another wrote:

If it is our goal to reach college students, people who are on the verge of their intellectual awakening, why are we (sorry for the generalization) not being thoughtful about how we handle the text and how we address real questions that students have, especially at conferences!! What is the purpose of our conferences--outreach to unconverted, skeptical college students, or refreshment for Christians? I get a weird sense of both at our conferences (i.e., big summer conferences). I'd say, let's pick one or the other. This vagueness trickles into our worship services as well. We say we want to reach college students, yet our worship services seem like tribal self congratulation. Let's figure out who(m) we want to reach and head that way. If we want to stay tribal, let's do it right. If we really want to reach skeptical, Buddhist, hedonist, or sleeping Christian college students, let's model our worship services and conferences in such a way that they can feel welcomed and loved, without compromising the gospel.

In UBF, fishing and one-to-one Bible teaching are promoted as the best and purest way to serve God, and other methods are not encouraged by senior leadership:

Within the past couple of years, I have seen people take more initiative in other methods of evangelism and areas of serving, but I'm not sure these are fully supported by the UBF Senior Leaders. For example, reaching out to people through movie nights, investing in friendships that might not always result in Bible study (though with a godly intent), going to art events, even hosting art events, having band performances with some Christian and some secular songs, book clubs, etc. may be innovative ways of reaching people for Christ, but I don't feel that most senior staff at UBF wholeheartedly support these things.

Christian activities not specifically aimed at campus evangelism are de-emphasized, to the point where non-students feel they are not being cared for and spiritually fed:

I would be more inspired if we could send the message that we are also seeking a balance in ministry that can feed neglected parts of ourselves and of others. For instance, I think it would be great to have young men's Bible studies... married couples seminars, singles workshops, grief workshops, worship nights, old and young people mixers, etc. I think we can learn from other churches in this particular area. We as humans have the need to be spiritually fed by the Word of God in many different areas, and it is also very helpful to connect in relationships with other people who are going through similar things as yourself... it would be great to branch out a little more to serve the whole human being.

Another writes:

The standards in UBF are set so that other ways to serve the Lord are disregarded or even looked down upon. If our goals are success in evangelism and disciple-making then MAYBE these are the kinds of leaders we should look up to... I rarely am inspired by the message of having to go spread the good news. I don't know why. I haven't had that calling to be a standard UBF shepherd/missionary. To limit our goal to that is telling more than half the people in our ministry that they aren't fit to be in UBF.

Some say that UBF needs to do a better job of valuing and upholding members who are not students and who serve in ways other than Bible teaching, so that they do not feel marginalized.

Recent daily bread passage from 1 Corinthians taught us that the body of Christ comprises in different members, some visible and many more invisible. Regarding high those who do well in tangible and presentable stuff (teaching, fishing, raising disciples) would make the body unhealthy and malfunctioning. Not too many people coming to UBF have a call to be Bible teachers and disciple makers. Expecting everybody to go fishing and become a Bible teacher is

unbiblical and unrealistic. The body of Christ needs all kinds of members. Many people leave UBF or live as second or third class UBF people because they can't find roles they can take other than being Bible teachers...

As long as UBF remains as a campus ministry and keeps its current name, it will not be a home for anyone, only for a certain group of people. As a church lack of heart and culture to welcome and accommodate anyone God sends will be critical. I strongly feel that UBF's name should be reexamined and leaders should be open minded for finding a more suitable name as a church that welcomes and serve anyone beyond university students. Leaders should be able to discern the evolving will of God upon the ministry. I don't think UBF should remain as a student ministry because founders started with a student ministry. Ironically, non-university students outnumber university student in most chapters.

But the strong expectations placed on members – many of whom have burdens and family situations that make it difficult to keep up with a rigorous plan of campus ministry – to continue to feed sheep at all costs becomes humiliating and crushing.

...when I had three Bible students and heard that those we exemplified served 10 in a week, I felt constantly that what I was doing was not enough for God. When I could not bring my Bible students to worship service, but they were faithfully studying the Bible each week, I still felt it was not good enough. And if my family could not handle a full time job, raising 4 children and serving 10 Bible students a week, daily bread and prayer, testimony writing, and fellowship meetings, that we are not leadership material.

Reason #8: The older generation is now telling the younger generation what their spiritual heritage and vision are without consulting them and without seeking renewal from the Holy Spirit.

Many say that the senior leaders are assuming that the next generation should just stay the course and do exactly the same thing that the older generation did, ignoring the fact that the next generation is different and that the Holy Spirit may want to empower and use them in new ways. One director says:

In theory and principle the seniors say they want to "empower" the next generation, but the reality is that our juniors are being enforced to conform to a pre-set, pre-determined ubf structure, format, methodology, strategy.

Another director says:

I think many of UBF leaders do not understand what younger people are thinking and what they really want. Even YDC programs are often determined by a couple of Korean missionaries. Are they or we making serious efforts to understand them? There are not much dialogue between leaders and younger people. Channels through which their voices can be heard hardly exist. Seniors often impose their own vision and direction on younger people and expect them to follow their footsteps and continue what they have been doing instead of freeing them to follow the vision of God and the Guidance of the Holy Spirit.

A younger person writes:

The third issue I have is the simplistic assumption and faulty expectation that the vision of the first generation is absolutely identical to our vision. I respectfully disagree. John MacArthur was once talking about different generations in a church. (I forgot which sermon exactly). He said that the first generation's task is to discover the truth. The 2nd generation's task is to defend the truth. I don't know how to apply this to UBF. But I agree with him that the mission and the task of the 2nd generation has to be a different one from the 1st generation. As [my pastor] put it: the

first generation in UBF had been pioneers, breaking things down to make a path. It is the mission of the 2nd generation to become builders of what the first generation started. Our task should be to stabilize and to manage. This requires a distinct vision for the 2nd generation so that they can identify with it. So far, I haven't heard a clear presentation of such a vision and I assume this might be the reason why many 2nd gens have problems to truly identify with UBF.

Some see in UBF a lack of understanding of how the Holy Spirit worked in the past and how he wants to continue to work in the present. Past successes of UBF should be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, and not to specific UBF methods or practices:

For UBF senior missionaries to claim that it was through their methods and hard work that Americans have been evangelized amazes me. Without a doubt, my own conversion was through the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, God used [my Bible teacher's] faithfulness, and the example of [my Bible teacher's family] as a vehicle, but God did the work.

Another person writes:

Yes, we get bogged down in UBF-isms. (I think we should abolish all titles.) But more than that, I think that we are bogged down in our selected "curriculum" and traditions. Many of those traditions are not wrong, but they can get in the way of movement of the Holy Spirit. It's difficult to say that, partly because I'm not sure what the movement of the Holy Spirit even looks like in a church. I think that he moved powerfully 50 years ago at the beginning of UBF, but now it seems that UBF is trying to perpetuate that spirit in our church, today, and it's no longer fresh. From my cursory reading of church history, I gather that this happens a lot: God sends a powerful wave of inspiration, often involving a charismatic leader, and then, especially when that leader leaves, the movement tries to maintain itself using the tools that the leader used. But the tools are not the point--the point is God revealing his changeless self in fresh, culturally-relevant ways. We appear to be holding onto the tools (i.e. "manger ministry," "one-to-ones," "marriage by faith," etc.), without listening to God about new directions.

Young members are not picking up the vision that the senior leaders are trying to impose upon them:

The general message that was communicated... to members of UBF today is that we need to get "back into the trenches", so to speak, and continue to feed sheep and have Bible studies. I thought the emphasis was on the "what" (feeding sheep; 1 to 1 Bible Study), "how" (work harder), and "when" (now), but the "why" was largely ignored. I thought that the focus of the [specific event] and the UBF message in general have very little meaning to me if any because I am not actively involved in "fishing" and feel very much disconnected from UBF's vision. While the messages may have reaffirmed and encouraged older members that are already on board with what was being taught, I can confidently say that the messages and workshops had very little meaning to most if not all the younger attendees. I thought this was fairly clear because the younger attendees were getting noticeably uncomfortable with what was being taught or increasingly disinterested. I had the opportunity to talk pretty intimately with one visitor and she mentioned that she thought it was "ironic that the [UBF event] was supposed to empower and inspire the next generation". My guess is that younger attendees struggled to find a discussion about "fishing" strategies to be relevant if they don't "fish" or if they're struggling with other questions about faith, the Christian life, Christian community, etc.

Another young person writes:

Ultimately I believe [UBF leaders] are trying to get me to become a product of UBF and what UBF wants me to be. More than soldiers of Christ, it's like we are supposed to be soldiers of UBF to maintain the spiritual legacy of the past. To be a second-generation missionary, bible teacher,

fruitful with many sheep, to further advance the work of UBF to validate the authenticity of the ministry...

Whether it is through official UBF meetings or sunday services I just am bombarded with UBF more than God himself. Through daily bread blurbs we always go back to the way UBF does things. All in all, I just hear more about UBF practices and UBF lifestyle that are being promoted more than the bigger picture of what it means to be a Christian today...

It makes me uncomfortable and confused. I'm not inspired to be a product of UBF. I want to be a soldier of Christ and participate with others around the world to fight for the advancing of God's kingdom here on earth, rather than create a well known ministry on earth. The emphasis on our unique practices is unsettling.

Personal messages that these members would like to convey to UBF's senior leaders

The responses that I received from these UBF members were not exclusively negative. For the most part, these members love UBF and have experienced God's work among us. By and large, however, they feel that their voices have not yet been heard. In response to my Questions 3 and 5, here are some of the messages that they want to convey to senior leaders.

One person wrote:

I truly appreciate Dr. Samuel Lee's prayer topic, "A kingdom of priests and a holy nation." I am certain it was God's direct vision and word for us. While I still believe in the sentiment, I believe it is time to form a new prayer topic for our country. This doesn't mean we throw this prayer topic out; rather, we need to pray to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and receive direction from God that builds on it. We should not cling to a prayer topic and stick to it solely out of respect and tradition for one person, but pray that WE may also be inspired as he was. A new prayer for a new generation that brings renewal for ALL people. We should move forward while still keeping a respectful eye on the past. Sometimes I feel that we are barely moving forward because we are working hard trying to make the past work for the present.

Basically, what would inspire me is: 1) inviting the Holy Spirit to reveal a fresh prayer topic that is biblical and relevant for the people of this country, 2) a humble acknowledgment that we still have MUCH to learn about how to serve American students, and 3) an openness toward necessary change.

Another wrote:

Give some freedom to the Americans, focus less on numbers and more on spiritual growth, and know that this isn't a perfect church.

Another wrote:

Be honest, open, and genuine. Invite people (even just key young leaders) to a round table discussion of the things presented in this email... Obviously we need to talk about them, and I agree that there is a pretty big disconnect. But our disconnect is not irreconcilable; in fact, I believe if we talk it out we will realize that we are on the same page about most critical issues (go back to the Bible)! If we all have open minds and are willing to compromise, maybe we can reconcile our differing viewpoints instead of just ignoring them or sweeping them under the rug (which both sides are guilty of). Be willing to be frank about UBF's weaknesses (yes, we have them), and look for ways to bring our small part of the body of Christ more in line with Christ's mind and heart.

A young person says:

Please, for the sake of the ministry and for the sake of our Lord, be willing to let go of everything that is UBF. This isn't saying that everything UBF is bad, but be WILLING to let go of what isn't helping. I am not against fishing, one to one Bible study, testimony writing and what else is out there. I just believe that there is SO much more. We use these but don't depend on these. We're treading in shallow water when God is so much more deeper than we can imagine. If we're willing to unlearn and relearn, then we'll experience so much more of who God really is.

Another says:

I am really thankful and appreciative for your prayers for the next generation of leaders. I know that you really love us, care about us, and want to see God use us in the future. I know you want us to experience how powerfully God can use us. I think it's important for us- second gens/young people and missionaries- to trust each other and believe God is with us. We young people can learn from the older generation of leaders, and I pray we will seek advice and wisdom from them. I also pray that the senior leaders may continue to pray for us and let us try new things and learn from our mistakes as well. The young people I know feel sometimes discouraged or frustrated when they give feedback and are just dismissed. For example, for conference message preparation, I think it's really good that the senior leaders spend so much time and prayer for our conference messengers. But it might be helpful if the committee includes young people that can give feedback as well. Maybe include young people in the messenger training committee, even if their role is simply to be a demographic "test" audience. I'm sure that many young people- myself included- need to also remember to have a humble attitude as well. I believe more co-working between young and senior leaders could yield very positive results as they learn from each other through consistent collaboration. When young people really feel their feedback is respected and valued- especially when they feel they didn't yet "earn it" or not necessarily entitled to it- they may feel inspired.

Another person mentions the treatment of women:

My priority is for UBF to allow space for women leaders. I am glad that we are slowly allowing space for American and youth leadership... But I firmly believe that UBF sends a message that women are less valuable than men. UBF segregates the genders more often than Americans are used to, and UBF clearly honors men more than women. UBF also defaults to only allowing males to be visible and vocal, and I don't understand why women can't even be more often prayer servants, Bible teachers, and presiders, even for those who don't believe women should be regular messengers. By not seeing/hearing women leaders, women are given the message that they cannot be leaders. They are given the message that they are not only less valued by their church community, but that they are less valued by God. Women in the church are statistically as abused (physically, mentally, sexually) as women "in the world." And this is influenced by this attitude that women are inferior.

And another who mentions women:

Church often feels stale! It often feels like we're trying to recreate the culture of the young UBF, as it existed fifty years ago in Korea. That includes many of the cultural differences that we Americans find offensive (like the unequal treatment of women).

We need to shed human traditions and cultivate a lifestyle of fellowship with God, in order to focus on his living Presence and maintain an ongoing attitude of worship, service, supplication, and love.

This person wants leaders to follow the Holy Spirit and recast the identity of UBF not simply as a campus mission organization but as a church:

UBF senior leaders should be able to see the place of UBF in God's history and the limits of its role as a student ministry. It has been growing as a church but not well functioning as a church. Don't be afraid of losing UBF heritage. WE don't have to regard the founders' heritage. It was the Holy Spirit who started this ministry. If the Holy Spirit leads differently, we should be able to flexibly follow His guidance. Please, reconsider a different name for the ministry which can be more embracing more including different groups of people including our own children.

And here is an impassioned plea from a fruitful UBF leader:

I deeply long for senior leaders to tell me, "Now it is your turn to lead. I trust you. Here are the "keys" to the UBF "car." It is your turn to drive. No matter what, I trust that the God who allowed us to experience a great work of God in our generation will be the same God who will do a mighty work in your generation. And though I know you may do things differently than us, and though you may even do things that seem almost misguided and unfaithful to the UBF mission, I trust your heart. I trust that deep down you want to serve the Lord and advance the kingdom of God in your generation. I trust that the Spirit may do things in your time that seems the complete opposite way in which He had worked during my time. But I trust Jesus to be with you to the end of the age. Even if it means that ultimately UBF becomes less, may it be that Christ becomes greater in your ministry. Even if it means that the Lord chooses your generation to do things that initially go against our expectations, may Christ be glorified in whatever you do. But please remember this: We worked hard to build this foundation. We know we made mistakes along the way. But don't be too eager to throw out the baby with the bath water. Keep what is from God – but everything else is disposable. All we ask is that you build upon the foundation in a way that is faithful to God's kingdom purpose. Whatever happens, we will pray for you always and if you need guidance or advice, or even want us to serve in a capacity you think will be beneficial, then let us know. In the meantime, I'm going to go read some more books recommended to me by John Armstrong, and mostly spend my time praying for your ministry. Oh, and call me if you want me to babysit your children while you go fishing from time to time. Just kidding. Only if you decide that your ministry is going to go fishing on campus. No pressure. I'm not going to push you to go fishing or tell you what to do. But just in case you do want to go fishing, I will babysit your children...I love you no matter what. I'm proud of you no matter what. Now go in the grace of Jesus, and may God help you accomplish for His Kingdom more than you can ask or even imagine. The God who calls you is faithful and He will do it!"