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Web Announcement

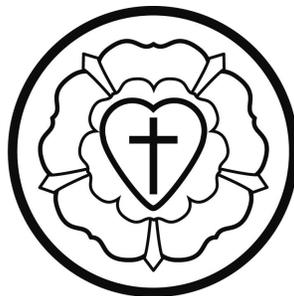
From <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/sgm/>

Ambassadors of Reconciliation's report on Sovereign Grace Ministries

Ambassadors of Reconciliation recently finished the report that documents their findings after a nine-month study of Sovereign Grace Ministries. Their report, as well as a response from C.J. Mahaney and our Board of Directors, is below.

Report to The Board of Directors of Sovereign Grace Ministries

April 10, 2012



**Ambassadors
of
Reconciliation™**

Report to The Board of Directors of Sovereign Grace Ministries

Prepared by the Ambassadors of Reconciliation Team,
Ted Kober and Rev. Ed Keinath
April 10, 2012

We were given the privilege of serving the Board of Directors of Sovereign Grace Ministries as the Ambassadors of Reconciliation (AoR) team. The Board accepted our proposal for a Group Reconciliation Assistance and invited us:

- to teach biblical principles of peacemaking;
- to review information related to conflicts in Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM), and to meet with people associated with SGM, including current and former SGM leaders and current and former members of member churches; and
- to report on any progress made and make specific recommendations for additional action.

AoR was initially engaged in July 2011 by the SGM Board of Directors for consultation. We prepared a Consultation Report to the Board of Directors on August 24, 2011, which was posted on the SGM web site. This report included four recommendations:

1. Go and Be Reconciled
2. Group Reconciliation Assistance
3. Adjudication of Charges against C.J. Mahaney
4. Follow-up Consultation

Following this report, Ambassadors of Reconciliation prepared a proposal for Group Reconciliation Assistance, which the Board accepted.

Process Employed by the Ambassadors Team

In consultation with the Board, AoR planned to implement the first phase of the Group Reconciliation Assistance concurrently with the SGM Pastors Conference on November 8-10, 2011 in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Because AoR wanted to engage leaders of SGM churches in teaching and interviews, the Board and AoR felt that this would be a good opportunity to bring people together in a time and cost effective manner.

Because so many in SGM had indicated that they were well indoctrinated in biblical peacemaking from Peacemaker Ministries and their resources, the AoR team determined to utilize the half-day seminar *Getting to the Heart of Conflict* for the initial teaching piece rather than the standard *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*. This half-day seminar included teaching and exercises on pronouncing God's forgiveness that many in attendance said they had never seen before. They expressed great appreciation for these new insights.

As information was released regarding the plans for AoR to begin the group reconciliation process, AoR began to receive extensive negative feedback on the process. Feedback was received directly by AoR through emails, letters, and phone calls. Additional reaction was received by the SGM office and forwarded to AoR. In addition, people were actively writing on blogs with complaints against the SGM Board, AoR and the process. The majority of complaints can be summarized as follows:

- People accused AoR of not being impartial for various reasons:
 - AoR was engaged by SGM and would be paid by the Board.
 - One of AoR's Board of Directors members (Dave Schlachter) was a staff person of Peacemaker Ministries, and since Peacemaker Ministries' President Ken Sande was viewed as not impartial in working with SGM¹, it was concluded that AoR could not be impartial either.
 - Some asserted that AoR would be swayed by the Board and favor the Board over and against those making accusations against the Board because AoR had already spent time with the Board and provided consultation.

- A number of people were outraged that attendance at the teaching seminar by AoR was required prior to meeting with an AoR team member. Complaints included:
 - This was another way for SGM to force people to jump through hoops before being heard (in spite of the fact that the requirement was made by AoR and not SGM).
 - People had "heard all of this stuff before" (a direct quote) and didn't feel that they needed to hear it again.
 - Those who had been hurt deeply by someone in SGM or in a SGM church felt that this was a way to punish them again. (A couple of complaints suggested that the requirement was a way to abuse those who had already been abused by SGM.)
 - Some accused SGM or AoR of setting the bar high so that people would be discouraged from giving their honest feedback.

- Some were angry about a false assumption concerning the way that AoR would apply confidentiality to its interview process. Apparently on one of the blogs², someone falsely claimed that if a person met with a member of the AoR team, he or she would be prohibited from ever talking about that issue again to anyone anywhere.

- Another concern was raised that people no longer associated with SGM would be forced to travel to SGM offices in Gaithersburg for these meetings. Two main issues were:
 - The cost would prevent many from coming.
 - Some would be intimidated to meet in the SGM offices or Covenant Life Church (some were quite fearful).

¹ This was due to Ken Sande's long term friendship with C.J. Mahaney and other leaders of SGM as well as his preaching, teaching, and consulting for SGM over the years.

² AoR was aware of at least two blogs which provide venues for people to vent their frustrations and concerns regarding SGM.

Contrary to false assumptions and complaints that were widely distributed through blogs and emails, the teaching requirement was not made by SGM, and the requirement to attend the seminar was not unique to this situation. AoR always provides a Bible study seminar at the beginning of a Group Reconciliation Process and asks that people attend it prior to individual and small group meetings. The purpose of this requirement is to teach a biblical basis for responding to the conflicts. It is AoR's experience that conflicted organizations have a number of people who exhibit worldly and sinful responses to conflict that make the conflict worse. By encouraging everyone to attend the training, the interviews can be used not only for gathering data but also for coaching people on how to respond to their conflict concerns in a biblically faithful manner.

The fear regarding the constraint of confidentiality was blatantly false. AoR binds its own team members to certain aspects of confidentiality, but does not restrain people from speaking to others about their concerns. AoR team members guide interviewees to follow biblical teachings regarding how to respond to conflict which includes things like avoiding gossip, speaking to build others up, going directly to those with whom one is in conflict, etc. But there has never been a binding requirement that such people can never talk about these things to anyone else again.

AoR recognized that people had some legitimate concerns as well as some unrealistic and false accusations. AoR consulted with the SGM Board to make provisions to help offset the legitimate concerns and correct misinformation about the process. On October 13, 2011, Ted Kober wrote a letter announcing these changes, which was posted on the SGM web site. The letter addressed the following issues:

- To provide some background information on the Group Reconciliation process and reflect on initial feedback AoR has received so far regarding the process.
- To answer questions regarding confidentiality in this process.
- To adjust the teaching requirement in response to the feedback.
- To confess his part in contributing to confusion and hurt among people invited to participate.

Even before the concerns were raised, AoR and the SGM Board had made provisions to address issues of travel and the requirement to attend the seminar. The seminar was recorded and posted on the SGM web site, and feedback forms and requests for telephone interviews were made available following the Pastors Conference. Anyone could review the teaching, send in completed forms with additional information, and request an interview if they desired. In Ted's October 13 letter, he released AoR's requirement to first listen to the teaching and instead encouraged people to attend or listen to the recording.

The AoR team was made up of five individuals, all of whom received special training and had experience in conflict coaching.

- Ted Kober (layperson and President of AoR) served as co-leader.
- Rev. Ed Keinath of Indiana (licensed counselor and Director of AoR's counseling ministry and a Lutheran pastor) served as co-leader.

- Ken Erlandson of Minnesota (a Director of Christian Education and Camp Director) served as a conflict coach.
- Rev. Jaim Gann of Maryland (a Lutheran Pastor) served as a conflict coach.
- Melissa Richholt (layperson, Administrative Assistant and Conflict Coach for AoR) served as a conflict coach.

Ed Keinath and Ted Kober presented *Getting to the Heart of Conflict* for approximately 230 people on November 8. During the week of November 8-10, the team conducted more than 70 in-person appointments with individuals, couples, and families. On November 10, Ted addressed the Pastor's Conference with a one-hour presentation entitled, "Forget Not All His Benefits" based on Psalm 103:1-5. This presentation briefly summarized some of our initial observations. An audio recording of the presentation and summary of Ted's observations were posted on the SGM web site.

Over the next two months, the AoR team reviewed written information and conducted approximately another 70 interviews with people by phone. In addition, an estimated 60 others submitted information by email or regular mail. On January 11-13, Ted and Ed met with the SGM Board members individually and as a group to gain their perspective on some of the main issues. In the end, AoR collected literally thousands of pages of data from various sources.

Since January, we have continued to receive some additional information from people within and outside of SGM. Over the past few months, we have reviewed all the information collected and evaluated the data in order to make observations about SGM and make recommendations.

It should be noted that AoR received a wide array of perspectives ranging from those who were highly critical, angry, bitter, or mistrustful of SGM and its leaders to those who were very supportive, comfortable, and trusting of SGM and its leaders.

Of the 250 different individuals that provided input to AoR, about half were estimated to be no longer directly associated with SGM. These included past SGM leaders, pastors, and members of SGM churches. Considering that SGM has approximately 28,000 people in its churches, AoR received direct information from less than one half of one percent of the total current membership.

Accordingly, AoR was unable to conclude that the input it received accurately reflects the majority of viewpoints from people currently in SGM churches.

Mediation Efforts

In September 2011, mediation was begun between two key leaders within SGM. In that process, information was exchanged regarding some of the key issues between them. As a result of initial attempts at mediation, the two individuals began meeting with each other without outside assistance. Although each has received some coaching, they have been able to meet without additional mediation assistance.

Sovereign Grace Ministries and Covenant Life Church (CLC) have enjoyed a close relationship over many years. Over the last year, however, strains between the SGM Board and CLC

pastoral team have grown as the two groups have disagreed over certain issues. The two groups met together a couple of times and were able to engage in discussions. However, it has proven to be challenging for the two groups to reach agreements or conclusions, partially because of the size of the two groups. AoR has proposed a way for the two groups to meet with AoR facilitation. Both groups seem open to using such a process in the future once AoR's final report is made available.

A few others made some requests for mediation assistance, but these requests were outside the scope of the AoR Group Reconciliation Assistance. AoR was responsible for mediating disputes that would have the potential impact of affecting the entire SGM network. Mediation assistance may be sought through other channels where both parties agree to seek such assistance. When appropriate, AoR provided counsel for people to encourage and prepare them for mediation through other sources.

Process Employed by the SGM Board for Adjudication

The SGM Board attempted to utilize the adjudication process proposed by AoR in its August Consultation Report. The Board contracted with Bryce Thomas to serve as an adjudication consultant and facilitator. Once the SGM Board contracted with Mr. Thomas and began to implement the adjudication process, AoR intentionally had little contact with the SGM Board regarding adjudication in order to remove itself from working both in adjudication and Group Reconciliation Assistance.

In its earliest conversations with AoR, the SGM Board asked AoR to adjudicate issues regarding the fitness of C.J. Mahaney for serving as president and/or chairman of the board. However, AoR declined to offer such services. AoR is not qualified as an outside organization for making such a final adjudication for SGM because we are not intimately familiar with your doctrine, practices, or polity. Although a team from AoR could study bylaws and other governing documents, the issues regarding the fitness of a leader to serve in leadership are also decided based on an organization's specific doctrine and application of biblical teaching. Since AoR staff and conciliators are not intimately familiar with the specific doctrines and application of those teachings to such areas, AoR felt it should not be empowered to make decisions that must apply doctrine to practice in this critical area.

The SGM Board was highly criticized by some for not using AoR or another outside organization for adjudicating these issues. However, we want to clarify in this report that the SGM Board specifically requested AoR to perform this function, but AoR declined to serve that role. Furthermore, AoR recommended that SGM *not* utilize those outside its fellowship for such functions because of the unique and special doctrinal applications involved. The SGM Board accepted our recommendation after hearing our reasons. To date, we at AoR believe that this was still the right approach to take on such matters, in spite of the allegations by some that people within could not be impartial. AoR observed in SGM many men of integrity, whom we believe recognized their first responsibility to God and were capable of being impartial.

Confusion on Adjudication Processes

From questions and comments AoR has received, we have noted that there were various misunderstandings of how adjudication was implemented. There were three distinct processes, and it appears from our perspective that some people have confused some aspects of the three separate processes.

First Adjudication Process: In August 2011, after consultation with AoR, the SGM Board asked three ministers outside of SGM to review the allegations made by Mr. Detwiler and the confessions made by C.J. Mahaney to issue a judgment on C.J.'s fitness to serve in ministry. Their assessment was to be based on those areas in which C.J. Mahaney admitted fault. This occurred prior to AoR issuing its Consultation Report in August. The SGM Board asked Ambassadors of Reconciliation (AoR) about this *process*, and AoR provided suggestions for the Board regarding the *process*. However, AoR did not select the ministers or recommend names, nor did AoR commission such a panel. AoR never met with the panel nor discussed any aspect of the case with panel members.

Second Adjudication Process: In its August report, AoR originally recommended another process of adjudication. AoR recommended that the SGM Board engage a separate consultant for implementing the adjudication process so that AoR was not involved in both the reconciliation processes and adjudication process. Mr. Bryce Thomas was later recommended by AoR and appointed by the SGM Board. The SGM Board worked together with Mr. Thomas to finalize and implement the details of the process. To clarify, Mr. Thomas was recommended by AoR but he was not acting on behalf of AoR. (This may have caused confusion for some trying to interpret what happened.)

Mr. Thomas invited Mr. Detwiler to participate in the adjudication process. Mr. Detwiler declined to participate in that process after multiple attempts were made to invite him. Mr. Detwiler publicly criticized the process in a number of ways.

Third Adjudication Process: When Mr. Detwiler refused the invitations to participate by the deadline set, the SGM Board worked together with Mr. Thomas to design a new three-panel process to address similar issues. The SGM Board did this because it believed that it was important and necessary to deal with these issues, whether or not Mr. Detwiler agreed to participate. Sometime after the deadline for the original process, and after the Board had begun planning a new process, Mr. Detwiler apparently changed his mind and wanted to participate in the original process. The SGM Board declined to go back to that process, and it proceeded with the new process it was already working on. Mr. Detwiler has been critical of the Board for not honoring the process it originally proposed to him, but Mr. Detwiler declined the original invitations and publicly criticized the process.

AoR was not involved with the design of implementation of this third process. After the process was designed, the SGM Board described it to AoR and asked for input. AoR provided brief comments to the Board, but AoR was not involved in the process. AoR did not commission the panels. AoR did not select people to serve on the panels. AoR did not design how the panels were formed. AoR did not meet with any of the panels or communicate with panel members.

AoR did not attend any of the panel hearings. AoR was unaware of those selected for panels until it was reported after the hearings were completed.

Hearing Decisions Posted on SGM Web Site

Prior to knowing what the results would be, the SGM Board of Directors committed itself to publishing the results of adjudication on SGM's web site. Accordingly, the Board posted the report of the first adjudication process (three-minister panel) on its web site. The Board also reported how it was progressing on the second adjudication process and announced its plans for the third process. As the panels in the third adjudication process completed their decisions, the Board posted the decisions on its web site. AoR observed that the Board took actions to communicate honestly and openly with its membership in these processes.

Observations on Responses to AoR During the Process

AoR has served many church-related organizations that struggled with conflict. As a result, we have often experienced how people misinterpreted our work or the actions of our team members. We have experienced being the target of gossip and slander as we sought to help organizations in reconciliation.

However, in working with SGM and its conflicts, there have been a number of aspects of this case that were unique, especially in intensity.

1. It is not unusual that AoR or its team members become the subject of gossip in a conflicted group. However, one unusual aspect in this case was that the gossip and personal attacks began *within hours of SGM Board announcing that it planned to use our organization*. Usually, groups wait until we begin working with them before criticizing us and our work. The first evidence of this appeared on the blogs.
2. Another unique aspect of the negative talk about our organization and its work was the intensity, the volume of input, and the threats that came with it. In September and October, long before our first meetings with people, AoR was the recipient of many direct and indirect attacks on our organization, our team members and our work. Some people made threats against us. For example, one threatened to report us to government agencies about our illegal work (based on false assumptions that were posted on a blog). Another threatened to publicly humiliate and discredit us by posting extensive blogs on the web if we didn't respond in certain ways by that person's imposed short deadline.
3. The strong reaction against the teaching component was also unique to this case. While people in a few other cases have expressed their dissatisfaction about our requirement to attend the teaching on peacemaking, AoR had never before received such strong negative reactions and personal attacks for the teaching component. Interesting to us was the argument was that people had been exposed to biblical teaching "ad nauseam" (an actual quote). And yet, many of the people raising this issue failed to exhibit how to respond to conflict in a biblically faithful manner. In fact, the more people attacked us in sinful ways, the more we were convinced that they either had not learned much about biblical peacemaking or were unable or unwilling to apply what the Bible taught.

4. Another surprising response was the negative reaction to our confidentiality policy. False information was apparently posted on one of the blogs and easily accepted and passed on as fact. People accused us of making a requirement that if anyone talked to one of our team members, he or she could not talk to anyone else about such a matter again to anyone. This rumor became the basis for one of the threats we received.
5. As a result of the false assumptions and misinformation, blog postings discouraged people not to participate in AoR's process and even warned people against doing so.

When AoR experiences unusual responses in a case, we see these responses as indicators of unique aspects that deserve investigation. Accordingly, as we met with people, we asked people why these issues were of such importance. Here is what we learned regarding the teaching requirement, sensitivity to confidentiality, and judgmental attitudes in communications.

Teaching Requirement

People upset about the teaching requirement explained that in the past when they raised issues with leaders in their churches or with SGM, they experienced a response from leaders indicating they simply needed more education. In some cases, they felt that leadership responded by teaching more on the subject with which they disagreed. Rather than listen to the concerns raised and respond directly to them, people felt belittled or "talked down to" (actual quote) through the teaching. Others indicated that teaching had at times appeared to be used as additional hurdles or requirements before leadership would take their concerns to heart.

Thus, when they heard about AoR's teaching requirement, many assumed that this was another "typical SGM response" (actual quote). A few indicated that this was just more "hoops that we have to jump through" (actual quote) in order to address the conflicts. Others indicated that the SGM way was to correct wrong attitudes and thus deal with disagreements from the ranks in this way.

We want to point out that these attitudes were not reflective of everyone we met with or who participated in the training. In fact, several people expressed great appreciation for our training, noting that we presented ideas that had not been taught before in SGM. Nevertheless, our unusual experience in this area indicated to us that for some people in SGM churches, their past experiences led them to respond to our teaching requirement in an unusually hostile manner.

Sensitivity to Confidentiality

The unusual resistance to our confidentiality statement was interesting to us because we had never encountered this kind of reaction before in more than 18 years of experience working with conflicted groups. Obviously, a number of people were misled by false information posted on the blogs. But we also encountered resistance to confidentiality in other settings not directly related to the rumors. For example, we encountered this resistance by one party in our attempt to mediate between two people.

As we explored this issue with people, they indicated that they had experienced times when church leaders (pastors and/or small group leaders) or SGM leaders appeared to use

confidentiality to keep secret matters which these people felt should have been shared openly. For example, when Brent Detwiler's documents had been widely distributed and then published on a blog, people felt that some of what Brent wrote about should have been disclosed long ago to reveal weaknesses and offenses of key leaders.

A few described situations where they or others they knew well were under a disciplinary process. While under discipline, they indicated that they were strictly charged to not discuss anything about their discipline case with anyone. In some cases, however, church leaders announced that individuals were under discipline and described the reasons why. Those who were under these restrictions felt this was unfair that the leaders could talk about them publicly but they could not defend themselves.

Others described situations where they were told that someone else was undergoing a process of correction and they were admonished not to talk to those under correction or to have anything to do with them. This type of situation was described at the small group level, the church level, and also at the SGM level.

Of course, not everyone we met with experienced these things. We learned about a number of serious situations that called for confidences and people explained that the situation was handled carefully, biblically, and legitimately.

At the same time, we were aware that trust in leadership by a number of people had been so violated in their minds that they interpreted the term "confidentiality" as negative images of secrecy, cover-ups, or hidden agendas.

While we were aware that not everyone had experienced these things in the same way, there were several cases from people in different churches in different areas that described these attitudes to us. While some may have been influenced by the blogs, there were enough different settings to indicate that others experienced similar things at different times and in different places.

Judgmental Attitudes in Communications

We at AoR experienced being judged quickly and negatively long before we had a chance to work or even prove ourselves one way or the other. While we have experienced some level of being prematurely judged in other cases, this experience stands out in our minds as the most dramatic example of being prematurely and sinfully judged in working with conflicted groups. Our observation is that the power of worthless talk (Ephesians 4:29 ff) and sinful judging (Matthew 7:1-2; James 3:5-12; 4:11-12) was greatly exacerbated by those writing and reading blogs and widely distributed emails. Coupled with the falsehoods and exaggerations about AoR, our team members and work were the threats and condemning words sent to us. Based on false information, people made assumptions, misquoted and twisted our words and statements, and made damning statements against us.

Once our team began to meet with people, many attitudes changed dramatically about AoR and its work. Some of the blog postings became positive and encouraged people to meet with us.

During November 8-10, a number of people made appointments *after* reading some of the positive reports on the blogs.

However, even after this, some continued to misquote or twist words that we had shared with individuals either orally or in writing. There seems to be a culture among some of interpreting others' words and actions either in the worst way possible or in such a way to justify one's positions. Among some strong SGM opponents, there appeared to us to be a pattern of twisting words, putting the worst construction on something, while at the same time accusing SGM leaders of doing the same thing. Such sinful behavior reflects matters of the heart that should be addressed through confession and forgiveness.

Communicating in blogs and emails can be beneficial. It provides a way to communicate quickly and publicly. Blogs can provide a way for people suffering with similar hurts or problems to share them with others who can sympathize and at times provide helpful advice. Blogs have at times served as electronic support groups.³ Some bloggers claim that such media provide a way for the oppressed to speak out with power against unfair treatment by those who control communication and cause hurt to the multitudes.

Nevertheless, the sinful effects of the blogging and judgmental emails cannot be minimized or ignored. While there were real issues to address regarding SGM and its churches, the way in which some people treated us as outsiders demonstrated to us that many in this system were prejudiced, bitter, angry, and judgmental in their approaches. It appeared to us that many were vulnerable to easily believe anything written on a blog and then add their own condemning thoughts, whether or not the blogger's identity was known. Furthermore, those being condemned in this way had no just way to respond to the accusations.

This attitude among those who were vocal put us on guard that we must be careful in our deliberations to treat people as kindly and justly as possible. At the same time, we needed to use caution against accepting everything we read and heard about failings among leaders or former members without hearing the other side of the story. If we who were unknown and inexperienced in this system would be so quickly judged and condemned, what did that suggest about the judgmental attitudes and accusations so widespread in these networks?

Participation in the Process

Our team experienced excellent cooperation and support from SGM Board members, SGM staff, current pastors and members of SGM churches, in spite of the fact that some warned us that certain leaders would not cooperate or would avoid being open with us.

In some other conflicted groups we have worked, we have experienced leaders being reluctant to fully participate or be open with us. But in our work the SGM and its churches, we experienced full and open participation from every current leader we met with. For example:

³ However, blog support groups rarely have a professional leader who guides the group and helps them avoid sinful talk.

- We received in a timely manner all written reports, statistics, and other information we requested from SGM Board or staff members.
- The SGM Board encouraged us to question any area or decision they had made. In fact, they regularly encouraged us to be honest and forthright in our concerns about their work.
- Our team was given every opportunity to meet with anyone we asked to meet with at SGM.
- We also received excellent cooperation with existing pastors of SGM churches. We found them to be open and honest about positive and negative information they wished to share.
- Many members from Covenant Life Church and some members from other churches participated in the Bible study (live and recorded) and interviews, providing various perspectives, including some by email, phone, and regular mail. For the most part, existing church members who met with us were open and willing to allow us to ask difficult questions and coach them on biblical teachings.
- Our AoR team believes that the SGM Board demonstrated integrity of leadership when they committed in advance and followed through to posting AoR's August Consultation Report and adjudication decisions on the SGM web. They also committed to posting AoR's final report on the web without knowing what would be in that report.

In addition, we met with a number of people who were no longer directly associated with SGM or one of its churches. Most of these people were cooperative and willing to share their honest opinions with us.

Some formerly associated with SGM were reluctant at times to talk with us, attend or listen to the half-day seminar, or other activities. A number of people (mostly formerly associated with SGM; a few currently in churches) sent information to us but did not want to talk with anyone or utilize the forms we developed to help gather data in a uniform way.

Our team found that claims accusing SGM leaders of trying to manipulate the process or resist answering difficult questions were unfounded. Our team observed that those making such claims were passionate and firm in their accusations. However, the accusations were at times based on second or third hand information, speculation on others' motives, or putting the worst construction on comments made or overheard.

Blessings in SGM

Sovereign Grace Ministries had its beginnings just over thirty years ago. With a strong emphasis on preaching the Gospel and church planting, SGM today has 90 churches in the US and several other countries. Approximately 25% of the churches in SGM were existing independent churches that joined SGM as member churches. According to Board statistics, some 28,000 people are served by its churches.

In the United States where most church bodies are stagnant or experiencing declines, SGM's intentional focus on church planting has proven successful and has been blessed by God. God has richly blessed the ministries and churches with Sovereign Grace Ministries. In spite of the

challenges and hurts that several experienced, this family of churches has experienced phenomenal growth not only in numbers, but also in people's personal walk in faith. We especially noted that nearly everyone we met with expressed appreciation for the preaching and teaching in SGM churches, especially for the teaching received from C.J. Mahaney. Even those who were most upset about how they were treated, including those who had complaints against C.J. Mahaney, praised his preaching and teaching and were thankful for how they had grown in faith due to his teaching and preaching gifts.

Many people expressed how much their church and its care meant to them. Some came into the church with shameful pasts, and yet they were welcomed and loved. Many talked about the blessings of being in a small group ministry where they felt supported and loved and they could develop close relationships. A number of people expressed how proud they were of being associated with a SGM church.

Observations about Culture within Sovereign Grace Ministries

As reconcilers who work with a number of conflicted organizations, we observe cultural norms that distinguish one ministry from another.

It should be noted that while we made these observations, they are based on the people with whom we had direct contact or from whom we received information. Because we met with such a small percentage of members (less than ½ of 1%), our observations may not accurately reflect the entire association of churches. Nevertheless, we offer these observations as part of our report.

A Culture of Thankfulness with Commitment to Prayer

In our August 24, 2011 Consultation Report, we reported our initial observation that throughout SGM there was a consistent response from everyone we met with by phone and in person. People throughout SGM and her churches consistently made a point to thank us for our working with SGM and to assure us of their prayers. This not only included those within SGM and her churches, but we noticed that many who are no longer in SGM also reflected this attitude.

We observed that in some other organizations we have served, a few had offered their thanks or indicated that they were praying for us. But we could not recall any other organization where it was more consistently and broadly expressed than at SGM and her churches.

In the several months since that report, we continued to experience this same expression of thanks and commitment to prayer.

This particular cultural norm stood in stark contrast to the judgmental criticism we received from the blogs and emails in September through early November. We wondered how an organization that has such an obvious culture of thankfulness and prayer could also have within its midst such a strong judgmental segment.

A Value of Personal Humility

As we met with people, one Christian value that stood out was people's continual striving for humility. This focus was evident in our discussions with the Board and other SGM leaders, with pastors of churches, and with members within churches. This particular trait was also mentioned by several who are no longer members of SGM churches. People often discussed their desire to display humility and praised people who they believed exhibited humility. Humility appeared to us to be highly valued in SGM.

The irony to us was our impression that some were *proud* of their accomplishment in humility. They talked about it in such a way as to distinguish themselves from people outside their fellowship in that those in SGM were better at humility than others.

A Commitment to Church Planting and Reaching Out with the Gospel

A distinguishing mark of SGM and its churches is its emphasis on church planting and reaching out with the Gospel. SGM has been extremely successful in its three-decade history of planting and growing churches. From a single church, this association of churches has grown into a body of 90 churches throughout the US and abroad.

People in SGM value church planting. This was obvious to us as we learned that in new church plants several members relocated their families just to start a church in a new location. This involved selling homes and giving up current jobs to move to another community (sometimes across country!) just for the purpose of growing a new church.

We observed that many people throughout SGM have willingly sacrificed a great deal personally for the sake of the Gospel. This is an unusual trait among Christian groups that speaks strongly of the church-wide commitment to church planting and spreading the Gospel.

A Caring Community Built through Small Group Ministry

SGM churches provide Christian care and grow together as disciples in what we observed is a well-developed small group ministry. Families participate in small groups for fellowship, study, and prayer. In these groups, we learned that they discuss the challenges and joys of living the Christian life. As in church planting, some families actually sell homes and relocate to be closer to their small group.

While many churches attempt to develop small group ministries, we were awed at how effective SGM is in this endeavor. Through this well developed system, people develop close relationships within their small groups, often describing their small group relations as stronger than those in their natural families.

However, we noted that this wonderful blessing had one negative effect. When people became disconnected to their SGM church and felt cut off from close relationships in their small groups, the hurt they experienced was greater than if they had been in an average church that did not provide such opportunities. We observed that hurt, anger, and bitterness among former members were more pronounced than in other cases because of the loss felt from these strong

relationships. The intensity of pain was also increased because of the personal sacrifices that many made to move their family to be close to their small groups or to plant churches.

Doctrine of Sin

As we met with people, they often mentioned the Doctrine of Sin and described the impact on their personal and corporate lives. Obviously the organization's teaching on the Doctrine of Sin plays an important role in the church's preaching and practice as well as within small group ministries.

Many described the extent at which small groups would hold one another accountable by scrutinizing each other's lives according to the Doctrine of Sin. A number of people noted how this had helped them or others grow deeply in their understanding of Scripture and their personal faith.

Some who were critical of SGM (including those still in SGM churches) described how small group leaders or pastors or SGM leaders worked to "drill down" (an actual quote) to the root causes of people's sins. Some described being examined by their leader (in various levels) for several hours. Although seen as a blessing or strength by many, others saw an abusive side of the practice of this teaching when it had the affect of beating people down or unfairly scrutinizing them.

Use of Email for Sensitive or Confidential Matters

It seemed apparent to us as outsiders that leaders within SGM have made extensive use of email for rather sensitive or confidential communications. While this may be an expedient way to communicate when key leaders work from scattered locations, the extensive use of this medium in sensitive communications seems unwise to us.

First of all, email tends to be informal and abbreviated communication. It does not always include the full context of the communication. Thus, when one looks back months or years later, it is easy to take communication out of context, misquote, or misinterpret the original meaning or fuller meaning of the message. Abbreviated communication can be limited in addressing complex or serious matters, and when reviewed later on, can appear cold, harsh, or inadequate.

Next, such information can be stored for long periods of time and is not easily protected by the organization. Should a key leader become disenfranchised with the group, it is difficult to recover all the confidential and sensitive material addressed in such a medium. Thus, a person who is disassociated with the organization, and who feels no longer bound by his official responsibilities or oaths of confidentiality, can make public information that would be harmful not only to leaders or the organization as a whole, but to innocent individuals who were not directly involved.

Matters of confronting others about sin, discussing issues with legal implications, discussing employment or supervisory information, confessing sins or forgiving others, and other similar communications should be done in person or documented in more formal written communications. Email tends to be less formal and inadequate for addressing sensitive issues.

We believe that it became evident in the conflicts within SGM why using email so extensively for sensitive matters is unwise.

The People and Churches of SGM Richly Blessed

Although we were called to talk about the current conflicts that challenge SGM, we also learned about the many ways in which God has and is blessing you as a people, and through you, to be a blessing to Christians and the world. You have developed an amazingly effective way for planting churches. You proclaim Christ and his message of reconciliation in numerous ways. Even in larger churches, you provide personal care for one another through small group ministry. Your confessed commitment to God and his Word is unswerving.

Current leaders and members we met displayed teachable spirits. When we encouraged or admonished on the basis of God's Word, leaders and members were teachable, humble, and appreciative. People often responded with contrition and repentance. When they disagreed with us, they were respectful, listening carefully and asking questions before expressing disagreement and offering their explanation.

While one would hope this would describe every church body, this has not always been our experience. We were blessed to work with you and experience your living out your Christian calling in such a wonderful way.

For this, we think about the people throughout your family of churches as we reflect on the words of the Apostle Paul as he wrote to the Thessalonians:

“We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).

Brief Description of Major Conflicts

For many years, C. J. Mahaney served as senior pastor of Covenant Life Church, the founding church of the association of churches known today as Sovereign Grace Ministries. He also has been serving as the President and Chairman of the Board of Sovereign Grace Ministries for several years. C.J. is not only well known and respected among the 90 churches of SGM, but also through the greater Christian community. He is known for his published books, articles, and other publications, and he is sought internationally as a speaker.

Brent Detwiler also served SGM ministries for many years as a key leader. He served closely with C.J. Mahaney as a friend and colleague, and he was instrumental in founding the SGM Pastors College. He served on the board for SGM, but resigned that position effective January 1, 2008. He later resigned his position as pastor for a SGM church.

Larry Tomczak was instrumental in the founding of SGM and served as a key leader in SGM over many years. He, Brent, and C.J. were close friends and worked together to form and develop PDI (the former name of SGM). At one point, Larry was confronted about various

issues by C.J. and other leaders and was asked to step down from his position as pastor for several months. During this time, there were apparent misunderstandings and disagreements on the reasons for Larry's stepping down and on the course of action needed to be taken for restoration. Eventually these disagreements led to major conflicts among Larry and his wife, C.J. Mahaney, and the SGM Board of Directors. In the end, Larry's involvement as a leader in SGM came to an end.

Over the last two years, Brent Detwiler has produced several lengthy documents that include a number of allegations against C.J. Mahaney and other leaders (current and past) of SGM. When Brent did not receive responses that he deemed satisfactory, he shared his documents and other information with a much broader audience, including the leaders of churches throughout the SGM family. While most of the alleged offenses involved C.J. Mahaney, Brent Detwiler included a number of complaints against other former and present leaders of SGM. To support the allegations, Brent quoted full or partial references of a number of documents, emails, letters, notes from meetings and phone calls, and he provided extensive personal commentary. Several of the items he quoted indicate that they were considered confidential in nature. Some of the documentation he wrote discloses personal information about many others.

Brent Detwiler called into question C.J. Mahaney's qualifications for continuing to serve as Chairman of the Board and President, asking for C.J. Mahaney's resignation. Brent described various actions that have led him to conclude that he cannot trust C.J. Mahaney or the SGM Board of Directors, and he identified a number of conditions that he required before he would agree to meet with C.J. Mahaney or the Board to discuss the matters or attempt reconciliation. He indicated his willingness to meet and desire for reconciliation, but only if his conditions were met to his satisfaction. Some of his complaints regarded SGM as an entire organization.

C.J. Mahaney and the Board of Directors recognized that the allegations and complaints were serious and needed addressing. After taking some time for personal reflection and asking others for their counsel, and after additional requests from Brent Detwiler, C.J. Mahaney responded to Brent with a detailed written confession. Following Brent's response that he was not satisfied with that confession, C.J. provided another written response with confession. The Board also offered some responses. A number of email responses were exchanged between Brent Detwiler and C.J. Mahaney and the Board of Directors and Brent Detwiler.

Other Conflicts within SGM

As our team met with and received information from current and former members of SGM churches, we heard of a number of situations where people felt hurt by actions of various leaders. Listed below are examples of the kinds of cases we heard about.

Church Cases Involving Discipline

Former members of congregations described situations in which they were under disciplinary processes for a number of reasons. We heard from a few people that as part of the discipline process, they were warned not to talk to anyone else about their situation. Some indicated that others were told to withdraw from them, leaving them to feel isolated, until such time as their leaders (small group leaders or pastors) believed that they were sufficiently repentant to be

restored. Because of the close relationships that had grown in the care group they were in, they felt shunned and isolated from people that were formerly very close to them. They felt cut off from the support they needed at a most critical time. They expressed anger, bitterness, and grief over losing these close relationships. In some cases, the relationships included those who were family members.

A few individuals described situations in which they were disciplined for things they disagreed with, but expressed repentance to the leaders in order to be restored in fellowship. Others indicated that they refused to admit things that they felt were not sins and thus made no attempts to be restored to their churches.

We learned that over the past 14 years, SGM pastors have been taught in Pastors College how to exercise church discipline in a redemptive way. We did not have sufficient information to determine whether or not all the cases we heard about were handled in ways that were consistent with that teaching.

Those most upset displayed to us anger or bitterness or hatred toward SGM and their former church leaders for events that took place ten to fifteen years ago. Some were so hurt or angry that they displayed tears, raised voices, clenched fists, and other physical demonstrations of anger. As we talked about bitterness or anger, several responded with raised or strained voices to our team members insisting that they were not angry or bitter.

Leaders Who Resigned or Were Removed

Former leaders (small group leaders, pastors, and SGM leaders) described situations in which they felt that they were inappropriately removed or pressured to step down from their positions.

For example, one former church staff member described how he had seen two fellow staff members removed after those in authority over them had conducted “secret” (actual quote) investigations. He described that the authorities asked him about two co-workers, specifically looking for information that might lead to their removal. He was told that the investigations were confidential and he was not to share information about their questioning with anyone. In both cases, the men were removed from their positions. Then, sometime later, this same leader and his wife experienced being investigated. Because he had been a part of past investigations, he began to see signs that people were questioning him, but those in authority spent little time directly with him. Soon after he was removed. He said that he and his wife were bitter for about two years, but later came to forgive those offenses. When he met with our team member, he and his wife were still active and supportive members in a SGM church, and he displayed a godly attitude. However, he commented that he felt that SGM leadership had treated other past leaders in inappropriate ways. He went on to say that today he believed the organization had matured and no longer mistreated leaders in these same ways.

Others, however, described situations in which similar type investigations took place and they were either removed or pressured to resign. Some people we met with were holding grudges more than ten years after these events. One man in particular told us that he was hoping that SGM would be destroyed and cease to exist, and he was intent on writing what he could on blogs or emails to that end.

A few former leaders described being pressured to read public confessions that they said they did not fully agree with. And yet they read them in order to be restored. Several expressed resentment for what they described as misuse of authority.

In another case involving a former leader, he described a number of offenses that hurt him and his family deeply. He explained in detail how individual leaders and the SGM Board as a whole had hurt him and undermined his ministry. Our team members who met with him empathized with him on how the offenses were so hurtful. At the same time, it became evident to our team members that this person had been deceptive with SGM leaders on a number of occasions. Our team members observed that he minimized his own contribution to the conflicts while making major points on how others had sinned against him.

Through our interviews, we were given a list of approximately 100 names of pastors, small group leaders, and other staff members who are no longer serving in their positions. In reviewing that list, the Board clarified which names were pastors. The Board then added some additional names of former pastors that were not included on the original list. Through this process, the Board identified 53 pastors who have resigned or have been removed from their positions. Of the 53 pastors, 17 were removed for cause, 11 resigned with disagreement, and 25 left their positions for their own reasons (to take another position, for retirement, etc.). The Board recognized that while some of these cases were appropriately handled, the lack of written policies contributed to handling some of these cases in an inconsistent manner.

Cases Involving Sexual Misconduct

We learned about cases in different settings that involved allegations of sexual misconduct among different members of the church. We met separately with parties from more than one viewpoint on a few of the cases. These situations involved complicated situations that had been addressed in different ways. Often people from one or both sides felt deep hurts about the ways in which the cases were handled or the ways in which other people responded to the situations.

Cases involving allegations of sexual misconduct are sensitive and require special attention and expertise beyond the scope of our Group Reconciliation Assistance. While we were open to listening to people about their concerns, we sometimes needed to recommend other avenues of assistance. AoR did not have access to all the information and resources necessary to directly address these concerns.

Some raising their concerns alleged that SGM consistently handles such cases in irresponsible ways. While we did not complete detailed reviews of cases involving sexual misconduct, we were able to review documentation in some situations that demonstrated the SGM leadership understood the gravity of the situations. SGM leaders offered care and concern, they sought professional legal and counseling help for SGM and key leaders involved, and in some cases they helped connect parties to Christian mediators.

In spite of the steps taken, we talked to people who were hurt in the way that such cases were handled.

As we talked to some of the parties directly involved, we sensed that some could benefit from additional personal counseling to help them deal with their disappointments and hurts. We see how SGM as an association of churches might also benefit by having a few people especially trained in these areas to assist pastors and small group leaders that are confronted with such issues.

Leaders Disciplined Because of Their Children's Behaviors

One area of conflict described was leaders (small group, pastors, SGM leaders) who were disciplined or pressured to step down because of the actions of their minor children. If a church leader had children who were judged to be undisciplined or who exhibited sinful behavior, the church leader was deemed disqualified for service.

Part of the difficulty in these cases was that there were no written policies or guidelines as to what specific kinds of children's behavior would disqualify a man for leadership in the church. Those who experienced this kind of discipline complained that such decisions were arbitrary and not consistently applied.

When AoR team members discussed this subject with the Board, they acknowledged that this type of activity did take place several years ago. They also acknowledged that SGM did not have written guidelines or policies in these areas, and thus some cases were handled inconsistently with others. However, the Board indicated that as the organization matured, and as leaders aged and matured, SGM's leaders came to understand these kinds of situations in a different light. The Board indicated that today there is a different view towards similar situations so that leaders who have children who misbehave are not immediately deemed unable to continue in service. We heard about more recent situations in which leaders were encouraged to continue in their leadership role, and they were supported and cared for as the parents sought to provide direction for their children.

Disagreement with Leadership

Some indicated that as long you didn't question leadership, you would not likely experience difficulties in SGM. But if you disagreed with leadership, especially publicly, you would be targeted for disciplinary action and could experience the kinds of hurts that others described. This contributed to a sense of fear and distrust of leadership within SGM or its churches. This observation was made from those who experienced difficulties as well as some who had not.

AoR Response to Hurting People

Our AoR team members offered a listening ear, provided coaching when possible and prayed with people who were hurting deeply. Sometimes we offered a devotion booklet on forgiveness. Most people received our care with appreciation and responded in godly ways.

We could see that many people had experienced deep hurts for various reasons. Many simply wanted their stories to be heard. Several indicated that they had tried to communicate their concerns to church or SGM leaders but felt that they were ignored or marginalized. In some

cases, they provided us with copies of correspondence and documents that were shared with leaders, but from which they felt they did not receive satisfactory responses.

A number of people indicated that they were not interested in seeking reconciliation or any restitution, but they desired to tell their stories in the hopes that SGM might be aware of the hurts they endured and find ways to protect others from similar experiences. Accordingly, many of these did not exhibit strong anger or bitterness.

Others expressed deep hurts or anger or bitterness. A couple of people openly expressed a desire to bring harm to SGM as an organization. In addition to receiving such feedback in personal interviews, we received copies of information that was sent in emails and on blogs that expressed similar viewpoints.

Appreciation Expressed for SGM and Its Leaders

While a number of people described various ways in which they experienced deep hurts or injustices, others described similar situations in which the leaders they worked with showed compassion, patience, gentleness, and fair treatment.

We heard about situations where leaders at every level acted professionally and offered loving support. Great care was shown, and people were treated with respect. Rather than the harsh disciplinary actions described by some, these people felt supported in their challenges and encouraged by their leaders and fellow members. Some of those identified as giving such care included the SGM president, current and past SGM board members, regional directors, and pastors. Those who received this care were grateful and emotional about the wonderful treatment they had personally experienced from leaders who were being attacked so strongly by others.

We also heard positive reports from members and leaders in SGM churches that personally had not experienced strife or mistreatment from their leaders. They remained positive and supportive of SGM and its leaders. However, some indicated that although they personally had not experienced hurts, they were aware of others who experienced hurts.

Observations from Interviews and Written Feedback

After considering the extensive amount of information that AoR received, we make the following observations:

- A number of people described situations in which they felt unjustly treated and deeply hurt by leaders at various levels ranging from small group leaders to pastors to SGM regional directors to board members.
- Many who were deeply hurt felt that their concerns were dismissed or marginalized, and they felt not listened to by the leaders to whom they appealed.
- A majority of those we met with the deepest hurts were from incidents that occurred at least seven years prior, and in several cases ten years ago or more.

- We met with both former and current members of SGM who observed that leaders were pressured to step down or were removed using investigative procedures that provided little notice or ability for the accused to address the allegations in a fair hearing in front of those making the accusations. However, these type of cases we heard about were from several years ago.
- We met with both former and current members of SGM who described situations where leaders were pressured to step down or were removed because of their children’s actions. Many indicated that there was inconsistency in how such actions were handled. AoR team members observed that these situations were from several years ago, and we do not recall people describing similar situations from recent years.
- We heard stories from people who were treated very differently from those who experienced deep hurts in similar circumstances. These people experienced excellent care and support in their difficulties and expressed appreciation for how they were treated. Because of these accounts, together with the fact that we met with less than one half of one percent of the members of SGM churches, ***we are unable to make either of the following broad generalizations:***
 - The entire SGM association of churches including SGM leaders at various levels has created a culture of consistently misusing authority and mistreating people.
 - The entire SGM association of churches including SGM leaders has consistently treated people well in difficult situations.

There is no doubt in our minds at AoR that a number of people have experienced deep hurts and disappointments in SGM churches. The passage of time does not invalidate these hurts. We encourage the leaders of SGM to acknowledge these hurts and past offenses, express sorrow for them, and explain how leadership has and is responding to overcome past weaknesses.

At the same time, we are also aware that many thousands of people have been and continue to be richly blessed by their involvement in a SGM church, and there is much evidence to indicate that there are many leaders and churches that provide loving, caring, and encouraging support and teaching. There is much to be thankful for throughout SGM and her churches. Moreover, we at AoR believe that SGM has made improvements over recent years to overcome a number of past shortcomings.

Observations from Overview of Governing Documents and Board Evaluations

In our meeting with people and reading various documents making accusations, it appeared to us that many in SGM do not understand its governance structure or the agreements made through the membership agreement for churches.

Upon our review of the articles of incorporation, the bylaws, and the “Sovereign Grace Ministries Membership Agreement for Sovereign Grace Churches,” we observed the following:

- Sovereign Grace Ministries, Inc. is a tax-exempt non-stock organization incorporated in the State of Maryland (Bylaw Section 1.2) and has no members of the Corporation (Section 4.1).
- The “Membership Agreement for Sovereign Grace Churches” is a voluntary partnership agreement between individual member-churches and Sovereign Grace Ministries. In that agreement:
 - SGM is defined as a church association (from “Introduction”).
 - There are individual and joint commitments for SGM and the individual member-churches (from “Membership Agreement”).
 - Member-churches and Sovereign Grace Ministries are independent and autonomously governed entities (from “Joint Commitments”).
 - Membership is voluntary and may be terminated by either party with or without cause (from “Joint Commitments”).
 - There are no provisions for member-churches or their leaders to provide input to the SGM Board of Directors regarding selection, appointment, election, or removal of Board members or Officers.
- The SGM Board of Directors has full authority and powers to decide all matters for the corporation, including the election and appointment of directors (Bylaw Sections 4.1; 4.2; 4.3; 4.4).
- The SGM Board of Directors alone has authority to remove any Director of the Board “when, in the sole judgment and discretion of the Board of Directors, it is determined by a majority vote of the Board at a meeting duly called for that purpose and at which a quorum is present that such Director should no longer serve on the board” (Section 4.6). Board members may resign in writing, which resignation will be effective upon formal acceptance of the Board. No other qualifications are stated in the bylaws. The Board indicated to us that there are no written policies that govern such decisions.
- The SGM Board of Directors has full authority and powers to elect Officers of the Corporation, including the Chairman and the President (Section 6.1).
- Individual members of the SGM Board of Directors serve at the pleasure of the Board (Section 6.2) and may be removed by the Board at any time “whenever, in their judgment, the best interests of the Corporation will be served thereby” (Section 6.2). No other qualifications are stated in the bylaws. The Board indicated to us that there are no written policies that govern such decisions.
- The SGM Board of Directors developed a process for evaluation of C.J. Mahaney as the Chairman of the Board and as President. The last formal process was completed in January 2007 by three separate Board members, considering nineteen different areas organized under three categories. In our review of the evaluations, there was no indication of “Does Not Meet the Value” or “Significantly Below the Value” by any of the three Board members. There was one indication of “Meets the Value.” All other indications were either “Exceeds the Value” or “Greatly Exceeds the Value.” We noted that this was subsequent to the meeting of August 20, 2004 in which both the Apostolic Team (also known as the SGM Board of Directors) and pastors of Covenant Life Church met with C.J. Mahaney regarding their concerns about his behavior and attitudes. It appears to us from the documents provided by Brent Detwiler that all three Board members who provided evaluations in January 2007 participated in the meeting of August 20, 2004. In addition, in 2009 several completed written evaluations of C.J. were done by board members and other co-workers according to the approachability criteria

contained in the article “Approachability: The Passport to Real Ministry and Leadership,” by Ken Sande.

- The bylaws do not identify specific qualifications to serve as members of the Board or as officers.
- The bylaws provide that the Corporation *may* [our emphasis added] engage in the ordination and/or licensing of ministers to serve the Corporation and the local churches affiliated with the Corporation (Section 7.1). Qualifications are identified for ordination or licensing (Section 7.2).
- The bylaws provide that the SGM Board of Directors “shall establish a policy regarding the grounds for removal or disqualifying an individual from ordination and/or licensing” (Section 7.3). However, Board members indicated to us that no such policy has been established.
- The bylaws indicate that Ordained and Licensed Ministers shall serve in various positions in the Corporation and/or one or more of its local churches affiliated with the Corporation (Section 7.4). However, in discussion with the Board members, they indicated that such provisions do not *require* ordination or licensing by SGM to serve in its Corporation or its member-churches.

We observe that SGM is a relatively young association of churches that has experienced significant growth within a short period of time. Sovereign Grace Ministries has been very effective in church planting and increasing the family of churches. We rejoice that God has blessed this growth and his kingdom been increased. Many thousands of people have been and are benefiting from the ministries of the SGM church family.

This family of churches has enjoyed close relationships with SGM key leaders, but its fast growth has outpaced its development of more formal structures that become necessary in larger organizations.

For example, SGM as a corporation has not developed or adopted bylaws, policies, or other procedures for handling complaints and allegations against its Board members or officers from those outside of the Board of Directors. We noted that other church bodies (older, more established) have adopted policies or procedures to handle such complaints in a godly manner that serves to promote justice and fairness for the accuser, the accused, and others affected by leaders. Some church bodies restrict who can make allegations or calls for resignation of a key leader to those who are in good standing with the church body or one of its member churches. We found no such provisions in the governing documents or policies of SGM.

SGM as an organization has contributed to the current disputes by failing to develop and adopt formal processes for handling allegations and charges against its own leadership and failing to specify qualifications for service as a Board member or officer.

While a number of pastors have been removed from its member-churches, SGM has failed to develop and adopt policies for governing the removal or disqualification of individuals as pastors as required by the bylaws. This has resulted in complaints from people who were removed that such processes were applied inconsistently and were not always fair or reasonable. While removal as a pastor is not the same as removal as a Board member or officer according to

the bylaws, the lack of definition and policies leaves SGM open to reasonable criticism when dealing with such matters.

SGM holds conferences and meets with senior pastors and other leaders of member-churches for informal feedback. However, SGM has made itself vulnerable to criticism by failing to provide structured processes to receive input from its member-churches regarding its governance, accountability, and other leadership responsibilities.

Although there are no provisions for member-churches or their leaders to provide input to the SGM Board of Directors regarding selection, appointment, election, or removal of Board members or Officers, member-churches and their pastors have the right to decrease their financial support of SGM or terminate their membership in SGM without cause. When leaders of churches sign the “Sovereign Grace Ministries Membership Agreement for Sovereign Grace Churches,” they agree to these provisions and bind themselves to both the rights and limitations.

Because the Board is solely accountable to itself, and because Board members are accountable to the Chairman and the President, and because the Chairman and President are accountable to the Board, there seems to us to be a lack of structured outside accountability among top SGM leaders that is expected for the member-churches and their pastors. Although there may be theological reasons for this leadership structure, we observed that such a system of accountability is subject to criticism because of apparent conflicts of interest.

Finally, while SGM leadership has encouraged member-churches to adopt biblical processes for handling conflicts, SGM as an organization has not formally adopted similar processes. In the “Membership Agreement,” there is a provision that “Member-churches and Sovereign Grace commit to resolve any disputes that may arise in a God-honoring manner in accordance with biblical principles” (from “Joint Commitments”). However, there are no agreements, policies or adopted procedures for carrying out such a commitment.

In summary, we observe that SGM has failed to develop godly processes for dealing with conflict involving its key leadership or the removal of pastors. This has contributed to frustration for those expressing their concerns, lowering their confidence that their concerns will be addressed in a godly manner.

Many Factors Contributed to Conflicts

Some people we interviewed concluded the present conflicts were primarily caused by one person, one group, or one major factor. Several people suggested that the solution was to remove those that they believed were most responsible and the conflicts would be solved. Our team believes that such conclusions are simplistic and fail to consider all the evidence available.

The AoR team concluded there was no one person, no one group, nor one major factor that led to the hurtful conflicts experienced by people within SGM. Much like a perfect storm, it takes a number of people and contributing factors to lead to such serious conflict.

We also recognize that SGM consists of many churches with a range of practices, and therefore individual pastoral mistakes do not necessarily indicate problems throughout SGM.

Many of these factors are described above in various observations. A summary of those mentioned include:

- SGM has grown quickly as an organization over 30 years, but has failed to develop policies and processes in several key areas. For example:
 - Requirements for pastors in SGM churches to be ordained or licensed by SGM as an organization (so that SGM can provide procedures for churches reviewing, admonishing, disciplining, or removing pastors).
 - Requirement for SGM Board members and officers to be ordained pastors of SGM.
 - Reasons and procedures for evaluating, disciplining, or removing Board members, officers, and pastors of SGM churches. This includes processes for pastors, SGM Board members and officers to have formal allegations heard and tried in a formal hearing. There is no regular appeals process for cases involving removal (which may be appealed by either the authority bringing the charges or by the party being removed).
 - Reasons and procedures for evaluating, disciplining, or removing member-churches from SGM.
 - Processes (including trained people to serve) for conflict coaching and mediation to deal with disputes between leaders, member-churches, or SGM and member-churches.
 - Processes and guidelines for handling complaints or allegations against SGM leaders (Board members, officers, etc.)

- SGM has not appointed key leaders and provided extensive training for dealing with sexual misconduct cases in consistent and informed ways.

- SGM and its churches have not developed structured ways for people to bring their concerns or complaints against their small group leaders or pastors, thus leaving people to find their own methods for doing so.

- In church discipline cases, there did not appear to us to be a defined process for people to appeal their cases, which led to people finding other ways to express their disagreement with the disciplinary actions taken against them.

- In the past, SGM has lacked training of its pastors and other church leaders, leaving them more vulnerable to misuse of authority or poor leadership skills. (The Pastors College continues to grow and has pro-actively worked to overcome this weakness.)

- SGM leaders' extensive use of email for sensitive and confidential communication contributed to the conflicts.

- In spite of the claim of many that they have received extensive training in biblical peacemaking, the way people often responded to AoR suggested to us that either many have not learned from the training or they have failed to personally apply what was taught.

- Leaders at every level have degrees of spiritual authority over others in submission to them. While this in itself is not a factor, when authority is misused or used in a way to pressure or bring force to bear on others in ungodly ways, the polity provides little opportunity for those under authority to resist or appeal unfair treatment.

Significant Factors

In addition to those things listed above, three significant factors contributed to the overall intensity of the conflicts that have escalated over the past couple of years:

- Lack of proclaiming God’s forgiveness to one another when addressing sin.
- Sinful attitudes and behavior.
- Sinful communication.

Lack of Proclaiming God’s Forgiveness

In our August 24, 2011 Consultation Report, we observed that SGM appears to not have a practice of declaring God’s grace to one another when sin is confessed. Since that time, our observation has been confirmed over and over again as we met with individual members, pastors, and SGM leaders.

We saw evidence that C.J. Mahaney’s preaching and teaching does proclaim God’s grace. When he began to sense that some in SGM were over-emphasizing the Doctrine or Sin at the expense of extending God’s grace, he warned against such behavior and urged leaders to balance the addressing of sin with God’s grace.

Nevertheless, when Ed Keinath and Ted Kober taught how to proclaim God’s forgiveness in confession during the *Getting to the Heart of Conflict* at the Pastor’s Conference (November 8), a number of pastors expressed appreciation for the teaching and personal experience (in the exercises we provided) and explained that this was a new concept for them. Further, as we talked to individuals and proclaimed God’s forgiveness to them, they indicated that the way in which our team members did this was new to them.

As noted in our August Consultation Report, when C.J. Mahaney made his public confession at Covenant Life Church, no one took the opportunity to publicly declare to C.J. a message of hope based on Christ’s forgiveness. For example, someone could have said the following based on the Bible’s teachings:

C.J., I have great news for you. God promises in his Holy Word: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9 ESV). The Apostle Paul also declares: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV). Having heard your confession of sin, and based on the promises of God, I remind you that God loves you and forgives you all your sins because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. You are forgiven by God. Go in his peace, which transcends all understanding.

In spite of his open confession, C.J. Mahaney was sent out without the comfort of God's good news for him. Instead, many discussed the merits and weaknesses of C.J.'s confession and his other wrongs in a large group meeting.

As we met with leaders and pastors of SGM, they also confirmed our observation that throughout the family of Sovereign Grace churches, there is not a practice of pronouncing God's grace when confession is made.

The Scriptures teach otherwise. For example:

- When Nathan confronted David about his sin, David confessed and Nathan assured him that his sin was forgiven. "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' And Nathan said to David, 'The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die'" (2 Samuel 12:13 ESV).
- Jesus declared forgiveness directly, specifically, and personally. For example, the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears was comforted by her Lord, even though he had already told Simon in her presence that her many sins were forgiven: "And [Jesus] said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven'" (Luke 7:49 ESV).
- On the cross, Jesus forgave the repentant thief with these words: "'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:43 ESV).

Note in each of the examples above, the one confessing did not itemize his or her sins or make a lengthy confession. They didn't even specify the most grievous sins (each one had much to confess!). And yet, God's forgiveness was proclaimed to each one clearly and specifically. Is that not an example of God's unfathomable mercy?

Jesus specifically assigned the responsibility of declaring forgiveness to his disciples when he appeared to them after his resurrection. He greeted them twice with the assurance of his reconciliation with them, "Peace be with you." He told them he was sending them as the Father had sent him. "And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'" (John 20:22-23 ESV).

The Apostle Paul also instructs us: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32; see also Colossians 3:12-13).

How has this lack of pronouncing God's forgiveness contributed to the intensity of the conflicts throughout SGM? When God's people emphasize and focus on people's sins, such as in the Doctrine of Sin, but do not have a similar emphasis and focus on the Doctrine of God's Grace and Mercy, the weight of God's Law becomes more prevalent in our lives. When we know how to confront one another with the idols of our heart and examine one another against the commands of God, but we fail to spend an equal amount of energy proclaiming the grace and love and forgiveness of our God, we become more obsessed with others' sins. Sometimes this even leads us to even be more critical of ourselves, leading to more guilt.

This over-emphasis of the teaching about sin without the balance of God's grace leads people to be judgmental, critical, and at times despondent. (This is what happened to the Pharisees in

Jesus' day.) The Law is meant to kill the Old Adam. The Law helps prepare us to receive the good news of God's forgiveness. The Law by itself does not bring about permanent change in our hearts. It does not bring healing or comfort to our souls. If only the Law is applied, and not the good news of the Gospel, we are left without hope or the power to amend our sinful ways.

Instead, it is the regular assurance of God's unconditional love that moves us to live the Christian life. Paul reminds us that it is God's love that empowers new living:

“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15 ESV).

Paul writes about the effects of the Law: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather, ‘The one who does them shall live by them’” (Galatians 3:10-12 ESV).

The teaching and application of the Doctrine of Sin is important and necessary. But also critically important is the teaching and application of the Doctrine of God's Forgiveness.

We observed that this lack of declaring God's grace to people is a weakness of people throughout SGM, including leaders and members. Although the name of the organization is Sovereign *Grace* Ministries, and grace and forgiveness are often preached and taught, there does not seem to be a similar emphasis on the *teaching and practice of declaring God's grace*.

Sinful Attitudes and Behavior

While lack of organizational policies and systems contributed to the conflicts, people's sinful attitudes and behavior inflamed the differences they experienced. Although people readily recognized the sins of those who offended them, people we met with often failed to understand how they contributed to the conflicts.

This could be said of leaders who seemed to minimize their own sins as well as current members who accused their leaders. This was also apparent among members and leaders who are no longer part of SGM churches.

In spite of the teaching on the Doctrine of Sin, and in spite of the reported extensive teaching on biblical peacemaking, people we met with often demonstrated little concern or awareness about their own sin and often responded to the conflicts in sinful ways.

As mentioned above, when people generally focus more on sin in each other without a similar emphasis on speaking God's grace to each other, they tend to judge others more quickly and minimize their own contribution to sin.

When reading people's stories or letters or emails or documents sent to AoR, we found that people wrote extensively about the sins of others but little about their own failings. The same was true in most of the interviews that we conducted.

This in no way exonerates the leaders that failed their people. This in no way minimizes the hurts that people endured. And yet, this lack of personal examination on their own contribution and concentration on others' faults brought more pain as bitterness and anger were kindled and fed.

The Bible teaches another way. For example:

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:29-32 ESV).

People's sinful responses to conflict could have lost their power through confession and forgiveness and been replaced with mercy (note Proverbs 28:13). Instead, refusing to acknowledge their own contributions to sin, many responded to sinful actions by *increasing* their sinful communications, returning evil for evil, further fueling the conflict (note Romans 12:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:15).

Sinful Communication

One of the greatest factors that inflamed the conflicts and increased people's wrath and clamor was the extensive use of sinful communication in talking, emails, blogs and meetings.

While every Christian would agree that gossip and slander are sinful, many in SGM failed to recognize when they initiated, participated, or listened to and read sinful communications.

When we met with people, they often justified their own judgmental and damning words with dangerous thinking such as:

- “It's just the truth!”
- “I am loving this person by revealing this person's sins to that person or to the community or even the world (e.g., through the Internet).”
- “Since I'm being ignored, I am justified in saying these terrible things about others.”
- “I need to protect the church or the world against these evil people.”
- “Because I was hurt, I am justified in how I hurt others by whatever kind of words I use!”

As mentioned above, AoR has often seen sins of the tongue in conflicted groups. But in working in this situation, we experienced first-hand an unusual severity of this grievous sin. It was simply shocking.

For a people who take pride in humility, who claim to have been totally indoctrinated in biblical peacemaking, and who brag about the way they share Christ and his love, we were saddened

that so many of these same people minimized sinful talk, justified gossip and slander, and refused to see how such activity itself exaggerated their troubles.

In emails and blogs, people speculated on others' motives, interpreted events and other communications in the worst possible light, and inserted commentary and falsehoods to enhance their positions. Modeling the sinful world's ways, some used sharp sarcasm to criticize and attack. Once something was posted or emailed, even though an outside bystander could see the sinful ways in which things were being communicated, others accepted the writings as truth and continued to add their own sinful talk. Unlike verbal gossip to one or two people, posting sinful talk on web sites or on blogs becomes a public venue, which has even more potential to destroy reputations, harm innocent people, and escalate further attacking.

Family meetings in churches also gave credence and opportunity for this type of sinful behavior. Although church leaders desired to give people a venue to discuss important issues and raise valid concerns, open forum discussions that we reviewed were given no or little direction on what was biblically appropriate to discuss. When people made slanderous statements or accusations against those not present (and therefore unable to respond), there appeared to be no leadership that gently admonished people against sinning in their talk. No warnings were given against sinful judging or speculating on others' motives. The lack of biblical guidance tended to encourage more people to join in the sinful conversations. Because these meetings took place in the church, people were taught by example and thus felt even more justified in these sinful means of communications. At AoR, we discourage all open forums because we have personally witnessed how damaging they can be to people's faith and witness to Christ. We rarely see such meetings conducted in ways that produce God-pleasing results. God is not glorified in meetings where sinful communication is left unrestrained. (It should be noted that we did not review all open meetings that were held to discuss SGM's conflicts. These observations are based only on those where we were given documentation.)

There are godly ways to deal with these same concerns. All such public venues, whether in meetings or on blogs and web sites, should remind people of what God warns against and encourages in our speech. Even better, people should be given instruction and opportunities to share their concerns privately with trained reconcilers who can coach them to take appropriate steps for reconciliation or compile a report (such as AoR's Group Reconciliation Assistance).

The Bible is full of admonition and teaching against sinful communication because of the natural tendency of human nature and the harmful effects of such talk. For example, leaders in meetings or those who sponsor blogs could remind people of things such as:

- “Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered” (Proverbs 11:13 ESV).
- “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:29-30 ESV).
- “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Galatians 5:15 ESV).

- “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11-12 ESV).

Those who truly want to *love* a person, including opportunities to restore gently (e.g., Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:24-26), can find God-honoring ways to do so. Tearing people down publicly, speculating on others’ motives, and sarcastic and caustic talk are anything but loving and gentle. Paul describes love in a very different way:

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 ESV).

Those who read and listen to such ungodly communications can easily be moved to their own sinful actions. Wise Christians learn to avoid such venues where sinful talk is left unrestrained.

In the end, sinful words and actions became a major contributing factor to the seriousness of the conflict. Much like a back draft in a building fire, gossip, anger, hurtful words and actions, and other sinful responses fanned the flames of destructive conflict.

Through sinful communication, more relationships were broken, the ministry of both the church and her people were damaged, and Sovereign Grace’s collective witness to Christ was greatly diminished.

Confronting the Sins of Key Parties

The Ambassadors of Reconciliation team addressed sinful attitudes, words and actions of key individuals or leadership groups privately as Scripture requires. Some expressed fear that the AoR team would not confront key leaders or groups on individual actions that contributed to the conflicts. Others expressed their desires that the team would expose sins of key leaders or admonish them publicly. Just as this report does not publicly address the sins of individual members, neither does it publicly address the sins of individual leaders. However, AoR did address such issues with key leaders privately.

What is listed in this report applies to Sovereign Grace Ministries as a corporate body. Not every sin listed applies to each individual member, but rather the sins listed apply to large groups of people within the body. The team noted that several people expected us to identify specific sins of the SGM President, the members of the Board of Directors, key pastors, or former leaders or members in this public report. This report is not the appropriate forum for confronting the sin of such individuals or boards. When appropriate, the team did attempt to confront those individuals and groups in private. If such individuals or groups did not confess their sins to those whom they sinned against, that does not necessarily mean that the Ambassadors team failed to address those sins.

AoR's responsibility and authority in such matters is limited as described in 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

“And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:24-26 ESV).

Restoration through Confession & Forgiveness

As Christians living in a sinful world, we must acknowledge that conflict is inevitable and to be expected. Like God's people of all times, we live and work together as saints and sinners. God knew we would experience conflict, and he provided the perfect way to deal with conflicts. While we were still God's enemies, he worked out our reconciliation through the blood of his son, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:6-11; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21). Because of what God has done for us, we live in the hope of eternal life; and out of our love for God, we respond by keeping his commands and seeking reconciliation with each other in all our conflicts (see Jesus' words in John 15:9-17).

As God's people fail to reconcile their conflicts through confession and forgiveness, they lose their effectiveness and efficiency in ministry. St. Peter says this of God's people who fail to demonstrate the characteristics of children of God: “If anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins” (2 Peter 1:9 NIV). When we fail to do what God calls us to do, we demonstrate that we have forgotten how much we are forgiven.

God's Response to Our Sin

Our holy, almighty, omniscient God hates sin. He judges all those who sin against him and break his commands. None of us can live up to God's expectations. We are all sinners from conception, and we all sin daily. St. Paul writes, quoting the Old Testament, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10 NIV), and later reminds us, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23 NIV). St. James teaches, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10 NIV).

But those who confess their sins and trust in God's promise of forgiveness need not fear God's wrath and punishment. Those who believe in God's good news and repent of their sins receive the gift of God's forgiveness. Paul teaches us, “[all] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24 NIV). God promises to give us everything we need to live the life of the forgiven sinner (2 Peter 1:3).

We thank God for his unfathomable love for us. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8 NIV). St. Peter boldly declares, “[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24 NIV). The Psalmist also comforts us: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He

will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:8-12 NIV).

Reports of Reconciliation

Throughout our work, especially in recent months, the AoR team heard reports that individuals were being faithful to God’s Word by initiating reconciliation. Some key people have gone directly in private to others with whom they were in conflict for confession and forgiveness.

We are aware that some of those who took first steps were leaders who have been accused publicly. Because of the private nature of reconciliation, most people (including the AoR team) will never know who all has attempted or experienced reconciliation. However, God knows each one intimately and he is glorified in every case where reconciliation is attempted or realized, regardless of whether other people witness such things.

We praise God that some people realized restoration through confession and forgiveness. Not every meeting resulted in reconciliation, but each person who has taken steps to be at peace with others was putting his or her faith into practice. As Paul instructs, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:17 NIV). We were encouraged that people began to recognize how they had individually contributed to the conflicts and began to seek others for confession and forgiveness.

Recommendations

After considering our work, we make the following recommendations to the Board of Directors of Sovereign Grace Ministries for continuing the healing of relationships and the resolution of issues, and for addressing future conflicts in more God-pleasing ways. We should clarify that these recommendations are not only for the Board, but also for anyone associated with SGM as applicable.

- 1. Repent and believe the Gospel.** Even though we often see this message as necessary for unbelievers, we as God's people need to daily remind ourselves of who we are as God's children. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9 NIV).

Confess your individual and corporate sins. Believe the good news that Jesus shed his blood for you and died for your sins, so that you would be forgiven. Live in the good news of God's reconciliation and "be reconciled to God." Having been blessed with his forgiveness, be reconciled to each other. Live out your calling to be Christ's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Examine yourselves in the light of Ephesians 4:26-5:2. Recognize where you have sinned. Confess your sin to God and to one another. Proclaim God's forgiveness to each other, and then forgive one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

Be careful, however, how you judge another's repentance. Only God can see into another person's heart. In repentance, we seek to express godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10), and at times we need help to understand the depth of our sin. But the Scriptures warn us in restoring others, "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Galatians 6:1b ESV).

No matter how much we try, we cannot identify all our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds in our confessions, whether to God or to each other. We must be careful in judging other's confessions so that we do not demand that they acknowledge every detail of each sin they have committed. Remember that God's forgiveness is complete, even when our confessions fail to be thorough (note Psalm 103:8-12).

As you repent, we urge you to live out the fruits of repentance by refraining from the sinful behaviors identified above. Discipline yourselves as you recognize yourselves falling back into sinful habits, and gently encourage one another to change sinful behaviors as they occur.

- 2. We recommend that Sovereign Grace Ministries intentionally develop a culture of proclaiming God's forgiveness to those who express repentance or confess their sins.** This needs to be taught, demonstrated, and practiced in various areas through the SGM network. We believe that SGM can significantly impact its culture by providing training for its pastors and small group leaders and teaching them to apply the proclamation of God's grace to people in confession. Using the wonderful network of small group ministries throughout SGM, we think that SGM could effect this change in culture in a much shorter

time than most church bodies. Just think what a difference this one teaching and practice could make if your people heard much more often, “I have good news for you. Because of Jesus’ blood and his righteousness, God forgives you!”

The more that you practice confession and announcing God’s forgiveness, the more it will become a regular part of your life. Your witness to Christ will become strengthened as you grow in your understanding of God’s grace and mercy. And you as a people will be strengthened through the power of God’s love and forgiveness to live as his forgiven children.

3. **We recommend that Sovereign Grace Ministries establish a Reconciliation Ministry that utilizes trained reconcilers to serve in four areas of peacemaking:**
 - a. **Teaching biblical peacemaking**
 - b. **Coaching people in conflict**
 - c. **Mediating disputes among people**
 - d. **Adjudicating issues that cannot be mediated**

We encourage Sovereign Grace to develop a system, policies, and practice for applying biblical peacemaking at the church body level. SGM should identify a core group of people, which may include both pastors and laity, who have natural peacemaking gifts and who are spiritually mature, and appoint them to serve you in building a new reconciliation ministry. This long-term recommendation will help build the ministry and witness of Sovereign Grace Ministries, and it will help prevent repeating the destructive conflicts that have plagued your church body for some time.

Furthermore, SGM should encourage its churches to develop Reconciliation Ministries that would serve similar purposes in the churches. Training in Reconciliation Ministries (also known as Peacemaking Teams) should be incorporated in the Pastors College, Pastors Conferences, and other training opportunities.

SGM may seek assistance from Ambassadors of Reconciliation or Peacemaker Ministries to help implement this plan over time.

4. **Several relationships need help in reconciliation. We recommend that people within SGM use the reconcilers you appoint or other outside sources to help mediate some of the major broken relationships.** As your identified reconcilers begin this difficult task, they may utilize the gifts of trained reconcilers such as Certified Christian Conciliators^{TM4} to assist in difficult cases.
5. **We admonish all current and former pastors and members of Sovereign Grace Ministries to stop the sinful communication and speculating on others’ motives.** When you hear another person telling you something unkind about someone else, gently stop him and encourage him to speak directly to the one he is talking about. With God’s help, you can change this sinful behavior pattern that has hurt so many.

⁴ Certification through Peacemaker Ministries.

- 6. We admonish people throughout SGM to stop blaming one another, especially trying to place blame on one person or group.** Jesus forbids us to sinfully judge others, and he calls us to take the log out of our own eye before attempting to take the speck out of our brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-15). Blame-shifting is a denial of sin (see 1 John 1:8-10). It discourages and can prevent reconciliation.
- 7. We recommend you develop policies and systems to address several key issues important to your church body. Utilize outside organizational consultants together with those within SGM who understand your doctrinal teachings on authority.** Some key areas you might consider include the following:
- Requirements for pastors in SGM churches to be ordained or licensed by SGM as an organization so that SGM can provide procedures for churches reviewing, admonishing, disciplining, or removing pastors.
 - Requirement for SGM Board members and officers to be ordained pastors of SGM. This will allow your evaluation and discipline procedures of pastors to apply to SGM officers and board members.
 - Reasons and procedures for evaluating, disciplining, or removing Board members, officers, and pastors of SGM churches. Strive to avoid obvious conflicts of interest that have created tension in the past (e.g., having Board Members as employees responsible for evaluating and removing the President, who also serves as supervisor of those same employees). This should include processes for trying formal charges. This may include an appeals process for cases involving removal (may be appealed by either the authority bringing the charges or by the party being removed).
 - Reasons and procedures for evaluating, disciplining, or removing member-churches from SGM. Although SGM can terminate a church's membership without cause, it would benefit SGM as a whole if you had developed systems for addressing such issues. By having a pre-planned method for dealing with the issues and considering systems for appeal, you can minimize harmful conflicts over such issues.
 - Processes and guidelines for handling complaints or allegations against SGM Board members and officers. Other church bodies have learned through experience that it is unwise to act on allegations against its leadership from those outside the organization, including those removed from membership because of disciplinary actions. Without such limitations, it leaves an organization vulnerable to those who intentionally or unintentionally bring harm and great disruption to the organization. At the same time, SGM should provide an organized and fair way to receive and hear significant allegations against its leaders to protect both leaders and organization against misuses of authority.
 - Develop structured ways for people to bring their concerns or complaints against their small group leaders or pastors. This will help you avoid the situations where people were frustrated and left to find their own methods to address their complaints.

- In church discipline cases, discuss with your church leaders how you might develop a defined process for people to appeal church discipline cases. This might also help you serve the churches in your association so that people are not left to find their own ways to express their disagreement with the disciplinary actions taken against them.
8. **Appoint key leaders and provide extensive training for dealing with sexual misconduct cases in consistent and informed ways.** Because of the increased sensuality of our society, especially through the Internet, AoR predicts that sexual misconduct cases in our society (including in churches) will increase significantly over the next two decades. The church must be prepared and proactive to minister to all people affected by such serious situations.
 9. **Keep building and increase use of your Pastors College.** As they matured, many other church bodies learned the benefits of extensive training of pastors. SGM has developed the Pastors College to help prepare pastors, and over time the curricula and course work has expanded. The Pastors College has proven to be a valuable asset of SGM. Nevertheless, it still comprises less than one year of course work. Consider how you might expand this blessing and its effects in your church. Also consider what requirements you might have of pastors who have been trained in other seminaries or Bible colleges so that your pastors all receive similar training in areas unique or important to SGM.
 10. **Look for ways to reinforce proper use of authority at every level.** Leaders at every level in SGM have significant authority over others in submission to them. While this in itself is not a problem, the misuse of authority (such as pressuring others in ungodly ways) is a temptation common to man. Provide checks and balances to minimize the temptation of pride among those in authority. Develop a godly way for those under authority to respectfully disagree with those in authority or to appeal unfair treatment.
 11. **As SGM Board Members and Officers, restrict use of email for sensitive and confidential communication.** Consider what media should be used for communications when dealing with confidential information or dealing with sensitive matters.
 12. **We encourage all the leaders and members throughout SGM to care for one another in Christian love, including reaching out to those who are no longer in your churches.** Seek opportunities to affirm, encourage, and seek out those who are hurting, including members and former members. Call those you have not seen for a while, and let them know that you miss them and care about them. Pray for one another in each other's presence. Share God's gift of forgiveness with one another. Gently hold one another accountable in love, always remembering your own forgiveness in Christ. Love one another, especially those with whom you are not reconciled, so that what Jesus said will be true of all of you: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35 NIV). You have done this so well in many ways, but there are some in your midst and some former members who have felt neglected from your love and care.

Conclusion

If you think that the implementation of the above recommendations seems like a huge undertaking, you are right. Living for God in a sinful world, especially when serving him in ministry, is always difficult and challenging and requires sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). But your perseverance will not be in vain, even if you cannot actually see the results you personally want. God does not call us to be responsible for the results of our work for him, but he does call us to be faithful.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is your risen Savior, Jesus Christ, who is your greatest strength. Do not look to yourselves for the strength to overcome your sins. Do not blame each other for your problems. Do not look to others for fixing your problems (although it is appropriate to seek godly advice to guide you). Focus on the only one who brings light into darkness. Take to heart these words from Hebrews 12:1(b)-2 NIV: “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ***Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith***, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (emphasis added).

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ***The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it***” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 NIV, emphasis added).

Respectfully submitted by your servants in Christ, leaders of your Ambassadors Team,

Ted Kober and Rev. Ed Keinath



Ambassadors
of
Reconciliation™

Ambassadors of Reconciliation

P.O. Box 81662
Billings, MT 59108-1662

www.hisaor.org

Response to AoR Group Reconciliation Report from C.J. Mahaney and the Sovereign Grace Ministries Board of Directors

This brief response is to let all those who are a part of Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM) know of our endorsement of the Ambassadors of Reconciliation (AoR) report on SGM. As the report notes, we commissioned this study in July 2011, inviting AoR to act with complete independence in what they read, whom they spoke to, and what they concluded. At that time we also committed to publishing their report in its entirety, which we have done as promised. Before we say more, we must thank AoR and particularly Ted Kober and Ed Keinath for the service they have provided us. Ted and Ed have invested many hours in this study and we are confident that their investment will bear good fruit in SGM. We have grown to deeply respect their integrity, professionalism, wisdom, carefulness, and experience.

We also want to express our thanks to current and former members of Sovereign Grace churches who participated in this Group Reconciliation study. Ted, Ed and their team conducted many interviews and read “thousands of pages of data” allowing them to draw the conclusions you’ll find in their report. These meetings and documents represent your investment in serving SGM, so thank you. Also, thanks to all of you who have patiently waited for this report. A thorough review of this sort can’t be rushed. We trust that you will find the end product worth the wait.

We recognize the need for careful application of the content of this report in the months to come. But, we want to make some brief comments on the two focal points of this report: polity and pastoral practice.

Polity

We agree with AoR’s assessment of our polity. They are correct to recognize that our “fast growth has outpaced (our) development of more formal structures that become necessary in larger organizations.” In 2009 we began a process of reviewing and refining our polity and membership agreement with local churches. AoR’s insights will help us in this process, especially where they have identified weaknesses in our current polity.

We recently announced the formation of a polity committee to continue the work begun in 2009. Just this past week we defined the process and formed the questions that this committee will address and the way that local church leaders will be able to participate. We will publish this information in the next few days. It is our sincere hope that we can have a clear polity statement and membership agreement finalized in the coming year.

We recognize that our polity deficiencies have caused us to be inconsistent in our evaluation of pastors and in addressing complaints and grievances. We sincerely apologize for the hurt, confusion, and frustration that this has caused. We have been able to contact many of the affected individuals to personally express our sorrow, and where possible will continue that pursuit.

Pastoral Practice

AoR identified the following areas of pastoral practice that reflect deficiencies in practice and, in some instances, sin against a brother or sister. Those areas were:

1. Misapplication of the doctrine of sin, which led people to feel beaten down or unfairly and overly scrutinized.
2. Failure to hear complaints or appeals from people in a humble manner, but instead correcting, ignoring, or marginalizing them. This was exacerbated by having no formal processes whereby by people could bring complaints or make appeals.
3. Failure to recognize that church members could feel fearful of approaching or questioning a leader, feeling that to do so would make them a target for criticism or correction.
4. Inconsistency in handling correction or church discipline situations.
5. Inconsistent and/or insensitive handling of sexual misconduct cases.

We were encouraged that from their study AoR did not find a broad pattern of failure and that from what they could see, these failings do not characterize Sovereign Grace churches as a whole. But we freely acknowledge that these things did occur, and we are grieved that there would be even one instance of such practices among us. These are failures in the care and leadership of God's precious people.

We want to express our deep sorrow to everyone who has experienced such treatment. As the leader of SGM since 1991, I (C.J.) want to sincerely apologize for the ways in which deficiencies in my leadership have contributed to the ministry failures catalogued in this report. We also ask each local pastoral team within SGM to consider whether any of these practices have characterized any of your relationships with past or current members and to do all in your power to correct these practices and reconcile with those who have been affected by them.

A brief response is inadequate to express our heart. We wish we could speak to each of you individually so that you could hear and see the heartfelt sorrow we feel over these things and experience our sincere desire to correct these things in the

future. So let us close by expressing some commitments to you for our future together.

Our Commitments

1. We commit to correct the deficiencies in our polity so that we might walk together in unity and clarity, and so that there are clear lines of accountability and appeal in place.
2. We commit by God's grace to correct the failures identified in this report and to do all in our power to shepherd the precious people of God with grace, patience, humility, and love.
3. We commit to teach our pastors and small group leaders on these important topics and make it a regular issue for our regional leaders to review with local pastoral teams.
4. We commit to being leaders who excel in expressing God's forgiveness to one another.
5. We commit to being leaders who carefully guard against sinful communication with and about anyone.
6. We commit to continue to passionately pursue our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ by planting and caring for gospel-centered local churches.

We have a rich history together and God has graciously enabled us to accomplish much together in 30 years. We are grateful for the reminders of those blessings in this report. We still have work to do. Let's all join together in love to accomplish that work. We are full of faith that our faithful and forgiving God will enable us to do these very things.