

FROM EVERY NATION

FIFTY YEARS OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS
1972 - 2022

JOHN FOLMAR

50 Years of God's Faithfulness

“The Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.” (Ps 36:5)

FIFTY YEARS OF GOD’S FAITHFULNESS

On October 27, 1998, H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum granted land in Jebel Ali, Dubai to three evangelical churches for a church building. The churches were the United Christian Church of Dubai (UCCD) and the Arabic Evangelical Church of Dubai (AECD), along with the International Christian Church of Dubai, which earlier had merged into UCCD. This generous land grant was the culmination of years of petition and prayer.



UCCD's meeting place since 2003

In those days, Jebel Ali (which means “mountain of Ali”) was off the beaten path—decades earlier it had been a rocket-firing range for the British Royal Air Force. When the land was granted, many wondered if anyone would drive so far south of the city to gather with the church. But in God’s providence, Dubai began expanding in that direction, even building a duty-free port in Jebel Ali, so that today the church occupies a prime location amid commercial and residential growth.

After 5 years of fund-raising and construction, the Dubai Evangelical Church Center (DECC) opened its doors on October 24, 2003 with thanksgiving and celebration. The original churches

meeting there were UCCD, AECD and Christian Fellowship, an Indian congregation with close historic ties to both anchor churches.

Now there was a stable ministry platform for evangelical witness in Dubai. Churches could gather without the uncertainty of meeting in unauthorized residential or hotel spaces. People who wanted to learn the gospel message now knew where to come.



The Current Ruler of Dubai

H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

But the story of UCCD does not begin with the Dubai Evangelical Church Center. It reaches back 30 years before, to the early 1970's when faithful followers of Christ began meeting in homes, then the Holy Trinity Anglican church building and later the music room of the Dubai Petroleum American School.

This history is the story of God's grace, spanning half a century, to those who served and preached, participated in baptism and the Lord's Supper, and loved one another for the sake of Jesus Christ and the spread of his gospel among the nations. From 1972 up to this day, God has been faithful to the United Christian Church of Dubai.

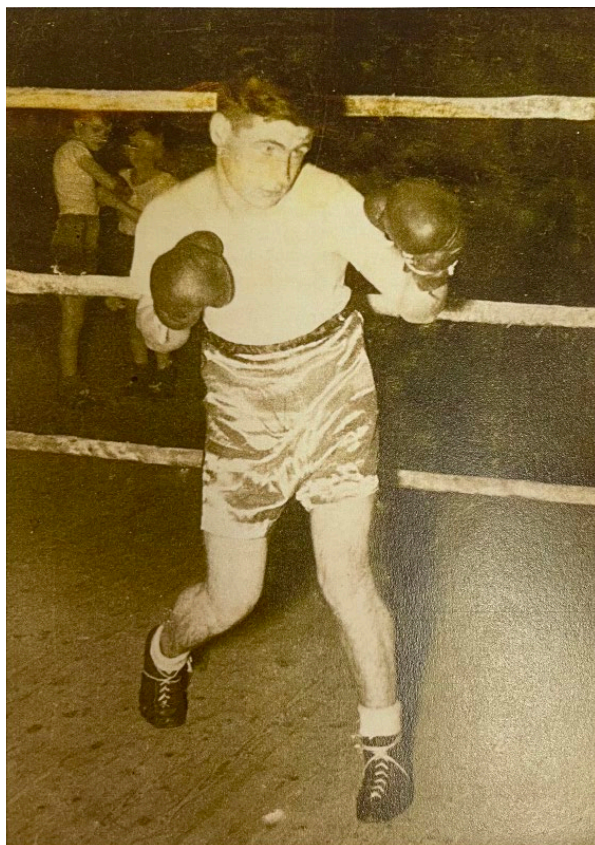
THE BOXER FROM BELFAST

Harry Young was a baker and a boxer from Belfast, N. Ireland. Young left school at age 14 and was converted five years later. He immediately desired to share the gospel among Arabs in the Middle East, so Young attended All Nations Bible College and prepared for overseas missions ministry. Coming from the Brethren tradition, Young believed the Bible was without error and insisted on the authority of scripture throughout his ministry.¹ He learned Arabic in Lebanon in the late 1950s and (along with his wife Joann) began serving with The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM) at the Oasis Hospital in Al Ain in 1959. The Oasis Hospital mission had just been established at the invitation of Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and under the patronage of his brother, Sheikh Zayed (later the founder and first president of the United Arab Emirates).

In 1960 Harry Young experienced conflict with the leaders of the Al Ain mission, especially related to evangelistic strategy. Once he and Pat Kennedy (the founder of the hospital mission) were talking with Sheikh Zayed about the love of God. Not content to speak in generalities, Young began proclaiming Christ crucified as the ultimate display of God's love. Afterward, Kennedy cautioned Young, "You're going to get us kicked out." Kennedy felt constrained to openly evangelize only on the hospital premises; Young, on the other hand, wanted to go out to the villages and proclaim Christ. Over time, the difference in methods caused stress on the relationship. (Young's amillennial views were also cause for dispute.) So Young separated from TEAM and moved to Dubai, where some Christians, almost exclusively Indians, were meeting informally in

1 Samuel Zwemer, who co-founded the Arabian Mission in the 1890s, died seven years before Harry Young arrived in Al Ain. Zwemer also believed in "verbal inspiration," that every word of Scripture is breathed out by God and therefore is true and authoritative across all cultures. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam*, p. 67.

homes, but with no constituted church.



Young's fighting spirit was useful in future years

The population of Dubai during the early 1960s was: majority indigenous Arab; Iranian merchants; Indian nationals; scattered other Middle Easterners; and small numbers of western expats affiliated with government and commercial interests.

The Christian presence in the 1960's was mainly Indian. The few western expats in Dubai (mainly British) were unintegrated,

wealthy and connected to the British consulate, where small Anglican church services were held. In those days Christians in Dubai would get together at Christmastime and watch Christian films on the roof of what was called the “Airlines Hotel.”

In neighboring Sharjah, chaplains served the British Royal Air Force personnel and held a Sunday night service. Sharjah was also the headquarters of the Trucial Oman Scouts, and several officers were helpful and supportive of Christian medical workers in Sharjah, Al Ain and Ras al Khaima.

In addition, Sunday evening meetings were held at the maternity hospital in Sharjah. Ten years earlier, in 1951, after saving the life of the favorite wife of a local sheikh during a critical delivery, Dr. Sarah Hosmon was asked by the Ruler of Sharjah to start a maternity hospital in his emirate. The hospital would become a base for Christian influence in the region. There were Bible-readings twice a day; one-to-one evangelism; weekly worship services on Sundays for the believers; and Scripture distributed to Arab women in the hospital. Years later one worker in the maternity hospital said of the Arabic New Testament, “The majority of the local women took it home...so most extended families in Sharjah had some portion of the Bible.” The sheikh provided Sarah a house in which to work. When he expressed reservations about an explicitly Christian presence in his emirate, Sarah replied to him with courage and candor: “I thank you; but, your highness, I am a missionary. I will give the gospel.”²

2 *Biblical Missions: Publication of the Independent Board for the Presbyterian Foreign Missions*, Oct. 1974, p. 7. Hosmon was renowned for her commitment to bearing good news. “One of the measures she employed was to wrap dispensary drugs in gospel tracts.” Lewis R. Scudder, Jr., *The Arabian Mission’s Story: In Search of Abraham’s Other Son*, p. 221, n. 47.



“There was one street in Deira and one street in Dubai.” (c. 1968)

In January, 1961 Harry Young arrived in Dubai from Al Ain with his family. He was introduced to the Dubai Ruler, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, by a British official, who asked for permission for this Christian minister to live in Dubai. “He has my permission,” the Sheikh replied. “But, your highness,” replied the official, “you should know that Mr Young is a mubasher [evangelist.]” The Sheikh replied again, “He has my permission.” So Young was allowed not only to live in Dubai, but also to bear witness and sell Christian books door-to-door. No “street gatherings” were allowed, but no one before or since was extended such freedom for witness. Joann Young recalled of her husband’s ministry, “He had free reign.” According to his son, Harry Young “loved mixing it up outside. Dad was always bringing people into our home.” And in those days, Arabs were always willing to “talk about religion.” As another friend described Young, “he would go to the ends of the earth to share the gospel with people.”

THE FIRST EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN DUBAI

In 1962, Harry Young was asked by some of the Indian Christian leaders with Brethren roots to gather an evangelical church in Dubai. They began meeting in a large upstairs room of a mud house³ in Bur Dubai and named themselves the “Dubai Christian Assembly.” This was the first evangelical church in Dubai. Young served as the lead elder along with T.T. Alexander and A.S. John. Young and a Mr. Thomas did most of the preaching. They met on Friday nights for a general gospel meeting and observed “breaking of bread services” on Sunday nights. In the early 1960s, church attendance was between 50-80, almost all Indian nationals, including men, women and children, plus a few westerners. Local Arabs did not attend the church, but occasionally some expat Arabs attended, like Fouad Accad of the Bible Society.



Dubai Christian Assembly meeting place in the 1960s

3 Young's son, Terry, remembered it as a “Persian-style house” with a second-story hall. Years later Young's family moved in to the house. Young's wife, Joann, described it as “an old building in a dilapidated condition. I wasn't keen about the move, but we had no alternative.”

Under Young's leadership, the Christian Assembly grew and baptisms were administered in the Gulf. The Youngs were accepted in the community and related socially to Arabs and Indians more than to British expats. Out of respect, Young gave Sheikh Rashid a Bible. Despite his evangelistic zeal, Harry was respected by the local people. One of them, commending his character, said, "Harry Young is the best Muslim I know."

The Youngs' 6 children were welcome in local homes, and one local boy once got trapped in the Youngs' washing machine! However, the Youngs' son, Terry, was physically handicapped, and by 1969 his medical needs required that the Youngs return to the U.K.⁴ By all accounts, no locals had come to faith during those years, but an evangelical church was now meeting and bearing witness to Christ in Dubai.

NOT ENOUGH ROOM

By the late 1960s, although many locals still lived in huts, oil wealth was attracting more foreigners, including western businessmen, who built bridges and installed infrastructure.⁵ Among them were the German missionary Fritz Dorsch and the British oil and gas worker, Phil Rhodes. These two men assumed Harry Young's responsibilities when he returned to the U.K. in 1969.

Fritz Dorsch was converted at a Billy Graham crusade in Melbourne, Australia in 1959. He had studied taxation law in Germany and moved to Australia where his life was forever altered. After conversion, Dorsch attended Melbourne Bible College and later joined

4 In later years, Harry Young remained active in ministry, including street evangelism of Muslims, in Birmingham, England. Young went to be with the Lord on November 26, 1996, having suffered a heart attack in the act of preaching at Handsworth.

5 Still, into the 1970's conditions were somewhat primitive. Church member Sue Kistler recalled that Kentucky Fried Chicken was there, but "they delivered chicken in a basket from a rope above."

Worldwide Evangelization for Christ (WEC) and in 1966 moved to Bahrain with his wife (who was a mid-wife) to learn Arabic. He was instrumental in founding the maternity hospital in Fujairah (1967-68). When Harry Young left in 1969, Dorsch was called by WEC to take Harry's place in Dubai. By this time, Dorsch recalled that "there was not enough room" in the mud building where the Christian Assembly had been meeting.

Phil Rhodes met with the Christian Assembly during the late 1960s. As more western expats moved to Dubai, believers had begun meeting informally in homes for fellowship and mutual encouragement. Such meetings, according to one leader, "acted as a magnet to draw believers together until there was enough stability to organize under a formal name." The Indian fellowship founded by Harry Young apparently was not widely known among western expats. Louise Morse, speaking of 1969, said, "There wasn't an evangelical church in Dubai. When I arrived, I travelled three times a week to the Sarah Hosman mission in the Sharjah souq for worship, Sunday School and prayer and fellowship."⁶

6 *Light & Truth* (church newsletter), July-Aug., 1978.



Initial Church Meeting Place (1972-74)—Holy Trinity Anglican Church

Thanks to the generosity of Sheikh Rashid, the Holy Trinity Anglican Church was opened in Bur Dubai on April 5, 1970, although Anglican services had been held in the British consulate for years before that.⁷

Eventually Rhodes reached out to Holy Trinity for permission to meet in their building. Christian Assembly remained in the mud house. Believers who were mainly western expats began meeting at Holy Trinity sometime in 1971. This was before air conditioning. As one leader recalled, “Sometimes we had to decide whether to sit inside and suffocate or sit outside and sweat!”

⁷ A Catholic Church building (St. Mary's) had been opened in April, 1967 on land donated by Sheikh Rashid.

RADAR ON THE MUSLIM WORLD

Seven years before the U.A.E. was formed, Leon Blosser arrived in the Trucial States⁸ in January 1964, landing at the RAF airstrip in Sharjah, and then passing through Dubai on his way to the Al Ain Oasis. At that time, “there was one street in Deira and one street in Dubai.” Blosser and his wife Margaret had been recruited to join the TEAM missionaries providing medical care and service to the indigenous Arab people.

Blosser came from Grace Baptist Church in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (USA). A 1960 graduate of Reformed Episcopal Seminary, he had been burdened for the unreached peoples of Arabia since childhood. “The only thing my wife and I had on our radar was the Muslim world.” One colleague said Blosser personally knew the sheikhs (rulers) of all 7 of the emirates. His Arabic was reportedly so good, “the locals thought he was a Palestinian!”

This colleague, Noel Brown, a Westminster Theological Seminary student who served the church for several months in 1975 before returning to the U.S. due to a family hardship, traveled with Blosser to several “majlis” meetings with the sheikhs, including one where “we sat around on the rug and drank tea, sharing the same cup as the sheikh.” Blosser later corrected the record: he knew or had audience with 5 out of the 7 sheikhs. Nevertheless, during his 12 years in the U.A.E. Blosser enjoyed extraordinary access to the Ruling family. Once he was resting in his missionary quarters in Al Ain when Sheikh Zayed (later the founder of the U.A.E.), knocked on the door, asking for help with a power generator. Leon recalled, “You don’t say no to the Sheikh,”

8 The Trucial States were so named because of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace that had been signed in the 19th century in order to protect the native pearling industry from piracy. The treaty declared a truce among the seven Sheikdoms that now comprise the United Arab Emirates, and it ceded full control of their foreign affairs to the British government. Unlike some other gulf states (e.g. Bahrain and Qatar), the Trucial States were not officially a British Protectorate.

so he got dressed and went along. Sheikh Zayed's predecessor, Sheikh Shakhbut, was a close friend of Leon's.

After 7 years at the Oasis, Blosser relocated to Dubai and lived in Deira (Riqa section), working for an Austrian company building span bridges over the inlet.



The Blosser Family (1973)



Original Church Leaders (1972)

Blosser became a primary teacher of the fledgling church comprised of mainly western expats that became UCCD. In the early days, he recalled, 30 to 50 attended the church. “Some would be off-shore, or working on construction of the underwater oil storage tanks.”

The leaders “had an extensive study through 1 Timothy held in our home as we moved toward the formation of a formal congregation.” They also worked through the 1689 Baptist Confession with C. H. Spurgeon’s introduction, and began working toward a church constitution. At the same time, the preaching was handled mainly by Blosser, Fritz Dorsch, and Max Campbell, a McDermott Engineering employee from Louisiana.

A HIGH VIEW OF THE SCRIPTURE

On December 2, 1971, the U.A.E. was formed as a nation. Four months later, the evangelicals led by Blosser, Dorsch and Rhodes formalized their relationship as a church and began meeting weekly at Holy Trinity on Friday nights (since the Anglicans occupied the building on Sundays). A 1980s-era history of the church states: “The Evangelical

Christian Church of Dubai (ECCD) opened her doors on March 31, 1972.”⁹ One month later it was estimated that the church was comprised of “six or eight families.”

Of those days Blosser recalled, “We held a couple baptisms in the sea in Jumeirah, and we had the Lord’s table monthly.” But the bulk of their ministry was personal: marriage counseling, bereavement due to industrial accidents, financial problems. “On the surface life seemed to be so wonderful, but beneath the façade there were hurting souls, often living in denial, and we worked with them on a personal basis,” Leon said.

During these years, Leon Blosser also gathered an Arabic congregation, meeting in the Holy Trinity building, where he preached weekly. Speaking of the English gatherings, fellow leader Stephen Procter (1973-76) said, “Leon brought more theological, thoughtful content to the worship.”

As in most churches, some nominal Christians attended, but the core of the congregation was “very serious about the study of the Scriptures, living the Christian life and family worship.” In such a diverse church there were differences, but, according to Blosser, “our unity was a common understanding of the gospel and a high view of the Scriptures.”¹⁰

OILERS SET UP THE CHURCH

In April, 1972 another leader arrived on the scene—Sid Smith from Houston, Texas. One year earlier he had visited Dubai with Conoco

9 See also Sid Smith’s April, 1977 history of the Evangelical Christian Church of Dubai. ECCD became ICCD (International Christian Church of Dubai) in 1983, which became UCCD (United Christian Church of Dubai) in 1992.

10 Procter recalled that his wife was “heavily involved in a ladies’ group where she was quickly installed as the leader of the studies after they ran into heavy water over the doctrine of election! She very much enjoyed those mid-week Bible studies.”

(Dubai Petroleum Company)¹¹ and “found there was no English-speaking evangelical church there.” Smith told his home church of the need, so one year later, Rice Temple Baptist Church sent the Smiths, “armed with a lot of prayer from our congregation,” along with 200 Baptist Hymnals and a Lord’s Supper service.¹²

From 1972-74, the church met at the Holy Trinity Anglican building. Gary Hanberry recalled that attendance in those days was 40-60 people.

In 1974, some members (led by Stephen Procter from the U.K.) became convicted that the church should meet on Sunday, the Lord’s Day, instead of Friday. Smith obtained approval from Dubai Petroleum Company to meet in the Jumeirah American School music room, an auditorium with capacity for 100 people, plus a wireless mic and a couple of speakers, beginning June 2, 1974. “It was ideal for us as we were growing.” The church would meet on Sunday evening in the school premises until 1986.¹³

11 Garrick Andrews, an elder in the 1990’s, observed, “oilers set up the original church.” Other church founders in the oil and gas industry included Phil Rhodes, Max Campbell and Stephen Procter (all with McDermott); Reggie Hanberry (Int’l Marine Services); and David Lidstone (Costain Construction).

12 Rice Temple Baptist in Houston continued for years to support the church financially.

13 In a 1988 history written by Pastor Virgil Smith, the reason stated for the move to the Jumeirah school was that “a more central location for meetings was desired.” The Lord’s Day concern was not mentioned.



Dubai Petroleum Co. American School (church meeting place 1974-1986)

Smith led corporate worship for 5 years, set the weekly order of service, and oversaw the preaching rotation. As Treasurer, he was also the only elected officer in the fellowship. In those days 8 laymen led the church. He recalled, “We didn’t have a plan. We kind of ran things authoritatively.”

As for the preaching, Smith observed, “We were blessed with a number of men who were called to preach.” One of those preachers, Fritz Dorsch, recalled that, from the beginning, the ministry was evangelical and “Bible-believing.”

One early difficulty was with Pentecostal preachers who presumptuously showed up and “felt led” to preach. Smith recalled telling them that “I’m feeling led not to have you preach.” In the end, “we had differences but the Lord got us through.”

The first constitution was adopted in 1978 after Sid left. He recalled, “I was instrumental in drafting the first constitution. I was also involved in naming the church: **The Evangelical Christian Church of Dubai (ECCD).**”



Our Original Church Name—Evangelical Christian Church of Dubai

During Smith's years of service, the CID (Criminal Investigation Department) visited a few times. "You could spot them, of course. Most were Yemeni police officers, sometimes in uniform. They would sit quietly in worship." Smith would ask them, "Is everything okay?" They would say, "Yes." "Any questions?" "No."

Ministry in those days was rough-and-tumble. Leon Blosser remembered, "the wireless PA system in the school would occasionally pick up some pretty salty ship-to-shore conversations between the tanker and work boat captains—often in the middle of a service!"

All they had was Baptist hymnals and a piano. The school-music-room atmosphere may have left much to be desired, but Smith observed, "Once you start worshipping in a place, it becomes a cathedral." Carol Campbell, wife of church leader and preacher Max Campbell, described the singing in those early years. "We had lots of parts singing...It was moving to me...I'm in a foreign country and here we are praising God; it's the same God."

The Importance of Biblical Foundation

When Israel entered the Promised Land, they were instructed to set up large, plastered stones and write on them all the words of God's Law, as a memorial of God's promises (Deut 27:2). Most churches affirm a high view of Scripture, but in fact tradition or subjective experience holds sway. From the start, our church was committed to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture.

Prior to forming as a congregation, the leaders devoted themselves to a year-long study of 1&2 Timothy, led by Leon Blosser, in order to establish their ministry on a firm biblical footing.

Fritz Dorsch (1969-76) described ECCD as evangelical and "Bible-believing."

Leon Blosser (1971-76) agreed, "our unity was a common understanding of the gospel and a high view of the Scriptures."

Bible studies had been prominent from the beginning. In July, 1977 one leader reported, "This meeting has really been owned of the Holy Spirit of late. There has been a deep sense of unity as the men have gathered for prayer and to study First Timothy."

The original Statement of Faith (1977) affirmed: "We accept the Holy Scriptures as the infallible word of God, of Divine inspiration."

But over the years that emphasis changed. The first three vocational pastors were all described as being "too Southern Baptist." Perhaps they allowed culture and tradition (e.g., "invitation hymns," altar calls, Southern Baptist Sunday School curricula) to overshadow biblical identity.

In later years, other examples would show a lessening of biblical priority:

- One pastor in the 1990's said, "we had freedom to try to win anyone but Muslims," contrary to the scriptural mandate to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).
- Another pastor called into question apostolic authority by preaching that the Holy Spirit was directing the apostle Paul in Acts 21:4 to stay away from Jerusalem but Paul disobeyed.
- During the early 2000s, biblical sermons were occasionally canceled for building presentations, international music segments, Global Day of Prayer videos, etc.

These later leaders personally held to a high view of Scripture, but it was not always evident in their ministries. Still, by God's grace, liberalism never took hold during the first five decades of the church. Each generation must be vigilant to preserve a true commitment to scriptural authority in the life of the church.

“REAL CHRISTIANS SHOW UP”

Beginning in May 1977 the church was led by an elected church council, with the proviso that “Men who may be offshore will have their wives to serve in their absence.”¹⁴ At the council’s first meeting topics discussed included “the calling of a pastor, the continued use of the gymnasium, the setting up of a tape library, and the eventual need for elders and deacons.”

Later that year, the church called their first full-time, paid pastor, Vincent Appleton, a seasoned American minister arranged through the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.¹⁵ He and his wife Olive arrived on September 1, 1977 and were welcomed by 75 worshippers on their first Sunday. Appleton wrote, “This surely made a deep impression. It was beautiful.” One member described him as “an old Southern Baptist preacher from Oklahoma.” Appleton was in his 60’s. “Maybe he was tired, but we loved him.”

By this time, the church had grown and moved from the Jumeirah American School music room to the school gymnasium, with fold-out chairs, a piano, and a nursery. Prayer meetings were held regularly in the pastor’s house, beginning in February, 1978. Weekly men’s and women’s Bible studies were also prominent features of church life. Weekly attendance in those days was around 60-75. Hymns included “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus,” and “The Church’s One Foundation.”

14 ECCD church bulletin, Feb, 5, 1978.

15 A trained lawyer from Buffalo, Oklahoma, Appleton graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky in 1942, where he met his future wife, who was studying religious education at the same institution. Appleton had been a military chaplain, as well.

SERVICE OF WORSHIP

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DUBAI

Sunday Evening, September 4, 1977
7:00 O'Clock

JUMEIRAH AMERICAN SCHOOL

VINCENT APPLETON
PASTOR

*Bulletin from the First
Sunday Gathering with
Vincent Appleton as Pastor*

ORDER OF SERVICE

Quite Music - Ann McKay

Doxology (No. 514 in Hymnal)

Invocation - Kelly Senter

Hymn No. 416 - Soldiers of Christ, Arise

Welcome and Announcements

Hymn No. 426 - O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee

Prayer - Pastoral Prayer

Offering

Scripture Reading

Hymn No. 344 - Saviour, Like a Shepherd Lead Us

Sermon - Sensitivity To The Lord - Vincent Appleton

→ Hymn No. 204 - Nothing But The Blood

Benediction - Allan Titley

On November 13, 1977 the church council proposed the first statement of faith for consideration by the church, which was read out loud in the Sunday gathering, and adopted in December 1977. It affirmed the scriptures as infallible; justification as “by faith (and only faith)”; baptism as testimony of repentance and faith; and regenerate church membership.

Church membership became formalized. The Feb. 19, 1978 bulletin stated, “Our church is composed of born again members who indicate their love for Christ. We receive members by confession of faith for baptism, by statement of their faith, or on promises of letters from other churches.” By the next month membership totaled 27, although weekly attendance was higher. Careful reading of the statement of faith was required to join the church. A pastoral interview took place, which led to questions about baptism. Eric Henderson, who had been converted out of a Mormon background, sought membership and was baptized by Appleton in the Arabian Gulf. Henderson noted, “Church in the Middle East isn’t a social thing; real Christians show up.”



Baptisms were held in the Arabian Gulf

One year later, in December, 1978, the *first church constitution* was adopted, providing for leadership by a “church council” comprised

of “Pastor, Elders, Deacons and Church Officers.” “All candidates for membership” were to be examined “with all charity” by the Pastor “together with an Elder if deemed appropriate.” The constitution was silent on how members were admitted. There was no provision for church discipline.

Throughout the 1970’s, the church recognized its calling as an evangelistic light among the local Arab people. An Editorial in the monthly newsletter said, “We ought to have a special function, that being primarily the spreading of the gospel to our hosts...[which is] very difficult because of language problems, but I’m glad to have been part of a church which takes seriously its commitment to those Christians who are performing this function.”¹⁶ Such a commitment continued to characterize the church. Selwyn Raj, a deacon in the ’80s and ’90s, recalled “a couple occasions when a local came in, sang hymns, got books from the stall, then he disappeared—somebody found out.”

The church sent Appleton and his wife to Iran for vacation in March, 1979. Appleton served the church for two years (1977-79), before leaving hastily due to a family crisis back in the United States. His final Sunday was June 13, 1979.

THE 1980’s: VIRGIL SMITH

In June, 1979 a pulpit committee was formed to identify a new pastor. Church member Ira Sumner, an American engineer, directed them to Virgil Smith, a 56-year-old Southern Baptist and World War II veteran pastoring in South Carolina (USA). On August 5, 1979, Smith was elected to serve as ECCD’s second vocational pastor. In a July church bulletin, it was emphasized that Smith, a life-long Southern Baptist, “understands our inter-denominational situation here in Dubai and

16 *Light & Truth*, Feb. 1978.

appreciates that our fellowship is composed of those who while agreeing on fundamentals of our faith, nevertheless have differing viewpoints on some passages of Scripture.” Nevertheless, one fellow leader described Smith as a “dyed in the wool” Southern Baptist.

At that time there were 32 members. Smith was elected by a vote of 18-0. The next week’s church bulletin explained, “N.B. Our membership is more than 18 but most of the missing members were away on leave during the voting period.”

Smith arrived for the first time in Dubai in November, 1979, and commenced a 12-year pastorate which saw much growth in the life of the church. His wife Joyce and son Phillip, a recent college graduate who later worked for decades with *The Khaleej Times*, joined him.



Virgil Smith, Pastor from 1979-1991

One member recalled, “he was magnanimous, giving, a true Southern Baptist.” Another said he was “a godly man, who treated

people well regardless of color.” One deacon recalled, “His preaching was very solid—much emphasis on the Lord’s second coming.” Virgil Smith baptized David Devadasan, who remembered, “He was forever talking about coming to know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.” In the 1980s “it was very much a Baptist church: green Baptist hymnals, sermons, invitation hymns, altar calls.”

NAME CHANGE TO ICCD

As membership grew during the 1980’s, Virgil Smith took a strong interest in a dedicated church building. As early as June, 1980, a special council meeting agreed to petition the Dubai government for land and permission to build a church building. At that time, the council recognized that “the building project should not obscure or overtake in priority the church’s main objectives which should be to foster growth and fellowship of believers and encourage them to share the good news with those outside.”¹⁷

Smith managed to secure a meeting with Sheikh Rashid to request a grant of land. Bill Duff, Scottish advisor to the Ruler, was present. Another person in the meeting recalled of the Sheikh, “He spoke pretty good English.” In the end, although the Sheikh had given land to the Catholics and the Anglicans, he said, “I can’t give property to an ‘evangelical’ church. I can’t oblige you for a building but will say nothing about house churches.”

Around the same time there were objections from the Ruler’s Office regarding the church name. The term “Evangelical”—which in Arabic connotes “proselytism”—began to present problems with the bank when the church sought an official stamp. Around this time, too, CID and police were observing baptisms being held openly in the Gulf.

¹⁷ At this time Virgil Smith started a building fund, maintained in a Cyprus bank account, that would later become a point of controversy.

The population was growing, and conversions (among expats) were taking place.

For these reasons, in 1983 church deacons decided, by a vote of 12-1, to change the name of the church to **International Christian Church of Dubai (ICCD)**.

SOJOURNERS IN A FOREIGN LAND

On April 15, 1986, the United States bombed Libyan targets in retaliation for Libyan agents' bombing of a W. German nightclub. As a result, fears of reprisal against pro-western interests arose, and security in Dubai tightened. Metal detectors were installed, and Dubai police manned the gates at the Jumeirah American School where the church had been meeting since 1974. In time the church, whose weekly attendance by that time was 100-120, was asked to find other arrangements for meeting and worship, due to international tensions.

Thus began a 3-year sojourn during which the church moved from place to place, seeking a more permanent home in hotels, ballrooms, and later the auditorium of Our Own English High School (with the help of the wife of businessman Sonny Varkey). One member who arrived in 1988 estimated an attendance in the auditorium of 60-70, one-third Americans, along with British, Filipino and Indians. One history dating from those days described "altar calls, open communion celebrated monthly, water baptism by immersion in the Gulf, and hymns sung from 'Baptist Hymnals' donated by a church in Texas U.S.A."

THE JUMEIRAH VILLA: 1990-2006

In January, 1990, the church found a suitable Arab-style villa owned by Sheikha Miriam, the sister of the Dubai Ruler Sheikh Rashid. When notified about the church's tenancy, the Sheikha reportedly said, "I praise Allah because my place is being used to worship him." Across

the street from the Iranian consulate, the “Jumeirah villa” provided a stable meeting place which led to a season of numerical growth as the economy continued to grow. Weekly attendance grew quickly to 120. The Arabic Evangelical Church, pastored by Carl Sherbeck, also met in the Villa. Later, Filipino, Indian and Chinese congregations shared the space as well.



Jumeirah villa (church meeting place 1990-2006)

The church continued meeting in the Villa for 16 years until 2006, when the government finally forced its closure after a complaint was made about church activity in a residential neighborhood. (By that time, the church was also meeting in the newly-built Dubai Evangelical Church Center in Jebel Ali.)

RUMBLINGS WITHIN THE CHURCH

During the late '80s and early '90s, the composition of the church began to change along with the demographics of the city. “The church became interdenominational,” recalled New Zealander Garrick Andrews, an influential leader for 17 years. Americans began to be outnumbered.

British and Asian influence increased, diminishing the Southern Baptist culture in the church. Virgil Smith had difficulty changing with the times, and tensions increased. One member said, “A new group came onto the scene, and tried to upstage him.”

By 1991, the church treasurer recalled, “there were rumblings within the church. Deacons’ meetings started becoming unpleasant.” Another member remembered there was a desire for “someone more contemporary.” In addition, “neo-charismatic style was on the rise.” Toward the end of Smith’s pastorate, contemporary worship and choruses were becoming trendy. Church member Shelly Baluch noted the stylistic evolution: “I had a real difficulty with contemporary music. Syncopation brought out false emotions.” Virgil Smith believed in hymns only. The next year, someone asked at a members’ meeting, “Is this church becoming charismatic?”

When Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, it sent shockwaves throughout the Gulf region. Security was heightened and many families were sent home. The entire society, including the churches, was affected.¹⁸

Unsettling times were in store. For almost a decade, the church descended into difficulty.

CHURCH SPLIT

Since 1974 the church had gathered on Sunday evenings, but in 1990 some leaders proposed beginning an alternative church meeting on Friday mornings (Friday being the Muslim holy day when most employees had the day off.) Pastor Virgil Smith reportedly responded: “I want nothing to do with it.” Nevertheless, four families began meeting

18 One history of the church states, “The invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent arrival in Dubai of many American and British warships [and servicemen] gave the church great opportunities to show love, friendship and spiritual help to many” who were facing the possibility of war.

on Fridays and within a matter of weeks more than 100 people were attending the gathering. After a few months the numbers approached 200, and the Friday gathering quickly became the main meeting of the church, causing the pastor's authority to erode. Member Charlie Donald believed Smith was threatened by the Friday group. Eventually Smith told the Friday leaders, "I'm taking over this service now." One of them replied, "No you're not."

At this time, some of the Friday morning leaders complained about inadequate accountability and oversight of the pastor. The existing church constitution (adopted in 1978) prescribed the offices of elder and deacon. But when a church member brought this to Smith's attention, Smith reportedly said, "I do not need elders, young man." This member concluded, "it had been a one-man ministry." Garrick Andrews recalled, "Virgil struggled with elders...It all got a bit messy."

Virgil Smith was, by all accounts, a strong-willed individual. His son, Mark, admitted, "he didn't take advice very well." For one thing, "he drove too fast." Once Smith was pulled over by Dubai police, who asked him for his passport. But Smith refused: "I won't give you my passport."

Without the pastor's approval, a constitution review committee was formed with a view to clarifying the leadership structure of the church. "The church was in a time of flux." Numbers were rising dramatically, but so were tensions among the leaders.

Amid the discord, Smith took an extended furlough in the United States in 1991. During that time away, one member recalled, "the leadership split on whether to have him back." Ira Sumner, who had been pivotal in bringing Smith to Dubai, believed, "British Brethren came and joined one at a time and eventually got a majority."

When Virgil Smith returned, he learned of the plans to replace him. Since he was now 65, a friend advised, "It's better for you to

resign.” Smith resisted such pressure, but the deacons convened a pastor search committee anyway.¹⁹ Eventually, to preserve church unity, Smith (with hurt feelings) agreed to resign toward the end of 1991, leaving in December. Deacon Selwyn Raj said, “He resigned eventually out of pressure.” So ended the 12-year ministry of Virgil and Joyce Smith.²⁰

As Virgil Smith was leaving, he contacted the Southern Baptist Foreign Missions Board, seeking an interim pastor. Sonny Rogerson, a young missionary, came with his wife and served the church for 6 tumultuous months, during which a split occurred.

Rogerson, who spoke Arabic and had pastored an Arabic church in Bethlehem, arrived at the end of 1991. In early 1992, the deacon board divided over loyalty to Virgil Smith as the pastor. About 70 people, mainly “Dubai Petroleum Company loyalists,” began meeting in the living room of the Smiths’ now-vacant parsonage. These were members who, according to one member, “didn’t like the way Virgil was treated.” As one member characterized it, “The Americans blew a fuse over replacing Virgil.”

In an attempt to mediate, Rogerson met with each deacon individually, after which he called for deacon elections in February, 1992. All of the pro-Virgil Smith deacons were voted out of office, which set the stage for a church split.

A vocal minority who were supportive of Virgil Smith, including the signatories of the bank accounts, decided to leave, taking with them everything in the name of ICCD. (This included a Cyprus bank account designated for a building fund, automobiles, and the Baptist Hymnals

19 One of the resumes submitted at this time (at the behest of Carl Sherbeck) was from Daniel Splett, who would become pastor 6 years later. In the meantime, Splett would pastor a troubled Mennonite Brethren congregation in Manitoba, Canada.

20 Both are now deceased. Virgil Smith died in South Carolina (USA) on September 14, 2016, age 94.

used since 1972.) They formed a new church, meeting in the pastor's old villa. Since the splinter group included the signatories of the bank accounts, David Dennis, then the church secretary, who remained behind, wrote, "the majority of the church members were in the unprecedented position of having no say over their demands." Selwyn Raj, who also remained behind, alleged, "We were helpless. They were not willing to negotiate." But the Jumeirah villa, which was in another's name, remained with the majority who stayed behind.

Many on both sides were hurt by the disharmony, which cast a shadow over the church for several years. In February, 1993, associate pastor Kevin Penman wrote to the church, "It is now 1993. There is no looking back; we cannot change 1992." But, as will be explained below, people were looking back: Thirty years later, one young member recalled, "The personal pain in my heart has never really healed. I failed to see how people so close to each other could be pulled apart." The majority, who were left with virtually no funds, left the judgment to the Lord. The chairman of the deacons, Garrick Andrews, wrote to one of the leaders of the departing minority, accepting their demands, "although this should not be seen as approval of the way your group chose to conduct yourselves."²¹

21 Eight years later, on September 27, 1998, ICCD dissolved and transferred its assets, including a now-diminished building fund, back to UCCD. At the initiative of ICCD pastor Eddy Jesudian, its 21 remaining members began meeting again with UCCD on October 9, 1998. In the meantime, another church, Emirates Baptist Church International (EBCI), had been formed, comprised of some of the 1992 splinter group.



Worship in the Jumeirah Villa (1992)

THE UNITED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DUBAI

In March 1992, those who remained held a members' meeting to discuss what had happened. The meeting, led by David Dennis and Ian Dunsire, consisted of 40 members, along with Carl and Barbara Sherbeck, who had lived in the region since 1966.²² They decided not to “chase” the ICCD church name, but instead to brainstorm on a white board about a new name. Carl Sherbeck urged the members to “think about how the new name will be understood by those outside the church.” Since they were not “Brethren” or “Pentecostal” but simply “Christian,” and also because the word “United” in Arabic (*mutahid*) echoes the United Arab Emirates, he proposed the name **“United Christian Church of Dubai.”** At Sherbeck’s suggestion, “a cheer went up. We didn’t even need a vote.” So, on March 18, 1992, the church’s name was changed to **UCCD.**

²² After initially serving at the Al Ain Oasis hospital (non-medical staff), the Sherbecks moved to Abu Dhabi in 1972, where they established what would become the Evangelical Community Church of Abu Dhabi, as well as an Arabic congregation. In 1988, they moved to Dubai and served the Arabic congregation then meeting in the St. Martin’s Anglican Church Center, and later moving to the Jumeirah Villa.

MORE TROUBLED WATERS

Interim pastor Sonny Rogerson had stepped into a hornet's nest, yet during his 6-month term he earned the respect of the people. He was "an absolute man of God, a gentle character," said one leader. Deacon Selwyn Raj remembered, "He poured out his heart and prayed for the church, for growth and evangelism." He guided the church through a difficult season, and many were disappointed when he announced his intention to return to the U.S. to pursue counseling training.

Meanwhile, the pastor search process languished. In August it was reported that "the committee was unable to make a recommendation for permanent pastor." Following Rogerson's departure, Kevin Penman served as interim pastor. Penman later applied for the permanent post, but when he was not selected he remained as an associate pastor. During the interim period, the church was led by multiple elders. Among other things, they decided, "in line with Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16, UCCD music ministry should be a balance of 50% traditional hymns and 50% psalms and spiritual songs." Also at this time, "the elders felt it was acceptable to permit Father Christmas/Santa Claus to visit the Sunday School."²³

A revised constitution was adopted in June, 1992, by a 31-1 vote, partly in reaction to the traumatic departure of Virgil Smith.²⁴ Significant changes included:

- justification by "faith only" changed merely to justification by faith;
- church discipline now included, based on unanimous elder recommendation and congregational approval (by majority);

²³ Elder meeting minutes, Oct. 17, 1992.

²⁴ Three years later, looking back on the 1992 constitutional changes, the elders wrote, "we believe aspects of the current constitution are a direct result of an overreaction to circumstances in the church just prior to, and at the time, it was written and adopted by the church. We further recognize that there is some risk of a similar situation now [in 1995]."

- pastor called for two years and then subject to annual renewal vote by the congregation (two-thirds majority);
- upon nomination, new elders approved by default, if no objection by the congregation. (No guidance on what happens if there is objection to new elders.)

In February, 1993, Don Smith (no relation to Virgil Smith) was called by a razor-thin margin to be the third full-time pastor in the church's 31-year history. Like Rogerson, Smith and his wife RuthAnn were Southern Baptist missionaries. The Smiths, who had served for years in Kenya, were living in Cyprus when they were called. Even after the split, divisions were apparent in the church. Smith recalled, "When we heard the vote for us to come was just one vote more than was required for a call, RuthAnn said she was not comfortable with that close a vote." Nonetheless, Don Smith accepted the call, which was specified for two years. "We continue sensing God's direction for us in opening the way for us to come to Dubai." ²⁵

On November 11, 1994, less than two years after Don Smith was called, the congregation declined to renew Smith's tenure, failing to meet the required two-thirds majority by one vote (46-27-1).

Smith cited factions within the church as one cause of his dismissal. Elder Gene Kornegay agreed, "ethnic cliques in the church worked against him." Another issue contributing to disunity, according to Smith, was the continued presence of associate pastor Kevin Penman, who encouraged cross-cultural evangelistic outreach, including to Muslims. Some had wanted to call Penman as pastor. But in Smith's view, "we did not click well at all." Penman resigned as associate pastor on

25 From a letter faxed by Don Smith from Cyprus on February 18, 1993. Smith added, "I would also very much like a list of members of UCCD, even now. We can direct our praying more specifically."

June 13, 1993, four months after Smith's arrival.

Some missionary families were committed to reaching Muslims with the gospel of Christ, but Smith opposed leading the church to embrace their calling more openly. "I pushed for the church's stand that we had freedom to try to win anyone but Muslims..." One member confirmed, "Don was nervous of evangelistic outreach to Muslims." Disappointed members complained that without Penman, "there is a danger...that the church will lose its evangelistic vision and become too 'nice and comfortable.'" Elder Brad Davis explained in a June 25, 1993 letter, "It became apparent to all elders, including Kevin, that a conflict existed and that a change was needed."

During his brief tenure, Don Smith was called "the singing preacher," because during sermons he would spontaneously burst out into loud song. One staff member recalled, "he was too Southern Baptist." Still, more than 20 people were baptized in 1993. One member recalled, "They put ice in the baptismal pool to cool it down during the summer!"

As the church grew, a pastor search committee was formed to identify UCCD's first associate pastor for youth. Englishman Peter Dale, 28 years old and fresh out of Bible College with his wife Ruth, arrived in September, 1994. A church leader called Dale's theology "Calvinistic."

* * * * *

Prior to Dale's arrival as youth pastor, UCCD had considered a couple (Kevin & Michelle Shaw) to serve as "joint youth directors." In this connection, the Shaws inquired about UCCD's position toward women's roles in ministry. In a February 1994 written statement, the elders affirmed the equality of men and women but denied that men and women necessarily exercise the same roles. "We believe that scripture

reserves the role of elder (therefore by definition including pastor), to be men qualified in accordance with 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Tit 1:5-9...There are no women elders recorded in any of the New Testament churches.”



Easter Sunrise Service on Jumeirah Beach during the 1970s

CHURCH CLOSED DOWN BY POLICE

On April 7, 1994, government authorities closed down the church for operating without a permit. “Pastor Don was warned not to conduct services at UCCD or any other premises until permission was obtained.”²⁶ One leader who accompanied Don Smith to the police station at that time recalled, “the phones were tapped; it was no big deal.” Elder Gene Kornegay concluded, “we somehow got on the radar screen of someone influential.” Replying to an April 23, 1994 letter from the Dubai Municipality, the church council explained that it was not a child nursery and that officials in the Ruler’s Court were aware that the Villa was being used “for the normal and common needs of a meeting place for Christian prayer and assembly.” After two weeks, the authorities allowed the church to begin meeting again. The reason for the church

²⁶ “Special UCCD Council Meeting Minutes,” May 4, 1994. The real estate manager wrote the church, “Now you must stop school and church within one week because this place is residence area.”

closing was never fully explained.²⁷

FALLOUT FROM DISUNITY

For the second time in only three years, the church's pastor was dismissed. When the church declined to renew Don Smith's tenure, "he and his wife didn't take that too kindly." One staff member said, "They wouldn't leave." But then the elders, according to one leader, tried to "put the decision on ice." Regarding the vote, church leader Doug Taylor said, "I think it was manipulated...A lot of it was cultural, he clashed with Indian culture."

Shortly after the November vote, the elders confessed their inability to lead on the matter. "We cannot, as a body, make a wise decision about the spiritual issue of who should be our pastor." In a January 5, 1995 letter to the congregation, the elders admitted "the work of God through UCCD is in paralysis due to the [unspecified] spiritual problems." The elders confessed failures of leadership and asked forgiveness of the congregation. However, citing 1 Timothy 5:17 ("Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor"), the elders suspended the congregation's vote of dismissal of Don Smith. "Until these issues are dealt with, Pastor Don will continue fully in his role as Sr. Pastor." The letter, signed by elders Frank Raj, David Dennis, Don Smith, Peter Dale, and Gene Kornegay, conceded, "We understand that some people may interpret this as a 'takeover' by the elders or by Pastor Don."

In an April 19, 1995 letter to the congregation, Don Smith confessed to "gnawing frustration" over the situation. He felt he was

27 A similar incident occurred three years later. As elder David Dennis wrote to then-pastor Daniel Splett, "The CID visited the church last week and I understand that they will return to see you this week." At that time CID was requesting a membership list of the church, which was never handed over. Church member Randall Darr accompanied Splett to a coffee-shop meeting with a CID officer who acknowledged, "from time to time we have people who attend the service." At that time, CID sought a commitment not to proselytize Muslims.

“being dangled” by the church. Although the congregation had voted to remove him 5 months earlier, he wrote to the church: “we still have the sense that God is not finished with us in our ministry with UCCD.”

After 5 months of deliberation, in May, 1995, the elders affirmed the church’s original decision to dismiss. Frank Raj, who was an elder at the time, recalled, “The Smiths wanted the elders to cancel the vote and were very upset when after prayer and consideration the elders decided to let the vote stand.”

The Smiths’ departure “left a grieving, a pain,” according to one leader. It was understood that the “spiritual problems” reached back to the dismissal of Virgil Smith in 1991. As the elders confessed, “Many of these problems relate to events which have occurred among us over the last five years.” Despite the unfortunate drama, Don Smith still believed “the people were very loving, kind, and accepting.”

In reaction to Don Smith’s dismissal, *the constitution was revised in 1996*, including:

- Admonition to love one another
- Church discipline authority removed from congregation and given to church council (¾ majority)
 - Discipline for members and “regularly attending non-members,” including forfeiture of “right to attend and participate”
 - Pastor’s initial call period no longer two years, but as specified in contract
 - Elders approved by default if no objection in 21 days; deacons approved by congregational vote
 - Elders now “plan and/or coordinate church worship services including preachers”
 - Absentee voting allowed by “voting members...16 years and older”

Reflecting on the reason for the constitutional re-write, Associate Pastor Peter Dale said, “Less arguing.”

Still more fallout from Don Smith’s dismissal was the formation of Emirates Baptist Church International (EBCI) in 1995. Del Allen, a member of UCCD, was a friend and seminary roommate of Don Smith. Allen, with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, was providing theological education for expat Christians. When Smith was dismissed by UCCD, Allen began a new church with Baptist distinctives, along with Elias Bardawil and other former UCCD leaders. Pastor Daniel Splett recalled, “Interaction between UCCD and EBCI was never really that warm or constructive.”²⁸ In later years, cooperation between the two churches grew stronger.

The Importance of Biblical Leadership

The early years of our church were marked by maturity and humility among the leaders, as evidenced by their mutual affection and careful study of Scripture and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith in preparation for constituting as a church in 1972. But as the years passed, that early unity was lost.

Emblematic of deep divisions, three out of the first four vocational pastors of UCCD were removed or forced out of their positions. But there were other striking examples of dysfunction.

- A rigid, headstrong approach to leadership, as when Pastor Virgil Smith told a church member (regarding elders), “I do not need elders, young man.” (The 1978 constitution provided for elders, but none were appointed until after Smith’s departure.)

28 Splett, Church Planting Report, p. 17.

- Immaturity, discord and factionalism, as when one church leader refused to allow Pastor Virgil Smith to oversee the Friday church meetings (“No, you’re not”); or when the 1992 departing splinter group took the bank accounts; or when an associate pastor resigned because, as the elders acknowledged, “a conflict existed” between him and Pastor Don Smith. One elders’ meeting minute noted, “Contentious behavior in the Council was discussed. The elders prayed for wisdom in how to deal with the issue. It was agreed that when the issue flares up again to deal with it promptly, privately, and properly.” (Elders meeting minutes, Sept. 3, 1994.)

- Admission of ministry “paralysis”: When the elders overruled the congregation’s dismissal of Don Smith by one vote, they admitted, “We cannot, as a body, make a wise decision about the spiritual issue of who should be our pastor.”

- In later years, the church allowed home groups to practice “Pentecostal gifts” contrary to what was being taught in the pulpit, resulting in a church split.

What was missing during these years (1992-2004) of dysfunction? It appears there was no unified biblical leadership. The New Testament prescribes a plurality of elders united doctrinally, as when Paul commands, “Teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). It also requires godly maturity: “Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). Moreover, the New Testament teaches congregational governance on matters of discipline and doctrine. During these years, our church leadership was fractured by personal and theological disagreements. Church elders today are susceptible to the same weaknesses, so we must heed Paul’s instruction: “Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching” (1 Tim 4:16).

DEPORTED FOR THE GOSPEL

During the 1990s, one of our church members, Englishman Ray Amey, was arrested. As a member of UCCD he ran the book table and distributed literature whenever he could. In January, 1993, Amey went to the Dubai Creek where the Iranian dhows (traditional commercial sailing vessels) came in. “I had a bag of Farsi New Testaments in my hand.” When he saw three Iranian sailors sitting beside their dhows, he greeted them and offered copies of the scripture, which they eagerly received. “But a plain-clothes cop wearing a dishdasha looking for stolen TVs showed up at the wrong time.” So Amey was charged and convicted of “promoting another religion in a Muslim country.” He confessed in court: “Yes, I gave them a New Testament.” Amey’s Emirati attorney objected (unsuccessfully) that the Quran says, “It is good for Muslims to read the Christian holy book.”



Commercial Dhows on Dubai Creek

The sentencing judge engaged three Muslim scholars to translate the Scriptures from Farsi to Arabic, in order to complete a thorough investigation. (He did not know that Arabic translations were available for sale in Dubai.) As a result, Amey’s court file “swelled to 700 sides of

A4 paper,” and three Muslims became intimately acquainted with the New Testament. In October, 1993 Amey was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment.

Reminiscent of Hebrews 10, the church rallied in support.²⁹ At the Jumeirah prison there were three visiting times per week. Amey recalled, “there was always a queue of people waiting to see me, bringing words of encouragement, telling me they were praying for me.” Don Smith, the pastor, was the first to visit. Amey also recalled particular encouragement from “the Indian brothers.” “Some of the single ladies came to see me, too, including Grace from Lebanon.” Most of the other prisoners never had visitors. “They had brought shame on their families. There was no one to say, ‘We love you.’”



Ray Amey before court appearance (1993)

²⁹ “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” (Hebrews 10:32-34).

Ray Amey received 700 letters in 8 weeks. Most of the letters were filled with scripture. “The prison staff were putting in for overtime so they could read all my mail!” Eventually the church was able to get a Bible to him in jail. Amey read it together with his Indian cellmate.

Amey recalled spending his 40th birthday in prison. Before Christmas, after spending 8 weeks in prison, he was released early for immediate deportation. When the prison guard met Amey to transport him he asked, “You’re the guy who gets all the visitors?”

The church paid for Amey’s return ticket to London. He was transported by prison bus, accompanied only by the driver and a police officer. “The whole church came to the airport see me off,” Amey said. The police officer asked one church member, “What are you all doing here?” “Ray is our brother; we’ve come to say goodbye.” The officer replied, “I have never seen anything like this before.” Amey recalled, “The church was fantastic.”³⁰

“YOU’RE A PRIEST?”

Peter Dale, who had been elected as an associate pastor for youth on July 31, 1994, served UCCD admirably during the difficult and uncertain days when the elders overruled the congregation’s vote to remove Don Smith. “There was still a lot of pain and hurt,” Dale recalled. As a result, Dale was asked to carry out not only youth ministry but also general pastoral responsibilities, as well. Three years later, Dale was exhausted and, by his own admission, “burned out.” “I took on far too much...In western culture they ring you early; in Asian culture you

30 Twenty years earlier, an American missionary named John Marr was arrested at the Dubai Creek for distributing evangelistic tracts to Iranians. A colleague recalled, “He worked with the Indian congregation that Harry Young had pastored, passed out literature among the anchored dhows, in the airport and in Rashid Hospital. In the hospital he unwittingly gave literature to a patient who was a judge, and this ended his short tenure in the UAE circa 1973. His home was searched and he was given 3 days to leave.”

have coffee late; I was all things to all men.” One contemporary history stated: “Peter Dale is presently very stretched as he has had to take on a lot of the responsibilities of the Sr. Pastor.”

Dale recalled renewing his driver’s license when the authorities took him into a back room and questioned him about Christianity and Islam. What ensued was an opportunity for him to communicate the gospel, for which Dale had been praying. During another encounter with police, when Dale was pulled over, he remembered them looking at his tattoos and asking, “You’re a priest?”

Dale, who now pastors Lerwick Baptist Church in Shetland, Scotland, left Dubai with his wife in March, 1998.

As UCCD grew numerically along with the city, the pastoral burdens and demands continued increasing. During 1998, UCCD began a second Friday morning gathering at the Villa. Peter Dale was replaced by Irishman Noel Kearney, from Dublin, who served the youth as interim until Gerald Longjohn arrived from First Baptist Church Downer’s Grove,³¹ Illinois (USA) on August 1, 1999.

NUMERICAL GROWTH, ACTIVISM, PRAGMATISM

Fifteen months after Don Smith was dismissed, Daniel Splett arrived in August, 1996, becoming the fourth full-time Sr. Pastor in the history of UCCD. Splett’s wife, Lori, had earlier served with TEAM in Abu Dhabi for two years along with Carl and Barbara Sherbeck. Carl, who was highly respected for his 30 years’ service in the UAE, had recommended Daniel for UCCD’s position in 1992 and again in 1996. Randall Darr, chairman of the pastor search committee in 1996,

31 John Welkner, who replaced Longjohn in 2006 and still serves UCCD as associate pastor, came from the same church. Gerald Longjohn’s father had served for many years (beginning in 1964) in Al Ain with TEAM at Oasis Hospital.

admitted, “Daniel was the only candidate we spoke to more than once.”³² Splett was aware of the church’s troubled history. In response to UCCD’s written summary of the ministry, he wrote to Darr on March 29, 1996, “We recognize your pain and challenges of the last few years.”

In those days, according to Darr, UCCD had “minimal doctrine,” and was “very diverse.” Membership was not a prominent feature of church life.

As Dubai’s economy grew, attendance continued to increase (by 1996 “regularly up to 200.”) In 1997, UCCD offered 4 service options (Fri 8:00, 9:30, 6:45, Sun 7:30), and another on Thursday would be added the next year. Ministry emphasized programs and events. As stated in the 1999 annual report, “UCCD is a busy place with lots happening! Sometimes we try to do too much and therefore cannot do some things very well.” Discontentment returned to the leadership. The pastor’s 2000 annual report to the church stated, “While not in any way wanting to belittle or chastise anyone, the present model we have for the leadership is not working very well.”

By 2001, the corporate worship was characterized as “primarily contemporary.” The Baptist Hymnals were long-gone. One visitor to the church described it as non-denominational, “although I would say they have Pentecostal leanings... ‘Shine, Jesus, Shine’ appeared to be the favorite song of the fellowship.” The annual “worship report” stated: “Although the worship leaders strive to choose songs that reflect the style preference of the congregation, this has become increasingly difficult due to the wide variety of backgrounds and preferences represented in our diverse congregation.”

32 None of the search committee had met Daniel until he came out to Dubai in summer, 1996. Darr noted Daniel’s experience as a pastor of Carman Gospel Light Church (Manitoba, Canada) and observed, “He wouldn’t come in and make drastic changes.”



Assembled Worship at the Jumeirah Villa (2003)

Daniel Splett was kind, gentle and a formidable tennis player, as well. He was admired for “caring about different ethnicities and incorporating them into the church.” His wife, Lori, was a well-regarded and visible leadership presence, often leading worship and giving announcements.

Nevertheless, harmony continued to elude the church. The neighboring emirate, Sharjah, was home to many UCCD members, and there was no healthy evangelical church there. In 1998, with UCCD financial support, space was rented in a Sharjah hotel and a church of 15 people started, growing to more than 40 two years later. UCCD’s pastor preached occasionally, but (as one participant recalled) “there were a couple families that were opposed to paying a pastor...Those families took over the Sharjah worship (effectively a split from UCCD.)” Mark Gates, one of the founders, said, “This did not occur originally due to a split but unfortunately ended up that way.” The church eventually dissolved in 2008.

An absence of clearly stated doctrinal standards allowed confusion and harmful teaching to unsettle the church. In 2001, two UCCD elders (from S. Africa) sought to form a “cell-group” within

UCCD that, according to Pastor Splett, practiced a “broader range of spiritual gifts and certain Pentecostal practices.” When a visiting pastor from S. Africa was allowed to preach at UCCD and called for healings at the end of a church service, tensions arose and eventually resulted in those two elders separating from UCCD and starting a group in their home. This group eventually split off to begin a new church.

During the early 2000s, church leaders adopted a “cell-based” church strategy (based on Ralph Neighbor’s book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*) In January 2003, a sermon was preached with the ambitious title, “The Second Reformation—The Cell-Based Church,” with an emphasis on rapid multiplication. The 2005 annual report stated, “It’s all about having the attitude like Jabez did, ‘Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory!’... Cells need to multiply!” According to this view, “cell-church” is not a gathered assembly (as we see in the NT), but rather a collection of small groups of believers meeting in homes but usually without the gospel ordinances. The “real ministry” occurs in the cells. Every so often, whether once a week or once a month, the entire network of cells will assemble to hear teaching from the Sr. Pastor. In a review of Neighbor’s book, Greg Gilbert called the cell-based strategy “seriously flawed.” “The [New Testament] pattern does not seem to be a conglomeration of cells, but one unified local body that has all authority to conduct its own affairs, guard its own doctrines and teaching, and care for and discipline its members. Cell groups are a fine addition to a church. There is much good they can do in the way of accountability and encouragement, but a Christian’s corporate identity needs to be found first and most profoundly in the church as a whole.”³³ (Moreover, in a Muslim country it was never a good idea to refer to “cells” spreading throughout the city.)

33 <https://www.9marks.org/review/where-do-we-go-here-ralph-neighbour/>

In 2003, the church adopted a new constitution (its fourth), centered around the five purposes of Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church*. Significant changes included:

- Now the church was labeled “a cell-based international congregation,” with “active participation” in the cells a “responsibility” of members
- The Church Council was abolished, replaced now by elder governance
- Church discipline authority was conferred exclusively to the elders with no congregational role ³⁴
- A “Leadership team” comprised of elders, deacons and pastoral staff was designated to meet semi-annually “as a forum for accountability, vision-sharing, and to review major decisions,” but with no specific authority structure.

The church leadership began relying more on guest preachers and others in the congregation. In 2004, church leaders preached through a non-canonical book (*Empowered Evangelicals: Bringing Together the Best of the Evangelical and Charismatic Worlds*), a defense of moderately charismatic ministry practices that characterized UCCD's ministry philosophy during the early 2000's. ³⁵

In February 2004, Glen Jones became UCCD's first full-time “Director of Music Ministries.” Previously of the Protestant Church of Oman, Glen was known by UCCD because he had participated in the UAE “Desert Challenge” youth conferences and had consulted on the new studio at DECC. Influenced by the New Wine network of churches

34 Contrary to the biblical pattern (Matt 18:17, 2 Cor 2:6). See Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (2016).

35 The Alpha course (complete with the Holy Spirit weekend) was a regular feature of church life in the early 2000's.

in the U.K., Glen continued the charismatic trajectory of the church.

In 2005, the senior pastor was officially shifted to oversee the cell groups, making way for another pastor to assume his responsibilities. The 2005 annual report stated, “We are looking for an Administration and Training Pastor to lead UCCD’s staff and to enable Pastor Daniel to devote himself primarily to our Cell-Life groups with our vision for UCCD being a cell-based church.”

In 2007, Daniel Splett left UCCD to pastor an English-language congregation of a Chinese church in Toronto, Canada (his home country.)

A PERMANENT CHURCH HOME

As early as the mid-1970s, the church prayed for a dedicated building it could call its own. Max Campbell, an early leader, wrote in 1976 of an overly-optimistic friend who “indicated that the land and permits would be easy to acquire.” As it turned out, another 21 years would pass before the government approved the request.

During the 1980’s, Virgil Smith had met with Sheikh Rashid, seeking permission for a church building, but to no avail. Another unsuccessful request was made to the government in spring, 1992.

Eventually Carl Sherbeck got involved. He cautioned that the government was unlikely to give unlimited numbers of “church licenses.” He cited the successful joint approaches leading to recognition and land in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. “To join with others in these pursuits is not only more realistic but more considerate and less selfish as well.”³⁶

On December 12, 1995, a joint request was made on behalf of UCCD and the Arabic Church, led by Carl Sherbeck. In addition to the standard reasons given (overcrowding, parking space), Sherbeck

36 Letter to UCCD Church Council, July 5, 1993. Of course, joint partnership with other churches involved challenges, as well. In the quest for a building, Max Campbell wisely cautioned (in 1976) against compromise of scriptural principle in a quest for a church building. “In the rush of life and ignorance of enthusiasm we sometimes lose perspective.”

mentioned, “The Iranian Consulate is a large building complex just opposite the entrance to the villa that we are using as our main meeting place. We are questioning the wisdom of our continuing to have numbers of western expatriates gathering several times a week there.”

On October 28, 1997, the land grant was received: “Based on the order of Shaikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai and Minister of Finance and Industry, a portion of land shall be set aside in the Bur Dubai area for the construction of one building for the following churches.

1. The United Christian Church
2. The International Christian Church³⁷
3. The Arab Evangelical Church”

Six months later, the location of the land grant was changed to “Jebel Ali.”

Dangers of Watered-Down Doctrine and Pragmatism in International Churches

International churches are known for lowering doctrinal standards in order to accommodate people coming from different traditions, denominations and cultures. Randall Darr, chairman of the pastor search committee in 1996, admitted, “there was minimal doctrine” at UCCD. The church’s 1983 name-change from **Evangelical** Christian Church of Dubai to **International** Christian Church of Dubai was a bad omen, a harbinger of future doctrinal decline.

Pastor Virgil Smith was known to be Baptist, but the congregation was assured in a 1979 church bulletin that “he understands our inter-denominational situation here in Dubai and appreciates that our fellowship is composed of those who while agreeing on fundamentals of our faith, neverthe-

37 ICCD dissolved and merged into UCCD during the same month that the land was granted, leaving two original anchor churches (UCCD and AECD).

less have differing viewpoints on some passages of Scripture.”

Garrick Andrews confirmed that during the 1990s “The church became interdenominational.” In those days, the most celebrated feature of church life was not that we were “evangelical,” but that we were “international.” In other words, the centrality of the gospel had been displaced by a celebration of our international diversity. The result was doctrinal indifference and immaturity.

When doctrine is displaced, pragmatism (whatever works) takes over, as in:

- Adding multiple services, including in 1998 “a Thursday evening contemporary youth-oriented service led by the ‘Splash’ band, which was well-liked by those who attended,” appealing to consumer preferences.
- Over-emphasizing the shape of the cross in the design of the Dubai Evangelical Church Center, based on claims of divine inspiration, overlooking the negative effect this would have on the main hall and preaching. In an earlier UCCD history it was noted, in connection with the DECC building, that a Christian architect “felt called to help with the project and first came up with the two-level concept in a cross pattern.” (Compare the oval-shaped design and acoustics of the Ras Al Khaimah Evangelical Church Center, dedicated in 2017. It is better to preach the cross than to see it (1 Cor 1:23)).
- Centering the 2006 church constitution around Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Church and designating the church a “cell-based international congregation,” following Ralph Neighor’s cell-based ministry strategy.
- Neglect of preaching, by electing a pastor in 1996 not known principally for his preaching gifts, later requiring the formation of a rotating “teaching team” to supplement what was lacking.

Pastoral fads come and go. But Scripture is sufficient for all of life and ministry, and God has revealed in his written Word how we should conduct ourselves as churches. Faithful pastors resist minimizing doctrine in exchange for trends and fashions. We must return again and again to the scriptural pattern and we must preach the Word. As Kevin DeYoung said, “We must resist the urge to get with the spirit of the age. We must feed our people with more than a steady diet of video clips and sermonettes.”

“The Dubai Evangelical Church Centre” (DECC) project was begun, commencing work on fundraising, building design and approval, and construction. A DECC committee was established, with representation from the two anchor churches, UCCD and AECD.

Construction began in 2001, although fundraising did not look promising. The next year the work stopped for two months due to lack of financing. UCCD elders discussed the problem: “Several in the church are growing more concerned regarding the seeming impossibility of the DECC project. Without outside help, it doesn’t seem as though this building will ever happen.”³⁸ “Decision & Risk Analysis” showed no earthly way the building could be completed. Nevertheless, the elders of both churches resolved to push forward. Fundraising appeals continued. In a last-ditch effort, church members were asked to make private loans. Twelve individuals agreed to extend personal finances, ranging from 5,000 AED to \$500,000 (U.S.). So, the work continued until DECC opened in October 2003. Many gave sacrificially to support the work. “We saw gifts of gold and gold jewelry given to help pay for the building.” Even Hindu construction workers on site took up a collection for the building.³⁹ In the end, the project cost 8.9 million AED (\$2,400,000 (U.S.)). By the 5th anniversary, all the private loans were repaid. Such extraordinary sacrifices and investments are still paying dividends 20 years later.

38 Elders’ Meeting Minutes, May 12, 2001.

39 Fifth Anniversary Celebration of Dubai Evangelical Church Center, 2008, p. 8.

CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Beginning in 2002, Mack Stiles spearheaded university student ministry in the UAE, along with David Lawrence and Brian Parks. In addition to student ministry, Mack was instrumental in the local church. While he was the general secretary for the Fellowship of Christian UAE students (FOCUS), he also became an influential elder and principal teacher of UCCD. The church was growing numerically along with Dubai, and the elders recognized a need for more pastoral help, so Mack was named chairman of the pastor search committee tasked to find an “Administrative and Teaching Pastor” to assume the responsibilities vacated by Senior Pastor Daniel Splett’s shift to cell group oversight.



Mack Addressing the CROSS Student Missions Conference

Mack was a catalyst for change in the church. As an elder, Mack oversaw the pulpit ministry of the church, coordinating the preaching. He also initiated meaningful church membership at UCCD, but without other pastoral support it had not yet taken root in the ethos of the church.

Mack assembled a pastor search committee comprised of Buck Rose, a charismatic Jamaican from the UK; Sharon Cousino, a

thoughtful American mother who had been in Dubai for two decades; Biju Matthew, an influential elder and businessman from southern India; and Griff Jones, a discerning Welsh oil and gas worker whose father taught at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. Here was a team of faithful believers committed to biblical ministry and evangelistic outreach.

Mack's friend, Mark Dever, the pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church (CHBC) in Washington, D.C., recommended me for the post at UCCD. At that time, I was an assistant pastor at CHBC and a 2003 graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Accompanied by another CHBC elder, I flew to Dubai and met the search committee in March 2005. From the beginning, there was a sense of camaraderie and shared commitment to gospel advancement, especially to the indigenous people of Arabia. The committee resonated with the priorities of preaching, evangelism, and cross-cultural missions. In May, 2005, I was called to pastor UCCD with the understanding that, if all went well, I would replace Daniel Splett. Two years later, Splett left UCCD and I was designated Sr. Pastor.



Capitol Hill Baptist Church Prayerfully Supported UCCD

CHBC's contribution to the effort in the U.A.E. was exceptional. The church generously provided resources, counsel, financial support, conferences and teaching for UCCD. They were particularly generous in later church planting efforts. Mark Dever explained, "None of this was a part of some grand plan of ours. In fact, neither the one revitalizing opportunity (UCCD) nor the two planting opportunities were initiated by us. We were just there to pray, help, and send financial and human support where we could."⁴⁰

In subsequent years, three elders of UCCD, three elders of Redeemer Church of Dubai, and two elders of Ras Al Khaima Evangelical Church, had formerly been members of CHBC. "A number of our members have relocated their jobs to the UAE to help the work of these churches. Our church gains in no particular way other than the sheer joy of seeing God's kingdom expand in this foreign land."⁴¹

LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

In 2005, the most noticeable feature of our meeting hall was the flags lining the walls representing the nationalities of those who attended. The "International Night" celebration was the most popular annual event. Now, years later, we still celebrate the global reach of the gospel and are committed to the Great Commission. Many who visit us comment on the striking ethnic diversity of the congregation, a foretaste of heaven, when all tongues, tribes and nations will be assembled (Rev 7:9). But our identity and focus are not in our differences but in what we have in common (faith in Christ alone).

40 Mark Dever, *Understanding the Great Commission*, p. 40.

41 Ibid.



Emphasis on “International Church” (at DECC opening 2003)

The prominence of UCCD’s flags was emblematic of the challenge of “international church” ministry. People liked seeing the diversity; they complained if their flag was missing; but that focus eclipsed the overarching truths that united us. One pastor who visited the church in 2005 described “the inevitable pressure in an international church setting to live at the level of the lowest common denominator, both doctrinally and ecclesiastically [in terms of church practice].” The flags were eventually removed because they became a distraction (especially to those from nations for which we had no flags) and required upkeep since new nationalities kept joining us.

As with most international churches, there was pressure to lower the doctrinal standards in order to accommodate people from different backgrounds. For example, I was urged not to teach on divine election (God’s sovereign choice of his people), even when it appeared in the sermon text, because it was not sufficiently “practical.”

One decade after arriving in Dubai, I wrote: “The worst thing you can do in a multi-cultural environment is to dumb-down the doctrine, or avoid the hard-edges of theological truth, in order to try and keep diverse people on the same page. Maybe you think: they are from all

over the world and I must lighten up the teaching to keep them unified. In actual fact, robust truth is what will keep churches and friendships together amid their diversity. *Lowest-common-denominator theology promotes strife and feebleness, not unity and strength.*⁴²

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH ARE WE?

Fifteen years ago, people occasionally asked, “What kind of church is UCCD?” In a setting like ours, without the luxury of denominational heritage, how do we characterize ourselves? Some answered, “multidenominational.” Others said, “international” or “multi-cultural.” But as we grew spiritually, we came to understand that our fundamental identity is “evangelical,” or “gospel-centered.” For the apostle Paul, the matter of “first importance” in a church’s life must be, not our ethnic makeup, but the good news that created us as a church (1 Cor 15:2).

Between 2005-2008, the members were responding to a more Word-centered approach to ministry. We began adding scripture readings to the weekly gathering, plus a scriptural call to worship, a prayer of confession, theologically richer hymns and songs (old and new), and a lengthier pastoral prayer that addressed matters of church life but also broader concerns of society and global missions. The corporate worship was becoming more biblically saturated, and the congregation was growing spiritually as well as numerically. Around that same time, I had written, “our congregation shares rich times of corporate worship and deep cross-cultural relationships that only Christ could have secured. If the church is to be a ‘colony of heaven,’ then we regularly experience foretastes of that ‘great multitude that no one could number, from every

42 <https://www.9marks.org/article/building-a-multi-cultural-ministry-on-gospel-doctrine/>

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (Rev. 7:9)."⁴³

NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL

While there were some doctrinal struggles within the church, there were also threats from the outside. In April 2006, a group of Filipino Christians was singing at Safa Park and someone filed a complaint with the police. As a result, the Dubai Municipality served notice of its intention to close the old UCCD Villa in Jumeirah, where the Filipino church met. Despite our pleas, protests and visits to government offices, the Municipality stood by its decision, explaining that our permitted location was now the DECC building in Jebel Ali. Thus, the Jumeirah villa, where we had met for 16 years, was closed. The Filipino church, in addition to an Indian congregation, shifted over to DECC and our Sunday night service ended.

In God's kindness, this was a blessing for UCCD. Since 2003 we had been divided—meeting both at the new DECC building (on Friday, the legal day off in Dubai), and also at the old Jumeirah villa (on Sunday evenings). As a result, we were not truly one “church” (that word literally means “assembly” or “gathering”). Moreover, we unintentionally sent the signal that church was a “service” one received, instead of a family one gathers with.⁴⁴ When the villa was finally shut down, we were forced to revert to the New Testament norm, one assembly, and we grew in unity as a result. We were also all reminded that, especially in the Muslim world, it is a privilege to meet together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we must not take our church for granted, but rather should “make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Eph 5:16).

43 <https://www.9marks.org/article/pastoring-multi-ethnic-church/>

44 See Jonathan Leeman, *One Assembly: Rethinking the Multisite and Multiservice Church Models* (Crossway, 2020).

Two years later, on March 14th, 2008, the Dubai police restricted access to all church premises and began inspecting individuals entering the church buildings. According to reports in *The Gulf News*, these were routine, Easter-related security procedures. However, at the same time, embassies in the Gulf region were cautioning churchgoers because of threats and adverse publicity surrounding the opening of a church complex in Doha, Qatar the week before.

Whatever the reason for the inspections, the heightened security reminded us once again that “doing church” on the Arabian Peninsula is a privilege that ought not to be taken for granted. In God’s providence, it also gave us the opportunity to bear witness for Christ. During these three weeks, police were stationed outside our building, often forced to stand outside for hours in the beating sun. They were also monitoring the inside of the building. So, we set up “hospitality stations” with water, tea, snacks, and copies of the Scriptures in Arabic. We looked for opportunities to thank the police for their protection and enjoyed conversation with them. Over time, all of the Bibles were quietly taken.



Dubai Evangelical Church Center Today

In Dubai, we are beneficiaries of generous and tolerant leadership.⁴⁵ Not only do they allow us to meet, but they also freely granted us the land where we gather each week, along with police protection when we are threatened. As a result, we are thankful to our hosts, and we look for opportunities to give “honor to whom honor is due” (Rom 13:7).



*The Church Assembled in 2007, Under the Flags
(which came down in 2013)*

Looking back, we see God’s faithfulness in strengthening us as a church from 2005 to 2022. Under God, there were multiple components of UCCD’s reform and growth.

45 From the beginning, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan opposed extremism and promoted dialogue among people of different religions. The official UAE Yearbook, p. 27-28, called Shaikh Zayed “an eager advocate of tolerance, discussion and a better understanding between those of different faiths, and in particular...an ardent [promoter] of dialogue between Muslims and Christians, recognizing that this is essential if mankind is ever to move forward in harmony.”

NINE STAGES OF CHURCH REFORM

There were *9 stages of church reform* that both led to and resulted from spiritual growth in the life of UCCD. The Lord himself produced this growth, but he used these means and the power of prayer to accomplish it, as Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6).

1. Expository preaching
2. Meaningful membership
3. Leadership Development
4. Bible teaching
5. Pastoral internship
6. Congregationalism
7. Church planting
8. Missions Launch Pad
9. Partnership in Gospel Ministry

Stage 1: Expository Preaching

In 2005 we began expounding books of the Bible from beginning to end, starting with Mark’s gospel. “Expository” preaching means the point of the sermon is the point of the text, not just a preacher’s ideas or favorite stories. When a preacher derives the points explicitly from the text itself and shows himself to be governed by the text, scriptural authority is upheld, and God speaks through his Word.

Sermon cards announced the titles and texts to be preached. People began to read the Scripture beforehand and come to church prepared and eager to hear. Small groups tailored their discussions to what had been preached the week before. The church gradually became

centered on the Word. In this way, it was not the preacher who set the agenda, but God.

Sound exposition is not a running commentary—it is gospel centered, either pointing *forward* to Christ (Old Testament), or looking back to him (New Testament). Expositional sermons preach the gospel each week from any text of Scripture. The whole trajectory of the Bible—whether the Law, the Prophets or the Psalms—leads to Christ. Jesus summarized the whole Old Testament in one sentence: “Thus it is *written*, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:46-47). So, Paul’s aim was to present “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

The gospel is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). In 2010 one university student recalled, “After battling with my own convictions and hearing the gospel preached over and over at church and in everyday conversations with my friends, the Lord truly started His work in me. He took out my heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh. He removed the veil from my eyes to see His own truth and beauty. Before, I had *heard* about the goodness of His gospel, but now, for the first time in my life, I *tasted* it and *saw* and *believed*. Everything was different.”

Many were becoming convinced that preaching ought not be homespun stories or anecdotes, but rather meaty exposition of the scriptures. One woman from a charismatic background at first was bored with the sermons. She had been taught that only weak Christians needed the Bible; mature believers heard from God more directly through voices or signs. After sitting under regular expositional preaching, she one day enthusiastically exclaimed that for her, “This is a whole new religion!” We were people from Costa Rica and Iran, Eritrea and Japan—from all kinds of ethnicities and socio-economic and religious backgrounds. And

what held us together was a renewed commitment to hear God's Word.

After 6 years of such preaching at UCCD, I wrote: "The driving force behind any true reform is the Word of God. As the Word powers through a congregation, it softens up the hard ground and produces spiritual change. In Dubai there were faithful members who had been laboring away for years but to little effect; they weren't being consistently supported by the weekly sermons. Valiant attempts were made to strengthen the community, but something was lacking. But when the preaching became consistently expositional and gospel-centered, it was as if someone dropped a burning match on gasoline. Ministry was multiplied. As the church began to turn around, one long-time member compared the preaching to a weekly artillery barrage. The steady pounding of the Word softened opposition and opened up avenues for more fruitful ministry to occur throughout the body."⁴⁶

More than a Sermon

Not only was the preaching word-centered, in time the whole community was. The conversation before and after, the content of our songs, the counseling, the home groups, the discipling occurring throughout the week. Jonathan Leeman described preaching as the power plant. "Electricity leaves the power plant and buzzes through power lines. Then it makes its way into street lights, grocery store freezers, office computers, and rows and rows of neighborhood homes. Lamps glow and refrigerators hum. In the same way, God's Word... should reverberate back and forth, from mouth to mouth and heart to heart."⁴⁷

A growing proportion of our church began reading good books of solid theology and practical Christian living and discussing them with

46 <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalwhat-makes-church-reform-possible/>

47 *Word Centered Church: How Scripture Brings Life and Growth to God's People*, p. 28.

one another. Men discussed Grudem's *Systematic Theology* and Owen's *Mortification of Sin*. We began a book-stall at the back of Maranatha Hall with 15 or 20 titles and pamphlets, regularly replenished. The Bible Society, managed and led by church members Babu and Ranjini Ganta since 2004, grew from being a generic Christian bookshop with heavy Pentecostal influence, to a valuable ministry resource pumping out books of reformed doctrine, sound Bible teaching, and helpful material for the Christian life. The Gantas were valuable ministry partners, supporting conferences, evangelism, and influencing editorial selection. The Dubai branch affected title selections at other Bible Society bookshops all over the Gulf, so there was a regional impact as countless books from Crossway, Christian Focus, 9 Marks and CCEF were distributed.

We worked and prayed to become an entire community centered on the gospel, since the church is “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15). Thus, as Dever and Dunlop put it, “The Sunday morning sermon isn’t the finish line for word ministry, it’s the starting line.”⁴⁸

Stage 2: Meaningful Church Membership

At times during our history, there was no list stating who was and was not a member in good standing of our church. There were just a few hundred people showing up on a weekly basis, some regularly, some not. People who had never committed to the church were serving coffee, singing up front, even leading small groups. The elders didn’t know it, but some of these official leaders held unorthodox views like universalism (everyone will ultimately be saved), and modalism (God is one person who appears in three different forms). They had never been vetted through any membership process.

48 Mark Dever & Jamie Dunlop, *Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive*, p. 91.

In 2005 we began promoting meaningful membership, the idea that following Jesus is a community project in which the community is defined and accountable. God has always worked through a community of people, whether Israel at Mount Sinai or the assembly meeting in the house of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:5). And these believers have obligations to “one another” (John 13:34, Rom 12:10, Heb 10:24).

As believers pursued membership, pastors began meeting and interviewing each candidate. In this way, we:

- ensured to the best of our ability that new members were genuine believers,
- confirmed that they knew and could articulate the gospel,
- explained biblical expectations for church membership, and
- established a pastoral relationship with the new members coming in.

Over time this affected the complexion of the church as a whole.

Pragmatism vs. Membership

Pragmatism is the idea that we do “whatever works” in church ministry. If an initiative results in immediately measurable growth—higher numbers—then it must be good. One hallmark of the seeker-sensitive church growth movement is that “belonging” comes before “believing.” That is (according to this view) non-Christians should be welcomed into community, given a sense of ownership and identity among the church, and afterward, through these influences, they will be led to embrace the gospel message. This kind of “attractional” model had characterized UCCD in previous years. Thus, UCCD’s 2005 visitors’ brochure promised, “There’s something for everyone...including you!”⁴⁹ There was no congregational vetting process.

49 “Growth in commitment is good. But growth into commitment is unbiblical.” Dever & Dunlop, *Compelling Community*, p. 55.

As a result, Roman Catholics and inclusivists (who believe salvation is found through multiple channels and not only through faith alone in Jesus Christ) were welcome to lead Bible studies and other ministries. All agree that churches should be warm and engaging to visitors and non-Christians, but we believed never at the cost of blurring the lines between the church and the world.

We began encouraging our members to pray for one another regularly, individually, and by name. The membership directory was a valuable tool for this. We urged members to pray for one page of the directory per day. Some criticized membership as exclusive or elitist, but membership necessarily delineates who is in and who is out, as when the apostle Paul spoke of one to be “removed from among you” (1 Cor 5:2).

We concluded that new attenders who are not members shouldn’t be representing the church in official ways, from serving coffee to volunteering with childcare. This is not because we wanted to be unwelcoming, but because the most important question that should confront any new attender is this: Where do you stand with God? Have you been forgiven of your sins and adopted into his family? Until people address these issues, their service in the church may simply distract them from these most important questions. This was a pivotal moment in the reform of UCCD. In the end, the elders agreed not to make membership optional, but rather an expectation for service in the church.

Church is not just an event we attend. In the New Testament, church is like a family one joins, with attendant privileges and responsibilities. As we promoted membership, large numbers of regular attenders, who had never been encouraged to pursue membership, began attending the membership classes and committing to the congregation. More people began embracing a sense of ownership and corporate identity with one another.

2005—72 new members joined the church.

2006—128 new members

2007—171 new members



UCCD baptism in 2007

As membership grew, so did our sense of community and fellowship. It sharpened our visible witness for Christ, and it helped us know each other better. This commitment was highlighted in 2009 when UCCD adopted a church covenant.

A Church Covenant

By itself, membership is merely a skeleton. Spirit-wrought fellowship and self-sacrificial love are the flesh and blood circulation, showing true life in the body.

Especially in a church with 60 nationalities, it was important to clarify the nature of our commitment to each other. Our fellowship was not based on shared interests, or shared ethnicity, or shared situation in life. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The great distinguishing mark of the church is this: we love one another.

But what does this love look like? How is it expressed?

On April 24, 2009, UCCD adopted a church covenant by a vote of 217-13 (6 abstentions). The covenant clarified the spiritual and relational commitments of membership, highlighting the practical love that Christ calls us to extend to one another. A church covenant is simply a promise, made to God and to one's fellow members.

In following years, we made use of the covenant by:

- praying through the covenant;
- reaffirming the covenant together in our members' meetings;
- teaching the covenant in new members' classes;
- reaffirming it together before taking the Lord's Supper.

Reaffirming the church covenant before taking the Lord's Supper involved members standing to affirm, while non-members remained seated. When we began this in 2015, some objected that it was unnecessarily exclusive or would make visitors feel left out. We believed, to the contrary, that since the Lord's Supper is a covenant meal when we reaffirm our bonds to one another, it was important to clarify that we do not have the same bonds with visitors and others we don't know, although in Christian charity we allow them to partake according to their conscience.⁵⁰ We concluded that we did not want people to attend comfortably year after year without confronting these basic questions.

Not only did this practice encourage membership but at least one person came to faith through watching others stand. He explained that when the members were standing and reaffirming the covenant, he asked himself, "why am I sitting?" This motivated him to attend the

⁵⁰ We do enjoy unity with all believers (John 17), but that unity is displayed through local assemblies of believers with "one another" responsibilities (Heb 10:24-25) and biblical structures of authority.

membership classes and reflect on his own standing before the Lord. He was eventually converted and joined the church.

So, the covenant became a biblical tool for growing community. It gave expression to the relational commitment of membership.

A Compelling Community

As we grew spiritually, our relationships became deeper and more meaningful. Spiritual conversations became more normal and widespread among our church. Over time we began to experience “a togetherness and commitment that transcends all natural bonds—because of our commonality in Jesus Christ.”⁵¹ The word of God began to reverberate through our community during the week.

Church-wide picnics at Safa and Barsha Parks were annual highlights as people lingered for hours enjoying each other’s food, coffee and conversation. Monthly prayer & praise services underscored evangelistic endeavors and celebrations like weddings and child births.

Our home groups became community hubs for serving one another throughout the week, applying the weekly sermons, caring for the needy, praying for one another. They often spun off individual discipling relationships and addressed counseling needs. For years, UCCD had emphasized Care Life Groups, but from 2009 onward, under associate pastor Richard Ngwisha’s influence, our leaders became better equipped. Most of them were elders of the church. In time, all of them were qualified to handle God’s word.

The home groups were not based on “niche marketing” (same ethnic background, similar social position or life experience.) It was the gospel that united and motivated us to meet and serve one another. We were mindful that “the point is not the community; the point is God.

51 Dever & Dunlop, *Compelling Community*, p. 13.

Community is merely the effect.”⁵² The gospel creates community.

Christians are people who ask their friends: “how are you doing?”—and they expect an answer. The world is surface and shallow. The church should be deep and real, and over time we grew in our desire for such genuine Christian experience.

We began to embrace that the Christian life is not a solo venture. When Hebrews 3:13 says, “exhort one another,” that means everybody ministers and everybody needs ministry. Ephesians 4:11-13: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood...”

A Revolving Door

Our size was increasing, and the proportion of church attenders who were committed in membership was growing. But at the same time, people were leaving due to the transience of Dubai. When expatriates return to their ancestral homes, they take the gospel back with them. In this way, UCCD would be a training center, an exporter of gospel assets across the globe. From 2009 to 2018, 786 members left UCCD and moved to places all over the world. In Dubai, we kept reloading and training.

These two stages, then, were the two pedals of a bicycle—preaching and membership. They got the church moving in the right direction. Other elements in the reform of UCCD followed downstream, and included—

52 Ibid., p. 30.

Stage 3: Leadership Development

When I arrived in 2005, UCCD had 5 elders, from an array of different theological backgrounds. They were Brethren, Mennonite, charismatic, or pragmatic. One was actually the pastor of a Mandarin-speaking church that UCCD had helped found.⁵³ As the church progressed during the following years, God raised up men to shepherd the flock who were increasingly characterized by:

- an ability to teach sound doctrine
- a pastoral commitment to God's people
- a high view of the local church in God's eternal purposes
- a belief in the exclusivity of Christ and God's sovereignty in salvation

At times in our history, UCCD had experienced disunity among the leaders (especially during the 1990s and early 2000s, see above). Nevertheless, many faithful men had cared for the flock in the past. But now, there was a growing unity among the elders, both in terms of theology and ministry philosophy.

From 2008 forward, the addition of more solid shepherds cleared the way for an acceleration of the church reform.⁵⁴ We also became more active in training up other leaders, in view of the New Testament pattern of plural elder leadership (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet 5:1).

53 In an attempt to oversee church plants, UCCD had taken the unusual step of making the pastor of a church plant (e.g., Chinese church, Filipino church) an elder of UCCD, the mother church. Even though he did not shepherd or teach or even attend UCCD, yet in elders' meetings the church plant pastor still had a vote on matters pertaining to the mother church.

54 The former senior pastor had left in 2007.



A UCCD elders' meeting in 2013

When we noticed a man who was responding to the ministry of the Word, who loved the congregation and evidenced it by regular attendance at the meetings, we would:

- spend time with him and get to know his character and family;
- ensure that he “[held] firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9);
- read and discuss with him good books on theology (e.g., Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*), ecclesiology (e.g., Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*), counseling (e.g., Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*), etc.;
- give him teaching opportunities to test his gifts (1 Tim 3:2); and
- observe his ministry and fruitfulness in the church over time, especially his discipling relationships.⁵⁵

55 See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/raising-up-elders/>

Ultimately, the Holy Spirit produces elders in a church (Acts 20:28), but he uses our prayer and discipling to that end. God was growing up faithful shepherds under the ministry of the Word. In subsequent years the congregation recognized additional elders from:

Australia	U.K.	Zambia
U.S.	S. Africa	
Philippines	Egypt	
India	Zimbabwe	
Nigeria	Ghana	

These men were diverse in ethnicity and cultural background, but united in the gospel and ministry philosophy. Serving alongside like-minded brothers like these is one of the greatest joys in ministry.⁵⁶



Emeka Okechukwu installed as an elder (April, 2018)

56 See Appendix I—Elders of the United Christian Church of Dubai since 2005.

As the years passed, we continued to grow (both numerically and spiritually), so we added additional staff.

- Richard Ngwisha, a former member who had returned to Zambia, was recruited back to UCCD to oversee our counseling and small group ministry, later being recognized as an elder (associate pastor) in 2009.
- John Welkner, our director of youth ministry since 2006, transitioned to associate pastor in 2010, eventually shaping our missions strategy and overseeing our pastoral internship program.
- In 2008, Jeremy Yong, Director of Ministries, strengthened our general member care, promoted group discipling relationships, initiated our pastoral internship program, and taught the Word faithfully in numerous settings.
- That same year, Roy Verrips, Church Administrator, helped with execution of ministry, staff office renovation and our transition from small- to larger-church administration.
- In 2009, Dave Furman, Church Planting Coordinator, began testing the waters to determine the best ways to plant other evangelical churches in the area.



*Richard Ngwisha leading a panel discussion on
“Christianity in Africa” in 2019*

New members continued to join (160 were added in ‘08-‘09) and there was a steady stream of conversions of people from a variety of different religious backgrounds. Membership approached 600, and in 2009, offerings grew 23% from the previous year.

Stage 4: Bible teaching

In 2005, neither adult “Sunday School” classes nor church-wide Bible studies were a part of church life. In January 2007 we implemented more teaching outlets—one on Friday morning before church (Friday Foundations) and a Thursday night Bible study, as well.

These classes started small, initially attracting only about 25 people. By 2010, 100 people were weekly receiving teaching on a range of practical and theological subjects. Fast-forward 10 more years, and now 200 people on average attend the classes on Friday mornings, covering topics such as spiritual disciplines, systematic theology, evangelism, parenting, etc.

Not only did these classes inject much-needed biblical truth into the life of the church, but they provided teaching opportunities for aspiring elders, who could then be evaluated and trained based on their teaching. In 2009, for example, more than a dozen men, several of them future elders, taught Friday Foundations subjects including “Just for Starters,” prayer, and cross-cultural evangelism.



An Elder teaching sound doctrine

Women’s Bible Study

For years, women’s Bible studies had been a prominent part of UCCD’s ministry, reaching more than 100 women each week. But sometimes the content was questionable, and any woman was welcome to lead a group, with the curriculum of her choice (usually video-based studies, like Joyce Meyers or Beth Moore.) The elders were concerned about some of the content, but they refused to get involved.

During the early 2000s, women’s Bible studies consisted of a large group of women meeting in the home of our deaconess of women’s ministries, Darlene Wheeler, and several smaller groups meeting at the DECC building. In the fall of 2006, with the encouragement of Mack Stiles’

wife, Leeann, Keri Folmar began an inductive Bible study of Philippians at DECC. This method of study caught on and women came to love studying the Scriptures. Keri's studies for UCCD were later published as the "Delighting in the Word" Bible studies by Cruciform Press. Women's ministry became a powerful engine for change and growth in the church.



Keri Folmar leading UCCD Women's Bible Study

The women also began to organize biblical, gospel-centered retreats in partnership with UCCD church plants. Kathleen Nielson came to the UAE three times and taught our women on enjoying God's word, the gospel of John, and Isaiah. Sharon James came twice and taught about the Christian worldview, plus a series of women from church history who were passionate about God's glory. During COVID in 2021 around 400 women participated in Nancy Guthrie's online Biblical Theology Workshop for Women and were greatly encouraged.

Women's Bible study continues to be a fixture of UCCD. Over 100 women engage in mainly inductive studies that are offered in the morning or evening. The elders are now happily involved in vetting both teachers and materials.

Bible Conferences

In 2008, we invited Paul Tripp to teach on *How People Grow*, a challenge to pursue godliness together. He was so well-received that we invited him to return the next year, and we began sponsoring annual Bible Conferences.

In previous years UCCD had preached a generic message with little doctrinal specificity. Outside speakers tended to be broad, “big-tent” evangelicals. But now the teaching became theologically focused, reformed, and robustly gospel-centered:

2009—D. A. Carson, “The Scandal of the Cross.”

2009—Conrad Mbewe, men’s conference.

2009—Paul Tripp, marriage conference.

2010—Paul Tripp, “Your Walk with God is a Community Project.”

2010—Mark Dever, “The Gospel & Personal Evangelism”

2011—Michael Reeves, “Deep Refreshment from the Past”

2012—Kevin DeYoung “Life, Mission & the Church”

2012—Carl Trueman, “God’s Truth & Faithfulness”

2013—John Piper, “Global Missions & the Church”

2014—Phillip Jensen, “We Preach Christ Crucified”

2015—Tom Schreiner & Bruce Ware, “Beholding Our God”

2015—Michael Reeves, “Delighting in the Trinity”

2016—David Jackman, “The Spirit of Truth”

2017—Tom Schreiner & Steve Wellum, “5 Solas of the Reformation”

2019—Ken Mbugua, “True Gospel & True Churches”

2019—Christopher Ash, “Praying the Psalms”



*Tom Schreiner and Steve Wellum interviewed at conference
titled “The Five Solas of the Reformation” (2017)*

These conferences exposed our church to outstanding authors and ministry networks and solidified the theological direction of the church. Moreover, when these speakers came to Dubai, we sponsored pastors’ conferences as well, to give instruction and encourage ministry fellowship in the UAE. In time, UCCD also began sponsoring Simeon Trust preaching workshops for pastors in the region.

Stage 5: Pastoral Internship

In 2008, a Syrian man named Mahmoud contacted us, seeking to learn more about Jesus. We met with him, connected him with church members, began studying Scripture with him, and in time he embraced Jesus as Lord, got baptized, and began growing spiritually. His family reacted forcefully against his faith, but he kept growing stronger and over time developed a love for the church and a desire to serve God’s people pastorally.

Around that time, Anand, an Indian brother who was converted

in Saudi Arabia, began attending our church seeking pastoral training. He had heard of our biblical and theological emphases, and he longed to be better equipped for ministry.

Then Robin Weekes, a pastor in Delhi, told us of a young minister in his church who wanted to study theology and learn practically what it means to be a pastor.

These three men became the initial class of our pastoral internship program in 2009.

Jesus called churches to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). In our case, since we are located at the crossroads of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, we have a unique opportunity to serve strategic churches and ministries. With the congregation’s support, we decided to equip aspiring pastors, evangelists and church leaders from this region with education, training and ministry opportunities, so that they might serve more fruitfully in local churches in this part of the world.

Our goal was to give a biblical model for doing ministry as these men became exposed to the inner workings of our church—first, by observing a biblical approach to ministry; second, by studying biblical teaching on the church, systematic and biblical theology, pastoral leadership, and spiritual formation, along with practical training in preaching and teaching; third, by engaging with the church’s individuals, families and home groups.

In following years, UCCD trained interns from:

Syria	South Africa	Japan
Tunisia	India	Ethiopia
Kazakhstan	Sudan	Kuwait
Germany	Indonesia	Philippines
Egypt	Afghanistan	Zanzibar
Pakistan	Somalia	United Kingdom
Kashmir	Jordan	
Palestine	Nepal	

Most of them today are pastoring or otherwise supporting ministries back in their home countries. One became the pastor of the Arabic Evangelical Church of Sharjah, U.A.E. in 2021.

Our whole church enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to build up future leaders. Every year, they got to know the interns, invited them into their homes, and prayed for them faithfully. The internship expanded our horizons and stretched us all into becoming “world Christians.” Such selfless concern about other nations and ministries was crucial for our spiritual growth.



Church Compound Jebel Ali (2018)

Dubai Evangelical Church Center bottom left

Referring to UCCD's development over these ten years, international pastor Andy Johnson wrote, "As that congregation has grown in health and diversity, it has become a doorway for the nations. Far from being a club for Westerners, the congregation is full of expat Arabs, Indians, and Filipinos. Their impact has been broad and deep. They've planted other churches nearby and in other cities. They've helped train local pastors from nearby Muslim nations and encouraged indigenous evangelism."⁵⁷

Stage 6: Congregationalism

Church membership is not a spectator sport. Many evangelicals have been taught just to show up on Sundays and passively receive a product or service. But in the New Testament, every member of a church has a job. There are solemn responsibilities that go along with church membership.

Not just the pastor, but all the members of the body should be building the church each week. As Colin Marshall observed: "Church is a place where Christians go to work..."⁵⁸ By that he meant: Talking to your neighbor sitting beside you. Helping others understand the word. Singing with gusto. Praying for church members. Inviting them over afterward. Having spiritual conversation. We are not just passive spectators when we gather.

There are also formal responsibilities that go along with church membership.

As we grew in unity and maturity from 2005 to 2011, our leaders became convinced by Scripture of certain principles that matter for

57 *Missions: How the Local Church Goes Global*, p. 108.

58 Colin Marshall, "Ministry of the Pew." <https://gotherefor.com/offer.php?in-tid=14837&changestore=true>

church life and health.

1. We believed the congregation should decide on its leaders.

Prior to 2011, UCCD did not vote for elders or deacons. Rather, names were put forward and after 21 days they were confirmed automatically if there was no objection. But there was no guidance for what to do if there was an objection. We removed the ambiguity by proposing congregational votes for church officers requiring a two-thirds majority. Acts 6:2-5 shows congregational involvement in leadership selection. Paul laid out leadership qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus in part so churches could evaluate their leaders. As early as AD96 Clement of Rome wrote of elders being commissioned “with the full consent of the church.”

Congregational voting allowed more ownership over who led and served the church.

2. We believed the congregation should decide on membership matters.

Paul wrote in 2 Cor 2:6, referring to a matter of church discipline: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him.”

If there was a “majority,” then there was something akin to a vote of agreement—a congregation making decisions related to discipline and membership. If one could be “put out” of a fellowship by congregational action (see 1 Cor 5:2), then one could be put in—a solemn act of the whole congregation, a declaration by the majority that the member is a true follower of Christ, and a promise to extend covenantal love and accountability to that person specifically.

As the congregation affirmed new members, we would grow in our love for and commitment to each other and the church as a whole.

3. We believed the congregation should decide on church discipline.

The prior constitution specified that elders carry out discipline

without congregational input. We proposed that the congregation must vote on church discipline, bringing our practices in line with the biblical pattern. The final court of appeal on matters of discipline in a local church is not the elders or the pastor, but “the church,” the assembly itself (Matt 18:17.)

Thus, the congregation embraced its responsibility in matters of discipline and doctrine.

Congregationalism is not democracy run amok. The congregation would not hereafter approve what photocopy machine we would purchase, or what kind of coffee we would serve after church. We still heartily affirmed elder leadership, but the most important matters of discipline and doctrine rested with the congregation as a whole. As the 2011 constitution put it in Article 3, section 3: “this congregation is led by elders but governed by its members.”

Not that the church is always right. The local church is not inerrant. There are plenty of examples in history where churches erred. But as we strove to make decisions according to the Scriptures, we trusted that we would glorify Christ.

Therefore, for the 5th time in UCCD’s history, we proposed a new constitution, this time providing for congregational government.⁵⁹ Now, being a church member required active care for others in the body—getting to know those we covenanted with, casting votes on important matters, praying for the members of the church, attending weekly meetings not as spectators, but as participants.

Our new constitution was more than just officers and elections, meetings and amendments. At stake were inestimable privileges and responsibilities. As the writer of Hebrews described it: “You have come to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You

59 It was approved on June 10, 2011. Prior UCCD constitutions were #1—1978-1992; #2—1992-1996; #3—1996-2003; #4—2003-2011.

have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (Heb 12:22-23). Citizenship in this city cannot be earned for all the work or all the wealth in the world.

Stage 7: Church Planting



The 163-story Burj Khalifa

On January 4, 2010, the iconic Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest skyscraper, was inaugurated in Dubai amid fireworks, ribbon cutting and international coverage. But the most important commissioning to take place that first week of 2010 was not the Burj Khalifa, but the commissioning of Redeemer Church of Dubai.

As UCCD grew numerically, we increasingly desired to plant more churches in Dubai. Since “a city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matt. 5:14), more healthy congregations would sharpen the visible witness of the gospel. As early as 2007, we were praying for opportunities to plant additional churches, looking for property to buy, and seeking

government authorization to establish new churches.

In 2008 we announced our desire to find a dedicated church planter. At just the right time, Dave Furman, a Dallas Theological Seminary graduate, expressed his desire to come to Dubai with a view to planting a new congregation. In time, Dave became our church planting coordinator, tasked with the responsibility to seek out church planting options for UCCD.

Dave tirelessly researched and visited hotels, schools and other venues, searching for the right location to house a new congregation. As Dave cast vision for the church plant, momentum and excitement continued to grow. Leaders such as Mack Stiles, Brian Parks and David Lawrence signed on, and we encouraged many to go.

At the January 8, 2010 commissioning of Redeemer by UCCD, we said, “Rather than one mega-church, we long to see multiple gospel-centered churches in neighborhoods throughout the city. This is the best way to reach the nations with the gospel. And that’s our ultimate goal.”

Redeemer initially met on February 12, 2010 at the Sofitel Hotel at Deira City Center Hotel, on the opposite side of the city from UCCD.



Dave Furman preaching at Redeemer launch gathering in 2010

Almost 150 UCCD members went with the new church, along with 600,000 AED (\$164,000 US) out of surplus funds to support the work, plus more support in subsequent years. At the time, the UCCD elders wrote, “This payment is simply an expression of our commitment to see healthy evangelical churches planted throughout the city. It’s rooted in our desire to see the kingdom of God advance throughout this emirate, this country, and indeed the whole region.”

Aside from Dave, the initial elders of Redeemer were Mack Stiles and Brian Parks. In addition, two UCCD staff members (including Australian Glen Jones, UCCD music minister for 6 years) shifted over to join and support that congregation.

Church planting was costly—both relationally and financially. Why did we send off one long-time elder, three fruitful staff members and almost 150 visionary members? Because Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” We believed church planting was the best evangelistic strategy under heaven. As Colin Marshall and Tony Payne explained: “We must be exporters of trained people instead of hoarders of trained people...The goal isn’t church growth but gospel growth.”⁶⁰

Gospel influence multiplied in the city. Four months after sending them out, UCCD’s elders reported to the church: “Redeemer Church of Dubai is already bursting at the seams, reaching people on the other side of town who were less likely to drive to Jebel Ali on Friday mornings. Many of the new people being attracted to Redeemer are from unchurched or unreached backgrounds. We rejoice in that.”⁶¹

But it still hurt. The absence of beloved friends impacted us emotionally and the departure of more than 100 tithers impacted us financially. Around that time, we also felt the tremors of an economic

60 Colin Marshall, *The Trellis and the Vine*, p. 25.

61 Letter to congregation, April 9, 2010.

downturn in Dubai. But we kept reminding one another that we were sacrificing for the sake of God's kingdom. At our annual members' meeting that year the elders said, "it's hard to build a robust community when you send away 100 of your best friends to go plant another church in the city. But this is what we've done with Redeemer." Again we were helped by the perspective of Colin Marshall and Tony Payne: "We must be willing to lose people from our own congregation if that is better for the growth of the gospel. We must be happy to send members off to other places so that the gospel may grow there as well. And be warned: this will happen if you take gospel growth and training seriously..."⁶²

By God's grace, gospel work doubled in our city a result of the church plant.

We also grew spiritually through the process. By necessity, new leaders had to be cultivated, and many rose to the challenge. Some ministries suffered, but others were strengthened. For example, most of the musicians went with Redeemer. Our musical accompaniment became more stripped down and mere. But as a consequence, our congregational singing actually became more robust. Shortly after Redeemer was formed, one non-Christian from Spain commented on how heartily we sang. He recalled that it made the hairs on his arms stand up on end, saying, "I didn't believe what they were singing, but they sure did!" Not long after that he was converted and joined our church. Our joy in the Lord became more and more evident.

A Second Church Plant—in Ras Al Khaima

A member of UCCD, Gavin Watson, was a trusted attorney for the Ruler of Ras Al Khaima (RAK), the northernmost emirate near the Strait of Hormuz. This church member was an unashamed follower of

62 Trellis & the Vine, p. 83.

Jesus Christ, and when he requested land for an evangelical church, the Sheikh generously agreed.

On April 5, 2012, Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al Qasimi allocated land to UCCD on which to build an evangelical church building in the Al Hamra district. At that time there was little evangelical work in that emirate, only a couple of small ethnic-based congregations meeting in villas, neither in English. Many Christians in RAK had to drive an hour to gather with a church. We perceived an historic opportunity to plant an evangelical church as a platform for gospel work throughout the under-reached northern emirates and beyond.



The Sheikh of RAK

The opportunity was not only for the establishment of a church, but a building. In Arabia, church buildings are important because: (1) religious meetings in hotels or other venues are not legally permitted, (2) a building signified legitimacy and legal authorization; and (3) an evangelical building served as a lighthouse, a visible witness for anyone who wanted to know more about Jesus Christ. Anyone who had

questions could just walk in. Three years later, at the groundbreaking ceremony for the new building, it was observed, “When we received his invitation, we at UCCD didn’t know how we could pay for it, we didn’t know if we could pull it off, but we jumped at the chance to see a gospel outpost for Christ here in the northern Emirates.”

Our elders agreed that a church plant from UCCD would need to be:

- Evangelical and reformed in its doctrine
- Committed to expositional preaching
- Similar in statement of faith and church covenant
- Eventually led by a plurality of elders, and
- Missions-oriented, with a view toward evangelism especially of unreached peoples, not only the nationals but also Iranians and other Middle Easterners.



*UCCD Pastors and Interns on the Future Building Site in RAK,
with Gavin Watson, third from right (2012)*

Our greatest need was for a qualified church planter to spearhead

the initiative—one who lined up with our theology and ministry philosophy. We reached out to Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. for advice in identifying “a biblically qualified man possessing the teaching and preaching gifts to pastor a church. In addition, he needs to be a self-starter with the skills needed to pioneer a work in an unreached environment, interact with the local people (and Ruling family), and lead a fledgling congregation.”⁶³ He would also need financial support and the ability to cast vision and raise substantial funds for a building.

Josh Manley, an elder of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, fit this profile. Like us, he sensed a strategic gospel imperative to plant evangelical congregations in the cities of the Arabian Peninsula. So, he arrived in Dubai in November 2012 with his wife, Jenny, and three young children. Josh said, “I thought given the land that had been given, there was an opportunity to put something down that would last. It was a risk worth taking.”⁶⁴ For three months, the Manleys got acclimated to life in the UAE, living in Dubai among the people of UCCD. Josh immediately began recruiting, fundraising, preaching and discipling.

On January 25, 2013, UCCD commissioned the RAK church plant, sending 12 members, including Sascha and Julia Baer, pivotal workers from Germany.⁶⁵ The fledgling congregation began meeting in the RAK convention center, while they grew and prayed for a meeting place of their own. Although the church was meeting an hour away, many UCCD home groups committed regularly to drive up to RAK to attend the gatherings and pray and support.

For the next two years, Josh and Jenny labored not only among

63 Letter to the elders of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Feb. 20, 2012.

64 *Southern Seminary Magazine*, vol 86, spring 2018, p. 46.

65 Sascha, a former UCCD intern, had grown up in Afghanistan and spoke Dari. In later years he would be valuable in RAK in the training of Afghan interns and house church leaders.

the people but also internationally as they raised more than \$2 million for the new building. Sascha, a trained engineer, served on church staff and later as an associate pastor, giving invaluable aid in the building process as well as pastorally. His wife, Julia, ran the children's ministry. UCCD contributed 2.2 million AED (\$615,000 US) for the building, as well as additional annual support for the church.



The RAK Church Center today—60 miles from the Strait of Hormuz

Through RAK Evangelical Church, the manifold wisdom of God was being made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10). The gospel began moving forward through the church that met and trained and worshipped there. Moreover, due to their strategic location, RAK was able to train gospel workers from unreached countries nearby and support evangelism in the region. Josh and another brother have been able to train dozens of house-church pastors from Afghanistan and send them back into the country. As Josh later put it, “I pastor an ordinary church in an extraordinary part of the world.”

When the RAK building was dedicated on May 12, 2017, we said to Josh publicly, “Not only have you raised the funds, but you have collected the church, and faithfully shepherded them from the beginning. This has been very much a team effort—but you have led the team, shouldered the responsibility, and now there are people coming to Christ,

and faithful elders are in place, and this building is a platform for gospel operations into the future.”

Martin Luther called the church a “mouth-house.” That is: the most important thing about a church building is what is spoken there—not (first) the music or the programs or even the fellowship—but the message. It is the preached word that fuels everything else. Our prayer for RAK has been that long after Josh and Jenny and Sascha and Julia and the entire first generation of that church are gone, the good news would still ring out in those halls.

A Third Church Plant—in Sharjah

Two months after we had commissioned RAK Evangelical Church, Chaplain Ernest Victor of the Sharjah St. Martin’s Anglican Church invited UCCD to start an evangelical church meeting in a new Anglican building there.

A few days later, four UCCD elders drove to Sharjah (35 minutes away) for a guided tour with Ernest through the construction site. The building was large, well-designed, and centrally located in the heart of Sharjah’s population. The Anglicans were excited about a reliable, long-term, international evangelical church as one of the anchor tenants in the building. So, it seemed to be a win-win situation.

Unlike our RAK church plant, Sharjah would not involve funding a building. Unlike Redeemer, it would not require starting a church in an expensive hotel. Instead, we had an opportunity for a prime Friday morning slot in a new church building that was already going up in Sharjah, paid for by others, in the heart of the city.

In a UCCD members’ meeting on April 19, 2013, the elders explained, “We have for years been eyeing Sharjah as an ideal place to plant a new church—800,000 people, heavy saturation of unreached people groups, no international evangelical witness that we’re aware of.

Some of our people live there and travel all the way to Jebel Ali to gather with us week after week but can't be as involved as they would like to be, due to the sheer distance."

In 2014 Sharjah had been designated "the capital of Islamic culture in the UAE," but there was no healthy international church witness there. So, it seemed like a prime location to plant a church.

Not only that, but UCCD had a gifted preacher on staff who was ready and waiting to pastor the flock. Anand Samuel had been in our first class of pastoral interns in 2009-2010. After the internship, he had worked for the Bible Society before joining us as an associate pastor in June 2011.

Even though UCCD had just planted the RAK church and was over-extended financially, we knew we had only a narrow window of opportunity before the Sharjah church building was full of other churches, so we committed. We believed we had received a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to plant a church where there was no healthy evangelical church. Our long-term goal was the multiplication of faithful, evangelical witnesses throughout the region. Grace Sharjah was a vital link in this plan.



*Grace Evangelical Church, meeting in St. Martin's Anglican Church
Building in Sharjah (2014)*

UCCD eventually sent 12 of our members including one staff

member to support the work. Anand has preached and disciplined patiently among the people year after year. Priya, his wife, has provided warm hospitality and disciplined and taught women. After 3 years of ministry he wrote, “while I would like to see lightning bolts of monumental change, the Lord shows me time and time again that He works in ways that are quiet, often imperceptible and incremental.” By year four more than 100 people were regularly attending. People’s lives were changed—many repented of sin; ethnic divisions were broken down; discipleship and hospitality grew; several believed the gospel and were baptized, like Mike from Denmark, who told Anand, “When I came to the church for the first time with my twisted theology, you stood up for the truth and loved and cared for me.”

Rollback

From the perspective of the Dubai government, evangelical churches were headquartered in the Dubai Evangelical Church Center (DECC), located on land granted by the Rulers in 1998. As the anchor tenants of the building, UCCD and its sister church, the Arabic Evangelical Church, are answerable to the government for other evangelical churches—those that meet in or are in partnership with DECC.

As Dubai has grown, churches have multiplied throughout the city, most of them ethnically based congregations meeting in villas, hotels and schools. Most of these churches are Pentecostal and unaffiliated, but some are evangelical and connected to DECC and UCCD.

In January 2018, Dubai Police began calling hotels to inform them that it was now illegal to host religious gatherings that had not been issued a permit by the Community Development Authority, a new government licensing entity. One year earlier, Dubai schools had informed churches that they would no longer be allowed to meet on

their premises. Then in February 2018, the police followed through on their warnings. One Pentecostal church, not partnering with DECC, was interrupted by authorities; leaders were taken in for questioning, and their documents were held and bank accounts seized (and later returned). The unregulated freedoms of the past were being replaced by a new system of tighter restrictions. DECC partner churches which had been meeting elsewhere, plus many others, now sought to begin meeting at DECC.

It was a tumultuous season as churches were relocated, suspended, and disrupted. The authorities warned us that unauthorized gatherings would be subject to fines and possible imprisonment. DECC leaders scrambled to organize records of the partner churches, sponsor visa-holders, and made room for homeless congregations. We obtained special hotel approval for a few churches, including Redeemer Church of Dubai, to meet outside the building.

Since most churches could no longer legally meet outside the DECC building, this building became even more strategic. UCCD began devoting more pastoral effort to government- and church-relations.

Associate Pastor Ben Woodward gave important leadership as chairman of the DECC oversight committee. A graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and previously an elder of Immanuel Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, Ben had joined UCCD in 2016 to bolster our administrative oversight. In addition to his other pastoral ministry, Ben partnered with the Arabic church leadership and skillfully liaised with other evangelical congregations throughout the crisis.

These government restrictions rolled back the church planting strategy we had pursued since 2007. We had aimed for neighborhood churches to spread the gospel throughout Dubai, but now we submitted to the Lord's providence and resolved to "be subject to the governing authorities" (Rom 13:1). Two of our key partner churches—Covenant Hope and Crossroads (Tagalog language)—moved into the DECC

building.

Tightening government restrictions highlighted the strategic value of an authorized church building on the Arabian Peninsula. We were grateful for the sacrifices made by previous generations in the funding and construction of DECC.

Stage 8: A Launch Pad for Missions

As mentioned above, our church was motivated from the beginning to be an evangelistic light among the local Arab people. A 1978 church newsletter said, “We ought to have a special function, that being primarily the spreading of the gospel to our hosts.”⁶⁶ Our commitment to the Great Commission never wavered, but the quality of our missions outreach was mixed.

As UCCD’s leaders became unified around a gospel-centered, word-oriented ministry philosophy, we realized that many of our supported missionaries were not on the same page. Some were not qualified for ministry; others were faithful laborers but operating from a different “ministry grid” and theology; still others were living in the United States and had little nexus to cross-cultural missions.

It was our conviction that “missions” on the Arabian Peninsula included, among other things, pastoral training and especially church planting in our region. This was because the local church is “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). We knew that it was God’s intent that “through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10). And through healthy congregations, the nations would be reached with the gospel message.

So, over time we reformed our missions budget to reflect our

66 *Light & Truth*, church newsletter, Feb. 1978.

missions strategy. Today we partner with like-minded gospel work happening in, among other places, the U.A.E., Egypt, Jordan, Nepal, Afghanistan, India and Kazakhstan, in addition to ongoing training and pastoral care of our supported workers. In each case, the work we now support is led by qualified men who teach sound doctrine and are committed to unreached and under-reached peoples. This is all in addition to our church planting and pastoral internship support.



*Pastors from Dubai, Ras Al Khaima, Abu Dhabi and Fujairah
meeting with the Crown Prince of Fujairah, expressing thanks
for his commitment to provide a building.*

In view of the missions potential on the Arabian Peninsula, in 2011 UCCD's elders adopted the following missions manifesto: "To display God's glory among the nations (Psalm 96:3) through our corporate and individual worship, crossing cultures with the good news of Jesus Christ and modeling sacrificial Christian living, directly among

the many unreached and under-reached peoples living here in Dubai, and indirectly in our geographic region, so that the nations might glorify God for His mercy (Romans 15:9).”

Today, global cities like Dubai are home to multi-national churches that worship in the English language, the *lingua franca* of our day. These churches reach into countless national and ethnic groups, even though English may be used as a second language. In an age of globalization and social media, overseas universities teach in English. People do commerce in English. For this reason, healthy international churches increasingly can become platforms for reaching the unreached.

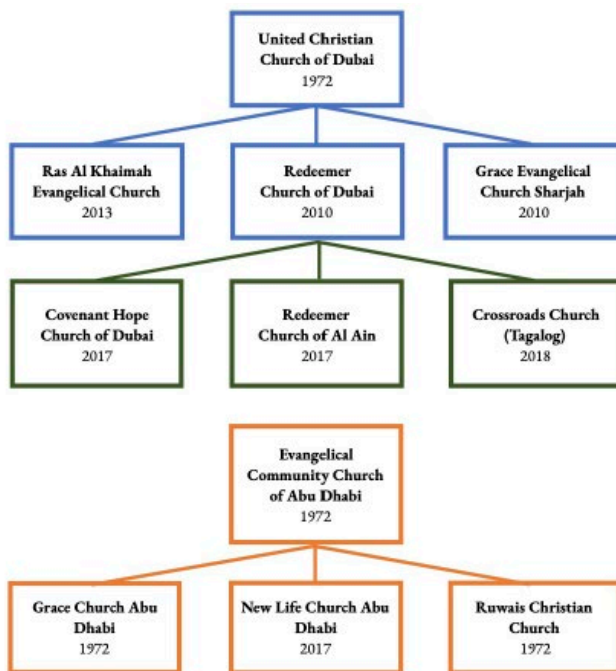
Stage 9: Partnership in Gospel Ministry

Between 2009 and 2022, the UAE experienced extraordinary growth in gospel influence through the reform and planting of English-language congregations serving expatriates in the UAE, coupled with a desire to be salt and light among the local Arabs as well. Alongside UCCD’s church planting efforts, churches in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and Fujairah were being reformed. In 2016, Jeramie Rinne was appointed pastor of Evangelical Community Church of Abu Dhabi (ECC) and began leading that church in a new direction. ECC in turn planted three other churches, one of them in the coastal town of Ruwais, westward nearer the border with Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, in Dubai Redeemer Church of Dubai trained pastors through the Gulf Training Center, sending them out to plant new churches in the oasis town of Al Ain and Fujairah on the Indian Ocean. Two other churches grew out of Redeemer—Covenant Hope Church pastored by Brian Parks, and Crossroads Church, a Tagalog-language church pastored by Alvin Litonjua.



Gospel Witness Multiplied through Healthy Churches

All 11 of these congregations are evangelical, reformed, and elder-led. The pastors of these churches have supported one another through fellowship and prayer. We have also partnered in Simeon Trust preaching training and attend each other's Bible conferences. We cooperate in church planting, preaching supply, and evangelism. What has unified us is a high view of the Scriptures, a commitment to reformed theology, elder leadership, believer's baptism, and congregational self-government. (An example of the leadership that has characterized these churches is found in Jeremy Rinne's book *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus*).



*Redeemer also trained and sent the pastor of Immanuel Church of Fujairah (2013). UCCD trained and sent the pastor of the Arabic Evangelical Church of Sharjah (2021)



Pastors Representing Churches from RAK, Sharjah, Dubai, Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, Fujairah (2018)

Likeminded churches all over the world have sacrificially backed us in prayer, financial support, and personnel. The following churches *sent pastors to the region* in recent years:

- Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC.
 - Sent John Folmar, pastor of UCCD (2005)
 - Trained Josh Manley (RAK), Ben Woodward (UCCD), Jeremy Yong (UCCD), Brian Parks (Covenant Hope), Jason Berus (Redeemer), Phillip Van Steenburgh (Redeemer) in its pastoral internship.
- Evangel Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia
 - Sent Richard Ngwisha, associate pastor UCCD (2007)
- Immanuel Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky
 - Sent Ben Woodward, associate pastor UCCD (2016)
 - Sent Aubrey Suqueira, pastor of ECC Abu Dhabi (2017)
 - Sent Will Drake, associate pastor Grace Sharjah (2018)
- Mt. Vernon Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia
 - Sent Jesse Brannen, pastor of Immanuel Fujairah (2020)
 - Supported pastoral internships and other strategic work
- Third Avenue Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky
 - Sent Josh Manley, pastor RAK (2012)
 - Sent Doug Reid, assistant pastor RAK (2021)

Sovereign Work of God

C. H. Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher in London, once said, “Brethren, we shall never see much change for the better in our churches till the prayer meeting occupies a higher place in the esteem

of Christians.”⁶⁷

In October 2007 UCCD began a monthly prayer meeting called “First Friday Prayer & Praise.” It started small, but over the years this meeting grew and became central to our lives together. We consistently prayed for gospel advancement, church planting, and the local people. The church reform of UCCD is attributable, finally, to the sovereign work of God and the prayers of his people.



Instructing UCCD on Baptism (2007)

A HEALTHIER CHURCH

Church reform is like piloting a large ship. It takes time to change the direction. UCCD altered course only gradually, over a period of approximately 5-8 years. Without the faithful prayer of churches like Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. and Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, it never would have happened.

Six years into the reform of our church, I wrote, “Take the long

⁶⁷ Quoted in Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines in the Church*, p. 163.

view when it comes to church reform. It helps to have a ten-to-twenty-year time horizon. With a long-term perspective, we can more patiently prioritize the areas of church life that need to change. We can more contentedly operate in an imperfect ministry environment even as we ask people to forbear with our personal weaknesses as well.”⁶⁸



Our Church Today (2022)

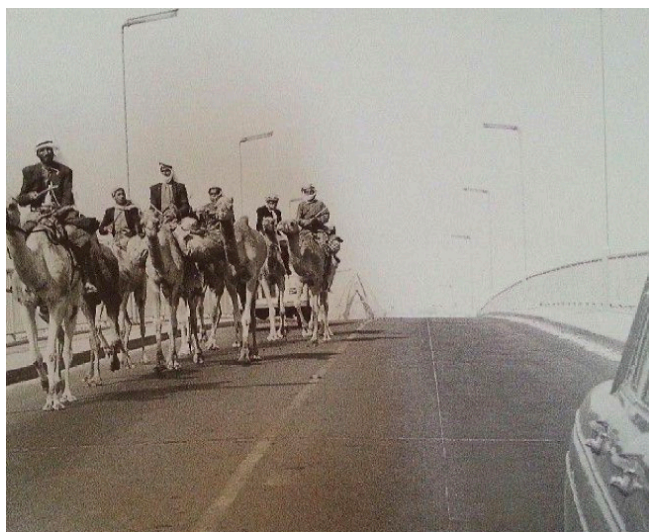
Today, UCCD is comprised of believers from 60 different nationalities, united in the gospel. The things we share in common loom larger than our diversity as a church. Over the years, several people from “restricted access” or “closed” countries have quietly attended our church, or even walked into our building during the week and asked to learn about Jesus. On occasion they have called the church office, identified

68 <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalwhat-makes-church-reform-possible/>

their religion, and asked to meet with someone to consider the claims of Christ. We were all too happy to oblige—not to pressure anyone, but to offer them friendship, true and clear explanations of the gospel, and the opportunity to observe the three-dimensional display of the gospel that is a local church. In many of these cases, these people were born again and joined together with us. They not only heard and understood the gospel, they *saw* how the power of Christ changes individuals and influences entire communities that have little in common except Christ. The church, then, is the confirming echo of the gospel that we proclaim.

BACK TO OUR ROOTS

During the last 50 years UCCD has come full circle. If the church was originally founded upon a commitment to evangelical faith, scriptural worship and solid Reformed theology, then we have now come back to our early roots.



Span Bridge over the Dubai Creek (c. 1970)

There are generally three approaches to church leadership: traditional (we've always done it that way); pragmatic (if it works, do it); and biblical (a commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture in church order, oversight, and worship.)

UCCD was founded in 1972 by leaders who were explicitly committed to scriptural authority and whose ministries were shaped accordingly. However, moving into the 1980s the church embraced a more revivalistic approach, including invitation hymns and altar calls. As the church grew more diverse through the 1980's, many non-Americans came to resent the heavy cultural emphasis, which was one of the factors leading to Pastor Virgil Smith's forced departure and the subsequent 1992 church split. Thereafter, the church drifted toward pragmatism. As one pastor search committee chairman admitted, UCCD in the 1990's was characterized by "minimal doctrine." Sadly, UCCD became more known for being international than being evangelical. Our diversity began to overshadow our unity. But in God's kindness to us, for 50 years UCCD never budged from holding to an inerrant Bible, and we never wavered in our commitment to cross-cultural evangelism. We continued to pray through the decades for the good news eventually to reach our beloved hosts, the Emirati people.

MOST STRATEGIC BUILDING ON THE PLANET

Around Easter, 2012, Redeemer Church of Dubai received notice from the government to stop meeting until they registered with the Municipality but were given no instructions on how to register. Later, after many inquiries, a different government agency allowed them to resume meeting, because the other government agency had no authority to require the licensing. On other occasions, Redeemer's church meetings were threatened with cancellation by the hotel, resulting in large expense and inconvenience.

As a result, our church was reminded of the benefits of an authorized building on the Arabian Peninsula. For one thing, we enjoy stability. Every weekend we can count on gathering in the same location. Not only that, but we have the luxury of mid-week Bible studies, training sessions, and periodic Bible conferences. So, DECC serves as a center for gospel training in the region. The building also affords us legitimacy. Since the building is recognized by the government, it is clear to the local people that we are not a covert cult. We are a church, openly representing Christ as we gather week by week in the building. We want to be as public as we can be, and our building allows that. So, the most important benefit of DECC is our visibility—when people are interested in the Christian faith, they know where to find us.

The same year that Redeemer was interrupted, an Iranian couple walked into the DECC building looking for information about Jesus. They met our associate pastor, Anand Samuel, and told him, “We need to get connected to God.” They had been investigating different religions (Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism)) but found them wanting. The wife recalled, “I never had the feeling that I could talk to God because I didn’t follow all the rules.” Anand explained the good news of Jesus Christ then and there in his office. Later he introduced them to other pastors and members of our church. They began attending the church, sitting under the preaching of God’s Word, and getting to know the community. In time, they believed the gospel and were baptized. As they recalled, “It was unbelievable. God touched our hearts!”

An evangelical building on the Arabian Peninsula dedicated to housing congregations, training churches, equipping pastors, and reaching out to the community, must be one of the most strategic buildings on the planet.

THE NEXT 50 YEARS

In 2022 we began meeting again on the Lord's Day (Sunday) for the first time since 1990.⁶⁹ This was in response to a government-decreed new weekend, as reported: "The United Arab Emirates, in a nod to global markets, has changed its workweek, declaring that Sunday, a work day in much of the Arab world, is now part of the weekend."⁷⁰

For years, we had wanted to meet on the Lord's Day in celebration of our Lord's resurrection the first day of the week. But, as our church constitution stated, "Constrained by the workweek of Dubai, worship services of UCCD shall be held each Friday..."

But with the weekend changed most of our members could meet on Sundays, so on January 9, 2022, amid much rejoicing, we met again on the first day of the week, joining with the church universal in public allegiance to our risen Christ.

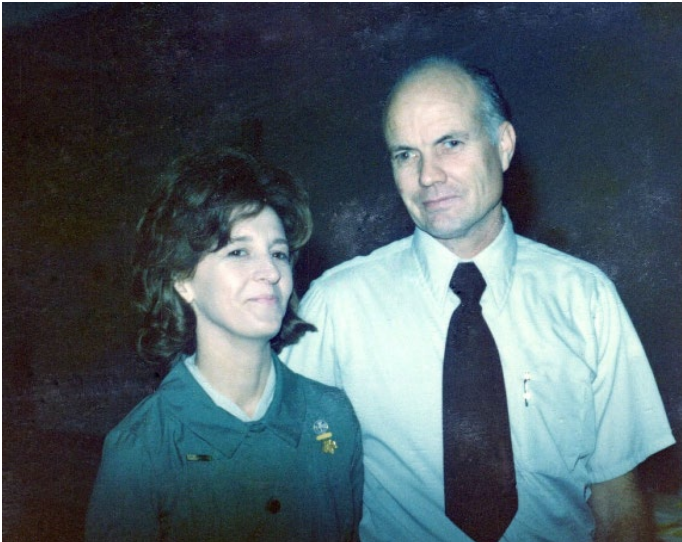
Another fundamental change was proposed in 2022. To commemorate our 50th anniversary and this return to our founding priorities, the elders proposed reverting back to our original church name—the **Evangelical Christian Church of Dubai (ECCD)**. In a world of spiritual confusion, ECCD would *better* communicate who we are and what we believe—namely, that the "Evangel"—the Gospel—is primary and is what truly unites us as a church. This change would bring greater clarity to our identity for the next 50 years.

69 In 1990 the church began a Friday morning gathering which quickly became the main meeting of the week. A Sunday evening gathering was maintained in the Jumeriah villa until 2006, when the villa was closed by the Municipality, but it was not the main assembly of the church.

70 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/world/middleeast/uae-weekend-shift.html>

THE POWER OF GOD

Max Campbell was a respected leader and preacher of our church during the early 1970s. His wife recalled, “Max did whatever they needed.” Another member, Linda Hanberry, called him “a true saint.” When Max first preached, he began by saying, “I am an unfit vessel.”



Max and Carol Campbell (1973-1976)

After leaving Dubai in 1976, Max continued corresponding with old friends, encouraging them, praying earnestly for the gospel work in Dubai to go forward.

Max Campbell went to be with the Lord on June 16, 2021, at the age of 91. I visited Max at his home in Monroe, Louisiana in June 2020. He was 90 years old and in declining health, but even then, he lit up visibly when he heard of the forward progress of the gospel through UCCD.

Forty-five years earlier, in a letter dated October 20, 1976, Max shared his heartfelt desire for the saints in Dubai, which we still share today:

“We continue to pray for the planting of a preaching station there as a testimony of the hope the lost may have in Christ and as an expression of the faith we Christians have that the power of God is more than equal with any adversary.”

APPENDIX

APPENDIX I

Elders of United Christian Church of Dubai (since 2005)

Daniel Splett, Canada (1996 pastor, departed 2007)

Pat Worsley, Canada (departed 2008)

David Dennis, U.K. (arrived 1982, departed 2009)

Biju Matthews, India (departed 2009, after 20+ years)

Jacky Lau, China (pastor, Chinese Church, departed 2009)

Mack Stiles, U.S. (arrived 2002, departed 2010 Redeemer Church plant, Deira)

John Folmar, U.S. (pastor August 2005-)

Etienne Nel, S. Africa (2007-13, sabbatical, 2014-2020, departed 2020)

Stuart Wheeler, U.K. (2007-2010, rolled off after one term)

Ken Harman, Australia (June 2009, rolled off Apr 2015)

Jim Fox, U.S. (June 2009-2012, rolled off after one term)

Paul White, U.K. (June 2009, resigned 2011, left UCCD for another church)

Richard Ngwisha, Zambia (arrived 2008, assoc. pastor June 2009-)

Theo Aryee, Ghana (April 2010, departed 2012)

John Welkner, U.S. (arrived 2006, assoc. pastor April 2010-)

Jeremy Yong, U.S. (arrived 2008, assoc. pastor April 2010, departed 2011)

2011 approved new constitution, congregational government

Roseman Natunay, Philippines (Sept 2011, rolled off Sept 2017)

Mike Bharwani, India (Sept 2011, rolled off after one term Sept 2014)

Anand Samuel, India (Apr '11, assoc pastor Jun '11, departed Grace Sharjah Jan '14)

Adeleye Falade, Nigeria (Sept 2012, departed June 2014)

Andy Davies, U.K. (Sept 2012, departed Sept 2013)

Bode Wilfred, Nigeria (Nov 2013, sabbatical, re-elected Feb 2021)

Kwesi Sena, Ghana (Nov 2013, sabbatical, re-elected Feb 2021)

Duncan Starnes, S. Africa (Sept 2014, sabbatical 2020)

Kwasi Frimpong, Ghana (Apr 2016, departed Apr 2018)

Brinton Howerton, U.S. (Sept 2016/Sept 2018 after sabbatical; resigned July, 2021)

Ben Woodward, U.S. (elected Feb 2016 as assoc. pastor, installed April 2016)

Emeka Okechukwu, Nigeria (April 2018-)

Scott Samuel, U.S. (April 2019-)

Nader Elias, Egypt (Feb 2021-)

Tanaka Matope, Zimbabwe (Feb 2021-)

APPENDIX 2

UCCD Church Covenant

(Adopted by the congregation on April 24, 2009)

Having been brought by God's grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we now, in dependence upon His Spirit, resolve to live by faith, and so establish this covenant with each other.

1. We will work and pray for the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Eph 4:3)
2. We will be devoted to one another in brotherly love. With humility and gentleness we will patiently bear with each other, forgiving, encouraging and building one another up, exercising watchfulness over each other and admonishing one another when necessary. (Luke 17:3; Col 3:13; 1 Thes 5:11; 1 Pet 1:22)
3. We will not neglect to gather together, or to pray for ourselves and others. (Col 4:2; Heb 10:25)
4. We promise to bring up our children and youth in the training and instruction of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and friends. (Eph 6:4; 1 Pet 3:1)
5. We will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, helping to carry each other's burdens. (Rom 12:15)
6. We will seek, by God's help, to live carefully in this world, denying ungodliness and worldly passions. We will strive to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, as we wait for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:12; 1 Pet 1:14)
7. We will defend and maintain an evangelical ministry in this church by supporting and upholding:
 - The preaching of the Word of God (2 Tim 4:2)
 - The administration of the Gospel Sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) (Acts 2:38; 1 Cor 11:26)
 - The exercise of Church discipline (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:13)
8. We will contribute cheerfully, generously and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations. (Matt 28:19; Luke 12:33; 2 Cor 9:7)
9. We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen. (2 Cor 13:14)

APPENDIX 3

Timeline of History

ECCD (1972-1983)

ICCD (1983-1992)

UCCD (1992-2022)

