

***Exhibit H***

**ORGANIZED  
TO  
ACCOMPLISH  
OUR MINISTRY**

**“You, though, keep your senses in all things,  
suffer evil, do the work of an evangelizer,  
fully accomplish your ministry.”—2 Tim. 4:5.**

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and to care for all His “belongings,” or Kingdom interests on earth. (Matt. 24:45-47; Luke 12:42-44) Rather than being an individual Christian, the ‘faithful slave’ today is the remnant, still living on earth, of the composite body of Christ’s anointed footstep followers. Such remaining ones are a part of spiritual Israel, the anointed congregation of God. (Gal. 6:16; compare Isaiah 43:10.) This remnant is faithfully discharging the responsibilities of the “slave” during this time of the end by taking the lead in the preaching of “this good news of the kingdom” throughout all the earth and by providing spiritual food at the proper time for the household of faith.—Matt. 24:14.

**USE OF RELIGIOUS CORPORATIONS**

During these last days of the present wicked system of things, the “belongings” of the Master have increased abundantly throughout all the earth. This has placed a heavy responsibility on the ‘faithful slave.’ In discharging its responsibility to provide spiritual food at the proper time and in order to get the good news of the Kingdom preached before the end comes, the remnant on earth, as “the faithful and discreet slave” class, has formed certain agencies, or legal entities. It has proved to be the course of wisdom for the ‘faithful slave’ to organize certain corporations that are recognized by the laws of various countries. These religious corporations own and operate printing facilities that produce and distribute Bibles and Bible literature on a worldwide basis for use in the Kingdom ministry.

The first in time and the principal corporation used in this way is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. This nonprofit religious society was incorporated in 1884, is made

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up of dedicated, baptized Christians and is exclusively devoted to advancing the interests of true worship in the earth. The Watch Tower Society has extended its works worldwide, establishing branch offices in various countries. Also, in compliance with local governmental regulations, a number of other religious societies have been legally formed, such as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. (1909) and the International Bible Students Association in London, England (1914). All these legal instrumentalities cooperate with one another. These and other legal corporations are used by the modern-day Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses to facilitate the preaching of the good news worldwide and to care for the spiritual needs of the entire congregation of God in all parts of the earth.

**STRUCTURE UNDER BRANCH ORGANIZATION**

Whenever a branch office is established, a Branch Committee of three or more elders is appointed to care for the various responsibilities involved in looking after the work in the country or countries under the jurisdiction of that particular branch. One member of the committee serves as the coordinator of the Branch Committee.

Local congregations under each branch organization are arranged into circuits and a number of circuits make up a district. Circuits and districts may be of various sizes depending on geographical and language considerations, as well as the number of congregations within the area assigned to a branch. A circuit overseer is appointed to serve the congregations in each circuit. District overseers visit the different circuits, serve at circuit assemblies and spend some time serving

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But if a brother should feel that it would be best for him to step aside due to changed personal circumstances that limit his ability to serve, he may choose to do so. He should still be held in respect and be able to do much good in the congregation, even though no longer having assignments and duties given to elders.

**POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY**

Generally, men appointed as overseers are recommended for appointment by the local body of elders. This is done during regular visits of the circuit overseer. However, the Governing Body may appoint men who qualify to serve as overseers in any locality at any time. The Governing Body is not bound by the recommendations of any local group. Such recommendations serve merely as a guide and may even be rejected for reasons well known to the Governing Body. Also, at times, the Governing Body may authorize certain representatives to make appointments of overseers.—1 Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:5.

In each congregation there is a presiding overseer who serves for an indefinite period of time. The same is true of the secretary, service overseer, *Watchtower* Study conductor and Theocratic Ministry School overseer. The elders do not serve in these positions on a rotational basis. Of course, if a brother holding any of these positions moves, is unable to care for his responsibilities due to health reasons or becomes disqualified for failure to measure up to Scriptural requirements, another elder is selected to handle the assignment. In congregations where the number of overseers is limited, it may be necessary for an elder to handle more than one assignment until such time as other brothers qualify to be appointed as elders.

## CHAPTER 12

### WHEN DIFFICULTIES ARISE

**U**NQUESTIONABLY a tremendous witness is being given worldwide as a result of our Kingdom ministry. This is a cause for wonderment on the part of millions of people. Even observers not favorably disposed toward the Kingdom good news have commended us for our zeal, unity and cooperative spirit. All credit goes to Jehovah God, since the work being accomplished by our ministry is due to his spirit and blessing.—Zech. 4:6.

Application of Bible principles enables us to put on the new Christian personality. (Col. 3:10) Every effort is made to conform our way of life to Jehovah's righteous standards. For this reason we put aside petty disputes and personal differences. By accepting Jehovah's view of matters we overcome divisive worldly elements, and this allows us to work unitedly in love as an international brotherhood.—Acts 10:34, 35.

Nevertheless, from time to time difficulties may arise, affecting the peace and unity of the congregation. What is the cause? In most cases it is a failure to heed and apply Bible counsel. We still have to cope with imperfect human tendencies. Someone may, even without fully realizing it, take a false step that could introduce moral or spiritual uncleanness into the congregation. Not one of us is without sin. By our thoughtless action or unguarded tongue we may offend another, or perhaps we may begin to feel offended because of what someone else has said or done. (Rom. 3:23) When such difficulties arise, what can be done to help set matters straight?

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We can be thankful that Jehovah has lovingly taken all of this into consideration. His Word provides counsel on what to do when difficulties arise due to our inherited human imperfections and limitations or when wrongdoing is otherwise introduced into the congregation. Personal assistance is available from loving elders. By accepting their mature help and heeding Scriptural counsel, we can continue to enjoy a fine relationship with all in the congregation and maintain a good standing with Jehovah. If some wrongdoing on our part requires discipline or reproof, rest assured that such correction is an expression of our heavenly Father's love.—Prov. 3:11, 12; Heb. 12:6.

**PERSONAL DIFFICULTIES**

There may be times when personal disputes or other difficulties of a minor nature arise between individual members of the congregation. These should quickly be settled in the spirit of brotherly love. (Eph. 4:26; Phil. 2:2-4; Col. 3:12-14) Very likely you will find that most problems of a personal nature involving your relationship with another member of the congregation can be resolved simply by applying Peter's counsel to "have intense love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Pet. 4:8) Such minor difficulties stem from human imperfections. We all stumble many times. (Jas. 3:2) By recognizing these facts and applying the golden rule, doing to others just as we would want them to do to us, usually we can dispose of minor offenses on the part of our Christian brothers by simply forgiving and forgetting.—Matt. 7:12.

But if something has disturbed your relationship with another member of the congregation to the extent that another approach or course



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needs to be taken, wisdom dictates that you not delay resolving the matter, knowing that your relationship with Jehovah is also involved. Jesus counseled: "If, then, you are bringing your gift to the altar and you there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, and go away; first make your peace with your brother, and then, when you have come back, offer up your gift." (Matt. 5:23, 24) There may have been a misunderstanding. If so, it should be cleared up very easily by keeping in mind the basic need for unity within the congregated body and keeping the lines of communication open. This is the thought expressed at Ephesians 4:25, where we read: "Wherefore, now that you have put away falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, because we are members belonging to one another." Good communication among all members of the congregation goes a long way toward avoiding misunderstandings and resolving problems that do arise because of our human imperfections.

**WEIGHTY RESPONSIBILITY OF ELDERS**

At times overseers may find it necessary to counsel or correct someone, trying to readjust his thinking. This is not always easy to do. To the Christians in Galatia, Paul wrote: "Brothers, even though a man takes some false step before he is aware of it, you who have spiritual qualifications try to readjust such a man in a spirit of mildness."—Gal. 6:1.

Surrounded as we all are with worldly influences and faced with temptations every day, the sinful flesh of some may allow them to become involved in questionable conduct or even to take a false step into sin before they are aware of it. The shepherds, by being vigilant and attentive to

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the needs of the flock, may be able to prevent someone from taking a more serious step that could bring into question his relationship with Jehovah. This is their objective when giving counsel to one who may have sinned.—Heb. 13:17.

Knowing just how subtly sin may creep in upon one, the apostle cautioned the brothers that they also are subject to temptation. He wrote them: “Each keep an eye on yourself, for fear you also may be tempted.” (Gal. 6:1b) Yes, to overseers today this reminder is especially fitting. They also need to watch closely their own personal conduct, so as to guard against falling into temptation.

Overseers are expected to be exemplary. Their example in daily living should add force to their words of counsel and instruction to the congregation. (Rom. 2:21-23) Although a brother may have qualified fully at the time of his appointment, if he should later on fail to maintain his proper relationship with Jehovah, the same holy spirit that led to his appointment will direct his removal from office in Jehovah’s own time and way. Paul admonished all Christians, including appointed overseers: “Consequently let him that thinks he is standing beware that he does not fall.”—1 Cor. 10:12.

By keeping themselves entirely free from accusation as they exercise watchful care over the flock, the overseers can protect the congregation from many potential spiritual dangers and avoid the need to handle more serious problems that could develop if there was negligence on their part. Shepherds of the flock should always strive to make their service to the congregation measure up to Jehovah’s promise through Isaiah: “And each one must prove to be like a hiding

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place from the wind and a place of concealment from the rainstorm, like streams of water in a waterless country, like the shadow of a heavy crag in an exhausted land.”—Isa. 32:2.

**NOT OVERLOOKING SERIOUS WRONGS**

Willingness to overlook offenses and to forgive does not mean that we are not concerned about wrongdoing or that we approve of it. Not all wrongs can simply be charged to inherited imperfection; nor is it for our brother's good or for the good of the congregation to overlook it if he commits wrongs that go beyond minor offenses. (Lev. 19:17; Ps. 141:5) Under the Law covenant given through Moses there was recognition of a difference in degree of seriousness of sins and transgressions. This is also true for Christians under the new covenant.—Compare 1 John 5:16, 17.

When giving counsel, Jesus outlined some specific procedures for resolving problems of serious wrongdoing, such as fraud or slander, that may arise between fellow Christians. Note the steps that he set out: “Moreover, if your brother commits a sin, [1] go lay bare his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, [2] take along with you one or two more, in order that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every matter may be established. If he does not listen to them, [3] speak to the congregation. If he does not listen even to the congregation, let him be to you just as a man of the nations and as a tax collector.”—Matt. 18:15-17.

If someone in the congregation has committed such a serious sin against you personally, do not be hasty to turn to the overseers, or someone else, requesting them to intervene in your be-

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half. First of all, as Jesus counsels, speak with the one against whom you have a complaint. Try to resolve the matter between just the two of you without involving anyone else at all. If the matter can be straightened out in this way, the one who has sinned will certainly appreciate the fact that you have not told others about his sin and have not marred his good reputation among others in the congregation. You will have "gained your brother."

Where the sinner accepts reproof, seeks forgiveness and straightens the matter out, Jesus states there is no need to carry the matter further. This fact shows that, although serious, the offenses here discussed were limited in nature to such as could be settled between the individuals involved. This would not include such offenses as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, blasphemy, apostasy, idolatry and similar gross sins that should be reported to the elders and handled by them. When the Law covenant was in force, these sins required more than forgiveness from an offended individual.—1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:19-21.

In view of this and in view of the illustration that Jesus subsequently gave, as recorded at Matthew 18:23-35, the sins considered in Matthew 18:15-17 evidently were sins such as those involving financial or property matters—failure to make proper payment for something or some action involving a measure of fraud. The sin might damage one's reputation by actual slander. In these cases, if the offender recognized his wrong, expressed willingness to right it to the extent possible and sought forgiveness, the matter could be settled by the offended one's granting forgiveness.—Compare Matthew 5:25, 26.

If the one who sinned against you cannot be

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convinced by your reasoning with him alone, then do as Jesus said and take one or two others along and speak with him again. The one or two you take with you should have the same objective, that of gaining your brother. Preferably they should be witnesses of the alleged wrongdoing, but if there are no eyewitnesses, you may choose to take along responsible brothers who become witnesses to the evidence presented in the discussion. Also, after listening to what you and the other person have to say, they may help the two of you reason on the matter and seek a solution to the problem. Keep in mind, however, that if you alone were not able to convince your brother that a wrong was committed, there is always the possibility that he has not sinned against you and that the individuals you take along with you may be required to convince you that you have no reason for complaint against your brother. (Prov. 18:17) Remember that the objective is to establish peace between you and your brother, to 'gain your brother.'

But if you are convinced that your brother has sinned against you and it has not been resolved either when you spoke with him alone or when you went to him with one or two others, and if a serious sin is involved so that it would be wrong just to let it pass, then you should report the matter to the overseers of the congregation. Having done this, you have taken it as far as you can. Leave the problem in the hands of the responsible members of the congregation and trust in Jehovah that it will be resolved. Never should you allow the wrong conduct of someone else to become a reason for stumbling or a force to rob you of your joy in Jehovah's service.—Ps. 119:165.

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If upon investigation it should become evident to the shepherds of the flock that the brother has indeed committed a serious sin against you and yet has been unwilling to repent and make appropriate amends, it may become necessary for the overseers to expel the unrepentant wrongdoer and in that way protect the flock and safeguard the cleanness of the congregation.—Matt. 18:17.

**HANDLING OTHER JUDICIAL MATTERS**

Some cases of wrongdoing may be brought to the attention of the overseers by individual brothers or sisters who report unresolved personal grievances. (Matt. 18:17) On the other hand, the elders may be approached by individuals who either confess their own sins or report what they know regarding the wrongdoing of others. (Jas. 5:16; Lev. 5:1) But regardless of the exact manner in which the elders first hear reports of serious wrongdoing on the part of a baptized member of the congregation, an initial investigation will be made. If it is established that there is substance to the report and evidence is produced showing that a serious sin actually may have been committed, the congregation's body of elders will assign a judicial committee of at least three brothers to handle the matter. In the case of reported serious wrongdoing on the part of one who is regularly associated but not yet baptized, similar steps will be taken.

While exercising watchful care over the flock, seeking to protect it from any elements that would be spiritually damaging, the elders will also endeavor to use their spiritual qualifications to restore or reprove any who have erred. (Jude 21-23) This would be in harmony with instructions given to Timothy by the apostle Paul. He wrote: "I solemnly charge you before God

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and Christ Jesus, who is destined to judge the living and the dead, and by his manifestation and his kingdom, preach the word, be at it urgently in favorable season, in troublesome season, reprove, reprimand, exhort, with all long-suffering and art of teaching." (2 Tim. 4:1, 2) Doing this may take much time and effort, but it is a part of the hard work of the elders that the congregation appreciates and for which they give the elders double honor.—1 Tim. 5:17.

In every situation where guilt is established, a primary endeavor of the overseers is to restore the wrongdoer if he is genuinely repentant, as indicated, for example, by his producing "works that befit repentance." (Acts 26:20) If they are able to help him and he is repentant, their administering reproof, either privately or before onlookers concerned in the case, serves to discipline him and instill a wholesome fear in any such onlookers. (1 Tim. 5:20; compare 2 Samuel 12:13.) Thus, the wrongdoer may be helped to 'make straight paths for his feet' thereafter.—Heb. 12:13.

However, the wrongdoer may have become hardened in his course of wrong conduct and fail to respond to the efforts of his brothers to help him. Fruits, or works, befitting repentance may not be in evidence, nor may genuine repentance be apparent at the time of the hearing. What then? In such cases it would be necessary for the responsible overseers to expel the unrepentant wrongdoer from the congregation, thus denying him fellowship with Jehovah's clean congregation. This would be done to protect other members of the congregation from the bad influence of the wrongdoer, safeguarding the moral and spiritual cleanness of the congregation and protecting its

good name. (Compare Deuteronomy 21:20, 21; 22:23, 24.) This is what the apostle Paul did when he became aware of the shameful conduct of a member of the congregation in Corinth. (1 Cor. 5:11-13) Also, this same apostle reports on the disfellowshipping of others who rebelled against the truth in the first century.—1 Tim. 1:20.

**IF THE DECISION IS TO DISFELLOWSHIP**

When a judicial committee handling a case of wrongdoing reaches the conclusion that the unrepentant person should be disfellowshipped, how should they deal with him?

It is appropriate for the committee to speak with him and let him know of their decision to disfellowship him from the congregation. They clearly state the Scriptural reason(s) for the disfellowshipping action. When informing the wrongdoer of their decision, the judicial committee should tell him that if he believes that a serious error in judgment has been made and he wishes to appeal the decision of the committee, he may do so by writing a letter clearly stating his reasons for the appeal. He will be allowed seven days for doing this. If such written appeal is received, the body of elders should arrange for an appeal committee to rehear the case. They may use local elders or elders from nearby congregations; they should be men who are experienced and qualified. The body of elders should request one of the traveling overseers to suggest who might serve on the appeal committee. Every effort should be made to conduct the appeal within one week after the written appeal is received. If there is an appeal, announcement of the disfellowshipping will be held in abeyance. In the meantime the accused person will be restricted from commenting and



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praying at meetings or enjoying special privileges of service.

If the wrongdoer does not indicate that he wishes to appeal, the judicial committee should explain to him the need for repentance and what steps he can take toward being reinstated in due time. This would be both helpful and kind, with the hope that he will change his ways and in time qualify to return to Jehovah's organization.—2 Cor. 2:6, 7.

**ANNOUNCEMENT OF DISFELLOWSHIPING**

When it becomes necessary to remove an unrepentant wrongdoer from the congregation, a brief announcement is made, simply stating that the person has been disfellowshipped. There is no need to say more. This will alert faithful members of the congregation to stop associating with that person.—1 Cor. 5:11.

**NONBAPTIZED ASSOCIATES  
WHO ARE WRONGDOERS**

What of nonbaptized individuals who have been recognized as approved associates, have shared in the field service with the congregation and perhaps have enrolled in the Theocratic Ministry School, but who have now become involved in serious wrongdoing? They should be dealt with in a way similar to that of baptized Witnesses with the exception that, not being recognized members of the congregation, they could not be formally expelled therefrom. It may be that they do not fully understand the Bible's standards, and kind counsel may help them to make straight paths for their feet.

If a nonbaptized wrongdoer is still unrepentant after a judicial committee has met with him and tried to help him, then it becomes necessary to

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inform the congregation. A brief announcement is made that the person is no longer recognized as an approved associate. (1 Cor. 15:33) The congregation will then view the wrongdoer as they would view one who has been disfellowshipped. No field service reports would be accepted from such a person.

**REINSTATEMENT**

A disfellowshipped person may be reinstated in the congregation when he gives clear evidence of repentance, demonstrating that he has abandoned his sinful course of conduct and is desirous of having a good relationship with Jehovah and his organization. The elders are careful to allow sufficient time, perhaps many months, a year or even longer, for the disfellowshipped person to prove that his profession of repentance is genuine. When the body of elders receives a written plea for reinstatement, the original judicial committee that disfellowshipped the person should, if possible, be the committee that speaks with that individual, evaluating the evidence and works of godly repentance on his part, and decides whether to reinstate him at that time or not.

If the person requesting reinstatement was disfellowshipped by another congregation, the local judicial committee may consider the person's plea. Thereafter, the local judicial committee will communicate with the body of elders of the congregation that disfellowshipped the individual, giving them their recommendation. However, the decision to reinstate is made by a judicial committee of the congregation that took the disfellowshipping action.

When the judicial committee is convinced that the disfellowshipped person is genuinely repentant and should be reinstated, an announcement

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of the reinstatement is made, mentioning also any restrictions that apply until the person has regained a measure of spiritual strength.

Elders are acquainted with the procedure to follow in handling pleas for reinstatement by those disfellowshipped from the congregation. Before any decision can be made in such cases, they have to weigh the various factors that apply. A similar procedure is followed in dealing with unbaptized repentant wrongdoers, whether they be adults or minors, who wish to renew their association with the congregation. In such instances a brief announcement could be made that it would be proper to recognize the individuals once more as approved associates of the congregation.

**DISASSOCIATION**

The term *disassociation* applies to the action taken by a person who, although being a baptized member of the congregation, deliberately repudiates his Christian standing, rejecting the congregation and stating that he no longer wants to be recognized or known as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. As a *disassociated* person, his situation before Jehovah is far different from that of an *inactive* Christian who, having grown weak spiritually, no longer shares in the field ministry. Such an *inactive* person may have failed to study God's Word regularly, or his zeal for serving Jehovah may have cooled off due to his experiencing personal problems or persecution. (1 Cor. 11:30; Rom. 14:1) The elders, as well as other concerned members of the congregation, will continue rendering appropriate spiritual assistance to the *inactive* brother. (1 Thess. 5:14; Rom. 15:1; Heb. 12:12) However, the person who has *disassociated himself* by repudiating

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the faith and deliberately abandoning Jehovah's worship is viewed in the same way as one who has been disfellowshipped. A brief announcement would be made to inform the congregation that the person has voluntarily disassociated himself from the congregation.

Concerning those who renounced their Christian faith in his day, the apostle John wrote: "They went out from us, but they were not of our sort; for if they had been of our sort, they would have remained with us." (1 John 2:19) Also, a person might renounce his place in the Christian congregation by his actions, such as by becoming part of a secular organization the objective of which is contrary to the Bible and, hence, is under judgment by Jehovah God. (Compare Revelation 19:17-21; Isaiah 2:4.) So if a person who is a Christian chooses to join those who are disapproved by God, it would be fitting for the congregation to acknowledge by a brief announcement that he has *disassociated himself* and is no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Such a person would be viewed in the same way as a disfellowshipped person.

CASES INVOLVING MINOR CHILDREN

Serious wrongdoing on the part of minor children who are baptized members of the congregation should be reported to the elders. When the elders investigate and handle cases of serious sins where a minor is involved, it would be good if the dedicated parents of the young person would be present and cooperate with the elders acting in a judicial capacity, not attempting to shield the erring child from necessary disciplinary action. Just as in dealing with adult offenders, elders serving on the judicial committee where a minor is involved would endeavor to restore the wrong-

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doer. However, if the young person is unrepentant, disfellowshipping action would be taken.

**MARKING DISORDERLY ONES**

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul expressed a warning concerning certain ones who walk disorderly and who, if accorded full acceptance as being of good standing in the congregation, could be exerting an unhealthy influence upon others. Paul admonished the Thessalonian Christians “to withdraw from every brother walking disorderly and not according to the tradition you received from us.” (2 Thess. 3:6) He further clarified that statement by writing: “But if anyone is not obedient to our word through this letter, keep this one marked, stop associating with him, that he may become ashamed. And yet do not be considering him as an enemy, but continue admonishing him as a brother.”—2 Thess. 3:14, 15.

Occasionally, in the congregation today, there may be those who, although not known to be guilty of practicing a grave sin for which they could be expelled, nevertheless continue to display flagrant disregard for theocratic order.

After giving repeated admonitions to such individuals and finding that they persist in disregarding well-established Bible principles, the elders may decide to speak to the congregation and give appropriate admonitions concerning such disorderly conduct. Even though no name has been mentioned, individual members of the congregation would then be obliged to ‘mark’ a person, or persons, of that kind, just as Paul advised the brothers in Thessalonica. If the disorderly one should still persist in his wayward course of conduct, he remains in grave danger of eventually committing a serious sin that could lead

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to his being disfellowshipped. On the other hand, the loving concern and firm stand of faithful members of the congregation could indeed move him to shame and repentance. When it is clearly evident that the individual has abandoned his disorderly course, it would no longer be necessary to treat him as a "marked" individual.

**JEHOVAH BLESSES UNITED CLEAN WORSHIP**

All who are associated with the congregation of God today can certainly rejoice in the rich spiritual estate Jehovah has given to his people. Our spiritual pastures have indeed been made fruitful and we have been provided with an abundance of refreshing waters of truth. We have experienced Jehovah's protective care through his theocratic arrangement under the headship of Christ. (Ps. 23; Isa. 32:1, 2) The spiritual paradise in which we find ourselves has given us a feeling of security in these troublesome last days.

By our maintaining fine conduct as ministers of God's good news and by our example of Christian unity, the Kingdom truth will continue to shine forth through us. With Jehovah's blessing we will have the joy of seeing many more people come to know Jehovah and join us in fully accomplishing the ministry.

CHAPTER 13

**A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION  
OF BROTHERS**

**A**FTER dealing exclusively with one man, Abraham, and his descendants the Israelites for a period of 2,000 years, Jehovah God "turned his attention to the nations to take out of them a