

***A Word from Woody . . .***  
**“Three Concerns I Have for 2022—and a Joy!”**

As we embark on yet another year, there are a few concerns I would like us to keep in prayer, and a joy.

I'll start with the concerns. My first has to do with China. Now let me be clear—I *love* the Chinese people, their culture, and their food! But the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is another matter. This Party has brutal control of a nation of 1.4 billion people, nearly a fifth of the world's population. This population is just a bit over India's 1.38 billion people, and more than four times the U.S.A.'s 330 million. But size is not the issue. Rather, it is the way the CCP exercises its authority and power over its people and the rest of the world. Take for example Hong Kong, as reported by *The Times Picayune* (December 30, 2021, p. 8A). At the end of last month Benedict Rogers, head of the non-governmental Hong Kong Watch, stated, “this once great, open, international city has descended into little more than a police state”. On December 29<sup>th</sup> police officers in Hong Kong arrested the editor of a “vocal pro-democracy website” called Stand News, described as “one of the last openly critical voices in the city”, and closed the media outlet. It is reported, “As the last days of 2021 dwindled, so did any remaining traces of democracy in Hong Kong. . . earlier in December, the opposition was shut down from elections under a new law that puts all candidates to a loyalty test. And monuments commemorating the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 were taken down.” The CCP's Belt and Road Initiative and other globalization efforts will work to further their influence. We already see it in the U.S. In October, 2019 the General Manager of the NBA team the Houston Rockets, Daryl Morey, sent out what was thought to be a mainstream tweet supporting the freedom efforts in Hong Kong— “Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong”. The CCP was unamused. It expressed its great displeasure and threatened to pull China's extremely lucrative market from the reach of the NBA. Thus, Morey's tweet was deleted, and the owner of the Rockets Tilman Fertitta sent out his own tweet saying his team was “NOT a political organization”. Huh? Wasn't it the NBA which just a year later put on its courts the initials “BLM” for “Black Lives Matter”, a polarizing political organization whose founders have strong ties to Marxism? The CCP's influence in the U.S. is alarming. Not only are they a major producer of America's goods, but they are also in the midst of a public relations campaign to soften their image. For example, in the December 27, 2021 *Time* magazine there is a four page

advertisement feature called “China Watch” which is presented by China Daily, and seeks to show China in a positive light through such articles as “East and West Meet in Harmony”. And this is not a one-time advertisement—several issues of *Time* have this multi-page feature highlighting China. But isn’t this the same nation run by the CCP which has cracked down on the Christian Church and imprisoned and forcibly indoctrinated over a million of the Muslim Uyghur population? A major cause for prayer in 2022 is the halting of CCP’s malicious influence both within China and outside its borders—such as in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Russia, Pakistan, and the U.S.

The second has to do with the COVID-19 virus, which ironically is closely connected to the CCP’s China in its origin. The latest variant of this virus, omicron, is surprisingly contagious. My family had a post-Christmas visit of about 27 of us. One of the families had been exposed to someone who had tested positive for COVID, but none of the family members had symptoms. A day or so after our family visit was over, about 20 of us came down with the dreaded virus! Elena and I were among them, and for me now my second COVID experience. By God’s grace our symptoms were mild -- a light fever, sore throat for a couple of days, cough, sinus issues, and just plain tired. And I know many of you have also contracted the virus recently with moderate symptoms, by God’s grace. An open question—and reason for prayer—for 2022 is how many more variants must we endure before this disease is a distant memory? My last count tells me the Greek alphabet has nine more letters after omicron!

The third area of concern is The UMC’s General Conference (GC), scheduled to meet on August 29<sup>th</sup>-September 6<sup>th</sup> of this year in Minneapolis. This GC is to be historic, as the separation of The UMC over the issue of homosexuality is expected to happen. But maybe not. Here is a brief history on our recent attempts to hold GC. This Conference was originally to meet in May, 2020, but the COVID-19 virus disrupted those plans and it was re-scheduled for August-September, 2021. Again, COVID negated those plans. GC was then re-re-scheduled for the 2022 dates above. But now this year’s meeting is in question because of the COVID resurgence with omicron. What makes scheduling GC so complicated is not just that GC is an international event which means delegates from other countries must meet the U.S. State Departments’ requirements to enter our country, but also our *Book of Discipline* has a difficult requirement. That

requirement is that the dates for GC have to be confirmed by a certain number of days out, which means a final decision to hold GD this year will be made by March. The Commission on General Conference, which makes this decision, will begin deliberating this month. If GC is postponed again—which I think is likely—then we will probably be looking at the next GC occurring in 2024. We need to pray for GC to happen this year, and, if it does not, that all the various interest groups that signed onto the protocol agreement would continue to hold together and Bishops would continue to respect the conservative churches.

Finally, the joy of 2022 is that, despite the concerns above, *nothing* of substance has changed for followers of Jesus. As the apostle Paul wrote nearly 2,000 years ago, our hope does not disappoint us, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:5-6).

Love in Jesus,

Pastor Woody