

Call to Unity

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

Issue 11 • September 2010



Council On
Christian Unity

**A Century of Witness...
The Journey Ahead**



FROM THE EDITOR

The Journey Continues . . .

This year marks the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the Council on Christian Unity.

One of the most significant events planned as part of our year-long celebration was the **Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup "2nd Century Visioning Conference on Christian Unity"** that took place in St. Louis, Missouri on June 14-17, 2010, where forty Disciples came together to take an honest look at the current state of the ecumenical movement, and to think together about the future of our church's witness to unity, wholeness and reconciliation in our fragmented society and world.

This issue of *Call to Unity* brings together the presentations offered during this conference, along with a final report on the meeting that summarizes a series of key affirmations, new insights, and specific recommendations. This issue also includes two important reflections: *first*, the presentation by Peter Morgan to the 100th Anniversary Celebration Dinner on April 27, where we honored Dr. Paul A. Crow, Jr., as "President Emeritus" of the Council on Christian Unity; and, *second*, an article by Tom Best, one of the participants in the 2nd Century Visioning Conference, reflecting on the meaning and impact of this event for Disciples—and perhaps for the wider ecumenical movement.

In this editorial I want to express my personal word of sincere thanks and deep appreciation to Joe and Nancy Stalcup for their support to the Council on Christian Unity that enabled this second "Visioning Conference" to take place and this issue of *Call to Unity* to be published. Joe and Nancy represent the best of our tradition as Disciples of Christ in their commitment to a vision of unity that embraces all peoples and all faiths.

As the Conference participants took a look back over the past 100 years and the current challenges to our work and programming, our focus was soon drawn to the future—a vision built upon the calling of one God, one mission, one church, and one world. And there, we discovered anew our identity as Disciples of Christ as a people committed to unity and wholeness: claimed in our baptism; celebrated at the Lord's Table; and made visible in our witness and worship, our mission and service to all God's people and the whole of creation.

It's a great adventure that calls us into the very heart of God.

Robert K. Welsh

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A Century of Witness... The Journey Ahead

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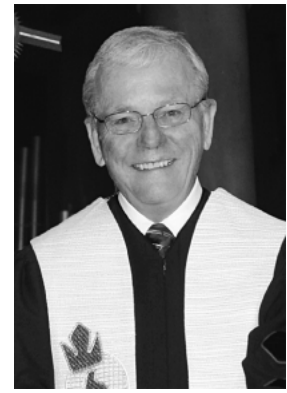
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Celebrating 100 Years as a Movement for Unity

Peter M. Morgan



REV. PETER M. MORGAN, *President Emeritus of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, serves as the volunteer historian and archivist at National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C.*

Come sit with me in a classroom at the old College of the Bible in Lexington. The year is 1962. Paul Crow, a very young professor, is at the head of the class lecturing on the history of ministry in the patristic era. Suddenly Professor Crow fast forwards 1700 years. “Many of you will soon be preparing for your ordinations—a magnificent day, the modern equivalent of the ancient church shouting at you ‘*Axios! Axios!*’ (worthy worthy) It’s easy to become confused on that day. The celebration is not primarily your celebration. It is the church celebrating once *again* God trusting it to propagate the gospel.”

Professor Crow, I remember well your lesson and come on this occasion as one of your students to recite a brief history of the Council on Christian Unity and its propagation of the gospel. The stewardship of the gospel of primary interest to the Council is the prayer of Jesus, “that they may all be one” (John 17:21) and the teaching of Paul “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (Eph. 4:4).

One hundred years ago we Disciples, who were founded as a unity movement, had a severe case of amnesia. But God raised up a prophet, Peter Ainslie, to help us remember and reclaim our vision as a people blessed and burdened with a catholic vocation of ecumenism. Earlier in that year of 1910 Peter had been in Edinburgh at the World Missionary Conference, the initial moment which launched the modern ecumenical movement. From an outdoor balcony of Stirling Castle he surveyed its

magnificent vista. Later in Topeka, Kansas Peter, in another high place, climbed the speaker’s podium of the International Convention. In one of the pivotal addresses in the history of our church he displayed a panorama of the great vista of the gospel played out across the centuries . . . “yonder are Polycarp . . . and Luther . . . the Wesleys . . . and the Campbells . . . What a host of saints!” he cried. “Some are called Nazarenes, Roman Catholics, Reformers, and some Disciples, but whatever be their names, all these are our brethren.” He then urged his Disciples family to reclaim their calling of Christian unity for that moment in history and for the century ahead. “(I)t is God’s program; it can no more be kept back than the sun can be kept from rising!”

A constitution put into words our mission and vision: “to watch for every indication of Christian unity and to hasten the time by intercessory prayer, friendly conferences, and the distribution of irenic literature until we all attain unto the unity of the faith.”

What an address! The Convention met in special session at First Christian Church. A constitution put into words our mission and vision: “to watch for every indication of Christian unity and to hasten the time by intercessory prayer, friendly conferences, and the distribution of irenic literature until we all attain unto the unity of the faith.” For one hundred years we have been watching for signs of unity, praying for unity, meeting in conferences for unity, publishing and promoting for unity. On that great occasion Peter Ainslie set in motion a movement

that is like a Bach fugue—lifting, floating, flying! For the first fourteen years of our life as a Council, Peter Ainslie, pastor of Christian Temple of Baltimore, served as president.

Dark days came to the Council in the 1920s. The Disciples were in the often angry agony of dividing. Peter Ainslie was in the spotlight of contention. He felt he had to remove himself as president of the Council. The days were so dark that Professor Willett of Chicago voiced the fear in many people's hearts: Can the Council survive without Ainslie?

More than a church fight, it was the very wounding of the body of Christ. The music in the heart of those who loved God's one church was Bach's "O Sacred Head now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down; . . . mine, mine, was the transgression, but thine the deadly pain."

A dozen years earlier Peter Ainslie had been a mentor to a young student he met in New Haven when he was there to give the Yale Lectures. Soon H.C. Armstrong was on the staff of Christian

Temple with his portfolio primarily focused on the work of the Council. God had given us a prophet in Ainslie. Now God gave us a healer. H.C. Armstrong led the Council from 1925 to 1931. We can thank God for H.C. Armstrong that we are still here.

George Walker Buckner was one of the volunteer leaders who guided us through the lean depression years of the 1930s. When the financial recovery began, he was named the executive director on a halftime basis, along with serving as editor of World Call magazine. Through him we Disciples were present and contributing when the provisional committee was forming the World Council of Churches and when plans were drafted for the National Council of Churches. The love and commitment of George Buckner to our Council's calling was like a Bach toccata. It was the music for us to anticipate and prepare for the fugue that followed it and sent us soaring again.

Soar we did. George Beazley came to the presidency like Bach's great Fugue in D Minor. In 1961, after the controversies and the lean times we again were lifted and floating and flying! George Beazley gave us the gift of contagious enthusiasm. His ministry is remembered for the "Beazley Buzz" and Midstream

journal and his pioneer work of bringing Disciples on board with the Consultation on Church Union. Dr. Beazley died on World Communion Sunday—during an ecumenical trip to the Soviet Union.

In God's providence the great soaring fugue continued. However, with Paul Crow you get more than a fugue: you get the whole Bach repertoire. Our longest serving president brought us to prominence in the worldwide ecumenical movement of the late twentieth century. A colleague once shared with me of being in the Soviet Union for the millennial celebration of the Christian witness of the Russian people. An orthodox priest made a friendly inquiry about her church in the United States. She said, "Oh, you wouldn't know us. I'm a Disciples of Christ." He replied, "Oh, yes, I know you. I know Paul Crow."

I recently led a retreat of Roman Catholics and Disciples in West Virginia. One of the first priests I met asked, "Do you know my friend Paul Crow?" Far away Russia, remote West Virginia—the Disciples ecumenical witness is known.

Let me recite a very abbreviated list of the Council's accomplishments with Paul's leadership: International Commission for Dialogue between Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church, full ecumenical partnership of the Disciples and the United Church of Christ, the creation of the Peter Ainslie III Lectures, and the Joe and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lectures on Christian Unity, and the work of the Disciples Commission on Theology which led to the publication of the major volume, *The Church for Disciples of Christ*.

For this last decade we have been led by Robert Welsh. Robert's leadership has connections to the legacy of Peter Ainslie. Ainslie called Disciples again to our founder's frontier vision to be a people of unity. Ainslie mentored H. C. Armstrong so that a new generation could ably take its place in ecumenical leadership. Robert and the Council are calling us again to form a new generation of leaders as we go to new frontiers of exploring interfaith dialogue and healing the wounds among those who share the legacy of Barton Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell.

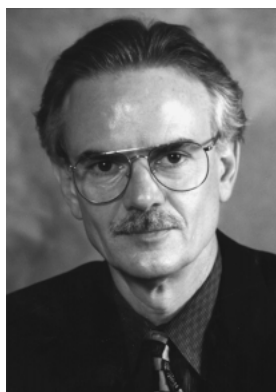
Robert and Peter share another gift, the solid

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spiritual foundation of prayer. Robert's immersion in the spirituality of the Orthodox tradition lets us recall Ainslie's teaching; prayer is not a request to get something but a way to become something—something new. What you believe is not as important as whom you believe. The music of Bach quietly plays Jesu, Joy of Our Desiring.

Professor Crow, that's the recitation of my history lesson for today. But I would like to add a personal

word to you, Paul, my dear friend, teacher and mentor. Forty-eight years ago you taught me well a lesson I echo back from a classroom at the College of the Bible in Lexington. When we remember and honor the Council's century-long ministry, we are like the great Johann Sebastian Bach offering his music. It is "*soli deo Gloria*"—for the "glory of God alone."



A Century of Witness, A Journey of Wholeness

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Michael Kinnamon

DR. MICHAEL KINNAMON is the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

I think Robert knows how much I appreciate his creative, bold, and faithful leadership in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), so I will simply say that all of us who love this church and treasure its ecumenical heritage owe him a great debt of gratitude. And the same is certainly true of Joe and Nancy Stalcup. Their support of Disciples ecumenism is without parallel. Thank you!

I want to begin by naming three assumptions that, I believe, shape this consultation, as well as my own approach to the topics we will be considering. First, a key characteristic of movements is that they *move*. We who gather here at the invitation of the Council on Christian Unity surely realize that we live in a period when previous understandings of unity are being rethought. Some of the ecumenical organizations that sprang up in the aftermath of World War II or Vatican II are losing vitality or undergoing renewal, even as new ones appear. We may lament some of these changes, but they do not necessarily mean that the ecumenical movement is terminally ill—only that it is moving.

First, a key characteristic of movements is that they move.

At the same time, and this is my second assumption, movements also have *continuity*. The vision that gave birth to the Council on Christian Unity in 1910 is a vision that still has power to inspire us a century later.

And so we gather, aware of the legacy that binds us

to generations of ecumenists and yet also aware of the changes in church and society that demand careful attention if our ecumenical witness is to be vital and persuasive. Thus, the goals for this meeting: a) to reaffirm as Disciples our historic commitment to the unity, the wholeness, of Christ's body; b) to address directly contemporary challenges to such commitment; and, c) to envision what Disciples participation in the ecumenical movement might look like in the years ahead.

The way Christian unity was understood in 1810 or 1910 is being challenged—radically challenged—in our era . . . our task is not to lament, but to assess and respond.

My third assumption is more theological. The vision that compelled Thomas Campbell in 1810, Peter Ainslie in 1910, and still compels us today has to do with God's reconciling ministry in Jesus Christ, and with the biblical call not only to accept this reconciliation, but to be ministers of it and witnesses to it—to be, as we now often put it, “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world,” welcoming others to the table of our Lord even as God has so graciously welcomed us. All Christians have received such a calling, but (thanks be to God!) we Disciples have felt it with a particular urgency. We are a people, to paraphrase Ainslie, whose larger loyalty is so fully given to the person of Jesus Christ that we seek to remove all barriers to communion with all persons who bear his name.

However, the way Christian unity was understood in 1810 or 1910 is being challenged—radically challenged—in our era. I want to identify four of those

challenges that we will explore in greater depth throughout the course of this consultation. And, please keep in mind, our task is not to lament, but to assess and respond.

Diversity and Unity

We live in an era (often called post-modern) when many people regard diversity as an end in itself. Surely, it is good to affirm groups and perspectives that have been historically marginalized or excluded. But it is also possible, in my judgment, to value diversity to such an extent that God's gift of unity is undercut.

Leaders in the ecumenical movement, drawing on scripture, have contended at least since 1910 that unity and diversity must be held in dialectical tension in any true understanding of the church. An emphasis on unity that does not value human diversity—diversity not only of race and culture, but also of theological perspective—can easily become bland and authoritarian. But, conversely, an emphasis on diversity without concern for what Paul calls the “common good” can easily become fragmented and provincial. Unity is meaningful only if it includes in one whole those who are not alike. And diversity is only diverse when seen in relation to the other distinctive members of a whole body.

During the early decades of modern ecumenism, however, the balance at times seemed to tip in the direction of unity, as if diversity were a problem to be resolved. Confessional identities, it was argued, need to die as part of the cost of union. Particular racial or ethnic groups need to be “included” (read “absorbed”) in the majority. Theological differences need to be eliminated through dialogues aimed at reaching “consensus.” It is little wonder that, when ecumenists spoke of unity, many Christians (especially by the late 1960s) heard it as a subordination of diversity based on the preferences of those with power.

Over the past two generations, however, the balance has clearly shifted in the other direction—and that, too, can have destructive consequences. Churches that overvalue diversity settle for tolerant cooperation rather than struggling to overcome church-dividing issues, such as those that still prevent Christians from sharing the Lord's Supper or recognizing one another's ministries. Affirmation of particular identity comes to be seen as an end in itself rather than as a God-given opportunity to

share spiritual and cultural gifts in order that the body, in the words of Ephesians, may be “built up in love.”

Disciples claim to be a movement for wholeness, but, in fact, our emphasis on personal freedom and individual interpretation makes this very difficult in practice.

This is difficult terrain. All of us here, I trust, affirm the goal of being a “multi-cultural, inclusive church”—as long as the different cultural and racial-ethnic streams are seen as parts of a whole communion. To put it simply, the goal of the ecumenical movement (and, I hope, of our life as Disciples) is not to bring together those who are diverse—that is the goal of governments or political parties. The goal is to celebrate the wondrous diversity of our given oneness as children of a single Creator and members of Christ's body.

Disciples claim to be a movement for wholeness, but, in fact, our emphasis on personal freedom and individual interpretation makes this very difficult in practice. The post-modern emphasis on diversity only increases the challenge.

Justice and Unity

There is clearly a new focus on justice as a central theme (for many, the central theme) of the ecumenical movement. Again, this needs to be said very carefully. Speaking personally, I am entirely in favor of a strong justice emphasis. (After all, I was the chair of the NCC's Justice and Advocacy Commission before becoming General Secretary, and am often identified among Disciples with justice causes.) The challenge, once again, is to sustain a necessary tension between justice and the calling to unity.

Let me put it as bluntly and succinctly as I can. Christians acting together for justice, without concern for how this deepens and expands the life of the church, are not “ecumenical” in any full sense of the word. Just as Christians pursuing sacramental fellowship, without concern for how this deepens and expands their engagement with the world, are not “ecumenical” in any full sense of the word. For ecumenical Christians, the terms help define each other. On the one hand, talk of unity can end up

bolstering old forms of domination unless constantly coupled with a commitment to just relationship. The unity we have in Christ is one in which those who have been marginalized find a home. On the other hand, the justice we seek is not merely the coexistence of separated communities, but a new community in which those who were estranged or marginalized now live together.

Both groups think they are the heart of ecumenism—and there is almost no overlap between them.

Needless to say, this tension between unity and justice is difficult to maintain—to the point that today the ecumenical movement is itself in great danger of fragmenting. A good example comes every Spring. In March, several hundred persons gather in Washington DC for Ecumenical Advocacy Days in order to bear common witness interdenominationally on issues of justice and peace. Then, in April, several hundred persons gather somewhere in the country for the National Workshop on Christian Unity in order to reflect on theological dialogues aimed at advancing the goal of eucharistic communion. Both groups, I know from experience, think they are the heart of ecumenism—and there is almost no overlap between them.

Of course, Disciples history also demonstrates the difficulty of holding this tension. To use an obvious example, Alexander Campbell took a vigorous stand against slavery in the early 1830s, but moderated his posture a decade later out of a desire to preserve church unity. In the same way, Campbell was an outspoken pacifist—in times of peace. But during the Mexican war of 1846 he refrained from calling for an end to the violence lest such a call prove divisive for Disciples fellowship. The contemporary ecumenical emphasis on justice only increases the challenge.

Interfaith Relations and Unity

There is, in this era, and evident and increasing appreciation for the importance of interfaith relations. Again, I trust we affirm that this is good news, for reasons that will undoubtedly be discussed later in this conference. The danger, however, is that interfaith will be seen as an *alternative* to ecumenical—and that, in my judgment, is disastrous.

Once more, I need to say this clearly to avoid misunderstandings. Dialogue and cooperation with people of other religious faiths belong on the ecumenical agenda for several obvious reasons:

- a. A movement concerned with the problems and future of the *oikoumene* (the whole world) will surely want to pursue peace or justice or ecological responsibility alongside neighbors of other faiths. The issues of this world are too large to be dealt with by Christians alone.
- b. Interfaith dialogue is something that the churches properly do together. It makes little sense to talk about Disciples-Buddhist dialogue!
- c. The question of the place of other religions in God's plan of salvation is still one that generates great controversy within Christianity and, therefore, must be on the agenda of a movement concerned with overcoming divisions within the church.

At the same time, ecumenism and interfaith relations should not be confused or collapsed because they have different goals, reflecting different theological foundations. Ecumenism seeks to make visible the communion, the intensity of shared life, that Christians have with one another through Christ. Interfaith relations also have a compelling theological foundation: humanity's common creation in the image of God. The goal, however, is not *koinonia*, but cooperative partnership on behalf of the human future. My point is not that one is "better" than the other, but that they are different—and that we need both.

If I am not mistaken, however, many people in our churches now regard the search for Christian unity as *passé*, even exclusivist, seeing interfaith relations as the more significant (and more exotic) alternative. Others apparently think that moving from Christian-Christian to, say, Christian-Muslim dialogue is simply a matter of expanding the circle.

I will add, although it almost goes without saying, that it is easier to relate to open-minded Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus than it is to relate to many of the narrow-minded jerks who insist on calling themselves Christian! Work for Christian unity is often harder than interfaith work. And it will be a real challenge not to minimize (or give up on) the one in order to concentrate solely on the other.

Local and Universal

We don't talk about it as much, but there is certainly a new appreciation for the local in ecumenical discussions—or, to put it another way, a new emphasis on contextual experience as opposed to that which is universal. In fact, ecumenical texts that claim to articulate a universal theological consensus are increasingly suspect. It would be impossible today for a document like *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (finalized in 1982) to become so widely influential.

As you might expect by now, I think that the local and universal must be held in tension in any adequate understanding of church—and this is reinforced by most ecumenical documents dealing with ecclesiology. Each gathered community of believers in which the gospel is preached and the sacraments celebrated, in which Christ dwells by faith, is truly the church—not just a branch office. But it is not the whole of it, because the church universal is a communion (not a loose aggregate, but a communion) of these local communities. The church is local, but local autonomy is a denial of the church's essential catholicity.

The church is local, but local autonomy is a denial of the church's essential catholicity.

This interdependence of local and universal is proving difficult to hold, however, in our post-modern era. The debate over human rights is a good case in point. When the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* was formulated (with considerable church input) in the 1940s, the importance and appropriateness of universal principles were taken for granted. Today, by contrast, various of the Declaration's claims—for example, about the rights of women—are contested by many as cultural imperialism, insensitive to contextual realities. Surely there is a danger in foisting off the values of Western culture on others as if they were universally valid; but isn't there also a danger of succumbing to a relativism that won't protect the neighbor? Dick Cheney to the contrary, I am convinced, as a person of faith, that it is wrong *everywhere* and *always* to torture any child of God.

This, again, is very tricky: how to affirm the diversity of cultures and religions, to be open to genuine

otherness, while also affirming the universal principles that seem central to our faith and on which human community is grounded. The most difficult discussion I witnessed during my years as dean of Lexington Theological Seminary came when a local delegate to the Cairo Population Conference denounced female circumcision (what many of us call genital mutilation) as a violation of human rights, only to be denounced in turn by African students for her cultural imperialism, her insensitivity to local African contexts.

It is easier to relate to open-minded Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus than it is to relate to many of the narrow-minded jerks who insist on calling themselves Christian!

I want to add that the church has developed a variety of connectional structures for expressing the interdependence of local and universal. In modern societies, especially those influenced by democratic principles, these structures are known as denominations. Denominations can, of course, hinder catholicity by claiming to be the church and resisting the work of ecumenical bodies, like councils of churches. But the breakdown of denominations can also weaken the connection between local and universal church. Disciples, with our early history of congregational autonomy, face a particular challenge in this regard.

Concluding Words

In the last section of my remarks, I want to shift gears slightly and suggest two things that I hope will happen at this consultation. The first has to do with what I perceive to be a loss of theological depth and conviction in many churches—and, therefore, in the ecumenical movement—over the past half century. One dreadful indication of this is the report of a widely-trumpeted gathering of church leaders, convened by the World Council of Churches earlier this decade, to reflect on the “reconfiguration” of the ecumenical movement. The five-page report uses the word “God” once and never refers to Jesus. This means, of course, that it is entirely human centered, talking about what *we* have done or should do, but never about what *God* has done, is doing, and will do for the world's salvation.

If you want people to build a boat, don't just give them a blueprint, but let them be filled with a yearning for the vastness of the sea.

I am pleased to note that the text affirms the goals of church unity and common witness, but it never suggests that these goals might stem from a theological mandate rooted in scripture. But, then, there is no reference to scripture whatsoever. There are references to the church, but those are set alongside an emphasis on agencies and specialized ministries as crucial for the ecumenical family. Ecumenism, in short, is reduced to cooperation on behalf of peace and justice. The idea that God has called forth a community, centered in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be an embodied expression of God's reconciling power and purpose, is completely absent. (Similar things could be said about some statements of the NCC.)

Am I saying this directly enough? If we want a vital ecumenical witness in the coming generation, then we dare not reduce a divine initiative to a purely human enterprise. If we don't believe that God has acted in Christ for the world's redemption, then the idea that God through the Incarnation has brought forth a new community of Jew and Greek, Protestant and Catholic, black and white, gay and straight, Iraqi and American will seem like pure idealism—impossible and, ultimately, irrelevant. In the absence of such conviction, the ecumenical movement will become simply another arena for pursuing political agendas or another set of agencies engaged in occasional cooperation—easily demoted on the list of ecclesiastical priorities. The National Council of Churches (about which you may have questions and comments) is suffering the effects of this theological impoverishment.

I hope, therefore, that we have not come here to rearrange ecumenical furniture, to discuss structural changes (though they may be needed) as if that were inherently renewing, but to hear God's Word and be renewed by God's Spirit. Antoine de San Exupery may have said it best: If you want people to build a boat, don't just give them a blueprint, but let them be filled with a yearning for the vastness of the sea.

My second concluding point stems from my experience a week ago at Edinburgh 2010. As you probably know, the symbolic beginning of the

modern ecumenical movement was a world mission conference held in Edinburgh one hundred years ago this very month. Peter Ainslie drew inspiration for the Disciples Council on Christian Unity from that historic event. The recent conference was intended to assess what we have learned about mission and unity over the past century, and to chart a course for the future. I will be happy to speak about the whole Edinburgh 2010 experience over dinner or in the hallway, but for now I want simply to note that the basic message of the conference was that the church must recover a sense of urgency about its witness. The biggest critique of the church seemed to be that it has become too timid at a time when the world needs bold proclamation of the gospel.

Well, yes, that is surely a problem and challenge. But in my judgment, the church has not only borne tepid witness, it has frequently borne *false* witness. We not only need encouragement, but renewal.

Like you, I suspect, I have lots of secular friends and family members. As they see it, the church in general often bears witness to four things: (a) abuse and the scandal of cover up; (b) intolerance of those who are different; (c) irrelevance to the most pressing problems of the day; and, (d) fragmentation. Of course, it is easy to say, "That's those other Christians!" But surely, it is in the spirit of I Corinthians 12 to insist that when one part of the body sins or falters, all are implicated with it. And besides, who can deny that our own witness is one of fragmentation?

On the way back from Edinburgh, I read a new book setting forth a theology of the Rwandan genocide. And it struck me that, while Rwanda figured prominently in the conference (as it did at the Athens world mission conference in 2005), it did so only as a case study in the need for reconciliation—not as an exploration of the failure of the church!

I say all of this as a reminder that the ecumenical movement is not only about unity, but unity through *repentance* and *renewal*. My fear, however, is that ecumenism in this country is often a cover for maintaining the ecclesial status quo, a way of cooperating just enough so that we can preserve current patterns of church life.

And so my prayer for this meeting: that, with God's guidance, we come here not to tinker with structures or to give pep talks, but to examine honestly our failures and to listen attentively to God's calling—that the years ahead, with God's help, will truly be a journey of wholeness.

Understanding the Lord's Supper for Our Vision and Work for Christian Unity Today

Reflections on I Corinthians II:17-33

Amy Gopp



REV. AMY GOPP currently serves as the Executive Director for Week of Compassion, the relief, refugee and development ministry fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

How do we break bread with those who have no bread? How do we work toward Christian unity while excluding the poor? We do so, of course, without realizing it, or without intending to—but we do it. I am concerned with the divisiveness of economics and the ensuing marginalization of people. Through the lenses I look out of, namely, those of Week of Compassion, responding to natural and human-created disasters and the often chronic issues of hunger, poverty, homelessness, displacement, disease and a lack of education, I see a church that prides herself on gathering at the Communion Table, but I don't see us acknowledging or struggling with issues of wealth and poverty and economic division.

*How do we break bread
with those who have no bread?*

I'm not sure we even notice who is not at the Table. How are we to be unified then? Can we honestly enjoy a meal knowing that so many go hungry? Christian unity includes feeding the hungry—literally and symbolically—at the Lord's Table. But it must not stop there. The acts of offering food to the hungry and communion to the poor is, in and of itself, also building up the church! Understanding the Lord's Supper for our vision and work for Christian unity today, in my estimation, looks more closely at who is still not at the Table and confessing how that absence stunts the growth of our church and the advancement of the

Realm of God. Let us look back for a moment at the early church for insight:

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! (I Cor II:17-22, NRSV)

The rest of this pericope we know so well that we think we know it all too well. (I Cor. II:23-33)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

This is where we usually end the reading, with the words of institution. But let's continue:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

When the early followers of Jesus would gather for a meal, they would do so remembering Jesus' last supper, the meal in the upper room. In Paul's first letter to these early followers in Corinth, he criticizes them for perverting this ritual act. Some of them would arrive with full bellies—some even drunk—at those good old first-century potluck meals. To show up at the home of one who did not have much to offer, having already eaten “better” or more food in their own homes, was an assault on the impoverished host. Moreover, it was hardly an act of sharing, of authentic communion. More than symbolic, the Eucharist, for Paul, was the holy Body of Christ. To disregard the meal was to disregard not only the poor who were your sisters and brothers, but also Christ. “Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” Paul asked. “For all who eat and drink without *discerning the body*, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Cor 11:29–30).

It is tempting to convince ourselves that this passage is merely allegorical. I wonder, however, if this statement of Paul's is not metaphorical, but literal. Because of the lack of compassion, generosity and hospitality of certain members of the body, others grew weak, fell ill and died. The gathered body of Christ had mocked and even defiled the Body of Christ, introducing death into the community. Not sharing the common meal in a truly communal way, where every member of the early church associations participated and benefited, abused the bodies of those present. *It also abused the Body of Christ and thus the unity of the church.*

In our Disciples tradition, Communion takes center stage in our worship experience. We claim that “we gather for the Lord's Supper as often as possible,” as one of our twelve principles of identity. We claim to place priority on the Eucharist among all other ritual actions. Communion: the Body of Christ, food and drink of the earth, our common meal, property of God. But is it really our priority, if so many in our own churches and communities—not to mention the world—go without? Are we Disciples communing in an authentic way with our sisters and brothers in the Two-Thirds World, where the majority live in poverty?

Are we Disciples communing in an authentic way with our sisters and brothers in the Two-Thirds World?

Is the church in the Global North stuffing ourselves silly while members of our body of Christ starve in the Global South? Are some of us still showing up full, hoping that others will mooch scraps up from under the t/Table? What about the homeless community that gathers at the soup kitchen in the basement of so many of our local churches? We prepare a meal *for* them. As we serve the food, we often talk *about* them. But we do not eat *with* them. Nor do we talk *with* them. We serve *on behalf of* the poor; we do things *for* them; we speak *at* them. But we do not walk *with* them.

We barely see them because we hide them away in a dimly lit basement. We relegate them to the bottom floor, just like we think of them—beneath us. We don't welcome them through the front door but through the back door past the refuse dumpsters, far from anyone's view, where their “impurity” will not infect our sanctuary or anyone sitting in it preparing to partake of the Lord's Supper. Yet we claim that the soup kitchen participants are members of our community—members of our church. In reality, many of us have two congregations assembling in our buildings and never the twain shall meet. The poor, the marginalized, wherever they may be, are members of the body of Christ.

This membership is not up to us; it is offered to us by Jesus the Christ, through whom we are sanctified as one, holy body. So when that holiness is defiled,

“Christians cannot partake at the Lord’s Table unmindful that there are many human tables that are bare. Power from the former must energize us to provide food for the latter.”

the body of Jesus Christ is dishonored. When the holiness of the body is not acknowledged, let alone affirmed, the *whole body aches*. Some even get sick and die (1 Cor 11:30). Our soup kitchens are no Lord’s Suppers. How do we truly break bread with those who have no bread? How do we work toward Christian unity while excluding the poor? Have we, unconsciously or otherwise, denied that the bodies of the poor—at times smelly, dirty, diseased, disfigured, disabled, female, non-Anglo—are part of the body of Christ and thus not part of our body of Christ that is the church in all its expressions? Have we dismembered the poor from our body? Instead of re-membering at the Table, have we engaged in dismemberment?

In my extensive travels and visits to our congregations across North America these past five years, I don’t see us inviting the poor into our church homes. Instead, I see us walking over bodies to get to church, driving past bodies on the streets, or perfunctorily placing an offering envelope in the plate to wash our hands of any deeper engagement with hungry and dying bodies on a global level. I have watched the body of Christ partake of the Body of Christ at the communion table as another body of Christ which happens to be poor and sleeping on the church steps is never invited inside the so-called church. Again, I ask, have we dismembered the poor from our body?

As Robert McAfee Brown stated, “Christians cannot partake at the Lord’s Table unmindful that

there are many human tables that are bare. Power from the former must energize us to provide food for the latter.”¹ I believe that our work for Christian unity today carries on the lifelong, generational struggle that Jesus began as a poor, Palestinian peasant in the face of an aristocratic and oppressive Roman Empire. In the face of our current day empire, let us vow to seek first the Realm of God.

Let us strive to honor Christ as the most welcoming and hospitable host we could ever possibly imagine, inviting all of us to embrace the mystery of our faith that only *broken* bread can be shared. Communion can’t happen without a broken body. To share the bread, we must break it. So how do we break bread with those who have no bread? How do we work toward Christian unity without excluding the poor? We welcome *all* to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us. No matter what; full stop. As Disciples of Christ committed to Christian unity, my hope is that we, as the body of Christ on Earth, embrace an embodied faith—one that we feel in our hands, hearts, heads, and deeply in our bones—and one that invites, welcomes, and breaks bread even with those who would otherwise have no bread and whose bodies would not otherwise be embraced so that we may all, indeed, be one.

Notes

1. Brown, Robert McAfee, review of *Broken Break and Broken Bodies* by Joseph Grass, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004.



The Lord's Supper and Our Vision of Christian Unity Today

Richard L. Harrison

DR. RICHARD L. HARRISON is the former pastor of Seventh Street Christian Church in Richmond, Virginia, and former President of Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, Kentucky.

When members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) speak of themselves as church, they will almost always go to three issues, one or all of three ideas: Christian unity, the Lord's Supper, and some form of freedom/liberty of thought and practice. The latter will be tied to matters of polity, how we do church. We will speak of the priesthood of all believers, which leads us to comment on the Lord's Supper, how we observe the Lord's Supper as a rite in which the laity have significant leadership roles. We talk about an open table, and that takes us immediately to a commitment to Christian unity.

For Disciples, the Supper and its Table is the high spiritual moment in our worship. What we believe is the Biblical practice, that is, the weekly observance of the Supper is affirmed by our belief that it is the Supper that brings us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the presence of the Living, Resurrected Lord of Life. We believe, and we feel, that the Supper renews us and ties us both to the Risen Lord and to the community of faith as we gather together around that Table. The experience of the community of faith also gives life and meaning to the idea that the Church is truly one, it is a gift of God in Christ. It is not something we achieve, but

it is experienced as a spiritual reality.

So Unity, the Supper, and Freedom are closely tied together as God's gift, God's call to us, and God's map for living in God's creation. As Michael Kinnamon put it so very well recently in his address at the General Assembly dinner of the Historical Society and our Council on Christian Unity, trusting in the words of Saint Peter Ainslie, "Take Christian unity out of the message of the Disciples and our existence only adds to the enormity of the sin of division by making another division." As Michael put it, "it is this passion for unity, this sense of distinctive mandate, this readiness to die for the sake of our calling, that has given vigor to our evangelism, an edge to our social witness, and particular content to our worship and preaching."¹

In other words, Thomas Campbell two hundred years ago got it right when he said that "the Church of Jesus Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one."² And in that essence we are told by Christ to love one another. We are not told who may, or who may not, share at the common Table. Yet this is clear, if any follower of Christ is denied access to the sacramental feast because of their understanding of the faith, or their understanding of Communion itself, then we have divided the body of Christ. "And division among Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is anti-Christian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against

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himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself.”³

We take this seriously. When Disciples attend a church service in which there is no observance of the Supper, or in which participation in the Supper is limited to a select few, we can often hear the comment made: “I don’t even feel like I’ve been to church.” Quite frankly, still in the feeling mode, when we are denied access to the Table, we begin touching deep-seated notes of anger.

And that reality might help us to understand how we began two hundred years ago. So let us remember that Barton Stone found himself in difficulty with his Presbyterian denominational power structure because of his radical freedom of thought, and his practice of an “open” Table. Thomas Campbell was called to task in part because he committed the sin of offering the Lord’s Supper to people who were a part of the main body of Presbyterians, not just his Seceder Presbyterians. Alexander Campbell found himself compelled to walk out of a communion service in his (and his father’s) denomination, the Anti-Burger, Seceder, Old Light Presbyterians because of the barriers put up between the people and the Table.

The birth of the Disciples thus began around issues of the Table, particularly the belief that the Table belonged to the Christ, and to all who followed him.

That’s where we came from. And now, two centuries later, and two hundred years down the road of the ecumenical movement, we still find the Christian community divided most obviously and painfully when we come to the Table. For theological and historical reasons, we are not permitted to share at the Table with many of our sisters and brothers in the faith. This break in fellowship can never be acceptable, and must be seen for what it is: sin against the very heart of the church.

And now, two centuries later, and two hundred years down the road of the ecumenical movement, we still find the Christian community divided most obviously and painfully when we come to the Table.

In the years to come, the Disciples are in a position to be advocates for the unity of the faith particularly as we accept the invitation to come to the Table. And

we can never be satisfied with the “way things are” when worship services include Holy Communion for some, but not all. Or worse, worship services which omit the Supper because of its “difficulties.”

And if we come to the Table of our Lord together, then By God we had best treat other Christians, other human beings with love and concern, as family. If we truly are called by our Lord to the Holy Table, then we must also work to make sure that no barriers keep us apart. The barriers of nationalism, race, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, even creed, none of these can be allowed to stand between us and the Eucharistic feast.

The ecumenical movement has a future only if we accept God’s gift of unity, and work to manifest that unity amongst all the peoples. As Thomas Campbell proclaimed in his magisterial Declaration and Address, God speaking through Jesus said that wholeness, unity among the followers of Christ is God’s express will that “they may all be one. As you God, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21, NRSV) To accede to a divided church, a divided Table, is sin, sin that separates us not only from one another but also from the Christ himself.

Within the community of faith it is not only possible, it is *likely* that there will be differences of opinion on matters of ethics, and theology, even over the Supper itself. However, when we permit the gentle nudging of the Spirit to operate among us, we will find ourselves led to places of power and reconciliation.

If we are to be a part of God’s united church, we must allow the Spirit’s power of forgiveness and tolerance to live with us, within us, rushing over us so that no opinion can overcome the unity with which we have been blessed, unity that brings us together at the Table of reconciliation and peace. This will require humility of the first order. And we will be called upon to live a tenderness and generosity of affection for and with each other, even as we experience such tenderness and affection with those beside us and across from us at the sacred Table.

There are many points of division within the church today, and if we are seriously engaged in seeking to live the unity of the church which God lays before us, we will have some profoundly difficult moments. If we think that we have the ability to overcome the

divisions that hold us apart, we will simply succumb to the sin of division. The only way that the future of the church will be Holy is if we follow the Spirit, and rejoice in the working of the Holy Spirit among us. This will be difficult work, a difficult way of living the faith. But that is what we are called to do by our Savior. We must use the best of our minds, the best of our hearts, the greatest strength of our

wills to lead us into this new expression of the Kingdom itself.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed for the unity of his people. Let us experience the blessing of doing, believing, and acting as Jesus has called us. Anything less would be to fail our Savior. Let us pray for our church to receive the courage and the determination to be agents for building God's reign.

Notes

1. Michael Kinnamon, "Celebrating our History as a Movement for Unity," Council on Christian Unity/Disciples Historical Society dinner, General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Indianapolis, IN, August 1, 2009. For a brief survey of Disciples history and practice of the Lord's Supper, see James O. Duke and Richard L. Harrison, Jr., *The Lord's Supper, The Nature of the Church*, Study Series 5, published for the Council on Christian Unity by the Christian Board of Publication, St. Louis, 1993.
2. Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington, Pennsylvania, Brown and Sample, first edition, 1809), reprinted in *The Quest For Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*, edited by Thomas H. Olbright and Hans Rollmann, ATLA Monograph Series, no. 46, Lanham Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000) p. 18.
3. Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, pp. 19-20.

Being a Multicultural and Inclusive Church in an Era of Radical Individualism and Diversity

Daniel Lee Kyung-min



REV. DANIEL LEE KYUNG-MIN, born in Korea, came to the United States in 1974 and currently serves as the pastor of a new Korean-American Christian Church in Sunnyvale, California.

When I had heard the words “multicultural and inclusive,” I asked myself whether or not I am in a position to talk about this. I asked this because I am not serving a church like that. My church is for Koreans and Korean-Americans because our primary language spoken is Korean. Thus, our gathering reflects a mono-cultural church with some generation gaps.

But I wonder whether or not a local church should include or desire to have other ethnicities and races with them. I heard an African American sister asking a White sister whether or not her church has any non-White members. What does it mean, and what does the conversation refer to? Should a church have other races and ethnicities in the worship service? From time to time, someone might ask me whether or not we have an English Ministry, meaning service in English. Well, eventually we will need to have one but not right now. Even if we had one now, what is my church? Is it really a multicultural church when a local church has people of other cultures? What sort of identity should these local churches have? I have seen on TV that some mega-churches have audiences consisting of people of color. Is that multicultural church? Maybe. I could be wrong, but I feel that there is an invisible demand or a push toward churches that they should include other cultures. I am not against the beauty of the gatherings of different backgrounds, cultures and traditions because that is the eternal plan of our God through Lord Jesus Christ. And with Him all things are possible. But I believe

it should come about by the flow of the Holy Spirit. Personally I will tend to keep my church as a mono-cultural church because of our own identity. My church wants, or shall I say it is I who want, to keep our Korean-American culture as we share our relationships in Christ. It is because identity and culture go together.

When I hear this question of becoming a “multicultural and inclusive church” which was asked by the central culture, I hear something else. I hear their humility, I hear their compassion for embracing, and I hear their willingness to share. Humility, embracing, and sharing are the words of the Servant of love which surpasses all. The question itself possesses the quality of transcendence, and I agree it should. I also agree that leadership should acquire that quality, for when you are at the bottom, then you will be able to see above. No wonder our Jesus himself said that whoever wishes to be a leader must be a servant first. He said that he did not come to be served but to serve.

A servant has an identity. In order to serve, one should have an identity first, and the only way one can have identity is when one becomes a being. Therefore, when the question was asked by the central culture, I have to say respectfully that there must be a willingness to be a cultural being in order to become a multicultural church. What I am talking about is a lot of sacrifice. I wonder whether or not this is the sort of sacrifice we learn from our Lord Jesus Christ. Among other things, He sacrificed His own comfort. He couldn't direct our lives from above but needed to come down to be one of us. Therefore, becoming among us tells of His humility.

I think I am confusing you, but I want to go back to

When I hear this question of becoming a “multicultural and inclusive church” which was asked by the central culture, I hear something else. I hear their humility, I hear their compassion for embracing, and I hear their willingness to share.

the identity issue which I think is important. The Disciples of Christ's Identity Statement and Principles stated, “Identity is a vital concern for all parts of the church.” Identity shows what we are, who we are, and where we are. It shows our characteristics and traditions, and it displays our outlook accordingly. Identity is visible to others that they may see us and tell who we are, what we are and sometimes where we are. Each identity carries its own uniqueness, and that uniqueness can be displayed as an ornament of the ministry of God. My church's extra distinction, if I could add, comes from our thinking that most of us are considered as the Korean-American generation 1.5. In this respect, we see ourselves as the generation who tries to live out our lives building a bridge between the First and the Second generation. With this sort of distinction, my church is proud to be called and identified as (Walking Faith) Korean-American Christian Church.

Because of the identity issue, I will respond to the question of becoming a multicultural and inclusive church on a regional or denominational level. I am not saying that becoming a multicultural and inclusive church on the local church level is not possible, but I believe the question should be aimed at a wider church. Even on this level, dealing with the identity issue needs be addressed, since we have many members and not all the members have the same function (Romans 12:4). Therefore, to become a multicultural and inclusive church is to provide an opportunity to identify themselves.

In the processing of identifying, I believe it calls one to examine oneself. As Socrates exclaimed, “Know yourself,” we need to know ourselves because we know that it is the beginning of our journey. When we identify who and what we are, and where we are, it allows us to see our placement and surroundings. The realization and recognition of one's social location, as you know, is very important as it declares our presence among others and seeks to become part of that surrounding as well. As a cultural being I tend to see others as cultural beings. But I wonder how it may be possible that members of the central culture can be able to see themselves as cultural

beings. I ask this because I believe that when they see themselves as cultural beings, then the word “multicultural” can be placed on a colorful spectrum.

The understanding and embracing of others comes when there is enough opportunity for relationship. However, this relationship must be build up in the others' context. Seeing others in their own context is good and important when we are relational beings. We need to know others in order to thrive. In this respect, becoming a multicultural and inclusive church means to provide opportunities to know others in context. Many times we tend to invite others into ours. The church has been inviting people to church. We are seeing gradually under the title of “missional church” that now people are trying to go out to see and visit others, to serve the needs of others. I believe it applies to the same idea of mission that, if we really want to know others, we should be able to spend some time with them in their context. “Let's go to them.” Does this sound familiar? We all know that the Lord of grace came down from heaven to be with us in our context, to be related to us and show us the light.

Providing opportunity to know others in their context is to provide them their own space to express themselves freely. In his book *Reaching Out*, Henry Nouwen describes the space as “where change can take place.” He goes further with this thought when he says that it is a place where others can enter and discover that they are created freely, where they sing their own song, speak their own language, eat their own food, dance their own dance, and celebrate their own distinct gifts.

Lastly, to become a multicultural and inclusive church is to extend opportunities to reflect intentionally upon our commonality. For this intentional commonality I will direct us to our faith in Christ. We as church have one big fundamental thing in common, our worship of our God who is the only source of our unity. In the worship service we share our common experience—the grace of God through the seed of the Gospel. Becoming a multicultural and inclusive church should hold this in common since it is not only the only way to become a church like that, but it also sets our vision higher

than our own cultural and traditional identity and uniqueness. Our cultural and traditional presence can be at the door, on the floor and under the roof of the church, but our hearts which are implanted with the Gospel of love is within the church. One of the sermons delivered by C.H. Spurgeon in August 1856 proclaims the love of God. The power and function of it he described in this way: “The love of God can remove every wall of partition which divides us from any of God’s elect and can reset the dislocated bones of society, join the bonds of friendship, and weld the broken metal of manhood into one united mass.” In other words, when we all come together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is the multicultural and inclusive church.

Lastly, to become a multicultural and inclusive church is to extend opportunities to reflect intentionally upon our commonality.

Before finishing my presentation, I must say this—because the more I think about my being here at the Council of Christian Unity, the more I am grateful for the invitation to share my limited experience and qualifications. I want to offer my thanks to Rev. Robert Welsh. I want to express my gratitude sincerely because when I was invited to present my perspective, I saw your energy of integration. I saw your operation of inclusiveness when you had known obviously my difference just by looking at my Korean last name. I believe that providing me with this sort of opportunity is a move toward becoming a multicultural and inclusive church. This invitation further says to me to address two other things: Accepting my difference and adapting to our differences. I believe this is also what is meant by being a multicultural and inclusive church in a fragmented world.



What it Means to be a “Multicultural and Inclusive Church”

D. Newell Williams

DR. D. NEWELL WILLIAMS is the President of Brite Divinity School at TCU in Ft. Worth, Texas.

Let me begin with three observations.

1. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada cannot be inclusive without being multicultural. Thirty-five percent of the US population is composed of minorities; it is projected that Anglos will be less than half of the US population by 2042.
2. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) cannot be multicultural without being inclusive. We believe that unity is achieved not through coercion, but through the bonds of covenant.
3. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) participates in the dominant North American culture which privileges Anglos. Therefore, we must be intentional about being a multicultural and inclusive church.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) participates in the dominant North American culture which privileges Anglos. Therefore, we must be intentional about being a multicultural and inclusive church.

In light of these observations, I would like to raise three questions. Why should we be a multicultural and inclusive church? How can we be a multicultural and inclusive church? And, what impact does a commitment to being a multicultural and inclusive church have upon the practice of Christian unity? These are not new issues for

Disciples. To help stimulate discussion of these questions, I will present a case study of how we have addressed these issues in a church that has always included both African Americans and Anglo Americans.

Why Should We Be a Multicultural and Inclusive Church?

Our first general church ministries to African Americans were directed by Anglos who asserted that blacks would not trust a black in leadership. Consequently, African American Disciples organized their own regional and national conventions culminating in the establishment in 1917 of the National Christian Missionary Convention. The National Convention was an affiliate of the International (meaning the United States and Canada) Convention of the Disciples of Christ—which was the predecessor of the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

In his inaugural address as president of the National Convention, delivered to a racially mixed assembly of forty-one Disciples leaders, the Rev. Preston Taylor, a formerly enslaved African American, stated why the Disciples of Christ must be a multicultural and inclusive church.

The Disciples of Christ, strange as it may seem, need the colored people, if for no other reasons, as the acid test of Christian orthodoxy and willingness to follow the Christ all the way in his program of human redemption. For if the white brother can include in his religious theory and practice the colored people as real brothers, he will have avoided the heresy of all heresies.

To help stimulate discussion of these questions, I will present a case study of how we have addressed these issues in a church that has always included both African Americans and Anglo Americans.

Like the Apostle Paul, Taylor understood that differences such as Jew and Greek do not trump the unity that we have in Jesus Christ. Through faith in Jesus Christ we are united with God and one another. Hence, Taylor's recognition that any religious theory or practice that denies the full humanity of others is nothing short of a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ—"the heresy of all heresies."

African American Disciples continued to recognize the theological foundation of a multicultural and inclusive church, affirming in 1959:

Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) have always held the firm conviction that the church is one as Christ prayed, "That they all may be one." While this has been commonly applied to denominational divisions, our basic philosophy also affirms that there can be no wholeness if any segment is excluded because of culture, race, or national origin. The church is the creation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, composed of all those who profess His name . . .

How Can We Be a Multicultural and Inclusive Church?

African American and Anglo Disciples have developed three models of *how* to be a multicultural and inclusive church. Each of these models developed in relation to a specific social and church context.

1917-1944: The Development of an African American Organization in a Segregated Society to Share with Anglos in the Oversight of Services to African Americans in a Segregated Church.

Leaders of the National Convention did not see the National Convention as duplicating program services which could be secured through existing agencies and staffs. In 1914 the Christian Woman's Board of Missions (a predecessor of Home Missions) had employed African Americans Rosa Brown Bracy as Women's Worker and P.H. Moss as Church School and Young People's Worker. With the formation in 1920 of the United Christian Missionary Society (through the merger of the Christian Woman's Board of Missions and other

agencies), a Joint Executive Committee with an equal number of members from the National Convention and the UCMS was given oversight of national program services to African American congregations. In turn, the National Convention was asked to cover half of the cost of black church services provided by the UCMS. Under these arrangements, R.H. Peoples was hired by the UCMS as national secretary of Negro evangelism and religious education in 1935 and served in that position until 1943.

1944-1969: The Development of an African American Organization in a Segregated Society to Deliver Services to African Americans in a Segregated Church.

In 1944 the National Convention accepted a proposal for restructuring the delivery of services to black churches. This proposal had been developed by the long range planning committee of the National Convention in consultation with the leadership of the UCMS. Introducing their report, the Committee stated that they had sought to preserve the National Convention's relationship with the UCMS while at the same time giving the National Convention a larger part in determining policies and directing work among African Americans. The proposal called for the National Board of the National Convention to assume functions of the African American work previously administered by the UCMS and other agencies. The Board was to establish its own headquarters in Indianapolis and employ its own staff. The constitution of the National Convention was to be amended to allow representation from the UCMS and other agencies on the National Board. In turn, each of these agencies would provide a share of financial support to the Convention. Under the new structure, Emmett J. Dickson became the Executive Secretary of the National Convention in 1945 and assembled a staff of program officers.

1969-Present: The Development of an African American Organization in a Desegregating Society to Foster Fellowship, Inspiration and Education of African Americans and to Exert Influence in a Desegregating Church.

R. H. Peoples became pastor of Second Christian Church (now Light of the World Christian Church) in Indianapolis after resigning his national staff position in 1943. As president of the National Convention in 1955, Peoples proposed a new organizational plan. Basic to Peoples' scheme was to merge the services and work of the National Convention with the services and work of the International Convention and the UCMS. The National Convention was to remain as a "fellowship-assembly" to promote inspiration and education and maintain a legal corporation which could hold property. Its executive secretary was to be employed by the office of the International Convention and have the status of an associate executive secretary. The executive secretary would relate to both the National Convention and the International Convention and ecumenical bodies.

Peoples' proposal for a restructuring of the National Convention was influenced by developments in the 1950s. Throughout the 1950's National Convention staff became increasingly interlocked with the Anglo staff in the various UCMS departments and other major agencies as they served the annual sessions of the National Convention, held worker's conferences, led schools of mission, and worked with children and youth. Moreover, in 1953 the International Convention in Portland, Oregon, adopted a resolution which committed the convention to a policy of non-segregation in all sessions of the convention, its constituent agencies, and in hotel and meal facilities. This policy, drafted by a committee appointed by the International Convention consisting of five members from the Executive Board and five members from the National Convention, was formally approved the following year in Miami, Florida. A National Convention Social Action Commission formed in 1952 monitored this commitment and worked closely with Louis Deer, director of the UCMS Department of Social Welfare. The National Convention Social Action Commission increasingly encouraged the National Convention membership to become full participants in the life and work of the International Convention.

In 1959 a National Convention Commission on Merger of Program and Services approved in principle and spirit the Peoples' plan and identified the first step as transfer of the three program staff from the direct supervision of the National Convention to the staff of the UCMS with those

persons maintaining the same professional status and relationship as other staff members carrying similar portfolios. The Commission also called for (1) African American board members on the policy-making boards of all agencies, (2) the UCMS to maintain in its employ a minimum of four African American staff on an executive level, (3) visibility of African Americans in the public life of the church, and (4) the formation of an Interracial Commission to attend to employment of African Americans at all levels.

This Commission's proposals, approved by the National Convention in 1960, led directly to the 1969 merger of the National Convention and the International Convention and the formation of the National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). According to procedures approved by the final meeting of the National Convention in August 1969, the General Office, in consultation with the executive committee of the Convocation and the administration of the UCMS, named John R. Compton to be the first administrative secretary of the National Convocation. Specific legal procedures for continuing the legal integrity of the National Convention Corporation were also developed.

What Impact does a Commitment to being a Multicultural and Inclusive Church have Upon our Practice of Unity?

The case study of African American and Anglo Disciples also addresses the issue of the impact of a commitment to being a multicultural and inclusive church upon our practice of Christian unity. There are African American Disciples of Christ who have never been affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These Disciples, initially centered in Eastern North Carolina, have been known since 1954 as the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ. By the early twentieth century they had created a distinctive church order which includes "feet washing" as an act of worship, quarterly (rather than weekly) observance of the Lord's Supper, and "chief elders," later called bishops, who exercise oversight of congregations organized in district assemblies. In the 1920s Disciples who were affiliated with both the Eastern North Carolina churches and the National Convention sought to unite the two bodies.

Among those Disciples was Elder John F. Whitfield. Through his efforts, the National Convention

approved a resolution in 1927 to extend to the Disciples of Eastern North Carolina a formal invitation to cooperate with the National Convention. However, the differences in belief and practice of the two bodies—differences in culture, if you will—prevented affiliation of the Disciples of Eastern North Carolina with the National Convention.

Disciples, or at least some Disciples, have understood that not to be a multicultural and inclusive church is a denial of the gospel.

Nevertheless, National Convention and later, National Convocation, officials remained undaunted in their efforts to realize unity with Eastern North Carolina Disciples, continuing to extend to the Eastern North Carolina assemblies offers of fellowship and resources. For their part, Eastern North Carolina Goldsboro–Raleigh chief elder Hardy D. Davis, invited officials from the North Carolina Christian Missionary Convention and executives of the National Convention to begin regular visits to Goldsboro–Raleigh in 1940. The visitation team typically included a representative of the National Convention, a minister from the Piedmont District, or a staff member from the regional office in North Carolina or the general office in Indianapolis. Seminars were offered by National Convention and UCMS staff. Beginning in 1949, seminars were also offered in the Washington–Norfolk district. Among the projects funded by Reconciliation, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) response to the urban crisis of the late 1960s, was one operated by the Washington and Norfolk District Assembly. The second Biennial Session of the National Convocation was held August 1972 at Atlantic Christian (now Barton) College in Wilson, North Carolina to encourage fellowship with the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ. In the 1970s, Homeland Ministries (now known as Home Missions) provided financial support for a continuing education program on the Wilson campus aimed primarily at Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ ministers.

Initial Conclusions

What does this case study disclose that can inform our reflection on what it means to be a multicultural and inclusive church in an era of radical individualism and diversity?

(1) Disciples, or at least some Disciples, have understood that *not* to be a multicultural and inclusive church is a denial of the gospel, the heresy of heresies, a refusal to act on Jesus' prayer that all who believe on the testimony of the disciples might be one that the world might believe that Jesus is the Christ.

(2) We see that Disciples have employed different structures for being a multicultural and inclusive church. These structures were related to different contexts in American culture and within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Among the critical questions for contemporary Disciples are: What are the contexts of the different racial/ethnic communities of contemporary North America? What distinctive structures will best serve the theological mandate to be a multicultural and inclusive church in those contexts? When it comes to being a multicultural and inclusive church, one type of structure for racial/ethnic ministries may not fit all.

(3) Finally, this case study shows how a commitment to being a multicultural and inclusive church impacts the practice of Christian unity. Or, maybe it is the reverse. Maybe this case study shows how a commitment to unity creates multicultural and inclusive relationships! Whichever is the case, the recognition and expression of unity between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ through fellowship and programming has not required conformity of beliefs and practices—conformity of culture—as regards feet washing, frequency of communion, or polity. The continuing relationships between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, despite their continuing differences, have witnessed to the unity of the One body.

Contextual and Local Ecumenism

Christopher B. Morton



REV. CHRISTOPHER B. MORTON, is the Executive Director of Associated Ministries in Tacoma Washington.

It was truly a pleasure to study with Dr. John Poebe, who was, at the time, if I remember correctly, the director of Bossey Institute. During the course on ecumenism taught by Dr. Poebe at LTS, I remember him saying distinctly that at the core of ecumenism is relationships. Through all of the studies of Scripture demonstrating God's desire for unity, growing in my understanding of words like *koinonia*, syncretism and dialogue, it was made clear that at heart of it all was relationships. Two key words for ecumenism, as I learned about it then, were relationships and dialogue. In fact, it was made clear that central to dialogue is the willingness of the people to be vulnerable and open to one another. To be truly in relationship. Whether bilateral, multilateral, or interfaith, dialogue is essentially the genuine encounter with and of the other person. In his book, *Theology by the People*, Poebe states, "the ecumenical movement gets nowhere unless and until ordinary church people are involved in it, embrace it and carry the torch for ecumenism."

That sort of theological grounding of ecumenism, coupled with my independent study on local ecumenism with Dr. Michael Kinnamon, has taught me a few things to keep in mind as God continues to call me to an ecumenical vocation.

Associated Ministries *builds community that is humane, compassionate, and just*. As you can see from the hand-outs, the mission statement is lived out by our primarily becoming a community service agency. Through an array of more than 25 services, and a history of incubating significant ministries like FISH Food Banks, Emergency Food Network, Pierce County Habitat for Humanity, and Pierce

County AIDS Foundation, Associated Ministries has identified ways that the religious community can contribute to strengthening the broader communities where no one else was willing or able to go. Years ago the 14 emergency sheltering providers of Pierce County asked Associated Ministries to be the neutral place where complaints could come to be resolved, dollars could come to be distributed, and regulations could be upheld. Today Associated Ministries has more than seven housing and shelter services, including the management of more than \$1.5 million in emergency shelter, rental assistance and utility assistance funding. And we conduct site visits of all 14 shelters to ensure that they are in compliance with the federal and state rules and regulations. While our member congregations are not directly engaged in that ministry, it is incumbent upon us at Associated Ministries to demonstrate to our member congregations how each time that Laura, our Intake Specialist, answers the phone, she is responding on behalf of the churches. Last Tuesday, Laura worked with 97 people who called our dedicated phone line looking for housing and shelter services, and I am convinced that every day Laura and the staff in housing and shelter services literally save people's lives—maybe not by providing assistance, but by being in relation to and with the person who is calling. Not always mindful of it, but nonetheless on *behalf* of our 250 member congregations.

Which is all to say that there are significant challenges facing the local ecumenical organization. The gap between the constituting members (that is, congregations and judicatories) and local and regional ecumenical organizations continues to grow, just as the pressing chasm between pulpit and pew. It's not a matter of interest, or even desire, but

of time and capacity. Who on earth can be in touch with 600 congregations in Pierce County; can you hear the faint echo of the pastor wondering about the people of the congregation that she serves?

This next observation may be a bit harsh, but from the other side of my mouth let me say that ecumenical organizations are where former local pastors come to be executive directors. Their commitment and passion for sound theological principles remain. What may be slowly evaporating is a love for and with the local church—not in its ideal state, but as it is—often declining, crusty and old. Ecumenical organizations are often led by people knowledgeable about the church, about questions of faith, with deep commitments to community service and a desire to pursue just policies. But ecumenical organizations, particularly at the local level, spend less time engaged in faithful dialogue and more time in delivering community services. They are led by people who do not have the knowledge or experience to run a nonprofit social service organization, nor are they likely to learn to do so. Instead, executive directors of ecumenical agencies often hire someone, or a couple of someones, to run the social services—which in turn frees them up to do the “ecumenical work” of the organization.

*It's not a matter of interest, or even desire,
but of time and capacity.*

Increasingly, state and local councils of churches, by whatever name, are decreasing in size, even closing. Leadership seems stymied, so they invest themselves in what they know best. Whether that is public policy advocacy, disaster recovery efforts, or educational programming, the leader gets busy with a myriad of important activities and loses sight of the need to be a leader.

In the midst of these times, there are also great opportunities for local ecumenism. It seems that church polity is becoming increasingly local, mostly by practice. As congregations experience themselves as individual congregations with limited relationships to and with congregations who share the same brand identity, they will either feel isolated or they will reach out to the congregations down the block. In such a context, congregations may be more willing to explore their relationships with other

churches in their neighborhoods or local communities.

*Whether that is public policy advocacy,
disaster recovery efforts, or educational
programming, the leader gets busy with
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sight of the need to be a leader.*

As churches are encouraged and equipped to be in relationship with one another, they will experience a sense of strength as they explore how they can truly engage one another in meaningful, practical, mutually-beneficial ways. This provides local ecumenical organizations an opportunity to convene, facilitate and equip local congregations for the sense of renewal and transformation that awaits them as they re-think what it means to be the church, and their relationships with one another.

There are many who place ecumenism on a continuum, with cooperation on one end and koinonia on the other, with varying stages of development in between. The use of a continuum is a helpful image to hold up, and a tremendous way to explain the different expressions of ecumenism. But the image leaves us wanting for a number of reasons, not least of which is the presumed preference for activities on the koinonia end of the continuum. But let me suggest that the line of the continuum might bend into a circle in which we can experience the fullness of ecumenism. Rather than pressing each cooperative effort towards koinonia, we celebrate in the ecumenical expression of cooperation that is, in itself, a worthwhile relationship, and watch expressions of ecumenism dance with one another in surprising and unexpected ways, allowing people of faith to grow in their relationships with one another across denominational lines.

After 23 years of marriage, my wife is finally coming to realize that I am high maintenance. She discovered that that was the beast with which she had been wrestling while we were having dinner with another couple. So, I asked my friend from that couple what her first clue was that I was high maintenance, and after a pause she said, “every one of your shirts is starched, even your golf shirts.” So it may not come as a surprise that some would consider me to be “intense.” Translated, I would

prefer to spend more of my time in pursuit of *koinonia*, the more intense form of relationships one might say—a celebration at the Eucharistic Table where we truly share our God-given love for one another, where there is a mutual understanding of our deepest hopes and fears, emptiness and desires. But, alas, not belittling comments earlier today, but on a more practical level, the Communion that most of us share each Sunday at local Disciples churches where we go is usually short of such an experience.

A bit of a secret for you all. Today is my 29th anniversary of staying sober. But in 29 years of continuously going to recovery meetings, I have experienced the rather extraordinary relationships one can have with another human being. The tragedies and disasters that can befall any of us are openly and honestly explored for possible insights and learnings, the celebrations and blessings recognized as absolute miracles. As one recent friend is fond of saying, “There is absolutely no way that someone like me can travel from a freezer box on Pacific Avenue and end up where I am today. Absolutely no way. Yet here I am, thanks be to God.” That sort of caring for one another, joining in our journeys, traversing our troubles, living high on life together, is something that we in the Church could learn a little bit about.

What the current literature of our day tells us about people’s spiritual yearnings is that more than anything, people desire relationships—trusting, meaningful, respectful relationships. It is paramount that our congregations hear that good news and identify one, or maybe two, of God’s gifts to the church that will provide people with avenues towards such relationships. Not the mechanics of small group ministry, but gifts from God, or *charisms*.

Let me apply such thinking to ecumenism, or Christian Unity as lived out in the local community. Remember that in the Pacific Northwest there are but 35% of the people who even claim any religious affiliation. Yes, 35%. Unlike Minnesota where I spent the last 15 years, where 65% claimed to regularly participate in a religious congregation. It was Dr. Patricia Killen, Provost of Pacific Lutheran University at the time, who penned what has been a very popular book called *The None-Zone*, playing off of the recent polls that report a growing, even a majority of people in the Pacific Northwest who are

claiming “none” as the category for their religious affiliation.

A board member of Associated Ministries, Dr. Kathy Russell, has been a close colleague of Dr. Killan’s, so she brought the three of us together. For more than two hours we explored the two *charisms* Associated Ministries would like to lift up for the community. Two *charisms* that are God’s gifts to and for the ecumenical movement: 1) the gift of unity (read “relationships”) and 2) the gift of dialogue. While these gifts are not exclusively to the ecumenical movement, it has been the ecumenical movement that has spent more time, energy and resources living into them than any other expression of the Church.

First, the church is a center for the community who gathers for worship and fellowship. Some sociologists would call this the bonding of the community.

Through the gift of unity and dialogue, Associated Ministries will develop community-based dialogues. That is to say, we will develop relationships amongst churches in local communities throughout Pierce County. In North Tacoma, the West Slope of Tacoma, East Side of Tacoma, South Tacoma, different parts of Puyallup, communities within the City Lakewood, University Place, Firerest, rural communities of Sumner, Graham, Eatonville. Where there is interest and energy, we will bring clergy and lay leaders together, strengthening relationships in the local communities, and invite people in those relationships to explore the topics and issues that are of most concern to their particular community through dialogue. Genuine dialogue: expressing commitments to firmly held beliefs, while listening deeply and intently with respect to the other. In more secular worlds one might think of this as civic engagement.

As congregations of all denominational stripes are increasingly living into a congregational polity, it seems that we are going to have to explore what it means to be the church today. Let me share my latest way of describing the church. It seems to me that the church is the *center for the community* in two ways.

First, the church is a center for the community who gathers for worship and fellowship. Some sociol-

ogists would call this the *bonding* of the community. And most churches, on most Sundays, provide a gathering place for worship and fellowship that meets the needs of those who gather. And during these past two decades there has been an increasing demand for attention to be paid to the church as a bonding place, or what I call a center for the community, to gather for worship and fellowship with the growing tide of family and children ministries, and corresponding, maybe even resultant, decline in outreach ministries.

The second way that the church is the center for the community is through hosting opportunities for people from the broader community to gather.

The second way that the church is the center for the community is through hosting opportunities for people from the broader community to gather. What sociologists would call *bridging*. Think back in church history to the time when the congregation

was the gathering place for the community—that time when there were no televisions, no soccer matches, no Quiz Bowl. With the gifts of unity and dialogue, let's reclaim that center for the broader community where people can come to realize that the church is a place where it is safe to express their thoughts, and that diversity is appreciated inside the gift of unity—a place where people can experience a deep listening to others, while being able to clearly, or not so clearly, proclaim their convictions.

Dr. Silkworth was a world renowned therapist who worked with alcoholics in a hospital in New York, and was a very good friend to Alcoholics Anonymous. At the end of his introductory letter for the Third Edition of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, Dr. Silkworth wrote, "though he came to scoff, he may remain to pray." It is my hope that as we reclaim God's gifts of unity and dialogue, and spread the good news in our local communities, that the skeptics will remain long afterwards and join us in living into God's desire for us to be united.



Ecumenism for the Local Church

Douglas Lofton

REV. DOUGLAS LOFTON is the Senior Minister at Southport Christian Church in Indianapolis.

First let me offer thanks for the opportunity to participate with this group in this thought-provoking and exciting conversation on Christian Unity. I am also grateful to be asked to share my thoughts with regards to the opportunities and the challenges surrounding the topic of ecumenism in the local congregation. I suspect I was asked, not because of any significant global or national involvement, but because of nearly 40 years of participation in leadership in ecumenical and interfaith conversations at the local level.

Some history . . . well actually a lot of history. I was selected as a teenager back around 1969 to be a part of the representative team from First Christian Church in Keokuk, Iowa to discuss some of the documents that were being circulated within the COCU movement. If my memory serves me, which it doesn't always do, we were involved in conversation about issues like mutual recognition of members, communion, and a basic plan of covenant. This conversation was going on in the heat of the debate within the different movements as they considered what union would mean. As I was involved in these discussions within local communities of faith for years, which documents were available at that point, I am not clear.

What I do remember was a real sense of frustration when it all fell apart, but our group kept meeting with the new goal of covenant, or I think the word might have been intercommunion. This was the

model where we would keep our own identity but would commit to some of the principles of the documents I mentioned before.

Before long we got somewhat sidetracked, and the real push then centered on Protestant/Catholic cooperation. Now this was a very significant discussion as in Keokuk, Iowa, diversity was not ethnic or even economic, but religious. To give you context, there were no ethnic congregations, two Mormon families, a Russian Orthodox family (who traveled to St. Louis on high holy days) and a Jewish family (non-practicing). The rest of the town, in church terms, was either Catholic or Protestant, and a pretty even split at that. Mixed marriage in Keokuk was still something people talked about. They were referring to Catholic/Protestant.

Out of those conversations came one major accomplishment, an annual Thanksgiving service at the Catholic High School. The first service had one of the priests presiding and preaching, and the protestant ministers leading and reading other parts of the liturgy. It was all male, all white, but a move in the right direction. That service continues today, but the participants have changed significantly representing the richness of leadership in all traditions.

My next experience was less theological and more practical. When I was serving as minister of the Yokefield Parish of Packwood, Iowa, I served the only two churches in town (200 people couldn't support more than that). I also held dual standing in the United Methodist and Disciple denomi-

I served the only two churches in town (200 people couldn't support more than that). This yoked relationship had existed for about 10 years as neither church could support a full-time minister.

nations. This yoked relationship had existed for about 10 years as neither church could support a full-time minister. They shared a Sunday School, moving a month at a time between churches, and worshipped in separated buildings. I lead the Christian Church worship at 8:30 a.m., lead a Sunday School class at 9:45 a.m., and then lead worship at the Methodist Church at 10:45 a.m. Everything was the same in the order of worship except for weekly communion at the Christian Church, passing the trays, and monthly communion at the Methodist church, at the rail. Most Methodist baptisms were by sprinkling, but several went to the Christian church to be immersed. It wasn't a big deal to them.

Within three weeks we had over 130 kids from 17 churches attending, representing Baptist, Friends, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Independent, Lutheran and Disciple congregations from the area.

The most significant ecumenical event in that community was one brought on by a practical solution to an expressed need. None of the churches in a five community area had a sizeable enough youth population to have a viable youth program. We decided to start an area youth ministry using some of the teachers and coaches from the consolidated school as staff. We even managed to get the school to change their Wednesday-night practices to get out early, and the big success—to have the school buses drop the kids off in Packwood where the program met. Within three weeks we had over 130 kids from 17 churches attending, representing Baptist, Friends, Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Independent, Lutheran and Disciple congregations from the area. No one messed with the curriculum, questioned our intent or did anything but support this ministry. Our combined youth choir sang at any church that wanted them, and all churches were welcome to provide meals, leadership and financial help. It went off without a hitch, and the reason it worked is because everyone wanted a good youth program for their kids. That was the driving goal; theology and practice were never a concern.

From that three-year experience we moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa to serve one of four Disciple congregations in that community. We were located on a

main north-side road which was a connector for several churches in the area. When we arrived in Cedar Rapids, both Noelridge Park Christian and the neighborhood mainline Protestant and Catholic churches had a long-standing relationship. For years they had celebrated Thanksgiving together. Much of the history related to this gathering had to do with the fact that several founding ministers of churches, all around 20-25 years old, were still present. Several had become good friends during the tent-building years, and for them, ministry was done as community. During our nine-year tenure some of these ministers retired, but the history of cooperation within these communities was deep-seated and of high priority.

We continued to build stronger relationships as we opened both food pantries and clothing centers in the north-side community. We also cosponsored one of the first Habitat builds in town. We expanded our worship together to include a summer service in the area park and a music program where our choirs performed. Another boost to building community came in the formation of softball and volleyball church leagues on the north side. This relationship, founded in the early years of seven churches (Catholic, Disciple, United Methodist, American Baptist, Dutch Reformed, Presbyterian, and Lutheran), continues even today as the significant ecumenical grouping in Cedar Rapids.

And finally, where there is a shared crisis or an identified need within the community, churches often realize that in pooling their resources more can be accomplished. This has a carry over effect that can generate other ecumenically based conversations, projects and the like.

The Concerns

1. Churches are more likely to cooperate when their own basic internal needs are met. Much like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, when the basic needs, safety needs, and psychological needs are met, then higher function activities can occur. If a congregation is suffering financial trouble, internal struggles or inadequate care for current membership, then efforts towards and conversations about things like ecumenical cooperation or external cooperation, even within the denomination, takes a back seat.
2. When professional or lay leadership has little or no interest, it can't happen.

3. In most churches, when they have a history of cooperation ecumenically, it is energized by a relatively small group. Deaths and migration can kill these efforts almost overnight.
4. When denominational loyalty is ebbing, a vision like that within our tradition of a gathered community around a common table loses out to people's loyalty to a local church. If they don't care about the denomination, then ecumenical conversations are probably not seen as of critical importance. On the other hand, if people don't identify themselves by denominational labels, is that a bad thing? Maybe they have already boiled it down to the essentials and are not bothered by what they see as denominational details.
5. If a congregation or a lead minister has been burned in a cooperative effort, the likelihood of them trying it again is slight at best.
6. If denominational loyalty is slanted towards our aging membership, then so is meaningful conversation about ecumenical relationships. Denominational connection gives us a baseline

for shared values and for differing beliefs. If that goes away, does the methodology for conversation also go away?

On the other hand, if people don't identify themselves by denominational labels, is that a bad thing?

Like many of you, I have committed the last several decades to building local congregations, and when the opportunity presented itself I have actively pursued ecumenical and interfaith conversations and activities. But I have also come to realize that the circle of leadership energized and willing to give leadership to those kinds of initiatives is small, and in many communities, disappearing. Do I have hope for the future of cooperation? Absolutely! Are we at the beginning of something new and exciting? I would love it. But, it also appears that this is a very fragile jewel that could easily be lost in the noise of, and desire for, local church and institutional survival. If it dies in our generation, we and all those who come after us will be poorer for it.

Christian Unity, Prophetic Witness, and the Unity of Humanity

Kristine A. Culp



DR. KRISTINE A. CULP is the Dean of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago.

Let me begin with words of gratitude to Joe and Nancy Stalcup, to Robert Welsh—and also to April Lewton. At Robert’s invitation, April gathered seven Disciples Divinity House students to discuss Christian unity and specifically, to reflect on “the challenge of maintaining unity and the church’s prophetic witness in the world” or, as the topic is phrased elsewhere, “understanding the connection between the unity of the church and the call for prophetic witness in our society and world.” That discussion provided the starting point for this paper.¹

For several of my conversation partners, the first and overwhelming response was suspicion: Who was appealing to unity and why? When church statements appeal to unity, they asked, what conflicts are being suppressed? Perhaps the appearance of language about unity provides a sort of inverse index of dissent and division: an indication of suppressed positions? One interlocutor, who studies religion in colonial and postcolonial Africa, noted how integral assumptions of unity are to nation-states. How often is unity an attempt to consolidate the authority of churches by eliding diverse identities?

These questions came from persons who are already cultivating intellectual, pastoral, and interpersonal arts of ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural engagement. Let’s follow their impulse and agree that a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” to use Paul Ricoeur’s term, can be a good starting point. It is crucial to ask how the language of unity functions—what it allows us to imagine, to do, and to trust, and what it hides, suppresses, or denies.

I’m going to follow some suspicions about appeals

to the unity of the church. Those suspicions arise in relation to basic human need and to transformation in history—the notions I am going to use here more than “prophetic witness” per se. (The language of prophetic witness can suggest a “stance” rather than concrete action to meet basic human needs and to enact political and economic changes that ensure those needs are met fairly for all.) Eventually, I will consider how Christian unity, especially as expressed in right participation and right testimony, serves the unity of humanity and witnesses to the grace and glory of the one God. Thus, I’m going to argue for distinguishing between the unity of the church and Christian unity, then I’m going to suggest that Christian unity must be interpreted and pursued in the context of the unity of humanity.

For several of my conversation partners, the first and overwhelming response was suspicion: Who was appealing to unity and why?

I’m going to do this in relation to key figures in the history of Christian thought: Augustine, who presented a more structural view of unity, but yet emphasized the transforming work of God in all of human history; Luther, who rejected a structural view of unity but possibly at the expense of transformation in history; and John Calvin, who stressed the importance of visible ministry and transformation—and whose thought informs the Disciples, at least indirectly.²

Arguably, the unity of the church was not a pressing practical matter for the earliest Christians; what pressed upon them were concerns about their susceptibility to persecution, false teaching, and alien powers, and about their status in the wider

religious and political world. Early followers of Jesus saw themselves as vulnerable to persecution and suffering from without; at the same time, Paul, Irenaeus, and others depicted the communities they knew as reliable, if earthen, vessels that could bear the grace and glory of God.

As persecution lessened and Christianity gained status in society, theologians and church leaders increasingly became concerned with immorality and laxity in the church, and ultimately, with securing the church as a means of salvation. Could churches bear God's grace when truth and falsehood were mixed within them? Faced with internal threats more than external ones, theologians and church leaders began to stress the unity of the church and to develop strategies of institutional, dogmatic, and moral invulnerability. At the turn of the fifth century, Augustine introduced the distinction between the visible and invisible church as a way to affirm that actual churches exhaust neither the reality of Christian communion nor the glory of God. At the same time, Augustine's thought consolidated the authority of the church. He pictured the visible church as a properly-ordered institution that minimized discord and bolstered human unity through the hierarchical rule of the church.

I'm not suggesting that we can divest ourselves of hierarchy (or heteronomy) by simply returning to Paul's vision of earthen vessels or by somehow rejecting institutions and order. Moreover, Augustine's theology broadened the horizon of transformation to the whole world and to all history—and that gain ought not to be lost. However, hierarchical authority, especially heteronomous authority, may rightly prompt a hermeneutics of suspicion. Contemporary Disciples should ask: Is unity serving institutional stability or the transformation of life before God? Is unity serving to bolster invulnerability rather than to attune us to creaturely vulnerability and a living God? Does the affirmation of unity grow from a sense of human vulnerability to devastation—and to transformation—or does it stifle awareness of shared creaturely plights and possibilities?

Accordingly, we might distinguish the question of the unity of the church from Christian unity, and then interpret Christian unity in relation to the unity of humanity. The Bible gives us many pictures of the unity of humanity, one being that we are earth creatures, fashioned from dust and the bones of

others. Paul's teaching that human creatures are capable of bearing the grace and glory of God in the clay vessels of shared life and worship remains crucial. Along with these biblical depictions, we must also attend to basic human needs. There are some universals: all persons need food, shelter, clothing, care, community, and dignity. Both the Bible and human need attest that we humans are creatures who are susceptible to pain, hunger, suffering, harm, and death; we are also susceptible to transformation. Such needs unite us and moreover, must test any notion of Christian unity.

That responsiveness to creaturely need ought to test the adequacy of shared faith, is not a new affirmation. The words of the prophets and of Matthew 28 come to mind. Likewise, Martin Luther trained his attention to the hungry poor and contrasted their plight with that of the wealthy church. Luther rejected any notion of the church or of Christian unity that was built on the consolidation of visible organizational and clerical authority. "The church is a high, deep, hidden thing which one may neither perceive nor see, but grasp only through faith, through baptism, sacrament, and Word," Luther wrote. He continued: "Human doctrine, ceremonies, tonsures, long robes, miters, and all the pomp of popery only lead far away from it into hell—still less are they signs of the church. Naked children, men, women, farmers, citizens, who possess no tonsures, miters, or priestly vestments also belong to the church."³ Although divine grace and glory can never be fully known, Luther taught that Christian people—humble and privileged alike—can be confident that the fullness of grace is hidden in God rather than contained in church hierarchies and ceremonies.

Luther contrasted the structural unity of churches with a spiritual unity in Christ.⁴ He taught that: 1) true Christianity is neither primarily a structure nor an institution; it is a spiritual communion of one faith; 2) "external matters of worship" such as vestments, rites, special masses, are not essential to Christianity; what the scriptures and the creeds teach is faith alone, which is inward and spiritual; 3) Christianity is not built up to the pope as its head, only Christ can be the source of life for the body; and finally, 4) Christian faith is not limited by the inequalities of material bodies—that is, those who are stronger, healthier, richer, or more powerful are not superior Christians. Luther's insistence that Christianity is not determined by the inequalities of

persons remains particularly relevant in our time when global divides of strength, health, wealth, and power are sharply drawn.

For Luther, “under the cross” is the place where Christians are united in evident faith and in their vulnerability to pain and destruction.

For Luther, “under the cross” is the place where Christians are united in evident faith and in their vulnerability to pain and destruction. He accented the paradoxical nature of Christianity in which God’s glory is hidden in the cross and essentially invisible on earth. Unfortunately, Luther tended to trust inwardness and invisibility in themselves and to denigrate visible and material expressions of faith as such.⁵

By contrast, John Calvin employed the distinction between visible and invisible church to aid believers in keeping communion with the church they could see. According to Calvin, the church’s foundation in divine election may be primarily invisible, but its ministry and purpose are primarily visible. Initiation into its membership is by baptism; its unity in doctrine and love is attested to by the Lord’s Supper; and its ministry is preserved in the preaching of the Word. This visible church is far from perfect: Its divinely instituted ministry exists in history and is susceptible both to corruption and to correction.

Calvin viewed the Christian life as a strenuous, engaged life. In contrast to Luther’s paradoxical stance, Calvin depicted a transformative faith engaged in history. “The church’s holiness is not yet complete,” Calvin taught. The church is holy in that God is “daily at work” in it and “in the sense that it is daily advancing.”⁶ Christians dwell in the midst of life’s complexities, vulnerabilities, and ambiguities, not on the edge of the world. Christians should rely on God’s mercy, give glory to God, name ignorance and falsehood for what it is, acknowledge their own vulnerability and ambiguity, and strive to transform lives and institutions toward the glory of God.

The gap that Calvin saw between divine glory and creaturely existence often called forth a practical responsiveness. And more, it called forth venture-some Christians who lived out their faith in the midst of a world that was a theater of God’s glory, albeit one distorted by corruption and idolatry.

Many of these followers grew impatient with falsehood and injustice and became uncompromising agents of change. They understood their worship of the God of grace and glory to entail the possibilities of transformed ecclesial, cultural, political, and economic life toward greater goodness, truth, and justice. But other followers of Calvin focused on the fear of God and their own vulnerability, and negotiated the gap between creaturely existence and God’s glory by creating and submitting to authoritarian religious and political regimes. At our best, Disciples exemplify the former practical responsiveness; at our worst, Disciples’ focus on unity can function to suppress not only divisions and diversity, but also responsibility for transformation.

The gap between God’s glory and creaturely existence is no less evident in our day. Globalization does not alleviate the shared human plight about which Paul and other theologians have been writing for centuries: human creatures now assimilate idolatries by megabytes and gigabytes; we consume tyrannies with how we eat, work, and live; we transact them in the global marketplace and suffer them in globalized risks and damage. To somehow secure our own lives from the ravages that others suffer—a sectarian option—is not a real option: persons are already intricately and globally interconnected. For example, cell phones allow communication with persons around the world; they also connect their users to the Congo, from whence comes eighty percent of the mineral that allows the phones to hold an electrical charge, but where rural Congolese themselves cannot afford the technology and where exploitation and rape accompany international looting of mineral resources.⁷

The deadly effects of contemporary idolatries are seen in places where the basic goods of life cannot be taken for granted, where constant vigilance is required to keep a child safe from violence and well-enough fed, where decent housing can be neither afforded nor found, where access to minimal health care or education cannot be assumed, where the lack of hope numbs minds and spirits. The effects of our day’s idolatries also cut across relative privileges. They are seen in interpersonal abuse and violence, substance abuse, ragged relationships, lack of viable common life, contaminated food and water and air, and relative inability to access or affect political processes.

However, it is not only shared harm and pain that unite human creatures. The unity of humanity

finds positive expression when basic human needs are met and the common dignity of creatures is affirmed. Let me turn to one example. M.F.K. Fisher believed that “the art of eating” must be encouraged, and it could be nurtured in better and worse ways. Over against “impatience for the demands of our bodies,” inattention “to the voices of our various hungers,” or “shameful carelessness with the food we eat for life itself,” she counseled training in attention and enjoyment. In a postscript to her book on cooking and eating during the World War II years, she concluded: “To nourish ourselves with all possible skill, delicacy, and ever-increasing enjoyment,” is one of the ways persons can “assert and then reassert our dignity in the face of poverty and war’s fears and pains.” Fisher commended “a kind of culinary caution,” learned in the experience of wartime food rationing, that was attentive to food as precious (butter, meat, spices, in particular) and not to be wasted. She noted that the art of eating can aid knowledge of other things, including of ourselves and of the powers that threaten human survival and dignity.⁸

As Paul and Irenaeus taught centuries ago, vulnerable creatures can be strengthened to receive and bear the grace and glory of God. At their best, this is what both daily bread and the great celebration of the Lord’s Supper do: they strengthen persons to the fullness of human dignity, and they strengthen the church to receive and bear the grace and glory of God. In the twenty-first century, shared Christian life and “prophetic witness” may entail marches and coalitions, but they more likely involve a persistent faith and a canny practicality that ensure basic human needs.

John Calvin argued that what united and ensured Christian life was ministry—not structure, not doctrine—and specifically the ministry of right proclamation and of right reception of the sacraments. For example, Calvin pictured persons as being delighted, strengthened, transformed, and reoriented by partaking of the Lord’s Supper: “We see that this sacred bread is spiritual food, as sweet and delicate as it is healthful for pious worshipers of God, who in tasting it, feel that Christ is their life, whom it moves to thanksgiving, for whom it is an exhortation to mutual love among themselves.”⁹

Calvin offered his own “culinary caution” about right participation in the Lord’s Supper. He saw much at stake in the rightful administration and

participation in the Lord’s Supper: proper honoring and discernment of God, of Christ’s body, of other members of the body, and of one’s self, as well as the ability to offer healing, solace, and aid to sick, distraught, and needy persons. Such attention and care for right administration and participation, especially when combined with tendencies to order and restraint, may degrade into rigorism and formalism, serve to divide insiders from outsiders, and close off participation—as the Campbells discovered in their day.

Much is at stake in the art of eating—whether it is daily bread or the Lord’s Supper.

Much is at stake in the art of eating—whether it is daily bread or the Lord’s Supper. Right participation in shared meals and in the waters of birth and life, and right proclamation spoken and lived offer means of shaping response to God and to the basic needs and dignity of other creatures. We might call these arts of eating, washing, and proclaiming the arts of Christian unity. Such ministry can foster delight and gratitude, respond to hunger and other basic needs, and anticipate the full welcome of God’s table. Doing so, these arts may serve as means of God’s grace and also to upbuild the unity of humanity and to bear testimony to the dignity and integrity of God’s creation.

I began with the suspicion that sometimes Christian unity becomes too associated with the structural and ideological unity of the church, that is with the consolidation of organizational, ministerial, and theological authority. I also suggested that at other times appeals to a higher “invisible” unity in Christ may function to divide Christian insiders from non-Christian outsiders and to divert attention from the commonalities of human need and the call of human dignity. A measure of suspicion can help churches and theologies be responsive to human need, to life’s complexities, and to a living God. I’ll conclude by noting two additional matters where a hermeneutic of suspicion may be useful: first, sometimes Christians talk about unity when reconciliation and transformation are really the tasks at hand; second, even the sturdiest reconciliation and most profound transformation are likely to fall short both of creaturely need and of the grace and glory of God.

Notes

1. Thanks to Mandy Burton, Kristel Clayville, Chris Dorsey, Anna Liv Gibbons, Laura Jennison Reed, Garry Sparks—among them four PhD and two MDiv students—and to alumna April Lewton.
2. I am drawing on my forthcoming book, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, [October 2010]).
3. Martin Luther, *Against Hanswurst* (1541) in *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann [cited below as *LW*], vol. 41, *Church and Ministry III*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 211.
4. See Martin Luther, *On the Papacy in Rome, Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig* [1520], *LW* 39, especially 65–76. Luther quotes Colossians 3 to support his view, "Our life is not on earth, but hidden with Christ in God" (69). Similarly, in *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther rejected the visible accouterments of medieval holiness because they are "items of an external, bodily, transitory nature" (*LW* 41:147). More exactly, Luther viewed them as "purely external," that is, *merely* external and as neither essential to salvation nor instituted by God.
5. Moreover, Luther tended to caricature late medieval Christianity as being distorted by material excesses and to polemicize against Judaism as a religion of externals (of law and ritual versus gospel and faith); he drew a severe line between such "externals" and the inwardness of Christ's kingdom. In addition, Luther used Judaism—perhaps even more than the papal church of his day—as his template for excoriating "externals." In doing so, he imbibed in and exacerbated Christian anti-Jewishness.
6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.17.
7. Elik Bonanga, president of the Community of Disciples of Christ in the Congo (CDCC), speaking in Indianapolis, Indiana, on 7/31/09. As reported at <http://www.disciplesworld.com/newsArticle.html?wsnID=15640>.
8. M.F.K. Fisher, "How to Cook a Wolf," in *The Art of Eating* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 350, 188.
9. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.40.



Christian Unity and Prophetic Witness

Nathan D. Wilson

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What I propose to do this afternoon—not least hopefully to keep you awake!—is present eight or nine ideas for our discussions and documents.

It's quite clear that unity among Christians was central to the genesis of our denomination. Within or beyond this room, there's little credible dispute about that. Unity among believers was central, or polar as the case may be. That I think is clear.

What is quite unclear, though, is whether unity is anywhere close to being a central priority for us as a denomination today. And what is even less clear than unclear is where among the pecking order issues of unity will fall in our near and long term future. In terms of seminary curricula, for instance, how much attention is devoted to matters of ecumenism? Is it restricted to history courses, or even history and theology courses? Or is the renewal of the church also a part of ethics classes alongside discussion about the reconciliation of humanity? More fundamentally, are we challenging new and aspiring clergy to consider where they root their self-identities as ministers: in the gospel or in a denomination?

Let me try this same point from a slightly different direction. I am privileged to serve on a nurture and certification team in the Indiana region. These are 5-6 person groups who accompany students through seminary, field education and the ordination process. It's something I enjoy doing because my own experience as a seminarian—with a different region—was significantly lacking, and because I often find the conversations with dedicated team members and students to be engaging. The consistent exception to this latter point is around

any clear articulation of the ecumenical nature of Disciples or the importance of ecumenism for congregational ministry. "If I get to it" is not an atypical response when students are asked questions about being involved in ministerial associations or district meetings, regional or general church life.

Charity and justice. The confusion of charity and justice is not new. From my standpoint, it's not improving. The problem is that this confusion undermines our attempts at prophetic witness. The congregation I serve, for example, hosts a community food pantry cooperatively administered by eight congregations and individuals not associated with any congregation. It is, by far, the most significant provider of food and hygiene products in our county. Like other pantries across the country, the number of families served is considerably higher the last two years. Thankfully, we have additional volunteers willing to staff the pantry and additional donations to stock the pantry's shelves. The commitment and energy for the pantry is strong. However, when a conversation emerges about what combination of factors cause so many to need the pantry's food, the energy diminishes considerably. It reminds me of William Sloane Coffin, who said:

Many of us are eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it. There's the great pitfall of charity. Handouts to needy individuals are genuine, necessary responses to injustice, but they do not necessarily face the reasons for injustice. And that is why so many business and governmental leaders today are promoting charity; it is desperately needed in an economy whose prosperity is based on growing inequality. First these

leaders proclaim themselves experts on matters economic, and prove it by taking the most out of the economy! Then they promote charity as if it were the work of the church, finally telling us troubled clergy to shut up and bless the economy as once we blessed the battleships.

The challenge for us is to affirm the good, well-intentioned charitable giving of those in our congregations *and* challenge our folks to engage in issues of justice by asking, in different ways, why so many need charity in the first place! Then our witness will be more complete.

*I wonder if discussions about unity
and witness would be better received
and enacted if they were reframed
using a rubric of generosity.*

Like many of you, I am constantly considering how best to craft and frame messages. My interest in message framing is a product of my love for preaching and writing, and it stems from my experience in political communications, where many times the debate is won or lost by how the issues under debate are initially framed. I wonder if discussions about unity and witness would be better received and enacted if they were reframed using a rubric of *generosity*. Put simply, our response to a generous God is to have open, welcoming, caring attitudes and actions. This rubric may also speak to the overarching concern of money and funding. When money is tight, do we retreat from outward commitments and focus on institutional survival? If so, might that hasten our decline?

Allow me a brief story. My grandmother, hands down, made the best homemade preserves ever! That's the end of that discussion (but not the end of my story). Among Nana's scrumptious offerings, my personal favorite was her cherry preserves. There was only one thing wrong with a jar of Nana's cherry preserves: It had a bottom. At some point, the preserves would run out. You could pound on the bottom of the jar until your hand ached or scrape it until the glass broke. You could strain your jaw and stick your tongue as far into the jar as humanly possible or consider rigging some vacuum to suck out just a little more. You could hoard the preserves and hide it from others. No matter what your

methods, the cherry preserves in that jar would eventually end.

Of course, my cousins who lived in the same town as my grandmother didn't have such a problem. They could go to Nana's house any or every day and eat preserves until their contented tummies wanted no more. They could wander in the house, toast some bread, casually sit at the kitchen table, talk to Nana, and comfortably eat preserves without looking over their shoulder for a father or younger brother who at any moment could swoop in and snatch that last bit of preserves right off your plate and then bask in glory.

Did the clink of the spoon at the bottom of a jar trigger anxiety and near tears in my cousins? I doubt it. Their supply was bigger. But even though my cousins were much better positioned than I, never once do I remember my grandmother withholding or restricting her preserves from me. To say it the other way, her abundant gifts were always more than plenty. Kind of reminds you of God's abundant love, doesn't it? Always plenty—and so rather than hoard it for myself, I can freely and openly share it with others.

When I served as executive director of the West Virginia Council of Churches, we provided liturgical resources to ministers. Usually the resources consisted of calls to worship, benedictions, communion meditations, corporate statements of confession, and occasionally pastoral prayers. Sometimes the unity or social justice themes were explicit; sometimes they were not. Sometimes I wrote them in ways that made reference to issues facing our state or nation. We started providing these largely because when I began as director of the WVCC, I was all of one month out of seminary. So, while I felt reasonably confident of my ecumenical theology—thanks to Lexington Seminary and the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland—I was less than confident of what I should “do” as director of a council of churches. Fortunately, the liturgical resources hit the spot! Pastors needed this stuff every week, so if what I wrote was decent, they'd use it. So it served my purpose of getting messages to congregants, and it served the pastors' purposes of accomplishing one of many tasks they faced each week. Wonder if something like this would work on a larger scale?

Briefly, for now, let me consider what activities count as “prophetic witnessing.” What comes to

your mind? I certainly think of picketing, organizing advocacy networks, writing letters to decision-makers and media, making phone calls, holding town halls perhaps, and so on. I wonder if we couldn't use more of our God-given creativity to increase our menu of options. For instance, the congregation I serve is full of business leaders. (At board meetings I sometimes think we have too many of them!) What are ways we can include and encourage business leaders to be advocates and people of justice in their work lives? Too often those with resources are preached at or scolded. We perpetuate the "money is bad" fiction.

I just accepted an invitation to speak on a panel this fall about how businesses can create positive social change. Over the last couple weeks, during my discussions about the panel with the organizers, at least two of their impressions have become clear: First, they perceive religious leaders as ignorant about the realities of social dilemmas, including poverty; second, they perceive us as those who talk a good game about social change, but rarely act to actually change anything at all—in society or in our churches. Whether or not we agree with these perceptions is secondary so as long the perceptions exist. And it certainly seems to be the case, from my view, that the most productive social change work right now is led by social entrepreneurs and philanthropists. Often they are doing the systemic change we are talking about. Now is the time for us to connect more deeply.

I'll just touch on this one: I'm not sure that Christian unity and church unity mean the same thing. In fact, I would argue that many people of faith—Christian and other faiths—are uniting precisely around issues of justice and prophetic witness. Many times this work happens independent of ecclesial structures. Are those structures slowing ecumenical progress? To ask it another way, is the unity and renewal of the church essential for its witness? Or, can the witness progress just fine, thank you very much, without being hampered by concerns of unity in any formalized sense? Who or what benefits from a more united church? When Jesus was asked about finding God's kingdom, he suggested taking some action or changing some behavior. Never is it recorded that he said, "Form the right set of doctrines." How, if at all, does this speak to us about unity and witness?

I wonder if another communication hurdle we face is due to the difficulty of measuring effectiveness in

church life. Whether it's the seminarians to whom I referred earlier, or congregational clergy, or judicatory leaders, or laity, I think part of our problem stems from the difficulty of proving that resources used on matters of furthering unity or witness are producing desired results. They might respond with that old joke about the man who went to his boss and said, "Boss, when's that pay raise of mine going to be made effective?" Boss said, "As soon as you are." Measuring things in the church is not easy, is it? Maybe that's why we fall back on counting noses and nickels. At least those are two things we can count: what's the attendance; what's the offering? Surely we can brainstorm ways to prove the value of unity and witness.

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I want to conclude with a problem I have. You don't have enough time for many of my problems, so I'll just name one. I'll call it the "Mark" problem. Mark sang at the church I serve last fall. Mark's special music was just after my message in the worship celebration, so he had no choice but to listen to the message! The following Thursday, Mark stopped by church just as I finished a class I teach about forgiveness. We didn't have an appointment scheduled, so my assistant buzzed me to see how I wanted her to handle it. I decided to meet with Mark, so he came to my office and we talked. For the first 30 minutes, there was nothing terribly remarkable in our conversation. He asked some questions about our order of worship, about why we celebrate the Eucharist every week and about how we mix genres of music.

Then he said, in what I first thought was his parting statement, "Well, I just wanted to stop by and say I thought your sermon was kind of, okay." I laughed and said that's what all of us preachers strive for: "Kind of okay" sermons! Immediately Mark launched into conversation with new vigor. He said that for him a "kind of okay" sermon was good. He said he never felt comfortable in a church, and that the only reason he sang in churches was to earn extra money with generally pretty minimal expectations. We talked about the openness of our congregation

and denomination. To my surprise, the next Sunday Mark was in the congregation. The rest of the fall and all winter, he attended regularly, only missing our worship on the Sundays he sang somewhere else. Those weeks he would listen to the celebrations online or on CD.

Does authentic witness sometimes mean going it alone? How do I determine those times?

Last spring, Mark learned that he is HIV+. I didn't realize he shared this with anyone until his name was mentioned by a colleague during a local ministerial association meeting. Looks between four or five ministers present were exchanged. I faced a dilemma: Do I pretend like I didn't notice the looks and see how the conversation develops, if at all, or do I ask what the looks were intended to mean and possibly disrupt the otherwise docile fellowship? I decide to ask. The conversation that followed was difficult and uncomfortable and, ultimately, has

alienated some of my local colleagues from me—which I truly regret.

At the same time, I am tired of tolerating the intolerance of the intolerant! I can almost tolerate the intolerant, but tolerating their intolerance feels like more than I can or at least want to do. Here's the issue, though: Maybe that's just my problem. Maybe, for the sake of the gospel, I must tolerate even the intolerance of the intolerant—suck it up and deal with it because there are bigger issues at stake here. On the other hand, is there a time or place when my desire for authentic witness overtakes my desire for unity? Does authentic witness sometimes mean going it alone? How do I determine those times?

One of my favorite passages from the Talmud says, "If people of learning participate in public affairs, they give stability to the land. But if they sit at home and say to themselves, 'What have the affairs of society to do with me?' they bring about the destruction of the world." I'm glad that we're not sitting at home. I look forward to our discussions.

Many Gifts—One Body; God's Counter-Narrative

A BIBLE STUDY ON I CORINTHIANS 12:4–27

April Johnson



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These are two assumptions on which this reflection is founded. While they will not be referenced in the actual reflection, they are primary to our shared work:

1. Our shared values are greater than our divergences. Said another way, the ways in which we differ are far less than the ways in which we are alike.
2. While we may not all share Christ, we all share Christ's message. We have the same message although our belief may be in a different messenger. (John 10:16)

I Corinthians 12:4–27 (from *The Message*)

4–11 God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful: wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

12–13 You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one

body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

14–18 I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different—but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

19–24 But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore

necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?

25-26 The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

27-31 You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything.

Self-interest is a shameful motivator. Looking out for one's own concerns, putting your own needs ahead of others, tooting your own horn and ensuring you are first and not last is inappropriate behavior, particularly for the Christian. When the mother of the sons of Zebedee asked Jesus for a place of prominence in his kingdom for her sons, Jesus answered that first, they did not understand what they were asking for, and second, in his kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. That response offered a counter-narrative to our inside voice, and, if we are honest, to that which everything and everyone around us affirms. Even in our nascent wrestling with trying to understand our place in the world, before seminary and church school and church camp, did we not wonder "why am I here?" Am I the only one who lay in the grass looking up at the clouds discerning not "what is God's call on my life?" but "is that an elephant with a stick in his trunk or a witch on a broom or an angel with a wand waiting to grant my heart's desires?" Surely I am not the only one who frequently wondered if this thing called life were a dream and everyone in it characters in the unfolding drama of my life! Were not, for many of us, our first theological musings fundamentally about our own self-interest?

*The ways in which we differ are far less
than the ways in which we are alike.*

In the scripture that forms the backdrop for our study this morning, First Corinthians 12, Paul offers a counter-narrative to the church at Corinth and to the church today. The church at Corinth was founded by Paul on his first missionary journey where the message of Christ was well received, especially by the "humbler" or marginalized classes. Corinth, as many of us know, was a wealthy commonwealth of Rome strategically located on the isthmus between northern and southern Greece. Corinth was a realtor's dream. Location. Location. Location. Populated with every social class, ethnicity and culture, the social economy of Corinth began to creep into the church. The epistle to the Corinthian church is a response to a report received by Paul that debauchery and lack of decorum in church were the order of worship; not Christ. The higher classes were literally throwing their weight around and abusing the lower classes. Some commentary's note a particular case of incest that went unchallenged in the home of a founding church family as the incident that sparked Paul's letter of instruction, commendation and reprimand that is this first epistle.

It is tempting to share with you only verses twelve through fourteen in chapter 12 of this letter: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all of the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greek, slave or free, and we were all made to drink of one spirit. Indeed the body does not consist of one member but many." It would be good to share these words of scripture with you and say, "Now, go and do likewise." However, these powerful words of instruction are part of a larger body of the biblical text. They come after a long practical and theological walk guided by Paul that begins in chapter 10. It is in chapter 11 where we find the words of institution we use today for the Lord's Supper—a mark of our Disciples identity.

Paul is instructing the church at Corinth and the church gathered in this room for this week, that if indeed you gather in the name of Jesus, if you identify yourself as Christian, if you desire to gather around the Table (big 'T') and around tables (little 't') in Christ's name, there is no host but Christ. There is more than enough for those who gather in Christ's name. There is no hierarchy at the table of the Lord. We take in the body and blood of Christ in remembrance of Him. Self-interest is set aside, and Christ-centered interest is imbibed. There is

simply Christ, poured out and broken for the many. Paul offers a counter-narrative to the one and the many who find their identity in Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to instruct us that the many-ness of who we are in Christ is the nature of our calling. Our calling is our giftedness as individuals and as church. Even there, no one gets to hoard all the gifts. There are many gifts but the same Spirit. Paul even says, if you try to hoard all the gifts, you couldn't if you wanted to because they have their expression and are activated by the one Spirit. Not by you. The gifts are not doled out by humanity. This concept is so hard to live into as church. The Spirit anoints and appoints your giftedness as is needed in the whole.

*Jesus' response offered a counter-narrative
to our inside voice, and, if we are honest,
to that which everything and everyone
around us affirms.*

Let me give you an example. I am a fixer. It is likely that some of my family-of-origin *stuff* makes me want to fix things. It could be gender, even though my girlfriends insist that my male side is overdeveloped—because I don't like to tarry long in problem identification. My tendency is to simply solve the problem and move on.

Several years ago, I was serving as director of our Children's Church. My Sunday School superintendent invited me to serve in that capacity despite my desire to continue teaching Sunday School. I agreed against my will. For me, I was clear that my calling was to Sunday School, with young

people who listen to you and challenge you much less than adults.

One weekend, Children's Church was sponsoring a bake sale, and we planned to invite young women to the church to bake on the Saturday before. When that day came, I received a phone call from one of the women in the ministry in charge of the bake sale, advising that the church's building permit had not been renewed to allow access that day. Out of frustration, I hung up the phone, fell to my knees inadvertently and began talking to God. I want to say I was praying, but I said in not so reverent language, "God, I told you that I didn't want to do this!" As clear as day I heard a voice say to me, "But it's not about you!"

Humbled and relieved, I called the woman back, gave her instructions to contact the young ladies scheduled to come to the church that day, and then I informed her I would see her at church the next day. From that moment on, my ministry work in Children's Church ran more smoothly with much better cooperation from the adult volunteers. Wouldn't you know that two months later I was transferred away and called into seminary?

Just when you think you have this thing called life all figured out, you know your gifts and how you are going to apply them, the ground beneath you shifts! God has use of your gifts where they are most needed. Today, the Spirit is declaring to us a reversal, a counter-narrative. If we believe that we do not serve the church out of self-interest, we deceive ourselves. The Spirit reveals to us our passion and gifts, using our self-interest to propel us to be whole—even whole church. We are not here to beat the Catholic Church at being church, but we are called to be the church catholic.



Boundary Crossing, Conversion and Resurrection

A BIBLE STUDY ON ACTS 10:34-43

Andy Mangum

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During year C, the *Revised Common Lectionary* places Peter's speech to Cornelius' household (Acts 10:34-43) on Easter Sunday. At first glance, the lectionary selection seems anachronistic. Most of Acts occurs after Pentecost; an Easter Day reading is at least 50 days too early. Yet the speech summarizes the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. So its content fits the transitional service from the Triduum to Eastertide. That raises another question entirely: What is the proclamation of resurrection doing at a juncture like this? The story is a boundary-crossing story—Peter crossed the boundary from the Jewish into the Gentile world. Peter's sermon to Cornelius' household could have recounted any number of stories about how open minded and receptive Jesus had been to *the other* in his ministry. But he passes over those stories to emphasize Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection. Why?

The speech and the events surrounding it form an important transition in the narrative of Luke-Acts. Everett Ferguson refers to this as the "Gentile Pentecost." The speech was a transitional moment in the ministry of the early church in the same way that Jesus' sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30) was a transitional moment in Jesus ministry. In his speech Peter proclaims, "In every nation anyone who fears [the Lord] and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35). "Acceptable" is the translation for *dektos*. The author of Luke-Acts uses this word only three times in his two-volume work. The word is used twice in Jesus' inaugural sermon (4:19 and 4:24) and here in the initial mission to the Gentiles. David Balch writes, "The prophecy

from Isaiah with which Jesus climaxes his inaugural sermon is fulfilled by God's acceptance of a pagan/Roman centurion into the people of God in Acts 10, which generated significant disputes in the early church, resulting in the first church council (Acts 15)." Balch suggests that the inaugural speech of Jesus claims a ministry of proclaiming the Lord's acceptance of the Gentiles and news of such acceptance started to reach Gentiles with the conversion of Cornelius. There are other links between Luke 4 and Acts 10: emphasis on the Galilean beginning (Luke 4:14; Acts 10:37); Nazarean origin (Luke 4:16; Acts 10:38); the anointing of the Spirit (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38) and Jesus fulfillment of prophetic testimony (Luke 4:21; Acts 10:43). Peter's speech to Cornelius is in many ways a second inaugural speech. It is appropriate, then, for us to consider what this second inaugural speech might teach those who look at the second century of Disciples ecumenical ministry. Three themes from Luke-Acts overlap at this speech that may be instructive as we consider the future of the ecumenical ministry of our church—(1) boundary crossing and hospitality, (2) the repeated conversion of the church, and (3) the enduring significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Boundary Crossing and Hospitality

Jesus and his disciples lived in a culture that was heavily segmented by race, religion, gender, economic status, and physical disability. People used any leverage point to separate themselves against others. The disciples had watched as Jesus ruptured boundary after boundary. Miroslav Volf writes,

Jesus offset the stark binary logic that

regulates so much of social life: society divided into X (superior in-group) and non-X (inferior out-group), and then whatever is not X (say, people who eat different foods or have different bodies) is made into 'non-X' and thereby assigned to the inferior out-group. The mission of re-naming what was falsely labeled "unclean" aimed at abolishing the warped system of exclusion—what people call "clean"—in the name of an order of things that God, the creator and sustainer of life, has "made clean."

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to separate themselves against others.
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Jesus included women in his band of followers. He demonstrated kindness to people culturally and religiously different than himself. He touched those society regarded as unclean. He lived a life that said—no matter who you are, where you were born, what you own, or how you live, God's grace and mercy and love are available to you. Boundary-crossing continued within the early church's ministry as they serve as Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Boundary-crossing moments do not eliminate all boundaries but confront repressive boundaries that become mechanisms for claiming God's preference for one over the other and thereby justifying exclusion or oppression.

Significantly, there are moments in Luke-Acts where a gospel-bearer's boundary crossing depends upon a gospel receiver's hospitality. In Luke 7:1-10, a Centurion requests Jesus' attention for his ailing servant. Jesus is willing to go to the man's house; however, the centurion himself excuses Jesus from such a boundary crossing. In Luke 7:36-50, a "sinful" woman enters the house of a Pharisee where Jesus is staying. She cleans his feet. Jesus accepts her actions in terms of contrasting her hospitality with the lack of hospitality offered by the Pharisee (7:44-47). In Luke 8:26-39, Jesus is denied hospitality by the residents of the Gerasenes after an exorcism, and so he leaves. In Luke 19:1-9, Jesus requests and receives hospitality from

Zaccheus, the tax collector. In the description of Paul's ministry in Acts, Paul receives hospitality from Lydia (Acts 16:15, 40) as well as from the Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:34). In both these instances, the act of hospitality accompanies the receiving of the gospel and baptism.

In Jesus' own teaching, he connects good news proclamation and hospitality. Jesus sends out the twelve telling them not to carry additional resources with them, teaching them instead to receive the hospitality in whatever town they go to and to shake the dust of a town off them when they have not received hospitality (Luke 9:1-6). In the second commissioning of disciples Jesus expands on the earlier teaching concerning the reception of hospitality. Here the curses for an inhospitable city are great (Luke 10:8-16). In both there is a connection between the hospitality of the receiver and the capacity of the disciple to proclaim the kingdom of God. Clearly Luke-Acts sees a strong connection between a person receiving the good news and their willingness to extend hospitality to the one bringing the good news.

There are significant boundary crossings that do not involve either the giving or refusal to give hospitality. Ten men are healed of leprosy and the one who returns to offer thanks is a Gentile (Luke 17:11-19). Jesus crossed both the boundary of clean/unclean and also demonstrated kindness to and praise for a Gentile. This interaction did not require a host. The interchange between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch occurs without shared meal or hospitality within the home (Acts 8:26-40)—though here there is the sharing of chariot space (8:31). Nonetheless, there are sufficient incidents here to suggest that Cornelius' conversion belongs to a theme woven throughout Luke-Acts.

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As we consider this first theme in light of the future of our ecumenical ministry, a couple of initial thoughts emerge. First, Peter's mission to Cornelius' household was not one that brought civility to savages. Luke stresses repeatedly Cornelius' ethical goodness. It was a mission that brought a proclamation of Christ's resurrection. In

a pluralistic context, Christians who seek to express the universality of God's love may try to do so by suppressing those parts of the gospel that make Christ and Christianity unique. However, Everett Ferguson emphasizes the need for a spoken word conveying the core Christian narrative at a moment like this, "Even with the elaborate efforts to get Peter and Cornelius together, it was necessary that words be spoken 'by which you will be saved' (II:4). Peter's sermon told the story of Jesus from the baptism which John preached until his resurrection appearances (IO:36-42)." This story pinpoints the centrality of our core narrative proclamation in the midst of a boundary crossing experience. It is the core narrative that must come to the surface in those significant moments of cross-boundary contact because to share those narratives is to share what most animates our existence and therefore is to truly share.

Imagine how disappointed you'd feel if you asked a Muslim about their practice of praying five times a day and they said, "Oh, it's no big deal really, it's just something we do."

As an aside to where this speaks to me in the present context, I recently had a conversation with another Dad. We both have teenage daughters. We were searching for what to tell our teenagers about how they engage a pluralistic, interreligious culture. Their definition of hospitable seems to be that they shuttle off the distinctive content of the Christian faith when confronted with difference. Boundary crossing moments are for them times to downplay what makes Christianity unique. Clearly, they—like their parents—have seen evangelism-as-blunt-force-trauma where would-be evangelists cross boundaries into other people's holy ground wearing combat boots—it might be better to say they have seen evangelism that transgresses boundaries rather than crosses boundaries. Wanting to avoid such cultural insensitivity, our kids seem to proclaim a vacuum—I recognize that they are often mimicking the behavior of us their parents.

The example of Peter and the early church seems to be that when there is someone on the other side of a boundary willing to invite you in and demonstrates hospitality, you should be prepared to give an answer

for why you have hope in Jesus Christ. My friend and I determined that if the opportunity to address the subject developed again, we would present it this way. Imagine how disappointed you'd feel if you asked a Muslim about their practice of praying five times a day and they said, "Oh, it's no big deal really, it's just something we do." OR if you were to encounter an Orthodox Jew and asked about the significance of keeping Kosher only to hear them say, "Oh, well, it's nothing really. We just do it because we want to." You'd feel almost cheated in a way. How would you feel if you were ready to listen and understand another person's faith story and they soft pedaled their faith? I suspect the same thing happens when you are silent about the content of Christian faith in the presence of hospitable others willing to listen to you. Crossing boundaries should cause us to re-examine our Christian faith and practice, but it should never be the excuse for us to suppress the content of our faith.

Additionally, this study primarily identifies with Peter as the agent of the church. However, within a discussion of the ecumenical ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) it may be equally instructive to identify with Cornelius. We are in a position of receiving those who wish to cross boundaries for the sake of the church's unity who nonetheless find aspects of our faith and practice *unacceptable*. The story of Cornelius' conversion suggests that such boundary crossing moments are frequently contingent on the hospitality of those on the other side of the boundary. That said, the task of twenty-first-century ecumenism for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) might not simply be one of navigating the boundary crossings but also providing welcome to those who cross boundaries to reach us.

Conversion of the Church

In baptizing Cornelius, Peter was crossing a boundary that the church had never witnessed Jesus cross. This was indeed a new thing. This story takes place in Caesarea (note the name CAESARea). Cornelius—gentile, God-fearing, and good—was instructed in a dream to invite Peter to come and proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles in Caesarea. Acts IO:28 points to the radical nature of the boundary crossing. Balch writes, "We do not usually realize how radical it is when the 'believers in Joppa' (Acts IO:28) hear Peter characterize Cornelius as an *allophe* and then baptize him."

Balch explains that *allophyle* is the Greek translation of *Philistine*, one who is characterized by LXX as worshiping idols, uncircumcised, and frequently at odds with the people of Judea. Balch declares, “he is baptizing Goliath into the church!” This was an extraordinary thing for a Jewish believer in the one crucified under a centurion’s supervision (Luke 23:47) to accept, much less accomplish.

Peter was prepared for his own conversion by the vision he received in Acts 10:9–16. Peter was hungry, fell into a trance and watched as a sheet was lowered with all manner of “unclean” animals. Peter refused to partake of the unclean animals saying, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (Acts 10:14). The response to him was that what God has made clean, you must not call unclean.

Readers run two great risks in interpreting this purely in terms of the legal requirement of kosher food. The first risk is the risk of anti-Semitism. Christians frequently dismiss “those ritualistic Jews” who maintain kosher diets. The reasons for and significance of a kosher diet is someone else’s holy ground particularly in light of the persecutions narrated in 2 Maccabees 6–7. The martyrdom of Eleazor involves meat regarded by Jews as unclean. Antiochus, the Selucid ruler orders everyone to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to torture and kill those who refuse. Among those refusing to eat the meat is a respected elder, Eleazor. Eleazor gives a speech stressing the religious significance of refraining to eat such meat. Antiochus *transgressed* boundaries; he did not cross them. And in so-doing he tormented rather than shared. Refraining from so-called unclean meat became a powerful sign of identity for some faithful descendants of Abraham and remains one to this day. Dismissiveness transgresses boundaries; it does not cross them.

The second great risk in reading the text in terms of food is isolating its application on a too literal plain. The message points Peter to a mission to the Gentiles. The words *katharizo* (cleanse) and *koinou* (impure, unclean, common or profane) in 10:15 in reference to animals emerge again at 10:28 in reference Cornelius’ household. Upon entering their house, Peter said to them, “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any *person* impure or unclean.” Peter’s culinary dream in 10:9–16 foreshadows the ecclesiastical reality in chapter 11 as the church

accepts the capacity of non-Jewish people to (1) receive the message of Christ; (2) receive the Spirit of Christ; and (3) be baptized.

Through this movement, the church accepts a reality that changes both its character and understanding of God. Beverly Gaventa writes, “By means of the issue of *hospitality*, Luke demonstrates that the conversion of the first Gentile required the conversion of the church as well. Indeed, in Luke’s account, Peter and company undergo a change that is more wrenching by far than the change experienced by Cornelius.” The church had to convert to this paradigm for itself—Do not regard as unclean any person God has made, any person God has loved, any person God has forgiven.

When Peter is confronted by those in Judea for his actions, he offers a speech giving his account. The evidence that Peter’s actions were right is lodged within the presence of the Holy Spirit as seen in the ecstatic tongues. He concludes his speech, “So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God!” (11:17). To which the people respond, “So then God has even granted the Gentile repentance unto life” (11:18).

And so Peter’s speech signals his own conversion toward accepting Gentiles, and indeed the church’s conversion, on this point by saying, “Now I understand.” Sometimes we read such statements through the lens of contemporary shtick. “Now I understand . . .” Sometimes contemporary preachers treat Peter and Paul like the Laurel and Hardy of the New Testament. They satirize one as slow witted and the other as quick tempered. How many sermons have we heard—and perhaps even preached—when the preacher reached this point in the story, rolled his or her eyes and said, “Oh, now you get it Peter. Took you long enough.” Preachers often fail to acknowledge the tremendous change that was underway within the world. Peter and the early church were the first to witness the momentous shift in human history. They were the first to try to make sense of it. They deserve credit for hanging onto that bull for the full eight seconds.

As the focus is shifted to a contemporary setting, the church repeatedly encounters boundaries the gospel compels us to cross. The church repeatedly must convert to accept a new reality. For millennia the church regarded slavery as acceptable, but then it converted. Then for a century the church

regarded segregation as acceptable, but then it converted—only not really because the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning remains largely segregated. It is coincidental though significant that the Easter Sunday 2010, when this text appeared in the *Revised Common Lectionary*, Easter fell on April 4—the forty-second anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. As Disciples sought to live out our ecumenical identity, we had to learn to say of infant baptism—do not call unacceptable that to which God grants acceptance. We used to say that a woman in ordained ministry was *unacceptable*. The church had to convert and recognize that those whom God has called into ministry, the church cannot exclude.

Crossing boundaries is just one of many metaphors that can be used to describe ecumenical and interfaith work. It is important that it neither be ignored—since it connects to an important biblical theme—nor used exclusively. However, one way to consider the future of Disciples ecumenical ministry is to identify existing boundaries where God may at this time be calling us to cross, to pinpoint places on the other side of that boundary where hospitality may be found, and articulate the core narrative of our Christian belief within that context of hospitable boundary crossing.

Peter's sermon does not pinpoint those boundaries for us. It does help us see that boundary crossing is a repeated experience for churches and the church as a whole. It identifies the friction points that go with such boundary crossing—like Peter in his vision a friction within the person, like the believers in Joppa and Jerusalem a friction within the church, and like Jesus himself and the whole early church a friction point with the world. Consequently, the church must hold before itself the ongoing need for conversion precisely within those moments of friction generated by boundary crossing.

Enduring Significance of Resurrection and Crucifixion

It makes sense for Peter to summarize the whole life of Jesus at this boundary-crossing/hospitality intersection because the whole life of Jesus was, and is, God's own boundary crossing. In the incarnation God crossed a boundary and—to borrow the language of John—dwelt among us. In Jesus' life and ministry he proclaimed a vision of God's kingdom. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God did not draw battle lines; it crossed boundary lines. He said

that Samaritans can be good neighbors, enemies deserve prayer and persecutors should be blessed. Jesus' embodiment of the Kingdom of God would willingly embrace zealots and tax collectors, fishermen and lepers, virgin mothers and prostitutes. Such a radical life of inclusion transgressed the rules of the world and the world recoiled against it. Society has a vested interest in keeping people in their place. The powers of this world do not like it when you declare someone else's authority. And so as Jesus came and preached the Kingdom of God, he made a lot of people nervous—particularly when he said that in the Kingdom of God all people are accepted. It made people so nervous that they sought to kill the message by crucifying the messenger. Jesus was executed because he declared the authority of God over the systems of the world. His life affirmed the power of love over and above the love of power.

Many people today react negatively when Jesus is portrayed as crossing boundaries. Several years ago, a compelling suggestion of boundary crossing was depicted in a painting by Lars Justinen contracted for a ministry called Heavenly Sanctuary. They used this painting to promote a conference on the character of God. It showed Jesus washing the feet of several world leaders—Angela Merkel, Manmohan Singh, Jiang Zemin, Kofi Annan, and George Bush. In the lineup of world leaders having their feet washed sat the likeness of Osama bin Laden. Reportedly, when the painting was put up in the public settings where the event organizers had contracts, the public revolted and demanded that it be taken down. The ministry currently uses a version of this painting that does not use the likeness of Osama bin Laden (www.heavenlysanctuary.com). We might consider our own reaction if the set characters included our least favorite political pundit, most annoying pop star or the CEO of British Petroleum. Following the Jesus who crosses boundaries is difficult for everyone.

Jesus was crucified for being an alleged messiah. God raised him from the dead to affirm that the allegation was true. Barbara Brown Taylor said, "To restore a dead person to life is to strike a blow at mortality . . . but to restore a *crucified* man to life is to strike a blow at the system that executed him." In the crucifixion of Jesus Christ the world said—we said—"you do not speak for God." And in the Resurrection, God said, "Oh, yes he does." To speak

of the resurrection is to speak of God's ultimate affirmation of the ministry and message of Jesus Christ. So too, then, God places an affirmation on the spirit and work that Christ initiated. And this includes the message that God's love is not bound by human-made distinction. Those who claim the resurrection as the high point of their faith must also see that what God has done for them God seeks to do for all *through* them. A person with faith in the resurrection cannot regard another person whom God has forgiven as "unclean." Resurrection is God's affirmation of Jesus' proclamation.

*God does not follow Jesus' own directives.
God does not knock the dirt of God's sandals
and move on.*

Only, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God does not follow Jesus' own directives. God does not knock the dirt of God's sandals and move on. The grace of the resurrection is that through it, God gives the world—God gives us—the chance to reconsider our earlier rejection of Christ's vision. Yes, it's true that the Risen One was "not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had chosen—who *ate and drank* with him after he rose from the dead" (10:42). Peter here speaks of those who ate and drank with Jesus after his resurrection and emphasizes the theme of hospitality that is present in this text. It also connects to Acts 11:3 where the people back in Palestine are critical of Peter for *eating* with the Gentiles. It is through their witness—those who ate and drank with the Risen One—and their willingness to eat with others that we find our own salvation. Through the power of the resurrection diverse people are collected into the church—people like the uncircumcised, pork-eating centurion Cornelius and the passionate persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus, and the unmarried, household-governing, European business woman Lydia. Luke-Acts delivers the message that God will

go to any lengths to reclaim what belongs to God (Luke 15). And that means you and me, and it also means those people we can't imagine anyone loving but can learn to love through our own ongoing conversion. Through the presence of the Risen Christ, the church repeatedly receives God's grace as an open door to reconsider accepting what we have rejected. We, like Peter, can hear God say, "Do not call unclean what I have made clean." OR do not call unacceptable what God in Christ has proclaimed accepted. For us to bear that witness, each generation of ministry must prayerfully discern the boundaries we must cross.

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Winds of Unity

JOHN 3:1-10

Darla Glynn



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Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

I don't know about you, but when I was in seminary it was drilled into us that context is everything. Context, context, context, know your context before thinking you can entertain your own role and the moving of God in the midst of it all! Well, I don't think I have to tell anyone in the room about the context in which the church finds itself in 2010 because we're swimming in it! It's a time that I would almost characterize as "global anti-context." In other words, the minute we think we've assessed our surroundings, they have already changed. This is what I would describe as a "virtual contextual black hole" known as post-modernity to most of us. The only thing it seems, these days, that we can count on

around us is escalating change itself. In fact, I think Alvin Toffler characterizes this phenomenon best in his 1970 book entitled *Future Shock*. Toffler, in short, describes future shock as an "... accelerated rate of technological and social change [which leaves people] disconnected and suffering from shattering stress and disorientation" caused by too much change in too short a time. Does any of this sound familiar?

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Now this might seem to be particularly distressing and disorienting news, to say the least, for the church who, as we all know, has always struggled with the reality of change even when global change moved at a much slower pace than it does today. It's almost as if we're in an age where the church is chasing a cultural freight train gathering speed on a down hill track into a future abyss. In fact, I think if H. Richard Niebuhr were alive today, he'd have to add another chapter to his book *Christ and Culture* entitled "Christ Chasing Culture."

We may not like the sound of all of this, but as a local church pastor this is how it feels to a congregation forged and shaped primarily by the modern era, which many of our congregations and conversation partners have been. In fact, many of the members of my congregation remind me of the father in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof" singing his lament about the loss of "tradition" while, at the same time, frantically scrambling to read, as most pastors are, all the emergent church books that have arrived on the scene. A congregation that is simply hoping for

*It's all around us...the movement of the Spirit of Unity given in Jesus Christ,
the core of our identity...that comes to us without a box.*

an answer not only as to how to move forward but how to keep up! I suspect this is the same phenomenon that is going on in all levels of church life across the denominational board and perhaps across the globe.

And so it begs the question, how does the church faithfully and creatively live out mission statements, arrange supporting structures and create media and venues to share our story (functional necessities it seems) that tend to become outdated as soon as they're established. How do we dwell in the moving of God's Spirit without the temptation of setting up camp when the spiritual wagon train has left to blaze new trails? Most of all, what does it mean to be faithful to the call of unity and reconciliation in Jesus Christ in the midst of this disorienting "contextual black hole" in which we find ourselves?

In John's rendering today, we have Nicodemus, a faithful leader of the religious establishment of his day, who has gone to Jesus by night for a little dialogue or debate, or perhaps for a little enlightenment about this new thing happening around this itinerant Rabbi. And Nicodemus goes to Jesus recognizing, or at least wants Jesus to think he recognizes, that Jesus doesn't do anything transformational apart from the presence of God. And with that acknowledgment made, Jesus, in short says to Nicodemus: Do not be astonished when I tell you that no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus, not quite understanding what Jesus is trying to say, then asks for more clarity. But to his dismay, Jesus responds by saying "Nicodemus, the wind blows where it chooses, and you may hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." And Nicodemus, perplexed by Jesus words, asks, "How can that be?" And Jesus reminds him, "You're a leader of the religious establishment and you don't understand these things?"

Whether we wish to claim it or not, I suspect on some level, we gather here this week as part of the greater global religious establishments of our day, and yet we (in particular) claim to be a Spiritual movement . . . certainly a tension that we live in as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). And yet we gather here, as many have before us, to meet Jesus for a little dialogue and debate, some enlightenment—to

gain some clarity about the ever-changing movement of Christ's Spirit and Culture, and about how to be a continued source of healing and reconciliation in the midst of a deeply disoriented and fragmented world of human need.

My friends, we are at an exciting and opportune moment, just as our founders were two centuries ago—a time of rapid change as they were experiencing the expansion of the western frontier. A time when the wind was blowing furiously across the prairie singing a vision of unity and inclusiveness. And our founders, who were listening, didn't ask, "How can this be?" but instead trusted in what they heard, courageously ventured into new territory and were awakened and transformed by a renewed vision of the kingdom of God. *Spiritual pioneers*—that's our heritage, passed on to us by the faithful listening hearts of each generation, including those like Peter Ainslee.

So what does it mean to be a spiritual pioneer in 2010? And what legacy will the cause of unity leave for the generation of 2110? Only the Spirit knows.

The late Anthony DeMello, an Indian Jesuit Priest (a modern mystic I would say), tells the story about a man who, while far from home, experienced an enormous gale force wind outside. And he wanted people at home to get an idea about what that gale force wind was like, so he captured it in a cigar box. And when he went to open the box, he realized that once he captured it, it wasn't a gale force wind anymore.

Isn't this the challenge we have before us? As the winds of new community blow through mediums like Facebook and Myspace. When the winds of unity blow through a college dorm room bringing a student from Nepal and the United States together in the same living space. When the winds of justice, compassion and restoration compel a Church World Service worker to care for a sick baby in Sri Lanka. When a Western mission partner is tended to by a village doctor in Lesotho. It's all around us . . . the movement of the Spirit of Unity given in Jesus Christ, the core of our identity . . . that comes to us *without* a box. May we continue to listen for the sound of it, follow its lead as unencumbered Spiritual pioneers . . . so that we may continue to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. May it be so. Amen.



Already...Not Yet: God's Gift of Unity

GEN. 1:26-27; EPHESIANS 4:1-6

Sharon E. Watkins

DR. SHARON E. WATKINS is the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

A gift is placed in your hands. It's wrapped. In beautiful, shiny paper, with a curly bow. It comes from one who loves you. You receive it and begin to open it. That's all you have to do. It's a gift! You just receive it. And open it. And enjoy . . .

These last few days together, we've been considering a particular gift—from a particular giver. God's gift of unity, of wholeness, given to humanity from the beginning of time and then made particularly real in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and in Christ's Body, the church.

Ephesians 4:4 says: "There is one body and one Spirit . . ." Hear that? "There is one body." Not: "might be one soon." Not: "will be one some day."

No. There is one body. *Already.*

In part, we're one already because that's the way God created the world from the beginning.

Genesis 1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"—and trees and animals—and human beings. "God created humankind in (God's) image; male and female . . . (and) blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply . . ."

From the beginning, God created us to be one human family, all mystically descended from one set of cosmic parents.

Already one. All we have to do is receive the gift! Open it. And enjoy.

Right? Well, maybe . . .

Sometimes for a children's message, I take a globe—a model of earth—each country a different color. Pretty.

But all the boundaries and borders stand out really clearly. Lots of dividing lines on that globe.

Then I unroll a big poster of that iconic photo of earth from space. In that God's-eye view we see a beautiful planet earth—also in many colors: blue, green, brown, swirling white clouds, a gorgeous multicolored jewel set on the beautiful, black velvet backdrop of space. Beautiful diversity, without dividing lines.

So both are before us—the globe as human beings have made it with its dividing lines, and earth from space as God made it, one whole planet, the home of one beautifully diverse human family.

So both are before us—the globe as human beings have made it with its dividing lines, and earth from space as God made it, one whole planet, the home of one beautifully diverse human family.

Both views tell us something real. God made us one human family. But the reality is families don't always get along. Especially the whole human family.

Look at our neighborhoods . . . people are still losing jobs, losing insurance, losing homes. It's hard to feel like one, when we feel like we might be next.

Look internationally. It's hard to feel like family when we can't figure out how to share the holiest places of the Holy Land or how to stop the mineral wars of Eastern Congo that keep our cell phones fueled but also fuel the outrage of women raped and maimed as a weapon of war.

Look at the church. Christ's one indivisible Body, the Reign of God at hand, the visible evidence of the gift, the appetizer of the feast, but Christians still can't gather at one Lord's Table.

So, in spite of what Genesis shows us about the gift of unity, in spite of Jesus' solidarity with us on the cross, in spite of what Ephesians declares about our being One Body already, our experience says loud and clear that we are not yet one.

So which is it? Unity already? Or—not yet?

My husband and I have two adult children. They look a lot different today than they did the day they were born. They act differently, too. Praise God! And yet, we notice some similarities now to what they have always been.

Our baby daughter was a snuggler. We'd hold her close, and her little body would just relax into us like a second skin. She loved being close. Needed us to rock her to sleep every night for her first year!

Then her brother came along! When I tried to rock him to sleep, he'd get agitated, fight sleep. One night I finally just put him down in frustration. He turned over . . . and went right to sleep.

They thought people would look at us living as family and say of us, like Roman citizens said of the early Christians, "See how they love each other!" And they'd want what we've got.

Twenty years later, you know what? Our grown up daughter still needs "Mommy" time—when she's sick or stressed. And our son? Mr. Independence.

The day we brought them home from the hospital, they were already who they are today—and not yet even close to who they would become. Already AND not yet.

I preach a lot about unity and wholeness. People definitely do sometimes receive it with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Can't I see the disunity so apparent within our own church? The scar of racism still festers across the Body of Christ. The outrage of poverty still exists among us.

The church still bears so many of those same divisions we engaged so long ago in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry but did not finally resolve. We're definitely not yet where we should be.

It's just that, according to the Bible, from Genesis

to Ephesians, God has already given us the gift! of unity—in creation in the first place, and (in case we missed it there) in the greatest gift of all, the gift of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who came to earth to reconcile us to God and to each other.

Yes, it's still all packed up in the mailing box—plain looking, full of tape and labels and all marked up with post office stamps, and beat up around the edges.

But what if we could just receive the gift? And begin to unwrap it? To take away those outer layers of division, piece by piece. What if we would begin to live beyond those divisions and barriers and act as if we were already one? As we are! Beautifully diverse, but not divided!?

Did you know that our forebear Disciples—those early Disciples who passed on to us this inspiration about the givenness of unity—believed, really believed, that if we could just live as one, our visible unity would result in the evangelization of the world? And thereby bring in the full reign of God? They thought people would look at us living as family and say of us, like Roman citizens said of the early Christians, "See how they love each other!" And they'd want what we've got.

Ephesians 4 has a witness here as well . . .

"I beg you," it says, "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph 4:1-3)

Maintain the unity of the Spirit. Not "get," not "seek." "Maintain." Again I say, "maintaining unity" does not mean passive acceptance of what is. To receive the gift of unity, and open it, means to stand up when that fundamental gift of unity already given by God is not yet experienced in this world. It means to speak out when God's unity is covered up by the world's injustice. It means to move on to something else when our ways are not God's ways. This passage says, how we treat each other matters.

Have you seen the studies about children and teachers in a school classroom? If a teacher decides on the first day that a child is smart and treats the child that way, that child will act smart. What if we in the church would expect the best from each other? What if we would remember on the first day we ever meet each other that we are united in creation—one

in Christ Jesus? What if we would expect to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit (unity already given to us by God) in the bond of peace?

If we treat each other as beloved family, would you bring out the best in me and I bring out the best in you as a teacher does when she brings out the best in her students? What if we saw each other as one human family even when we can't see eye to eye?—as part of the beautiful swirling colors on the one planet earth—diverse! but not divided?

Of course it's ultimately much more complicated. At this conference we've delved into how complex this business of unity can be. But doesn't it all begin by receiving God's gift? It is certainly true that in our one human family, in our churches even, layers of division have accumulated year after year, surrounding God's gift of unity. We have much to repair and much to forgive. But can't we just begin? . . .

Some years back, workers began to remove years' worth of dust and grime on the paintings of the Sistine Chapel. As those layers of grit came off, vivid colors of the painting were revealed like nothing that modern viewers had ever imagined. Like with the colors of the Sistine Chapel . . .

Or like when the buildup of grime on the windows of an abandoned house, so thick that the transparency of the glass has become completely opaque, when that grime is finally cleaned and we can see within, our day-to-day reality of division is there because we have *Not Yet* looked into a deeper reality of unity *Already* given to us from the very hand of God.

Church! Let's keep on peeling those layers back and see what we've got!

Let's treat our neighbor as beloved family. Let's approach each other as bright and beautiful and full of potential and bring out the best in each other! Let's set tables of welcome, Christ's table, where we gather from all our broken places and in the mystery of the risen Christ become whole again, one Body of Christ for the world.

At this conference we've delved into how complex this business of unity can be. But doesn't it all begin by receiving God's gift?

Let's be that movement for wholeness that God has seen in us from the day we were born children of God, diverse but not divided.

Let's keep at it, layer by layer, peeling back all the dust and division that surrounds us until eventually we reveal the pure sweet core inside—diverse but not divided—on each one of us the image of God!—One God who makes us One **ALREADY!** Let's start in the church. Let's start at the Table, and see if it is catching!

Church, God has given us a gift. Let's receive it. And open it! And enjoy.

Glory be to God, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Friend. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Report from Visioning Conference on Christian Unity

Mercy Center, St. Louis, Missouri

June 14-17, 2010

Introduction and background

As a major event in the yearlong celebration of its 100th anniversary, the Council on Christian Unity hosted the *Joe A. and Nancy V. Stalcup 2nd Century Visioning Conference on Christian Unity* with three specific goals:

- (a) To examine our historic commitment as Disciples of Christ to the unity, the wholeness, of Christ's body
- (b) To address contemporary challenges to such commitment
- (c) To envision what Disciples participation in the ecumenical movement might look like in the years ahead

The Conference took place on June 14-17, 2010, at the Mercy Center in St. Louis. Forty Disciples—lay and ordained, women and men, younger and older, new to ecumenical discussions and more experienced ecumenists—met for four days of worship and prayer, presentations and small group discussion. Participants and presenters included persons from local, regional and general expressions of the church, seminaries, ecumenical organizations, with broad representation of African American, Anglo, Haitian, Hispanic, and Pacific Asian Disciples.

Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Christ in the USA, delivered the keynote address in which he declared, "I hope that we have not come here to rearrange ecumenical furniture, to discuss structural changes (though they may be needed) as if that were inherently renewing, but to hear God's Word and be renewed by God's Spirit. Antoine de San Exupery may have said it best: If you want people

to build a boat, don't just give them a blueprint, but let them be filled with a yearning for the vastness of the sea."

Conference design and process

A major component of the Conference was that of worship and Bible study. Worship leaders included Darla Glynn, associate pastor at Community Christian Church in Manchester, Missouri; Chimiste Doriscar, pastor of the Haitian Christian Church in Auburn, Georgia; and, Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President. Bible studies were led by April Johnson, executive director of Reconciliation Ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Andy Mangum, senior pastor of First Christian Church in Arlington, Texas.

Presentations were offered on the following "issue-areas" as a way to introduce various challenges to the ecumenical movement today:

- *Understanding the Lord's Supper for our vision and work for Christian unity* (Amy Gopp, executive director of the Week of Compassion, and Richard Harrison, retired pastor and church historian)
- *What it means to be a 'multicultural and inclusive church' in an era of radical individualism and diversity* (Daniel Lee, pastor of Walking Faith Korean-American Christian Church in Sunnyvale, CA, and Newell Williams, president of Brite Divinity School at TCU in Ft. Worth, TX)
- *The challenge of interfaith dialogue and encounter* (Jonathan Webster, chaplain at Carilion New River Valley Medical Center in Christiansburg, VA, and pastor of Snowville Christian Church in Pulaski County, VA.)

- *The challenge and opportunities of contextual and local ecumenism* (Chris Morton, executive director of the Tacoma Associated Churches in Tacoma, WA, and Doug Lofton, senior minister at Southport Christian Church, Indianapolis, IN)
- *The challenge of maintaining unity and the church's prophetic witness in the world* (Nathan Wilson, pastor of First Christian Church, Shelbyville, IN, and Kris Culp, dean of the Disciples Divinity House at Chicago University in Chicago, IL)

A major piece of the Conference design was the small groups that discussed the Bible studies and presentations. These small groups also offered insights and recommendations regarding the nature of the vision of the unity we seek and future work and program of the Council on Christian Unity.

Affirmations and Insights

Growing out of the rich discussion, worship, and small group conversations, several *recurring themes, affirmations* and *new insights* on the nature of God's call to unity and reconciliation emerged as key elements for our Disciples' understanding and practice:

A. Basic affirmations:

- We affirmed that unity, understood as God's gift and calling, is central to our Disciples' identity and stands as our distinctive witness as a church.
- We affirmed that unity is not for its own sake, but for the sake and salvation of the world; unity is for the sake of mission as we manifest the oneness that God has already given to the church.
- We affirmed the celebration of the Lord's Supper at an "open Table" as the historic practice of the Disciples that is essential to our understanding of and witness to unity; we do not get to exclude those whom Jesus loves, saves, invites and welcomes.
- We affirmed the need to be more intentional in our teaching about baptism as the foundational event establishing our unity in Christ with all Christians.

- We affirmed that Scripture and the apostolic faith of the whole church are both source and resource to our work for unity, reconciliation and wholeness.
- We affirmed that if Christian unity is to be real for Disciples, it must be local and make a difference in the lives of individuals and congregations; indeed, local experience must inform and shape our overall ecumenical witness and involvements as a church.
- We affirmed and celebrated the changing context of our life today as a church experiencing rapid growth in becoming a more multicultural, multi-ethnic and inclusive community of faith.
- We affirmed the need to reach out to a new generation of Disciples, especially to youth and young adults, who bring different gifts, insights and perspectives to our church's total life, witness and agenda.
- We affirmed that the relationship between Christians and people of other faiths is playing an ever more important role in the life of the church today; we are, thus, called to respond to the challenge of relating the search for Christian unity to interfaith dialogue and engagement.
- We affirmed that there can be no true unity within the church that does not include a passion for justice, peace and compassion in our society and world.
- We affirmed that greater communication and more theological resources are needed for the ecumenical education and formation of Disciples to articulate and practice Christian unity.
- We affirmed the Disciples' commitment to working through councils of churches and ecumenical organizations as an expression of our own life and witness which not only extends our resources (i.e., good stewardship) but is also true to our identity as a people of unity.

B. New insights:

- Disciples have long claimed that "*Christian unity is our polar star*," a phrase that was first used by Barton W. Stone, one of the early founders of our movement.

During the Conference we noted that the imagery of “polar star” is not widely understood by persons in our 21st century world. It is important, therefore, as we continue to use this language to reinterpret the image of “polar star” for Disciples today as a navigation point—not something that is sought directly, but rather is an abiding and necessary orientation guiding all of our life and mission. Unity is not merely our “polar star,” it is also part of our core identity: it is as the light within us that we carry into our witness and ministry in the world.

- Our self-understanding as Disciples from our beginnings has been shaped by *the celebration of the Lord’s Supper at an open Table*. Our church’s “identity statement” (approved by the General Board of our church in 2007) states:

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.

It is the Table that both manifests our unity and models our future.

During our Conference, a significant new element in our understanding of the relation of the Table and our quest for Christian unity was lifted up: that is, as we gather at the Lord’s Supper, we need to confess and repent that despite our calling and identity as bearers of unity we participate in the brokenness, division and fragmentation in the church and culture, and need to develop a greater awareness of those who are often left behind or excluded (the poor and oppressed, the lost and the lonely) when Disciples celebrate at the Table. We need to encourage reaching out beyond the sanctuary of the local church (e.g., in soup kitchens, hospital rooms, prison ministries, etc.) that live out the radical inclusiveness, hospitality and love of Christ that we experience week-by-week as we gather for Holy Communion.

- In light of the *multiculturalism and pluralism that are contemporary realities* in our context, we seek a visible unity among people of diverse ethnic, cultural, and economic status as well as a visible unity among divergent Christian denominations.

During our Conference, we recognized that this change is calling and challenging us to be a people

who work for unity that is (a) bolder in its witness to confronting all forms of exclusion, including racism, bigotry, hatred, and economic hegemony, and (b) more open and welcoming to the diversity of spiritual gifts, theological positions and forms of worship of persons from the growing racial/ethnic communities within the life of the church.

- One of the foundational principles that gave birth to the Disciples of Christ was “*The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one. . .*” A key learning to emerge from our conference is that, after two hundred years of living with this ecclesiological principle, and one hundred years of organized work for Christian unity, *the unity of the church and oneness among all Christians cannot be understood apart from a commitment to the unity of humankind*. As Disciples we understand that in the story of creation in Genesis, God has made all peoples to live and to be one family.

During our Conference, we identified more clearly the goal of the unity of the church and the oneness of all Christians with the call to address the existing divisions within the human community – divisions caused by racism, sexism, economic systems of privilege, sexual orientation, or class. We also recognize and confess that these divisions exist within the church, and often divide and fragment the body of Christ. Church unity, Christian unity and human unity must be seen together as single and related agendas. We are called to work to bring together our efforts toward Christian unity – liturgically, missionally, and theologically – with the essential unity of all humanity.

- A strong witness of Disciples throughout our history has been our understanding that *unity is not something we create, but is a gift of God in Jesus Christ*. Authentic unity is “born of the Spirit” and must manifest itself in spiritual disciplines that are lived both by individuals and as communities of faith.

During our Conference, we identified that the search for Christian unity must include a commitment to the formation of the individual Christian character that is grounded in ecumenical spirituality. However, ecumenical spirituality is more than the sampling of spiritual practices from different Christian traditions or coming together once a year to participate in a service of

prayer for Christian unity. It is more important that CCU look at the “spiritual dispositions” that make multicultural, ecumenical and interfaith engagement fruitful – that is, in the words of Sharon Watkins, we need to develop an exploration into the “habits of wholeness.”

Recommendations for the Future

Recommendation 1: In light of these affirmations and insights on the vision of Christian unity for Disciples today, the Conference participants issued *an urgent call to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for renewed commitment to Christian unity in remembering its distinctive identity as herald of unity and reconciliation, and urging the church to claim a more holistic, radical and dynamic understanding of its ecumenical vocation.* That is, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) should claim its commitment:

- to becoming more multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and inclusive;
- to holding together a vision of the unity of the church and the unity of humankind; and,
- to giving priority to the tasks of ecumenical formation and education of Disciples (pastors and laypersons; young adults and seminarians; congregations, regions and general ministries) in and for a changing society and world.

At the heart of this calling is a deep desire for a church that would model the very unity it seeks.

Recommendation 2: Many participants advocated for and recommended *a higher degree of mutuality between local, regional, and national church bodies, and*

a greater awareness of those who are often being left behind when Disciples celebrate the Lord's Supper. Time and time again the participants pointed to baptism and the communion table as touchstones in the quest for Christian unity, both for the Disciples and for the wider ecumenical church.

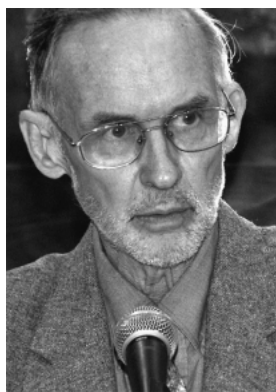
Recommendation 3: A primary focus for the CCU in this era must be on helping Disciples recover their identity as a people of unity and wholeness—through education and networking in congregations, regions and general expressions of our church's life. Specifically, we recommend that *the CCU take a leadership role, in partnership with other expressions of our church, to nurture and educate Disciples in understanding of our identity statement and its accompanying twelve principles.* The CCU should provide resources and programs to do greater theological work on the relation of baptism and Lord's Supper to our core identity as a people of wholeness and unity; to nurture “habits of wholeness” in our life as individuals and as a church; and, to claim this distinctive identity/witness within the wider church as its own calling as a gift to be received (not as something we negotiate or another program to be pursued).

Recommendation 4: As a second major focus of the CCU's commitment to promoting Christian unity in the changing context of our church and society today, we recommend that *the CCU continue its work and partnerships with other ministries in our church in addressing the rich opportunities and critical challenges to Disciples in becoming a more multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and inclusive church and in meeting the challenges of living in an interfaith context and world.*

Participants in the Conference



David Artman	Darlene Goodrich	Mark Leach	Nancy Stalcup
Thomas Best	Howard Goodrich	Kyung-Min Daniel Lee	James Suggs
Viann Bristow	Amy Gopp	Douglas Lofton	Kim Tran
Sue Shadburne Call	Richard Harrison	Jose "Al" Lopez	Sharon Watkins
Kris Culp	Jamie Haskins	Andy Mangum	Suzanne Webb
Beverly Dale	Cathy Hubbard	Paul Matheny	Jonathan Webster
Chimiste Doriscar	April Johnson	Christopher Morton	Robert Welsh
Robyn Fickes	Gary Kidwell	Patrice Rosner	Newell Williams
Liv Gibbons	Michael Kinnamon	Jenn Simmons	Nathan Wilson
Darla Glynn	Gene Lawson	Joe Stalcup	



REFLECTIONS ON THE DISCIPLES VISIONING CONFERENCE:

The Journey Ahead

Thomas F. Best

REV. DR. THOMAS F. BEST, a pastor of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), recently retired as Director of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

I believe that the Second Joe A. and Nancy V. Stalcup Visioning Conference, sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity and held June 14-17, 2010 at Mercy Center in St. Louis, will prove to be one of the most significant events of the decade for the Disciples of Christ.

Under the theme "A Century of Witness, A Journey of Wholeness," the conference reviewed Disciples current ecumenical engagements, challenges and prospects. It then asked such questions as: What distinctive witness do we, as Disciples, bring to the ecumenical movement? What challenges does our ecumenical engagement pose for our understanding of Church, and for our self-understanding? And, not least: Can we discern "an ecumenical vision for our future" as Disciples of Christ? Can we identify "foundational principles" to guide our ecumenical engagement in the years to come? How can congregations live out these values in practical ways in their own day-to-day life?

Being Disciples, these issues were tackled in light of the Lord's Supper as our focus and inspiration: what does our gathering regularly—and more frequently than most other Protestants—at the Table tell us about our own identity? How does being fed regularly at the Table compel us to work in the world, in order that none need to be hungry? In addition to the Lord's Supper, Baptism emerged as another key Disciples theme, indeed one which should receive more attention in the future.

A host of pressing challenges were also on the agenda: ongoing efforts to deal with racism in the

life of the church; recognizing the gifts of African-American Disciples in the life of the church; recognizing the gifts of Disciples churches from "new" Asian (for example, Korean and Vietnamese), African, and Haitian constituencies; how to live as Disciples in an interfaith context; how to relate our commitment to the unity of the church and our prophetic witness to the world; and how to witness to the unity of the Church and humankind in an era which celebrates individualism and radical diversity.

At one remarkable moment, and not long ago, the heads of at least five major national and international ecumenical bodies were from the Disciples of Christ.

A Century of Witness

The conference theme celebrated, first, a century of witness. Christian unity has indeed been our polar star, and the visioning conference did well to celebrate our ecumenical achievements of the past and present. We sometimes forget this, but it is important for us to know that few other Christian communions have had such a history of ecumenical commitment and engagement. The leadership offered by Peter Ainslie, George Beasley, Paul Crow and now Robert Welsh has been exemplary. At one remarkable moment, and not long ago, the heads of at least five major national and international ecumenical bodies were from the Disciples of Christ (the Secretaries of Christian World Communions, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA,

Christian Churches Together in the USA, and Churches Uniting in Christ). For a communion relatively small in numbers, this is remarkable.

There is more. Disciples participated honorably in the missionary expansion of the Church in the 19th and earlier 20th centuries in India, Africa and Asia. But in recent years they have actively encouraged these mission-founded churches, and others in Europe and Australasia with Disciples' heritage, to enter church unions. The United Church of Christ in Thailand, the Church of Christ in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom—these and more embody the Disciples commitment to the visible unity of the Church. Disciples have also fostered many local, national and regional councils of churches, for example in the USA and in India. And more: though Disciples in the US have not entered into a church union, they have formed a far-reaching partnership with the United Church of Christ in the US. In an arrangement which may be unique worldwide, the two churches have established a common board for world mission. For Disciples this has truly been a century—and more—of witness to the cause of the unity of the church.

Why spend time and energy—not to mention financial resources—in reviewing our ecumenical present and future? Should we not just congratulate ourselves, and continue on as we are?

Ironically, the very intensity and depth of our ecumenical engagement prompts the following questions: Given that we are so engaged and prominent ecumenically, why another “visioning” conference on Disciples’ ecumenical life? Why now? Why spend time and energy—not to mention financial resources—in reviewing our ecumenical present and future? Should we not just congratulate ourselves, and continue on as we are? The planners of this conference had the courage to answer, “No.” They recognized that the life of our church, and of the ecumenical movement, is a journey, a work in progress. They recognized that it is precisely when things are going well that one is tempted to forget this, that one must constantly re-examine and re-evaluate the situation.

The fact is that our own church is changing, and it

is essential to review our ecumenical life in view of that. It is imperative that we involve a wider range of persons—not just a loyal group of professional ecumenical staff and enthusiasts—in our ecumenical life. This is true in the context of local congregations, in the various regions, and within the General Ministries of our church. And it is all the more important as the present generation of leaders approaches retirement, and the next generation has to be widely won to the cause. Thankfully our church is being enriched by new populations of Disciples, both from within the US and from around the world; this is a blessing, but for many of these new Disciples the ecumenical cause is not self-evident, and the ecumenical case has to be argued anew.

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It is also important to re-examine our ecumenical life because the ecumenical movement itself is changing. Some have said that it has suffered due to its very success—that the excitement of 100, or even 30, years ago has waned as ecumenism has become a recognized “field” and the pioneering generations of enthusiasts, working too often in the face of indifference or even suspicion, have been replaced by professional ecumenists who are only too well integrated into the bureaucracy of their churches. There are many positive changes as well: churches are taking ecumenical lessons to heart; they are discovering new possibilities in their common confession, worship and witness. Fresh theological and ecclesiological insights have opened new perspectives on classic church-dividing issues. And the traditional ecumenical movement is facing new challenges as a host of new partners (today, especially evangelicals and Pentecostals) brings new concerns and issues to the discussion.

A Journey of Wholeness

These points bring us to the second aspect of the conference theme, *a journey of wholeness*, and to the results of the conference. These were summarized in a preliminary draft Report produced and discussed already during the meeting. In its final form the Report will serve as a basis for recommendations for the Council on Christian

I believe that the Second Joe A. and Nancy V. Stalcup Visioning Conference will prove to be one of the most significant events of the decade for the Disciples of Christ.

Unity Board to use in shaping Disciples' ecumenical engagement in the next decade, and beyond. But it seems to me that the draft report reflected exactly the pulse and mind of the meeting, and captured the "foundational principles or fundamental values" that Disciples bring to ecumenical life, witness and encounter. Consider the following central points:

- 1) That unity is both central to our Disciples identity and urgent for the sake of the world
- 2) That Christian unity is nurtured, and becomes visible, in concrete relationships (personal, but I would add, also institutional)
- 3) That the Disciples' distinctive witness for unity is marked by the centrality of the Lord's Table—an *open* Table—and the practice of baptism as a mark of Christian unity
- 4) We value our Christian freedom highly, and seek a church life marked by accountability without coercion; all the while, we freely admit our brokenness in living out our unique Disciples heritage.
- 5) Even as Disciples value unity, we recognize that it is experienced and expressed differently in different contexts locally, nationally and internationally; recognizing that unity may tempt us to settle for uniformity, we insist that unity must be a force which confronts, rather than justifies or hides, any kind of racism or domination of one group over others.
- 6) We insist, further, that our search for unity must be informed by our commitments to justice, to local and global mission, and to interfaith dialogue.
- 7) While affirming our work for unity at the national and international levels, Disciples need also a new stress on unity in local congregations and ecumenical settings—each generation must renew for itself the commitment to "habits of Christian wholeness."

- 8) Nothing motivates more powerfully than examples and experience; therefore, we should suggest concrete guidelines and practices for living ecumenically, and tell one another our "stories of Christian unity."
- 9) The Council on Christian Unity has a special responsibility for promoting and coordinating the Disciples' search for unity and the church's ecumenical engagement.
- 10) Precisely because Christian unity is foundational for our whole church, the Council on Christian Unity should be more visible in the life and work of the whole church.

These points from the draft Report emerged not just through the formal plenary presentations and group discussions, but were the fruit also of the daily worship and bible studies, countless discussions at mealtimes and other interludes, and quiet reflections by individual participants. More than most such meetings, this conference quickly developed a coherence and ethos of its own, a palpable common commitment to the work at hand. Looking at the conference from this perspective, one could discern three overarching themes and concerns which developed in the course of our work. These surfaced time and again in various guises in the draft Report but are, I believe, worth noting in their own right; they provide a wider framework within which to view the consultation's formal results and will to be considered seriously as the church finds its way into its ecumenical future.

Three Overarching Themes

The first of these themes was *a desire for wholeness and integration* in every aspect of the church's life. Participants spoke of their longing for a church whose life would model the wholeness it proclaimed to the world. *Theologically*: the integration of the search for unity and the quest for justice in the life of the church and the world. *Liturgically and personally*: the integration of all the people of God at the Lord's Table, that "open table" *par excellence*, and in the life of the church generally. *Structurally*: the integration

of the local, regional, and national expressions of the life of our church. Disciples hunger for an antidote to the divisions and divisiveness of our world. They seek wholeness, and they seek it in their church first of all.

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The second, closely related overarching theme was a new awareness of *the great, and growing, diversity among Disciples today*. Disciples as a whole know, at long last, of the vibrant liturgical and prophetic witness made by African-American Disciples to the church. But beside African-American and Anglo participants stood Disciples from Haiti, from Hispanic cultures, from Asian and Pacific cultures; in addition to English one could have heard Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, various Pacific languages, French and Creole. Our theological and liturgical diversity was more in evidence than usual; we were reminded that not all Disciples gather at the Lord's Table weekly; and that some among us seek a more positive relationship to the classic creeds of the Church. Our institutional diversity was embodied in persons from the general, regional and local expressions of Disciples life, from ecumenical staff and organizations, from financial and benevolent staff, and from seminaries. And all these diversities were cross-cut by others—by the rubrics of lay persons and ordained, women and men, younger and older persons.

Some majority participants understood for the first time what exclusion means for those who experience

it. At least one old wound in the life of our church was re-opened—though healing hopefully had the last word. Disciples will need gifts of the Holy Spirit to honor this diversity while finding a just coherence in our life as a church. This is the challenge of catholicity *à la* Disciples! Here and there, new possibilities were glimpsed.

A third overarching theme was *a desire that we move forward together into a more authentic life as a church, that new things actually happen*. Theologically, there was a strong affirmation of the Lord's Supper as central to our life, but also a call to rediscover baptism as central, and to explore anew the relation between baptism and the Lord's Table. We longed to clarify some of our conundrums: What does an "open Table" really mean, and how can congregations live out that openness not just at the Table, but in their wider life? How can joint action by congregations become the norm, and not the exception, in our church life? How can we practice ecumenical formation, and foster an "ecumenical culture" in congregations, regions, and all the general ministries of our church? In all these areas, Disciples are longing for their church to move forward. We need to show progress; if we cannot, we will soon have even more serious problems on our hands.

In summary, this Second Visioning Conference could—and should—have a major impact on the life of our church over the next decade and more. This was one of those rare meetings which gave energy to its participants rather than taking energy away from them. May that energy now be felt throughout the whole church. May the Council on Christian Unity now lead the whole church to recapture its primal calling: to witness to the unity of the church.