

AGREED STATEMENT

Apostolicity and Catholicity (1977-1982)

I. Introduction

1. In September, 1977 a five year international dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church was launched on the theme: "Apostolicity and Catholicity in the Visible Unity of the Church." The eighteen-member Commission had been appointed jointly by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in collaboration with the U.S. Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada. Its membership included Roman Catholic theologians and pastors from Canada, France, Ireland, the United States, and the Vatican, and Disciples theologians and pastors from Canada, England, Puerto Rico, the United States, and Zaire. Dr. Paul A. Crow, Jr. and the Most Reverend Stanley J. Ott were named as co-chairmen for the Commission.

2. In developing the main theme of its work, the Commission selected four sub-themes to focus discussion at each annual meeting: "The Nature of the Church and Elements of its Unity" (Indianapolis, 1977); "Baptism: Gift and Call in the Search for Unity" (Rome, 1978); "Faith and Tradition in the Life of the Church" (Anna-

polis, 1979); "The Dynamics of Unity and of Division" (New Orleans, 1980). At its fifth session (Ardfert, Ireland, 1981), the Commission prepared a final report to be submitted to its authorizing bodies.

3. Each annual meeting lasted five days and followed a regular pattern of work, of sharing in worship and prayer, and of worshipping with Disciples and Roman Catholics in local congregations and parishes. Four papers, two from each team, were presented and discussed with the tasks of identifying present agreements, convergences, new insights and continuing tensions or problems for further consideration. An "agreed account" of each meeting was prepared to serve as a common memory for the Commission's work. The papers and agreed accounts were published in *Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal* (Vol. XVIII, No. 4, October, 1979; Vol. XX, No. 3, July, 1981).

4. This final report does not summarize the papers and the agreed accounts from our previous meetings. Rather, it is a statement of shared insights and findings which the Commission identified out of its work, its discussion and debate, and its life together in fellowship and prayer during these five years.

II. Our Life Together

5. These five years of the dialogue between Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics have been the occasion of joy as we have grown together in theological understanding, in fellowship, and in the way we approach the problems of doctrine. We have been led to a better understanding of the nature of the one Church of God, the situation of our divided traditions, and also of the pressure of our common calling to visible unity in Christ.

6. We are aware that we come from two very different Christian backgrounds. Our histories, our cultural journeys, our theological traditions and methods have, in

some often important respects, been different. Some of the problems between us spring from these differences. Yet, the very diversity of our histories and Christian experiences frees us for a new kind of ecumenical dialogue. The Disciples movement was born out of the churches of the Reformation but has developed its own unique position among them. In particular, there was no deliberate, formal break in communion between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church, although our histories have included the general bias which in the past reflected uncharitable attitudes between

Protestants and Roman Catholics. This fact has allowed us to move beyond any initial apprehensions or presumed distance into cordial relationships and to discover that we have more in common than we expected.

7. A significant amount of what we thought initially to be division cannot be so defined. We have begun to discover that when we go beneath the current theological descriptions of our traditions, a convergence becomes evident. As we understand our traditions and our ecclesologies more clearly, we discover a common source has fed them. The customary vocabulary of division does not exactly describe our situation, even though there are still some important things we cannot do together or on which we cannot yet be at one.

8. This dialogue has been liberating because both Disciples and Roman Catholics set the fullness of communion at the heart of their understanding of the Church. Barton Warren Stone claimed for Disciples: "Let Christian unity be our polar star." Alexander Campbell proclaimed that "The union of Christians is essential to the conversion of the world." The same vocation, inherent in the Catholic tradition, was also claimed for Roman Catholics by the Second Vatican Council: "The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican

Council. . . . The concern for restoring unity involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, nn. 1,5).

9. Paradoxically, some of our differences spring from the ways we have understood and pursued Christian unity. For example, the Disciples of Christ, called into being as an instrument of unity among divided Christians, have refused to make creeds the definitive faith in order to promote unity and communion among Christians. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, holds to the creeds and the Petrine ministry for the same purpose. Our dialogue has helped us see this and other contrasts in the context of the fundamental commitment of Disciples and Roman Catholics to serve the visible unity of the whole People of God. In this perspective, some issues that seem to divide us can be traced to the same roots and certain of our differences appear complementary.

10. The nature of our ecumenical dialogue requires us to listen to each other's theological words while searching for the language of convergence, always in faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel. Our report gives substantial commentary on the issues which have been at the heart of the first phase of our dialogue and gives our churches hope for the future.

III. Spiritual Ecumenism

11. In Christ God has shown his supreme love for the world (Jn. 3:16), destroying the power of sin, reconciling us to himself (II Cor. 5:18-19) and breaking down the barriers of division in the human family. The Spirit of God is in the Church to bring this reconciling work of Christ to completion and continues to gather into it all who are ready to accept the saving Gospel. As human history unfolds, the Spirit of God prepares the coming of the final Kingdom. Already in the Church, the future unity of the Kingdom is anticipated as the Spirit brings together in faith and love those who acknowledge the Lordship of Christ.

12. The Spirit of God draws the Church towards full unity. God's Spirit also works in the world for a new humanity through the liberation of human beings from the oppression and alienation that comes from sin. Both realms of the work of the Spirit are integral parts of one plan of salvation.

13. The unity God has given and continues to give the Church has its origins in God's own life. The Spirit of God is the author of the Church's unity. Through the Spirit, all who are one in the Church are drawn into the loving communion of the Father and Son and in that communion are united to one another. Thus, they are being made one in mind and understanding, since through faith they

adhere to the one eternal Word in whom the wisdom of God is fully expressed. In this unity, the divine plan of salvation accomplished in Christ is expressed in the world and is being ever more fully revealed.

14. This theological awareness permits us to affirm that visible unity will come from the one grace of the Spirit of God dynamically present among Christians even in their divided condition. The Spirit calls all Christians to assume responsibility for giving authentic expression to their unity in life, in worship and in mission. The Spirit enables them to overcome obstacles and empowers them to grow together towards full visible unity.

15. The work of Christian unity, then, is profoundly and radically a spiritual one, i.e., it comes from and is a response to the Holy Spirit. We are encouraged that both our churches share a will for unity but acknowledge that, for this unity to be made fully manifest, our will and our commitments must be sustained by what has been called *spiritual ecumenism* (*Decree on Ecumenism*, paragraph 8). Spiritual ecumenism does not permit us to avoid the pain of our separated existence, being content to remain as we are. Indeed, the Spirit gives us the courage to confront our divided state.

16. Spiritual ecumenism does not allow us to leave aside the need to deal with the visible manifestation of the unity

of the Church. Indeed, we understand that just as the Word of God became flesh in Jesus, so in a similar way, the power of the Spirit of God is manifested in the Church as a visible communion.

17. Nor does spiritual ecumenism relieve us of the Gospel concern for the poor, the alienated and the oppressed. Indeed, Christians often become truly aware of the bonds that unite them and hear the call to conversion of heart as they meet the challenge to promote a society of justice, freedom and charity serving the dignity of every human being.

18. Spiritual ecumenism arises from the realization that the one Spirit of God has already brought us into Christ and continues to move us towards full visible unity. Spiritual ecumenism gives us hope that the Spirit will lead us from the imperfect unity we know painfully in our divided condition to a wholeness we shall experience in joy.

19. Spiritual ecumenism implies a clear consciousness of the sinfulness of division among Christians. Through spiritual ecumenism we are set free as communities and as individuals from seeking to justify our divisions and we are moved to seek a shared life in a reconciled community. Spiritual ecumenism impels us to a quality of evangelical life marked by the will to be faithful to Christ and open to one another. It also implies repentance and renunciation of egoism, as well as newness of mind, humility and gentleness in the service of others, that is conversion of heart. This *metanoia* thus provides what might be called an “evangelical space”—an arena for the operation of the Gospel—in which we find God’s grace newly available to bind us together in praising, blessing, beseeching the God who makes us one. In this evangelical space, we discover new possibilities for genuine exchange and sharing and for seeing in a new light these

affirmations that find historical expression in our still separated communities.

20. Thus, spiritual ecumenism allows us to be open to the grace of God. The Holy Spirit is freeing us to experience together his unifying power in the many ways open to us in the ongoing life of the Church, that is, accepting and proclaiming together the Word of God in the Scriptures, confessing together the same Lord, praying together, attending one another’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper and having a common mission as the priestly people of God in the whole human community. Although we do not yet fully share these experiences owing to our desire to be authentic and faithful to the Church as we have known it heretofore in our communions, we nevertheless realize that God makes the power of his unifying love felt even now. He speaks to us about the contradictions of our divisions when together we open ourselves to Him in prayer and worship, in our joint efforts at articulating a common theological language in ecumenical dialogue, and in the common struggle for justice and peace in the world.

21. In this evangelical space we are empowered both to grow together and at the same time to pay the price of suffering caused by our present divisions and by the efforts to overcome them. Here we discern a reflection of the present growth in painful struggle that marks the whole ecumenical movement. But we take hope, knowing that “the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await . . . redemption.” So “we wait for it with patience,” confident that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” and trusting that “the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (cf. Rom. 8:22-27).

IV. Baptism

22. By its very nature, baptism impels Christians toward oneness. In baptism a person is incorporated into Christ Jesus and into his Body, the Church. The fundamental unity which God has given us is rooted in the sacrament and cannot be destroyed. We are called to the one baptism by the Gospel that is the way of salvation for all humanity. Baptism is, therefore, the fundamental source of our oneness in Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

23. Yet, we came to the subject of baptism with an awareness of differences in baptismal practice which could not be treated lightly. At first sight, these differences might seem to represent divergent understandings which could threaten our fundamental unity through baptism.

24. In fact, we have discovered important areas in which our understanding and practice of baptism encourage us to speak truly of one baptism. These areas were found to have varying degrees of significance.

(a) We share a common attribution of the origins of baptismal observance to the example of Jesus, the command of the risen Christ, and the practice of the primitive Church.

(b) For both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics baptism is with water and “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

(c) In both our traditions, baptism is ordinarily administered by a duly authorized minister.

(d) In both our traditions, it is affirmed that we enter into

a new relationship with God as his children and as brothers and sisters, one of another in Christ, for in baptism our sins are forgiven and we become a new creation.

(e) Since God never revokes the new relationship brought about in baptism, rebaptism is contrary to the Gospel and should never be practiced. Nevertheless, we are aware of the need for continued repentance after baptism and we experience forgiveness in the ongoing life of the Church.

(f) Both our traditions maintain the necessity for the role of faith in baptism. For both Roman Catholics and Disciples, incorporation into the Body of Christ and forgiveness of sins are primarily acts of God that presuppose faith and call for a continuing active response of faith for their full development and fruitfulness.

25. This fundamental agreement must be kept in mind as we seek to interpret anew certain differences in regard to baptism. These differences fall under two headings:

The Relation of Personal Faith to Baptism

26. Since believers' baptism is the form of baptism explicitly attested in the New Testament, the conviction of Disciples is that the rite of baptism should be preceded by a personal confession of faith and repentance.

27. For historical, theological and pastoral reasons, Roman Catholics baptize infants. They see this as the first sacrament in the process of Christian initiation, followed by Christian nurture and instruction, and culminating in the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist, accompanied by a life of continual repentance and conversion.

28. However, Catholics see the fundamental belief of their church regarding baptism as expressed with new clarity in the revised rite for adult baptism, which includes personal confession of faith.

29. At the same time, Disciples have an increasing appreciation for the place of infant baptism in the history of the Church. In part, this involves understanding infant baptism in relation to Christian nurture in both the family and the Christian community. Also, Disciples have seen that infant baptism has been a pastoral response in a situation where members are no longer predominantly first-generation Christians.

The Mode of Baptism

30. Disciples practice immersion, believing it to be the practice of New Testament times and the clearest symbolic representation of our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. Roman Catholics, on the basis of early Christian tradition, regard pouring as an acceptable mode while acknowledging the symbolic value of descent

into the baptismal waters. They have always recognized and sometimes practice baptism by immersion. Disciples are coming to recognize the other modes, while retaining a preference for immersion.

31. Although God's saving power in the world is unlimited, baptism is fundamental in Christian life. By it, we become members of Christ's Body and participate in the life he gives. Participation in Christ's life calls us to enter his ministry, suffering, death and resurrection, as is prefigured in our baptism, for the salvation of the whole world.

32. Because both baptism and the eucharist involve participation in the Body of Christ and since the grace of God received in baptism is nurtured and strengthened by participation in the eucharistic meal, the oneness achieved by grace in baptism should find manifestation and completion in the *anamnesis* (memorial/remembrance) of the sacrifice of Christ for all humanity at the table of the one Lord.

33. Baptism is, paradoxically, a sign of unity and a reminder of disunity. It is a sign of unity inasmuch as it incorporates all Christians into Christ. It is a reminder of disunity in that, as administered, it also initiates Christians into separated ecclesial communities with their special traditions and doctrines.

34. We have been helped in our further consideration of this paradox by distinguishing two affirmations of faith. The one is the fundamental assent of the person to God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ, a gift that is, in itself, life-transforming and that is signified in baptism. This affirmation brings our lives under the determination of God's grace, thereby turning us outward from ourselves and making us one in Christ. The other is the acceptance of the elaboration of the faith as that has come to expression in our separated ecclesial communities. Baptism is also the induction into a particular ecclesial community with its own explication of the one faith. Making this distinction, therefore, has helped us to understand our fundamental unity and to locate the source of our separation.

35. However, in conclusion, we affirm the mutual recognition of baptism administered by Roman Catholics and Disciples, convinced that the oneness we received by the grace of God in baptism must find its completion in visible ecclesial unity, so that the world may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, as we together confess him to be. We are determined, therefore, by the same grace to discover more fully the truth that shall set us all free.

V. Faith and Tradition

36. Our two traditions are called to proclaim to the world the fundamental truth of God's reconciliation in Christ, to which both have given assent. This common assent is sealed through baptism in separated ecclesial bodies; nevertheless, in our baptism we are given radical unity. This realization impels us as the Church, the Body of Christ, to witness to the Apostolic faith in our life, teaching, liturgy, and service.

37. The Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has developed the means for proclaiming the Apostolic faith from age to age, as it has sought to defend the faith and communicate it faithfully in different times and circumstances. Scripture and Tradition embody these responses to the faith that God gives.

38. Faith is God's gift, both to the individual and to the community. In both cases, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we believe, grow in faith and live by faith. Our faith is that Christ is the Risen Lord who is the reason for the existence of the Church. This faith begets a new relationship among all who believe. The faith which commits a person to Christ commits that person to the Church which is his Body; because faith is given by the one Spirit of Christ, it is the one basic faith that binds Roman Catholics, Disciples and other Christians in one fellowship in that Spirit. However, in spite of this radical unity in the Body of Christ, we recognize that we have not yet fully achieved the visible ecclesial unity which he willed. While gratefully recognizing the measure of agreement reached on this topic, we also became acutely aware, at this point, of some serious unresolved issues that need further discussion in our dialogue; these, we believe, should be a major part of our future agenda.

39. The conversion process by which one commits oneself in faith to Christ and to Discipleship is a gradual, continuous and difficult one. Christ promised that his Spirit would be present to the individual in and through the community of believers. The Christian community, therefore, calls forth, nurtures, illumines, and sustains the faith of the individual in its liturgy and prayer, and its example of Christ-like love and service.

40. Christian life is life in community, a community which recognizes the dignity and freedom of human conscience, while also acknowledging the need for the individual conscience to develop in greater obedience to the Gospel. The Church is called to guide and enable this process.

41. Each Christian's faith is inseparable from the faith of the community. Personal faith is an appropriation of the Church's faith and depends on it for authenticity as well as for nurture. At the same time, bearing witness to

personal faith builds up the life of the Church and quickens and strengthens the faith of all.

42. Insofar as the Church as a community of faith and love is the sign of Christ in the world, believers are called to offer a common witness of faith, so that the world might believe that Jesus is Lord. Thus the life of faith, both of the individual and of the community, is expected to manifest a certain quality by which it becomes a "light in the world," "salt of the earth." Both the individual believer and the pilgrim Church are ever called to a deeper conversion to Christ, a more authentic faith. Scripture, mediating the Word of God, has a central, normative, and irreplaceable role in this process of personal and ecclesial conversion.

43. Together the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church acknowledge the important role of Tradition in the life of the Church. The relationship between faith and Tradition has to do with the question of how Christians from age to age come to the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Lord of life and the way of salvation for the whole world.

44. The Apostles were called by Christ and commissioned to a unique position in the life of the Church. They attest the presence of the risen Lord and hold a special place in the communication of faith to subsequent generations. In that communication, the Holy Spirit is always present in the life of the Church, guaranteeing that the Church shall not fail to bring about the fulfillment of the divine plan.

45. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the New Testament expresses the response in faith of the Apostolic Church to the risen Lord. This response was itself conditioned by God's revelation and promises to Israel.

46. The New Testament Scriptures, resting on the authority of the Apostles and interpreted with the aid of the Holy Spirit, constitute the inspired record of the Tradition which stems from the Apostolic Era. This Tradition reflects the *sensus fidelium* (the shared awareness of the faithful) of the primitive church as a whole. However, the *sensus fidelium* is not fixed in the past, but is ever dynamic and living through the dialectical interaction of Scripture and Tradition in the ongoing life of the Church from age to age.

47. Each generation must come to faith anew through the power of the Holy Spirit and hand on this faith to succeeding generations. At the same time, the Church in every age inherits the successes and failures of the past.

48. In the process of making explicit the implications of revelation, various traditions arise. This resultant diversity is to be expected and is frequently itself an ex-

pression of the catholicity of the Church. Problems arise when the ecclesial context in which a baptismal assent is made exercises an influence of such a kind that the communion in faith is compromised. Roman Catholic and Disciples both recognize that they move beyond the fundamental reality of faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ to understandings that have grown out of a diversity of Christian traditions.

49. Roman Catholics hold that the living transmission of the Gospel in and by the Church is necessary for a more complete articulation, manifestation and application of the truths that are in Scripture than Scripture alone affords. They look to the affirmations of faith and interpretations expressed in the Church's official liturgical texts, creedal statements, teachings of the episcopal college, especially in councils, and papal teachings which they believe to be formulated with the guidance of the Spirit. While the Scriptures are normative and the soul of all subsequent theological investigation, their adequate understanding is possible only within the life of the believing community.

VI. Affirmations About the Unity We Seek

52. Through a convergence of doctrinal understanding and in the experience of the reality of our oneness in the fundamental assent to God, we are able to accept as a basic principle of ecumenism that there can be only one Church of God (*unica Ecclesia*) and that this Church already exists. It is the accomplishment of salvation, both individually and corporately, for all humanity. This salvation to which Scripture bears witness expresses God's purpose for the entire creation.

53. The new humanity in Jesus Christ which God wills comes to exist in the one Church of God. The coming definitive form of the Church as God's eschatological people can be fully known only to God. Both Roman Catholics and Disciples believe that the Church takes visible shape in history and that one sign of this visibility is the common profession of the Gospel with reception of baptism. This visible community belongs to the very *esse* of the Church.

54. Through their common life and fellowship (*koinonia*) the members of this community which is the Church witness to salvation as they pray and worship together, forgive, accept, and love one another, and stand together in time of trial. Such communion is made possible by a deeper communion, a communion in the good things that come from God who makes the people of the Church his own as a new creation in Christ.

50. Disciples believe that the New Testament is a sufficient expression of the essential faith, doctrine, and practice of the individual Christian and the Christian community. Thus while being conscious of standing in the Tradition of the Church, they have not given a normative position to later expressions of the faith of the Church, and in particular have not used creeds and confessions as tests of eucharistic fellowship. Disciples believe their history shows that a church can develop and sustain its own distinctive character without a formal creed, and that the exercise of freedom and diversity in expressions of belief and worship need not threaten its unity. However, where affirmation of faith, both ancient and modern, have been used as a basis for the expression of the essential unity of the whole Church (for example, in united churches). Disciples have gladly accepted them.

51. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics are committed to the appropriation in their own lives of all that is good from the traditions of others, both in the past and today.

55. We become this new creation through the means of grace which God has given to his Church. Thus the Church is the visible form of God's grace. It opens the way to salvation through preaching, sacraments, and other institutions derived from apostolic authority. Participation in these means of grace constitutes the deeper communion that unites us together in true fellowship in the Spirit.

56. To this one Church belong all those who are baptized in water and the Spirit with the authentic confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God. These persons become members of the Body of Christ and receive the seal of the Holy Spirit, which cannot be removed even by schism. Divisions among Christians cannot destroy the one Church of God.

57. As we look at differences between Roman Catholics and Disciples we often discover in them elements of complementarity. We see ourselves as having a communion *in via*. The unique unity of the one Church of God is the goal. We are already on the way; we have taken the first step in faith through baptism which is also the call to that final unity. Now we have the task of giving external expression to the communion *in via*. In the very process of our mutual discovery of certain ecclesial elements in each other, we are called in a renewed fidelity to actions that will make our relationship more intense and more profound.

VII. Looking to the Future

58. Our situation as Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics, discovering each other in this dialogue, is a reflection of what is happening everywhere among Christians as they yield themselves in obedience to what God is doing through the ecumenical movement. We are not yet at the point where we can ask the churches to which we belong to make a definitive judgment on our work or to commit themselves to some decision which could have structural consequences.

59. Yet our experience tells us and we must declare, that the relation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ is in the process of a growth which is deeply important for both partners. This process calls for loyalty and courage as we pursue it towards maturity and, here and now, it challenges and makes demands on us both in a practical and costly way. The Lord is confronting us with these demands. We believe several of them especially require us to give a faithful response and to draw certain conclusions in practice:

(a) Catholics and Disciples along with many other Christians are discovering that, in essence, their commitment to Christ and their fellowship in the Gospel are the same. There is already a unity of grace which in some measure is present, bearing fruit, and which is disposing us for visible unity and urging us to move ahead to it. One of the most striking insights we have received in our dialogue is the awareness that the interior communion between Christians across divisions is an essential element of unity and a necessary part of achieving the goal of full visible unity. This is something we have experienced as we have learned to take each other seriously in our theological awareness and in our commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ. Above all, we have experienced it together in our prayer, our reading of the Scriptures, and the meditation which has seasoned all our work and given a special flavor and substance to this dialogue. We have come to appreciate more deeply also the importance in our two traditions of the renewal of the liturgy and the centrality of the Eucharist. It is our immediate task to reflect seriously on what all of this means for the relationship between Roman Catholics and Disciples of Christ in each parish and congregation.

(b) Spiritual ecumenism leads to more than the sum of doctrinal agreements. It requires us to “do the truth” of unity by acting together in the name of the Gospel. Our obedience to Christ, the Lord of history, has to be made incarnate as we carry our own responsibility of enabling the Kingdom to penetrate the world, its life, and its institutions. In its own way, it can be as full an expression of the common faith as doctrinal agreement, for action in harmony with the demands of the Gospel makes known Christian truth and reveals its riches. Communion expressed through practices is an important element of the emerging *koinonia* among churches. Joint action, both of individuals and of separated churches, is a factor in unity which reaches to the roots of the ecumenical task. This, too, has implications now for Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics in each place.

(c) Preparation for visible unity is taking place already through discussion of important doctrinal issues. This is clear from the work which has been done in our dialogue commission over the past five years. That is a significant beginning. We have now the framework in which it becomes possible and necessary to do further work on unresolved issues, particularly the nature and mission of the Church, the Eucharist, and the ministry.

60. The dialogue commission gives thanks to God that certain doctrinal convergences on some key issues begin to be discernible in our work already. This encourages us to work for no less than visible unity—not a limping compromise achieved by paring away divergences, but nothing less than common witness to the one apostolic faith.

61. The dialogue between Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church has begun, and already we must live in the logic of what is happening. It demands that we begin now, as far as possible, to proclaim together the same Lord Jesus Christ, giving common witness to “the hope that is in us” (1 Pet. 2:13). It demands, even now, that we enter to the fullest extent possible into that process of mutual recognition which is ultimately a worshipful acknowledgment of the one Lord in whom we are baptized, whose gifts we enjoy, to whose service we are called.

**Disciples of Christ–Roman Catholic
International Dialogue Commission 1977-1981**

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Dr. Klaus-Martin Beckmann, Darmstadt, Germany (1978-1980)
The Rev. Robin H. S. Boyd, Dublin, Ireland (1981)

Dates and Places of Meetings

September 22-27, 1977, Indianapolis, Indiana
December 8-14, 1978, Rome, Italy
September 7-12, 1979, Annapolis, Maryland
December 5-10, 1980, New Orleans, Louisiana
September 10-16, 1981, Ardfert, Ireland

AGREED STATEMENT

The Church as Communion in Christ (1983-1992)

Introduction

1. After the completion of the first stage of the dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church (1977-81) and its agreed account, *Apostolicity and Catholicity* (1982), it was understood that the current state of ecumenism required serious study of the nature of the Church. This came from our conviction that the Christian identity in itself and Christian mission in the world are inseparable from a clear and deep understanding of the Church.

2. The choice we made to focus on the Church coincides with the choice made by many ecumenical dialogues today: the Anglican-Roman Catholic, Orthodox-Roman Catholic, Anglican-Reformed, and Disciples-Reformed International Commissions, and the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission in the U.S.A. The same focus is found in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. This is a sign of our day that reveals the ecumenical movement to be in the midst of a deep probing of the

link between ecumenism and the nature of the Church.

3. For this second stage of discussions, our dialogue met ten times: in Venice, Italy (1983); Nashville, Tennessee (1984); Mandeville, Jamaica (1985); Cambridge, England (1986); Duxbury, Massachusetts (1987); Gethsemani, Kentucky, (1988); Venice, Italy (1989); Toronto, Canada (1990); Rome, Italy (1991) and St. Louis, Missouri (1992). In every meeting we prayed together, we met with members of local congregations, and we studied and discussed together the similarities and differences that characterize our two communities. In our meetings we focussed on how the Church as communion is linked to the new creation that God wills. We studied the visibility of the Church's communion (*koinonia*) as revealed in the celebration of the Eucharist and maintained through continuity with the apostolic tradition. And we focussed on the role of the ministry and the involvement of the whole Church in maintaining the faith of the apostles.

I. The Specific Nature of this Dialogue Within the Ecumenical Movement

4. The dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church has a specific character. This character may be described in sociological categories by saying that it comes not only from an encounter between a catholic and a protestant ethos,¹ but more particularly from the ways in which Disciples understand themselves to express a protestant ethos and Roman Catholics understand themselves to express a catholic ethos.

5. Generally in a catholic ethos great emphasis is placed on sacraments and liturgy. The corporate character of the faith in both the definition of doctrine and its continuing affirmation in the life of the Church is stressed. Episcopal oversight, rooted in apostolic con-

tinuity and succession, is regarded as necessary for the preservation of the Gospel and the life of the Church.

6. Generally in a protestant ethos great emphasis is placed on the proclamation of the Word, the necessity of the judgment of each individual's conscience as it is bound by the gospel, and the individual's responsibility for the appropriation of the Word of God. Episcopal oversight may be considered desirable for the well-being of the Church but not essential. Sometimes it has been denied that a specific form of oversight originates in the will of Christ for the Church. The test of church structures is the extent to which they are faithful to the gospel and facilitate authentic proclamation and Christian living.

7. These general differences between a catholic and a protestant ethos explain important differences between Disciples and Roman Catholics. Not only are their theological traditions and ecclesial structures different but they have ways of appropriating the Christian mystery in daily life that are not the same. Nevertheless on some vital issues what they share in common is more determinative for them than their belonging to a protestant or a catholic ethos. The customary vocabulary of division between protestant and catholic does not apply exactly to the specific priorities of Disciples and Roman Catholics.

8. The Disciples movement emerged out of nineteenth-century Protestantism but it had nothing to do with a deliberate break from the Roman Catholic Church and lacked the memories of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century controversies. Moreover some of its most specific concerns were criticisms of the way in which contemporary Protestantism understood and lived out fidelity to the apostolic witness. It came from the desire to lead the Church towards a unity rooted in the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Alexander Campbell was convinced that "the union of Christians is essential to the conversion of the world," an insight which has lost none of its force in the twentieth century.² The Roman Catholic Church too proclaims that it has a specific mission for the unity of the world, and affirms that this unity is signified and given by the eucharistic communion. It too teaches that the restoration of unity among all Christians is linked with the salvation of the world. Indeed Disciples and Roman Catholics pursue these goals in ways deeply marked by their different histories. But they have to discern whether all these affirmations and convictions are not in fact the expression of a very profound communion in some of the most fundamental gifts of the grace of God.

9. This is why, after a certain agreement had been expressed in *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, Disciples and Roman Catholics continued their dialogue in order to discover the degree of communion they already share. Their goal is to be together, growing in this communion and fostering it, and to be with all Christians (as the First Letter of Peter puts it) "God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9 NRSV).

10. To be honest and not lead to a "cheap ecumenism" this dialogue required two important and complementary investigations. It was necessary first to discuss clearly the issues on which, because of their history and ethos, Disciples and Roman Catholics are different. But then it was necessary to discern in what measure these differences are really divisive. Are they only two diverse ways of mani-

festing or living out the same basic conviction? If that should be the case, another question has to be asked: how would it be possible to express visibly this existing communion? More precisely: what kind of changes would be required to enable this existing communion to contribute to the full restoration of Christian unity?

Differences in Christian Faith and Life

11. At first glance the historic differences between the Roman Catholic Church and Disciples of Christ seem to make the division between them irreconcilable. Roman Catholics have understood themselves in the context of the continuous history of the Church: Disciples have understood themselves in the context of their origin as a reform movement (developing out of the Presbyterian Church) committed to find a way to overcome denominationalism. Hence where Roman Catholics have seen the Church throughout its history as continuous with the teaching of the apostles, Disciples have considered that some discontinuities in the life of the Church have been necessary for the sake of the Gospel. Roman Catholics have found in creeds and doctrinal definitions a sign of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to bind the Church into one and to lead it into all truth. Disciples have wanted to remain faithful to the apostolic Church of the New Testament with its vision of unity in Christ, but have been distrustful of many of the creeds, confessions and doctrinal teachings within Christian tradition, finding in the way they have been used a threat to unity. This has led them to be suspicious as well of the structure of episcopal authority which Roman Catholics believe is a necessary means for maintaining continuity with the apostles and with their teaching. Roman Catholics have been convinced that the college of bishops in communion with the See of Rome, teaching in conjunction with other ordained ministers and with the whole Church, is a necessary means of preserving the Church in continuity with the apostles.

12. The celebration of the Eucharist (also called the Lord's Supper or Mass) has been central to both Roman Catholics and Disciples, but the Eucharist has been understood in different ways.

13. For Disciples the centrality of the Lord's Supper has been highlighted by its celebration every Lord's Day. In obeying the Lord's commandment, "Do this in memory of me," Disciples have understood themselves to be in communion with the faithful in all places and all ages. Hence they have called all the baptized to the communion table and in particular have eschewed any formal creeds that kept Christians from taking communion together. However, they generally did not recognize the validity of infant baptism until the present century. Understanding themselves as a believers' church after the

pattern of the New Testament church, the Disciples have practised baptism upon confession of faith in Christ and have looked upon faith more as a trusting attitude and a life of witness than as assent to doctrinal formulations. They have emphasized the role of the whole eucharistic congregation in witnessing to the apostolic faith, and they have felt free to designate, as part of their church order, members of the community other than ordained ministers and ordained elders to preside at the Eucharist, especially if no regular minister or elder should be present. In the practice of believers' baptism and in the recovery of the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, Disciples have claimed to be in continuity with the faith of the apostles.

14. In celebrating the Eucharist, Roman Catholics also have claimed to be in continuity with the faith of the apostles. Indeed, they have seen the celebration of the Eucharist as a way to enter into communion with the whole Body of Christ. They have emphasized that the Eucharist signifies the unity of the Church and so they have invited to the eucharistic celebration only those in communion with the bishop and through him in communion with all the local churches in communion with the Bishop of Rome throughout the world. They have practised infant baptism and have emphasized the role of the whole community in supporting and nurturing the faith. In using ancient creeds and traditional liturgies, Roman Catholics have understood themselves to be in continuity with the generations of Christians who have gone before them since the apostles. Faith for Roman Catholics is not limited to the assent to such formulations, but it cannot be recognized without such assent. While different members have different gifts in the life of the Church, only the bishop or an ordained minister in communion with him is empowered to preside over the celebration of the Eucharist.

15. Disciples have been readily critical of some developments in the history of the Church, even seeing in these developments errors needing correction, because of their awareness of human finitude. They have been inclined to recognize sin in many aspects of the institutional church. Roman Catholics have recognized sin within individual members of the Church but because they believe the Church belongs to Christ and has received the gifts of the Spirit that maintain it in holiness and truth, they are slow to find sin and error in the Church's actions and teachings, and quick to see continuity with the apostolic teaching.

16. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics approach Church teachings with appreciative yet critical eyes. Their two different general attitudes about the Church as an institution lead Roman Catholics to be more appreciative and Disciples to be more critical. For this reason they

differ on the relative weight given, on the one hand, to individual discernment and conscience and, on the other hand, to the communal mind. It can be said that Roman Catholics are convinced that, although they must decide for themselves, they cannot decide by themselves. Disciples, on the other hand, are convinced that, although they cannot decide by themselves, they must decide for themselves.

17. Indeed Roman Catholics and Disciples appear so different and live in such different ways that for many of their members the proposal that their differences could be overcome is nearly incredible.

A Convergence of Vision?

18. Through our dialogue we nevertheless discovered that, despite these real and continuing differences, our understanding of the Church converges on some notable points which both Disciples and Roman Catholics believe necessary for the visible unity of the Church. We are convinced that these convergences are important not only for our two traditions but also for all the communities in dialogue to achieve this goal.

19. We had already begun to discover this convergence in the first stage of our dialogue. In *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, we saw that our two traditions had sometimes pursued the same goal using different means. We became convinced that "the Spirit of God has already brought us into Christ and continues to move us toward full visible unity" (p.4). We recognized that "each Christian's faith is inseparable from the faith of the community" (p.9), and agreed that "every generation must come to faith anew through the power of the Holy Spirit and hand on this faith to succeeding generations" (p.10). We were convinced that "there can be only one Church of God" (p.11) which cannot be destroyed by divisions among Christians. We were able "to affirm the mutual recognition of baptism administered by Roman Catholics and Disciples, convinced that the oneness we received by the grace of God in baptism must find its completion in visible ecclesial unity" (p.8). We affirmed a common belief "that the Church takes visible shape in history and that one sign of this visibility is the common profession of the Gospel with reception of baptism" (p.11). The restoration of "the unique unity of the one Church of God is the goal," we agreed, and "we are already on the way" (p.11); we sought a renewed fidelity to actions that would intensify and deepen our relationship.

20. In the second stage of our dialogue together we deepened our conviction that we are one on some crucial issues; and the goal of this statement of convergence is to elucidate a shared vision of the Church. We do not intend to discuss the extent of communion between Disciples

and Roman Catholics. Nor will we focus, one by one, on a number of separate issues that have divided us. Instead we want to present our shared understanding of the whole plan of God to draw together and redeem the human family, and the essential role of the Church in manifest-

ing and bringing about this plan. By beginning with God's offer of salvation to the whole of humanity and the means God gives to remember and announce this offer, we have been able to discover that we share the same understanding of the basic nature of the Church.

II. New Creation and Communion

21. Christians confess that the same God who created human beings has also redeemed them. God has not abandoned humanity to its sinfulness but, through the plan of salvation, has given the possibility of forgiveness of sin and new life. This plan of salvation culminates in Christ Jesus. In the Spirit through the Son the Father gathers into fellowship all those who had been alienated. By drawing people out of isolation and into communion (*koinonia*) God makes a new creation—a humanity now established as children of God, a people who know themselves to have received forgiveness of sin and to have put away the old and put on the new, even as they await the consummation still to come (Rom. 8:18–25).

22. This activity of God—the forgiveness of sins and making a new creation—and the response to it in thanks and praise is fundamental to the experience and understanding of *koinonia*. Various meanings of *koinonia* are found in the New Testament. Paul uses *koinonia* to describe sharing in the Eucharist (1 Cor. 10:14–20). In breaking the bread and blessing the cup, Christians have *koinonia* with the body and blood of Christ. The communities which contributed to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem were bound in *koinonia* (or partnership) with them through the sharing of material goods (2 Cor. 8:3–4, Rom. 15:26–27; Phil. 1:5). Yet another use of *koinonia* stresses the fellowship of those who walk in the light because they are in communion with the Father and the Son, and consequently with one another (1 John 1:3,7).

23. To speak of communion (*koinonia*) is to speak of the way human beings come to know God as God's purpose for humanity is revealed. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit calls human beings to share in the fellowship within the divine life, a call to which they respond in faith. Thus, communion refers first to the fellowship with God and subsequently to sharing with one another. Indeed it is only by virtue of God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ that deep, lasting communion is made possible: by baptism, persons participate in the mystery of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and are incorporated into the one Body of Christ, the Church.

24. The new creation is a foretaste of what will come in fullness through the Spirit at the end of time. The Spirit of God, acting in history, is the main agent of that communion which is the Church. Persons are brought into living relationship with the Father through the Son

by the power of the Spirit. Human relationships are thus set in a new context so that people may recognize one another as equally God's children and come to acknowledge the bonds that link them as a gift from God. People who have come to this new self-understanding see all other human beings as men and women whom God wills also to save. God's redeeming act in Christ demands that all humanity be united.

Eucharist and Continuity with the Apostolic Community

25. To be the communion God wills, the Church has to live in the memory of its origin, remembering with thanksgiving what God has done in Christ Jesus. That memory sustains and nourishes its life. The Church in fulfillment of its mission proclaims the good news of the gracious, saving acts of God as the Word of God is preached, the sacraments are celebrated, and the new life shared with God is given.

26. To live in this memory means for Disciples and Roman Catholics to be in continuity with the witness of the apostolic generation. The New Testament speaks of those called apostles in the earliest period in a variety of ways; and they played a unique and essential role in formulating and communicating the Gospel. The Church is founded on their proclamation. They began or nurtured the early communities, and they soon chose collaborators in the first generation of Christians to share the apostolic work of preaching, teaching, and pastoral guidance.

27. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics share an intention to live and teach in such a way that, when the Lord comes again, the Church may be found witnessing to the faith of the apostles. By preserving the memory of what the apostles taught, and by proclaiming and living it anew for the present day, both Disciples and Roman Catholics believe that they maintain continuity with the apostolic witness, forming a living tradition that is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20).

28. Memory, as in biblical usage, is more than a recalling to mind of the past. It is the work of the Holy Spirit linking the past with the present and maintaining the memory of that on which everything depends—the faith itself and the Church which embodies that faith.

Through the Spirit therefore the power of what is remembered is made present afresh, and succeeding generations appropriate the event commemorated. The Spirit keeps alive the sense of the faith in the whole community, and lavishes a variety of *charisms* that enable it to live in the memory of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist especially, the Spirit makes Christ present to the members of the community.

29. Both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics celebrate the Eucharist regularly and frequently—at least every Sunday. Although they have differences in the understanding of the Eucharist, they are one in the conviction that the communion willed by God takes on a specific reality at the Lord's Supper. In fact, the celebration of the Eucharist renews, makes real and deepens visible fellowship with God. In the eucharistic gathering, they celebrate God's salvation given through Christ as a gift, a gift which empowers for service. To participate in the eucharistic celebration is to be reaffirmed in membership of the people of God, to be empowered by Christ through the Holy Spirit and so to be made a part of the work of reconciliation in the world.

30. The Eucharist is an act through which a divine reality otherwise more or less hidden emerges and is made present. What is revealed is the plan of salvation, the good news that Jesus Christ reconciles humanity to the Father. The Eucharist both symbolizes and makes present, together with the gift of Christ himself, the salvation offered through him. In it faith is freshly evoked and is further nourished in the participant; for the community the essential elements of Christian faith and life are expressed.

31. The Eucharist is a communal event. In it Christians are bound with Christ and with one another. It is the action that most fully expresses the fellowship that is the Church. Here also Christians know more deeply and strengthen the bonds that unite their local community with other local Christian communities. Furthermore, they find themselves impelled by eucharistic communion to extend themselves in care for all those in God's creation, especially those who suffer. Indeed, the Eucharist is essential to the being and mission of the Church of God in the world. Christians acknowledge that a test of their credibility to the world as a symbol of God's presence can be found in the quality of the communion among themselves and with others.

32. God in Christ invites to the Eucharist, and through the Holy Spirit binds together into one body, all who break the one loaf and share the one cup. At the Lord's table the unity of the Church is accomplished, for believers are joined to Christ and to one another. Thus, precisely because the celebration of the Eucharist is the

climax of the Church's life, disunity among Christians is felt most keenly at the Eucharist; and their inability to celebrate the Lord's Supper together makes them less able to manifest the full catholicity of the Church.

Teaching and Continuity with the Apostolic Community

33. Disciples and Roman Catholics are convinced that in their faith they must remain in continuity with the apostles, even if they understand what this demands in different ways. This common conviction challenges them to explore the ways in which each has remained in continuity with the apostolic community, and to explore as well the possibility that each might be enriched by gifts remembered and exercised more fully by the other. As they have come to understand each other better, they have realized that each continues to retain many of the ways in which Apostolic Tradition is maintained.

34. Both receive the Scriptures as a normative witness to the apostolic faith. Both agree as well that the history of the Church after the writing and formation of the New Testament canon belongs to the Church's continuity in Apostolic Tradition, even though they have different emphases in understanding the significance of that history. Both find within this history many developments which, because they are the work of the Holy Spirit, are normative for the Church. Both affirm that the Gospel is embodied in the Tradition³ of the Church.

35. When Roman Catholics and Disciples evaluate earlier formulations of doctrine, both are committed to continuity with the Church's history, though in different ways—a significant difference which requires further investigation. Both agree that doctrinal statements never exhaust the meaning of the Word of God and that they may need interpretation or completion by further formulations to be clear. Both also agree that fresh doctrinal statements may be needed to preserve the Gospel when it is endangered or to preach it in a new cultural context.

36. Human memory can be deficient and selective because of finitude and sin, and the pilgrim Church is affected by these limitations. But both Roman Catholics and Disciples are agreed that the Holy Spirit sustains the Church in communion with the apostolic community because Christ promised that the Spirit "will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26 NRSV). The Spirit guides the Church to understand its past, to recall what may have been forgotten, and to discern what renewal is needed for the Gospel to be proclaimed effectively in every age and culture. This underlines the importance of reflection and study in the life of the Church to keep alive the memory.

37. Continuity with the Apostolic Tradition calls for fresh understandings or practices of discipleship, which the Church adopts in order to transmit the same apostolic faith effectively in new times and places. As the Church receives the Apostolic Tradition in different contexts and circumstances, the Spirit enables it to hold fast to the apostolic faith, and to discern authentic developments in its thought and practice. The Holy Spirit guarantees that the Church shall not in the end fail to witness faithfully to the divine plan.

38. Thus the Church not only remembers (in the biblical sense) what was done in the past, the saving act in Jesus Christ. Neither does it only remember what is promised in the age to come (cf para 28). At the very heart of the Church's memory, God's saving acts in the past provide a foretaste of transformation so that the future breaks in already to the present. Salvation seen from the perspective of the Scriptures reaches out from the past into the future.

The Gifts of the Spirit for the Church

39. The Holy Spirit not only gives the Church that memory which enables it to remain in the Apostolic Tradition, but is also present in the Church leading Christians and the whole community of the baptized deeper into the mystery of Christ. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics recognize this as a constitutive gift of God to the Church. Through the Holy Spirit the believer is drawn into union with the love of Christ for his Father, for humanity and for the whole of creation. The will of the believer is also led to unite itself with the will of Christ in obedience to the Father. Thus the individual believer is drawn into deeper communion with the movement of Christ's self-offering, embodied in the Eucharist. This in turn becomes the center of a life of witness to Christ.

40. A Christian receives the gift of faith within and for the communion (*koinonia*) which is the Church. Hence, the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) in the life of an individual Christian is a reflection of the extent to which, by the same Spirit, each one shares in the life of the ecclesial body as such; it becomes an expression of the instinct for faith of the whole body. The inner dynamism of the gift of faith—the power of the Holy Spirit which draws believers into spiritual unity—sustains the interaction of the faith of the individual and the faith of the community.

41. The Spirit gives a variety of gifts or *charisms* which enable the Church as a whole to receive and hand on the Apostolic Tradition. At the heart of these are the gifts appropriate to worship, particularly in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the act of celebrating the Eucharist the whole community of the baptized is drawn together by the Holy Spirit in a visible unity of faith, hope and love.

Together with the *charism* of the one who presides at the celebration, many other charisms can be exercised in service of the Church in the central action of its life. Then there are charisms of Christian formation, such as the witness to the faith given by parents to their children, and by those who teach in schools and congregations.

42. Moreover the memory of the apostolic faith is maintained in lives lived according to the Gospel. The faithful have a sense of care for all humankind, responsibility for their well-being, and sharing in their suffering, sorrow and oppression as well as in their joy, good fortune and liberation. The charisms which enable the work of mercy—with the poor, the needy, the homeless, the sick and the aged—recall the whole community to the Gospel imperative of love.

43. In addition there are extraordinary gifts, which are found in the lives of people who give vivid witness to the Gospel and capture the imagination of the community of the baptized in such away that it is recalled to the Gospel and the apostolic tradition. These gifts, like all gifts, must be tested in the Church for authenticity.

44. Within the mutuality and complementarity of the different charisms which are given to and for the Church, there is a particular charism given to the ordained ministry to maintain the community in the memory of the Apostolic Tradition. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics affirm that the Christian ministry exists to actualize, transmit, and interpret with fidelity the Apostolic Tradition which has its origin in the first generation. It also has a special responsibility in serving and showing forth the unity of the Church. The intention of the apostolic community in establishing ministries in other places was initially to establish collaborators rather than to choose successors: what began as an expansion of communion over distance became later on an expansion over time. We have found this a helpful insight in enabling us to affirm a common understanding of the importance of succession.

45. Although historically Disciples came from those traditions which at the Reformation rejected episcopacy as the Reformers knew it in the Roman Catholic Church, Disciples have always recognized that the work of the ministry, shared in the local congregation by ordained ministers and ordained elders, is essential to the being of the Church and is a sign of continuity with the Apostolic Tradition. Roman Catholics believe that the bishop, acting in collaboration with presbyters, deacons and the whole community in the local church, and in communion with the whole college of bishops throughout the world united with the Bishop of Rome as its head, keeps alive the apostolic faith in the local church so that it may remain faithful to the Gospel.⁴ Both Disciples and Roman Catholics

affirm that the whole Church shares in the priesthood and ministry of Christ. They also affirm that ordained ministers have the specific charism of re-presenting Christ to the Church and that their ministries are expressions of the ministry of Christ to the whole Church. They believe that God has given to the Church all the gifts needed for the proclamation of the Gospel; but this does not mean that every member has received every charism or authority for doing so. Rather it is the corporate shaping of the whole people of God by the Gospel which enables them to hold fast to “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, RSV). The ordained ministry is specifically given the charism for discerning, declaring and fostering what lies in the authentic memory of the Church. In this process this charism of the service of memory is in communion with the instinct for faith of the whole body. Through this communion the Spirit guides the Church.

The Church

46. We thus discover that our diversities are real but not all of them are necessarily signs of division. Roman Catholics and Disciples have more in common than might be expected after the exposition of their differences. We are now sure that in confessing together that the Church is communion, we are in agreement on a very crucial issue, which is not isolated from many central issues of the faith. We agree—together with many other Christians—on important truths:

- a person is saved by being introduced into this communion of believers, described in the New Testament by images of the body of Christ, the temple of God, the vine, the household of God;
- this communion is never given to the believer without the involvement of other believers, some of them being the ministers of the Church, having a specific responsibility for preaching the Word of God and presiding at the celebration of the sacraments. Through the Word and the sacraments the Church is the servant or instrument of God’s plan of salvation;
- this communion is ultimately with the apostolic community, whose memory is constantly kept alive and made present, especially thanks to the work of the ordained ministry, the witness of the holy and committed members of the community and the expression of the mind of the Church by all the members trying to be faithful to their vocation.

47. We therefore come to a very important agreement concerning the nature and mission of the Church. The Church of God is that part of humanity which through faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit responds to

God’s plan of salvation revealed and actualized in Jesus Christ. Consequently it becomes the community of all those who in Christ, by the gift of God, are bound into a communion with the Father and with one another. Its members are called to live in such a way that, in spite of their failures and their weakness, this communion becomes visible and is constantly in search of a more perfect realization.

48. This visibility is realized especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. There, gathered together and after having confessed their faith, the baptized people receive the body and blood of Christ, the Son of God who reconciled humanity to God in one body through the cross. There they enter into communion with the saints and members of the whole household of God. Moreover, what is celebrated at the Eucharist has to be actualized in a life of common prayer and faith, of faithfulness to the Gospel, of sharing the spiritual and even material goods of the community, and of commitment to the will of God that the saving work of Christ be extended as offer to all.

49. Participation in this communion begins through baptism and is sustained in continuing eucharistic fellowship. The Holy Spirit uses the Church as the servant by which the Word of God is kept alive and constantly preached, the sacraments are celebrated, the people of God are served by the ministers with responsibility for oversight, and the authentic evangelical life is manifested through the life of holy and committed members of Christ. This is why Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that the Church is the company of all the baptized, the community through which they are constantly kept in the memory of the apostolic witness and nourished by the Eucharist. The Eucharist is never celebrated and received by a member isolated from an ecclesial community gathered around its ministers. The Church is therefore at the same time the sign of salvation (to be saved is to be in communion) and the community through which this salvation is offered.

50. By this communion—which is the Church—an effective sign is given by God also to the world. This sign stands in contrast to the divisions and hatred within humanity. Even if it is always stamped by the deficiencies of its members, the Church of God demonstrates that the division of humanity created by the corruption of the human heart with its egoism and desire for possessions or power, has been overcome through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. A new life is made possible, the life of the children of God whose bonds of relationship are a gift coming from the Father.

51. Moreover, because Christians come to know that God wants all other human beings also to become mem-

bers of Christ, they are drawn to give themselves in loving witness and service to humanity. This service culminates when they commit themselves to the preaching of the Gospel, being obedient to the command of Christ, their Lord. The Church is in that way not only a sign of the new humanity God wants but also an instrument the Holy Spirit uses in order to extend salvation to all human situations and needs, in all places until the end of history.

52. Hence, we are able to affirm gladly the traditional conviction that the Church is at one and the same time an epiphany of the destiny which God wills for all humanity and a means to achieve that destiny. These inseparable functions of sign and instrument, epiphany and means, are contained in the expression "the Church is the sacrament of God's design," as used in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. This phrase signifies that God

realizes the plan of salvation in and through the communion of all those who confess Jesus Christ and live according to this confession. We know, indeed, that this saving work is not limited to those who confess Christ explicitly, but that the benefits of Christ's work are offered to all human beings. In hope we expect that these benefits may be accepted by many who do not fully confess the giver of their gifts. Nevertheless, we do believe that the Church, by making visible God's reconciling work and being the servant of God in the accomplishment of this work, stands as a light on the mountain top, awakening the world to a recognition of its true destiny. The communion that is the Church allows people to witness what Christian faith confesses: there is salvation and it comes from God through Christ.

Future Work

53. We have not yet, indeed, discussed some of the most important points which continue to divide us. For we believe that these issues can be fairly and deeply treated only on the basis of the kind of agreement we have reached in the document we are now publishing. Moreover we are convinced that they are to be treated in conjunction with the work of other bilateral ecumenical dialogues, which are also struggling with them. They will be proposed for the agenda of our future discussions. Among them four have a very specific meaning for the visible unity of the Church:

a) First, our dialogue has made us aware of a point we need to consider more deeply: even if we agree on the signification and function of the Eucharist, we feel that we still have to discuss our traditional teaching and practice concerning the presence of the Lord in the celebration of the Supper, its sacrificial nature, the role of the ordained minister and the role of the community. This is important, given the emphasis that both Disciples and Roman Catholics put on the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper and its link with the visible unity of Christians.

b) A second issue is the way we understand the funda-

mental structure of the Church gathered around the Eucharist and the catholic tradition's understanding of episcopacy—given through a sacrament—as the institution necessary for an authentic Eucharist to be celebrated.

c) A third issue is the nature of the rule of faith in a changing history. In what sense is "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" expressed in the teaching of the Church throughout the ages?

d) Lastly, an issue which requires to be explored by all the churches and communities in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church is the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the affirmation that it is founded in the will of Christ for the Church.

54. These are difficult issues. Nevertheless we believe—after these ten years of dialogue on the Church—that it will be possible to clarify many misinterpretations (on both sides) and possibly to discover ways of growing towards the kind of mutual *metanoia* (repentance) and coming together which will allow very profound communion in some of the most important gifts of the grace of God, and make possible important and irreversible stepson our road towards the full unity God intends.

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Dr. Efele Elonda, Mbandaka, Zaire (1983-90)
Dr. H. Jackson Forstman, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A.
Dr. Nadia Lahutsky, Fort Worth, Texas, U.S.A.
Dr. Russel D. Legge, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada (1983-90)
Dr. W. Paulsell, Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A. (1986)
Dr. C. Roy Stauffer, Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A. (1987)
Dr. Paul S. Stauffer, Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A. (1983-86)
Dr. M. Jack Suggs, Forth Worth, Texas, U.S.A. (1983-87)
Dr. William Tabbernee, Enid, Oklahoma, U.S.A. (1989-92)
Dr. David M. Thompson, Cambridge, England
Dr. Robert K. Welsh, Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A. (Staff 1983-87)

Roman Catholics

The Most Rev. Samuel E. Carter, SJ, Kingston, Jamaica (Co-chairperson)
The Most Rev. Kevin McNamara, Dublin, Ireland (1983-87)
The Most Rev. Basil Meeking, Christchurch, New Zealand
The Rev. Michael Jackson, London, England (1988-92)
The Rev. Dr. Kilian McDonnell, OSB, Collegeville, Minnesota, U.S.A.
The Rev. Dr. John P. Meier, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.
The Rt. Rev. Mgr. John Mutiso-Mbinda, Vatican City (1986-92)
Dr. Margaret O'Gara, Toronto, Canada
The Rev. Dr. J.M.R. Tillard, OP, Ottawa, Canada

Notes

- 1 By *ethos* is meant the social, mental, religious and philosophical atmosphere surrounding a group and influencing its way of life.
- 2 A. Campbell, "Foundation of Christian Union," *Christianity Restored*, Bethany, Va 1835, 103-4 (more commonly cited in the 2nd ed, *The Christian System*, 1839, 115). Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), son of the Rev. Thomas Campbell, a Seceder Presbyterian minister from Ahorey, Ireland who emigrated to the U.S.A. in 1807, was President of Bethany College, West Virginia and one of the leading figures in the emergence of Disciples of Christ as a distinctive religious movement.
- 3 The use of a capital *T* follows the definition agreed at the Montreal Faith and Order Conference in 1963: "By the Tradition is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church" (*Report of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, para 39, p. 50).
- 4 cf Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 22: Norman P. Tanner (ed), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, (1990), ii, 866.

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AGREED STATEMENT

Receiving and Handing on the Faith: the Mission and Responsibility of the Church (1993-2002)

Preface

The International Commission for Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church has been holding annual meetings since 1977. Through its work several important theological agreements and insights have been identified that give assurance of the unity already given in Christ, and that hope for fuller unity that will be God's gift someday in the future.

The first report from the International Commission for Dialogue, *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, was published in 1982. The second report, *The Church as Communion in Christ* (1993) was the product of ten years of intensive theological work, building of friendships, and common prayer.

This third report, *Receiving and Handing on the Faith: the Mission and Responsibility of the Church*, begins with the common affirmation that "the Church is essentially a missionary community of those sent into the world to proclaim the offer of God's gifts to all persons." It addresses the topics of the Word of God, proclaimed and received; holding to the faith in the formation of the Canon, the Councils, and discerning the Gospel in every age; receiving the faith; conscience and teaching authority; and, handing

on the faith as the mission of the whole church. This report is now offered for study and reception by Roman Catholics and Disciples throughout the world, and to our brothers and sisters in other communions who seek to be faithful to Christ's prayer for the unity of the Church.

We rejoice in the measure of agreement, however partial, we are able to record after these twenty-five years together. We look forward with promise to our future dialogue that will take up the issues and theme, "the presence of Christ in the Church, with special reference to the Eucharist."

We hope and pray that this report and the years of dialogue will broaden the exchanges between our churches locally and globally, and strengthen our common witness and service to the world in the name of the triune God.

The Most Rev. Daniel Buechlein
Archbishop of Indianapolis
The Rev. Dr. Paul A. Crow, Jr.
Co-chairpersons
May 23, 2002

I Introduction

1.1 From the beginning of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue in 1977 the goal was to enable all Christians to be together in the visible unity of the one Church of God. In the report of the first phase, the Commission accepted "as a basic principle of ecumenism that there can be only one Church of God (*unica Ecclesia*) and that this Church already exists"; furthermore it stated, "We see ourselves as having a communion *in via* . . . Now we have the task of giving external expression to the communion *in via*" (*Apostolicity and Catholicity*, p 11). This was reaffirmed in the report of the second phase: "Disciples and Roman Catholics continued their dia-

logue in order to discover the degree of communion they already share. Their goal is to be together, growing in this communion and fostering it" (*The Church as Communion in Christ*, §9). After restating some of the agreements about the vision of unity in the first report, the second report continued, "the goal of this statement of convergence is to elucidate a shared vision of the Church" (*The Church as Communion in Christ*, §§19-20). As we report on this third phase of dialogue, we reaffirm these convictions about our goal.

1.2 This Report is a theological reflection. But it arises out of regular meetings each year in which we prayed and

studied the Bible together, met with members of local congregations, and studied and discussed together the similarities and differences that characterize our two communities.¹ This sharing locally and internationally is a vital part of the “spiritual ecumenism” referred to in the first report.

1.3 Both the previous reports referred to the relationship of the individual and the Church. *Apostolicity and Catholicity* noted that “each Christian’s faith is inseparable from the life of the community. Personal faith is an appropriation of the Church’s faith and depends on it for authenticity as well as for nurture” (p 9). *The Church as Communion in Christ* stated that “the inner dynamism of the gift of faith—the power of the Holy Spirit which draws believers into spiritual unity—sustains the interaction of the faith of the individual and the faith of the community” (§40). From this starting point, we reflected on how the faith is handed on from one generation to another through history; and came to see that the proclamation of the Good News provided a crucial context for understanding the whole process of receiving and handing on the faith.

1.4 Disciples and Roman Catholics share a commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; they place a similar emphasis on the Church as communion, and on the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. They share some common beliefs about the nature of the Church; yet there are also some differences, which reveal themselves in different structures. Perhaps the major query from a Roman Catholic perspective is how Disciples, with an apparent lack of structure and creedal formulations, have handed on the Gospel. For Disciples, on the other hand, the main question is whether the more elaborate hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, with an apparent emphasis on uniformity, gives people sufficient freedom of conscience in their response to the Gospel.

1.5 Both Disciples and Roman Catholics acknowledge that in the New Testament the community of believers is primary, and that the identity of individuals is defined by their membership in the community, not *vice versa*. This understanding, which has been traditional for Roman Catholics, finds its own expression among Disciples. Throughout Disciples history there has also been a concern to identify with that which was believed always, everywhere and by everybody (to use a phrase of St. Vincent of Lerins). The common sense philosophy characteristic of the early Disciples leader, Alexander Campbell, depended on an appeal to that which the community as a whole could accept. This community is the context in and through which the Christian message is received and lived out.

1.6 The conviction that it is necessary for every Christian to come to a personal confession of faith (which has sometimes been regarded as representing an individualistic emphasis) does not in any way deny the logical and chronological priority of the faith of the whole Christian community of believers. Rather than arguing at length about the relative importance of the individual and the Church, the Commission affirms that a believer’s Yes to Christ incorporates that person into the Yes of faith spoken by the Church throughout the ages (cf. 2 Cor 1:20).

1.7 This Report therefore begins with a discussion of the Word of God, proclaimed and received (section 2) and continues with a discussion of how the Church in history holds to the faith (section 3). It then considers the question of the relation between the teaching office of the Church and Christian freedom (section 4), and concludes by considering the mission of the whole Church in handing on the faith (section 5). We offer this Report hoping to remove mutual misunderstandings, to diminish the differences which still separate us and to renew the vital link between the mission and unity of the Church.

2 The Word of God, Proclaimed and Received

The Missionary Nature of the Church

2.1 The Christian faith announces that God has reached out to humanity decisively in the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is the living Word, the mediator and fullness of revelation. New Testament writers express, in a variety of ways, the truth that God wills to gather all humanity into the community that shares in the communion between the Father and Son in the Spirit (cf. Eph 1:9–10, Col 1:19–20, 1 Jn 1:3). The Holy Spirit, sent to make real the work of Christ in mysterious ways which are not all revealed, is thus the agent of mission. The Church is

gathered by God to carry on the work of the twofold mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Church is essentially a missionary community, a community of those sent into the world to proclaim the offer of God’s gifts to all persons.

2.2 In living out its missionary identity the Church proclaims the Word of God and invites person to be converted and become part of the communion of believers. Only there can the full meaning of the Gospel be known. Our two communions are convinced that, in all the Church says and does, its call to proclaim salva-

tion is accompanied by the presence of the Holy Spirit empowering the Church to discern that which is necessary for salvation.

Hearing the Word of God

2.3 One way in which the Holy Spirit has assisted the Church in its call to proclaim salvation to all is in the writing and identification of the books that came to be in the Bible. The books of the Bible had human authors to be sure; nevertheless, God is heard speaking through these books. We agree that we hear the Word of God through the Bible when it is used in celebrating the sacraments, in preaching, in teaching the faith and in personal devotional activities.

2.4 Members of each communion participate in a living tradition of scriptural interpretation and prayer, which they pass on to others. The shaping of distinctive common ways of understanding and sharing the scriptural text links each Christian and each generation of Christians with those who have preceded them. It is through the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures in the congregational life of each communion that the Word of God is made real in both praise of God and Christian discipleship. Thus, the Gospel message leads necessarily to life in community, which in turn helps to

shape the understanding of the message for subsequent generations (cf. *The Church as Communion in Christ*, §§13-14, 21-23). Both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics affirm that the Holy Spirit guides the Church, which because of this guidance will not finally fail in its task of proclaiming the Gospel. Our ultimate confidence is in God's promise to bring about the divine purpose for all.

2.5 Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree on the necessary link between the Word and the sacraments. The Word of God has its own efficacy: and its saving power is experienced most fully when the Word is received together with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The fullness of the Good News is received in the gift of communion with God and with each other, a communion beginning through baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ and extending throughout one's life. In both the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ the sacraments make real the communion the Gospel announces (cf. *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, pp 9, 12). The sacraments are by their nature integral to the life and being of the Church. They bring a new believer into the community, creating a link between the believer and all other Christians in every time and place. Thus each believer receives the living Tradition, becomes part of it, and participates in passing it on.

3 Holding to the Faith: the Church in History

3.1 As they waited in expectation for the return of the Lord, Christians wanted to remain faithful to him while they celebrated his presence in word and sacrament. The Church has always recognized the need to hold on to the memory of the apostolic community about what God has done in Christ. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics recognize that the canon of the Scriptures, councils of the Church, and creeds confessing the faith were developed as instruments to do this, under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit (In 14:26) (cf. *The Church as Communion in Christ*, §36). In our dialogue we have also come to appreciate more deeply the process the Church used in discerning these instruments of faithfulness; this process of discernment continues whenever the Church seeks to confess the Gospel with courage in the face of new situations and challenges. Through our discussions on the formation of the canon, on councils and the declaration of the faith, and on the process of discerning the Gospel in every age, we have enriched our understanding of the ways that the Church holds on to the faith throughout history.

Formation of the Canon

3.2 Why did Christians develop a canon of the books they came to regard as their Scriptures? The reason can be stated simply: Christians wanted to hold on to the same

faith preached by the apostolic community. In the face of controversies about the content of the faith, the Churches in the East and the West began to list the venerable books, which they considered as the genuine documents of God's revelation, containing the substance of the apostolic faith and expressing the will of God for Christian life. In this diverse group of books the Church recognized the authentic Word of God in its written form inspired by the Holy Spirit.

3.3 The early churches included those begun by the apostles; but in addition churches were considered *apostolic* in which the apostles preached or to which they wrote letters. Some books not written by apostles were included in the early lists making up the canon because they too came from the apostolic era, they were sometimes read aloud during liturgical celebrations, and they were in agreement with the apostolic tradition. The canon also enabled those churches with no direct personal link to the apostles to have the assurance that they too proclaimed the apostolic faith in communion with the apostolic churches. The books which constitute our New Testament are those in which, from apostolic times, guided by the Holy Spirit, the local churches in communion with one another had come to recognize the apostolic faith.

3.4 The way in which sayings and deeds of Jesus were transmitted helps us to understand concretely what the authority of the canon means. The deeds and words of Jesus were known and *received*² in the communities of believers from the teaching and preaching of the apostolic witnesses to the Christ-event. But not all these deeds and words were included in the written gospels; and not all the written gospels, but only four, were judged to have a reliably apostolic origin and *received* in the official canon.

3.5 The making of a list of books to serve as a canon does not imply that the truth concerning God and the norms for the guidance of Christian life are to be searched for only in these documents. But if Christians want to hold on to their faith, to preach authentic Christian doctrine, to live according to authentic evangelical norms, they must look at these documents and conform their words and deeds to these teachings. The intention of the canon is to indicate where the heart of Christian faith is authentically to be found, because the Church is sure that in the documents listed—after centuries of testing—the “memory” of the Church of God has been faithfully preserved and transmitted since earliest times.

3.6 Moreover, the Church believes that the books which comprise the canon belong to the work of the Holy Spirit in history which keeps the Church indefectibly attached to the revelation disclosed in the history of the People of God and ultimately given in Christ Jesus. Thus setting the canon was at the same time an act of obedience and of authority. In obedience to the Holy Spirit the Church discerned which books contained the authentic apostolic witness, and acted with authority to set these books as its norm.

3.7 By holding together the Old Testament and the New Testament in this canon of inspired books, the Church shows its recognition of the links between the books inherited from the Jewish community and the books recording the Church’s memory about Christ Jesus. And by holding together the rich but limited variety of books within the New Testament itself, the Church manifests that the diversity found there is compatible with the *koinonia* of all the faithful in “one faith, one Lord, one baptism” (Eph 4:5). The canon is therefore a symbol of unity in the diversity of the Church’s life; it is also part of the givenness of that life.

3.8 The formation of the canon was a process of ecclesial discernment which lasted many years and involved many aspects of the life of the Church. Today Roman Catholics and Disciples recognize the significance of this process and the criteria which, at least implicitly, functioned to determine which books were to be included

or not to be included in the canon. These criteria included apostolicity, conformity with the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, and use during liturgical celebrations. But these interlocking criteria did not function in isolation during the Church’s discernment process.

3.9 Although official lists were authorized by local churches as early as the second century, only in 1442 did the canon enter a conciliar decree when the Council of Florence listed the books of the canon within its statement on union with the Copts. While this was quite a long time after the canon-making process of the early Church, the centre or heart of the canon had not been questioned. Disagreements between the Reformers and the Council of Trent about the canon of Scripture concerned only the somewhat imprecise edges of the canon of the Old Testament.³ The differences between Roman Catholics and Disciples on the number of books in the Old Testament need not be Church-dividing.

3.10 There is a close relationship between the canon of the Scriptures and the unity of the Church. Because it is held in common by Christians, the Bible holds Christians together with one another as they read and proclaim the same Word of God received from the Church of the apostles. The diversity of the Bible also helps to explain why the same Word of God has led to different emphases among different Christian communities. The canon of the Scriptures determines and supports the faith of both of our communions, so Roman Catholics and Disciples again and again recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Councils and the Declaration of the Faith

3.11 Disciples and Roman Catholics share the desire to hold on to the emphasis on Church unity which characterized the patristic period of the Church’s history. For Roman Catholics the patristic writers are witnesses to the Tradition who have a special authority because their foundational insights on the central trinitarian, christological, and sacramental teachings have been received by the Church, notably through the great councils. Disciples for their part have received the major teachings of the patristic period without necessarily always using its texts explicitly. However most Disciples theologians turn less readily to the patristic writers, the councils and creeds, than do Roman Catholics.

3.12 Roman Catholics and Disciples agree in recognizing the theological definitions of the first seven ecumenical councils as part of the common history of the Church. In these councils the Church responded to new controversies about the content of its faith and sought to hold on to the authentic teaching received from the apostles.

3.13 We discovered that we share more agreement about these seven early councils than previously recognized. Disciples and Roman Catholics together recognize the first seven councils as authentic gatherings of the Church able to speak in the name of the whole Church for four main reasons:

a) The councils articulated and defined the mystery of the Triune God manifested in history, revealed through Christ Jesus, which the Church has to proclaim “until he comes again.”

b) The councils were conscious that Christ is in their midst because they were gathered in his name. In their teachings received by the Church they always remained “under the Gospel”: the Holy Spirit was at work in the community to maintain it in an authentic communion with what Christ did and taught despite the sometimes questionable tactics of some participants.

c) In their decisions the councils respected and preserved the diversity of traditions present in the Scriptures. As the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon themselves demonstrate, councils wished only to be at the service of the Scriptures. Conciliar definitions were not intended as substitutes for the language of the New Testament authors; they clarified and made explicit the main affirmations of the Scriptures.

d) The councils gathered the bishops, who were seen as succeeding to the apostolic community. As leaders of their communities presiding at the Eucharist, they were considered to embody their local churches and as such were able to speak for them in the process of clarifying or defining the faith. Subsequent to the councils, the bishops were responsible for interpreting the councils’ decisions to their churches. All local churches were drawn into the decisions of the councils through reception afterwards.

3.14 Roman Catholics believe that their life continues to be shaped by the work of the seven ecumenical councils celebrated and received by the Eastern and Western Churches together. The Roman Catholic Church is assured that some of its provincial councils and its general councils assembled since the separation between the West and East and the Reformation divisions are providential instruments the Spirit of God uses to keep the People of God faithful to the Gospel. Moreover the Roman Catholic Church claims that, when the college of bishops meets in an ecumenical council which is confirmed or at least recognized as such by the Bishop of Rome, it is able to define doctrine as divinely revealed, to be accepted with the obedience of faith.

3.15 The situation is not the same for the communities of the Disciples. Certainly Disciples recognize that their

life continues to be shaped by many of the declarations and decisions of the councils—the seven ecumenical councils and some of the Western general councils—celebrated before the Reformation. The Disciples tradition has never held the theological positions condemned by the early ecumenical councils. Disciples hold that the conciliar christological and trinitarian definitions belong to the providential *oikonomia* (ordering) by which the Church of God is kept within the path of the Gospel and preserved from grave distortions in its confession of Christ Jesus, the Saviour. To the extent that they have accepted the decisions of those councils, Disciples have acknowledged their authority.

3.16 The first generation of Disciples leaders was critical of the way in which confessions of faith were used as tests of fellowship, particularly at the Communion Table. The main targets of their criticism were the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions such as the Westminster Confession and the Secession Testimony⁴, rather than the Apostles’ or Nicene Creeds. The motto “No Creed but Christ” was not intended to exclude the use of creeds for the purpose of teaching the faith. Disciples, however, have preferred to use New Testament confessions of faith; they emphasize the dependence of the conciliar creeds on the New Testament.

3.17 Today both Disciples and Roman Catholics draw on the central teachings of the first seven councils when judging new ideas or practices proposed in our churches. These conciliar teachings define the boundaries within which to search for faithful interpretations of the Gospel. For example, a wide diversity of theological understandings of Christ can be used in preaching and teaching, but an understanding of Christ in opposition to the teaching of Nicaea or Chalcedon is not acceptable. At the same time, affirming the teachings of these councils does not imply affirmation of their world view or conceptual structure. Both Roman Catholics and Disciples recognize that no statement exhausts the mystery of God to which it points and that attempts to express in human language the mystery of God’s saving work for humanity are open to restatement. A distinction may be drawn between the language in which conciliar definitions are expressed and the reality to which they bear witness. It may be necessary to restate that reality in different terms in later ages, but such restatement will always be faithful to the truth originally intended, and not contradict it. In fact, the councils demonstrate that sometimes the Church finds such restatement necessary precisely in order to remain in continuity with the faith it has received.

3.18 The ecumenical commitment of the Second Vatican Council acts today as an invitation to Disciples to explore together with Roman Catholics what more may be received from the heritage of the councils. Ecumenical

dialogue has become one of the most important channels for the diffusion and reception of conciliar teaching, and because of such dialogue Disciples are more ready than in the past to use the Nicene Creed in the celebration of the eucharist as Roman Catholics do. In fact, today some Disciples congregations are in a process of *re-reception* of the doctrinal formulations of the early councils. Yet ultimately the full reception of the work of councils will be unselfconscious, reflected in the everyday teaching and worship of the Church.

3.19 The history of councils reveals God's guidance, but human sinfulness and frailty can be seen there as well. Sometimes councils failed to overcome divisions. Despite this, the history of the conciliar process itself gives our churches a record of a series of solutions to problems threatening the Church's unity in faith. The heritage of the councils shows that a common faith can be maintained along with a diversity of theological interpretations. Disciples and Roman Catholics can take hope from the struggle for unity in this conciliar heritage.

Discerning the Gospel in Every Age

3.20 As the Commission discovered many unexpected agreements about the canon of the Scriptures, ecumenical councils and the declaration of the faith, we also discovered agreements about the process by which they came to be received into the life and teaching of the Church. In fact, this process of discerning the Gospel is central to the life of the Church because of what God has done "for us and our salvation" (Nicene Creed).

3.21 Christians believe that God has acted within, indeed has entered, history in Jesus Christ. Living in Christ, the Church is both an eschatological and an historical reality. The Church belongs to the reality of salvation and to the *oikonomia* (ordering) revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God, who became flesh in an authentic and concrete humanity marked by its historical and cultural context.

3.22 The discernment of the meaning of the revealed truth and of the imperatives of Christ's will for his people takes place in this historical situation. It cannot be detached from the contingencies of human dependence in regard to history. Time provides the opportunity for the

Church to sift authentic from inauthentic developments in its tradition.

3.23 The discernment and reception of the Word of Truth are the fruit of the presence in all the faithful of the *sensus fidei* (the sense of the faith). It belongs to their Christian being. The Spirit gives to all the baptized believers this *sensus fidei*, together with a diversity of charisms. Among these are the gifts attached to the functions of exercising *episkope* (oversight), of teaching, of searching the meaning of the revealed Word through study and research. (The process of authoritative teaching is discussed further in §§4.9-4.16.)

3.24 This meaning is not discerned by the mere addition of individual insights. It is the result of the communion of all these diverse charisms expressing the mind of the entire Body of Christ, through a process of mutual reception. To be authentic, ecclesial agreement in matters of faith will include ordained ministers with responsibility for teaching in the Church, scholars working within the community of faith, and the body of the faithful who receive and celebrate this consensus in their worship and witness.

3.25 Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that the Church must always be sensitive to contemporary questions and to diversity of cultures when discerning authentic developments in its understanding of the Gospel. Elements harmful to the Gospel must be distinguished from the insights necessary for its effective proclamation in that time and place. In every changing circumstance of its history the Church stands under the judgment of God.

3.26 In many cases an immediate discernment is impossible because the community as such has to be involved in the complex dynamism of reception. Disciples and Roman Catholics both recognize the importance of the way in which the Gospel has been received and handed on from generation to generation for an authentic understanding of Scripture. They recognize a process of development in the understanding of doctrine in the Church which can be traced through history. Reception plays a crucial part in this ongoing process. Disciples and Roman Catholics are not unanimous on the ways in which reception is achieved, but they agree on its necessity.

4 Receiving the Faith: the Individual in the Community

4.1 Receiving the faith from previous generations is an important and complex process. Through the life and teaching of the Church each generation seeks to work out the meaning and implications of obedience to the Word of God in that time and place. Here there is a difference of emphasis between Disciples and Roman Catholics on the relative weight given to individual discernment and conscience, on the one hand, and to the communal mind of the Church on the other. In *The Church as Communion in Christ*, we wrote: “Roman Catholics are convinced that, although they must decide for themselves, they cannot decide by themselves. Disciples, on the other hand, are convinced that, although they cannot decide by themselves, they must decide for themselves” (§ 16). This section explores this difference further. Nevertheless both Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that obedience to the Word of God has priority.

Conscience, Freedom and Being in Christ

4.2 The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Word of God. As it does so, the Church respects the freedom of every human being created ‘in the image and likeness of God’ (cf Gen 1:26–27). Both Roman Catholics and Disciples agree that the Church affirms each person’s freedom; but the Church also has a responsibility to help its members make informed decisions, not to misuse the freedom that is God’s gift, but use it for following God’s will.

4.3 Consideration of Christian freedom necessarily involves examination of the role of the conscience in matters of belief. For people need to be convinced about the teaching they receive. The words of St Paul come to mind, “The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God” (Rom 14:22).

4.4 What is the role of conscience in matters of belief? Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree that what we call human conscience is rightly described by the classical image of a voice of God, present in the heart of every human being. This is shown by St Paul’s discussion of the position of Gentiles in relation to the Mosaic law when he writes, “They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience bears witness” (Rom 2:15). Conscience may also be seen as a spiritual perception of what conforms with the dignity of the “image of God” and what has to be done according to this dignity. This first level of conscience is the work of God and, although sin can cloud conscience, it cannot destroy it.

4.5 The Church has a truth to teach which its members cannot discover only by themselves: it has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ and kept in the memory which is guarded by the community of believers.

In order to say a free human Yes to the Gospel Christians need to know to whom and to what they are called to say Yes. Indeed they will remain free to say Yes or No. It is their responsibility to form a conscience which is open to what God is saying. Nothing can oblige them to act against their perception of the will of God. Family, school, friends, and the culture all play a part in influencing human decisions. Because the Church has received from God the mission to teach the Gospel, it has a duty to help its members to make the faith of the Church their own in order to inform their conscience. This is therefore the second level of Christian conscience—to make a reasoned response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

4.6 Sometimes in the history of the Church individuals or groups, acting in obedience to the Word of God as they discerned it, have disagreed with the prevailing teaching or practice. Disciples and Roman Catholics respond to this situation differently. Disciples came into existence because their leaders were unwilling to accept the restrictions which Presbyterians placed on access to the Lord’s Table. This memory has shaped their attitude towards the issue of disagreement with prevailing views. The nature of the history of the Roman Catholic Church means that it has no similar dominant memory; it also places a strong emphasis on the value of unity. Further work and reflection is needed on these differences. Nevertheless Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that certain groups in the history of the Church have made an important and prophetic witness which has not immediately been recognized.

4.7 If men and women want to be in harmony with God, they have to hear and obey the voice of their conscience, informed and enlightened by the Word of God, assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and prudent advice, and guided by the teaching of the Church. Christians respond to the Gospel as the first disciples responded to the call of Christ; but like those first disciples they discover the truth of the words of Jesus, “You did not choose me but I chose you” (In 15:16). In so doing they are led to the peace and happiness of the Kingdom for which they are created and redeemed.

4.8 The Commission’s discussion has been important in dispelling old stereotypes, such as the idea that the Roman Catholic Church has no place for freedom of conscience, or the idea that Disciples place no limits on the freedom of conscience. Both communions teach the place of the freedom of conscience and both see limits to its exercise within the community. This leads to two important agreements. Disciples and Roman Catholics both recognize that commitment to the Gospel should be freely made. They also recognize that living the Christian

life is a continuous process of receiving and living by the teaching handed on in the Church and making personal decisions which are themselves shaped by life in communion with other believers.

Teaching with Authority

4.9 Both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree that the faithful and truthful expression of the Gospel is inherently persuasive, because its authority comes from God. Members of both communions also agree that the discernment of the authentic meaning of the revealed Word belongs to the whole community, and that some members from within the community are called and empowered by the Spirit to teach the Word of God. These are the pastors. *The Church as Communion in Christ* stated that “the ordained ministry is specifically given the charism for discerning, declaring and fostering what lies in the authentic memory of the church” (§45). The ordained ministers have a specific mission to teach the teaching Church; and their teaching role is primary among their pastoral duties. Beyond that, Roman Catholics and Disciples would locate and describe the exercise of ministerial authority in different ways.

4.10 For Roman Catholics the discernment of the authentic meaning of the revealed Word is expressed especially in the charism of ordained ministry. The unity of the ordained ministry is found in the communion of the bishop with all the other bishops, a unity sustained by the Bishop of Rome. In this way the authority to teach is linked intimately with all the churches in the: communion of the Apostolic Tradition. In the sacrament of Holy Orders bishops are charged to “preach the Gospel faithfully and constantly . . . , keeping in its authenticity and its integrity the deposit of faith according to the tradition always and everywhere transmitted since the apostles.” Moreover, their service of the faith extends from their preaching and pastoral care to the celebration of the sacraments, culminating in the Eucharist.

4.11 For Disciples this teaching is the function of theologically educated, ordained ministers. These are faithful persons, possessing the qualifications required to hand on the apostolic records of Christ’s teachings, and to teach correctly what they contain. Alexander Campbell stated that “it is indeed the Holy Spirit and not the congregations, which creates Bishops and Deacons. The Spirit gives the qualifications both natural and acquired” (*The Christian System*, p 185). The office of what the first generation of Disciples called bishops (although the title was afterwards abandoned) or elders is specifically related to teaching and oversight within a particular local congregation. This office developed differently in different countries.⁵ Local ministers do not teach alone but in con-

sultation with their colleagues. They use teaching materials prepared regionally, nationally or internationally, often in collaboration with other churches.

4.12 In the Roman Catholic Church the bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome are responsible for the ordinary teaching of the Church. The purpose of such teaching is not only to inform the faithful, but also to form their consciences so that they may take responsible decisions, confident that they are acting in accordance with the will of God. The special charism of the bishop is to keep the church in his care in communion with the whole Church. Thus individual bishops are sometimes necessarily cautious in responding to new expressions of the faith. The Roman Catholic Church has a clearly identified teaching office which especially in contemporary times has articulated, with due regard for consultation, an increasingly large number of positions on new challenges or questions. Part of Roman Catholic life includes understanding these explanations of current magisterial teaching and also understanding the different levels of authority with which they are taught. Thus for Roman Catholics the authenticity of the faith is assured when bishops teach in communion with the Bishop of Rome and the other bishops.

4.13 Among Disciples the teaching of the Church is in the hands of ministers of local congregations, and the whole community is encouraged to read and study the scriptures daily. Following the confession of Christ celebrated in baptism, members are nurtured by regular church attendance and participation in the Lord’s Supper. Disciples expect ordained ministers to teach a common faith, taking account of the ecumenical consensus shared by other churches with whom they are in fellowship. Those persons with regional oversight also seek to keep their congregations in communion with the whole Disciple fellowship and they are responsible for exercising a prudent approach to the teaching of new ideas. But Disciples are more reluctant than Roman Catholics to provide official teaching on a wide range of matters. They often do not seek to articulate an official position when a question is under debate, preferring at times to leave the question open until time, debate and continuation in eucharistic fellowship lead to a consensus. This is an important difference in teaching practice. Beyond that, church members have a significant measure of freedom and personal responsibility to work out their own pattern of discipleship according to their conscience.

4.14 Among both Disciples and Roman Catholics teaching takes place within a set of limits or boundaries accepted by the community. However, there are differences of emphasis. Roman Catholics have emphasized that individuals cannot ignore the faith which the Church

has received through the Holy Spirit when proposing a new understanding of some point. Since the community of faith precedes the individual, anyone proposing new understandings of Christian teaching must be prepared to accept the community's discernment of those understandings. This communal discernment, in which the teaching office has a special role, acts as a discipline within which the theologian must work. Gradually a new consensus may emerge. The Disciples' process encourages continued conversation as the Church seeks to identify those expressions of the faith that best show a clear relationship to the faith witnessed in the New Testament. When responding to people whose views or practice of the faith seem outside the common norms, the process is primarily pastoral.

4.15 In both communions, especially when crucial doctrinal and pastoral issues are at stake, it is the authority of the pastors, guided by the Holy Spirit, which is the instrument of God to keep the community in the right direction. It is their responsibility to show how their teaching is in communion with the faith of previous generations. Nevertheless bishops and pastors have not only to be aware of the needs of the community but also to weigh the various insights of the people and to *receive* those insights that are an authentic expression of the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) of the whole Church of God. Their pastoral charism implies what the Catholic tradition designates as "pastoral prudence" enabling them to take into consideration inseparably the authentic evangelical truth

and the concrete situation of their flock within the whole People of God. Disciples have used the term 'common sense', that is, the sense common to the believing community. This prudence and common sense oblige the pastors to teach always within the common faith of all the Christian communities, with which they are in communion.

4.16 For both Roman Catholics and Disciples the authority of the Church's teaching derives from a combination of elements: the truths of revelation, the theological arguments based upon them to guide human thought and behavior, the position and experience of those responsible for teaching, and reception by the whole Church. However, the relative weight attached to the elements differs between Roman Catholics and Disciples. Thus the claims made for the authority of the Church in matters of conscience differ in our two communities. In the Roman Catholic Church those with episcopal or primatial oversight, who hold the apostolic teaching office conferred by ordination, can at times make decisions binding on the conscience of Roman Catholics. For Disciples ultimate oversight rests with a General Assembly or Conference (comprising both ministers and other church members), but their decisions do not bind the conscience of individual members. The Commission needs to reflect further on whether these different emphases can be held together within the one Body of Christ.

5 Handing on the Faith: the Mission of the Whole Church

Equipping the Faithful for Evangelization

5.1 Christ gave the whole Church the commission to transmit, teach and nurture the faith. Through baptism all members of the Body of Christ become partakers in the dignity and mission of Christ—prophet, priest and king. Hence they are called continually to receive and understand rightly the Word of God. Furthermore, as the Commission stated in *The Church as Communion in Christ*, the members of the Church, because they are bound into a communion with the Father and with one another, "are called to live in such a way that, in spite of their failures and their weakness, this communion becomes visible and is constantly in search of a more perfect realization" (§47).

5.2 Being bound together in a common mission undergirds our joint understanding that no teaching of the faith can ever be a completely solitary task. Teaching the faith occurs in many contexts: the loving mother or father showing a child how to pray, Sunday School teachers and catechists struggling to respond to the

questions posed by young people and adults, university and seminary professors instructing future ministers and lay leaders, Roman Catholic bishops exercising their office as teachers of the faith, Disciples leaders with regional oversight guiding congregations through a church controversy, and many more. All these experiences of teaching and learning deepen and strengthen the ecclesial communion we have in Christ. This vision of the whole Church's commission is crucial for our two communions.

5.3 Faith is normally taught to the younger generation in the family, especially through the charisms God bestows on faithful parents. It is their responsibility to give a child the first experiences of love and constancy of care. These experiences can help that child see himself or herself as a child of God. When parents explicitly teach Christian truth to their children and when they help them to be formed in virtue, they are working to form in them a Christian conscience. But they do this also through the examples they themselves offer of their own

visible struggle to live lives that are faithful to the Gospel and by presenting to their children opportunities to learn about other witnesses to faithful Christian living. Catholics and Disciples agree in considering that the function of parents is rooted in the grace of God. The Catholic Church emphasizes that this grace is a particular gift of the sacrament of matrimony, and accordingly is integral to the sacramental life of the Church.

5.4 In Catholic and Disciple congregations, systematic initiation and education in the essential matters of faith (*catechesis*) plays an important role, through Sunday Schools and catechetical programs. For the Roman Catholic Church a very important part is played by church schools, which have often been founded and staffed by religious orders or congregation with the official approval of the bishops or of the See of Rome. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, an authoritative exposition of the one apostolic tradition and a sure norm for teaching the faith, is used by local episcopal conferences in ways adapted to the local situation, but always in conformity with the common teaching of all the local churches in communion with the See of Rome. The discipline of the sacrament of penance and of participation in the eucharistic liturgy, following the course of the Christian liturgical year, with the example of Mary and the saints constantly presented, is also a major occasion of catechetical instruction in the context of prayer. Pastoral preparation for baptisms, marriage and death is another. The responsibility for catechesis shared by all the baptized is exercised by the bishops in a way unique to their office. Among Disciples the regular pattern of worship, including the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper and preaching, provides opportunity for spiritual growth and instruction. As well as preaching, ministers teach Sunday School classes and prepare candidates for baptism. Adult church school classes, and women's and young people's fellowships form competent persons able to nurture Christian faith. In different ways, both our traditions enable individuals to explore the implications of Christian discipleship for themselves and to share their experience with others.

5.5 In both our communions, professors, theologians and scholars in universities, seminaries and elsewhere are involved not only in the search for the right understanding of the sources of the faith or the history of their transmission, but also in teaching the teachers. An important contribution can also be made to the life of the faithful by spiritual writers.

5.6 The essential test for the Church's teaching is its faithfulness to the Gospel. Teaching the faith is more than communicating the content of a catechism or a book on Bible history and doctrine. It is inseparable from the witness of a faithful life and authentic devotion to God

and the Church. Here the authority comes from the baptismal and eucharistic grace at work in the lives of Christians, especially those whose faithfulness captures the imagination of the community. Conversion to Christ is a lifelong process, and in the Church Christians are challenged repeatedly to receive the fullness of the Gospel.

5.7 The Church itself is also called continually to receive the fullness of the Gospel. This is normally the fruit of a long process of interaction within the community. However, there may be occasions when an immediate decision needs to be taken for the sake of the Gospel. Such was the decision of the early Church to admit Gentile Christians without requiring them to conform to the whole Jewish law; in more recent centuries the decision of certain Christians to oppose slavery without waiting for a church consensus might be a similar example. The discernment process can be enhanced as the voices of other Christian communities and the insights of ecumenical work are taken into account. The teaching and living in the Gospel of one communion may bring to mind an aspect of Christian faith or practice which others have neglected, and are therefore called to *receive*. The implications of this for our understanding of communion require further patient discussion.

Evangelization by Word and Witness

5.8 In Jesus Christ the truth of God has come into the world in an historically unsurpassable and definitive way. The news of this is liberating and life-giving, yet also demanding; it is simultaneously gift and call. The good news calls for faith in the one who died and was raised by God to new life; it calls for repentance and a radical transformation of life. This proclamation of the good news is what is meant by evangelism or evangelization. The Church is by nature a missionary community, a community of those who are sent by God into the world to share in the proclamation of the good news (Mark 16:15-16). Its proclamation of the Gospel through preaching and the celebration of the sacraments requires intentional commitment to the task of evangelization. The message must be communicated in words to those who have never heard it, to those who have heard it but are no longer active in the life of the Church and to those who continue to shape their lives in and through the Church.

5.9 Speaking and telling are not the only ways to evangelize. The witness of holy lives, strengthened by the Eucharist, is also integral to the mission of the Church. God's good news can be expressed in sacrificial lives and acts of mercy, before any word is spoken. Authentic witness to the Gospel takes place through lives of faithfulness to God sustained by prayer, self-denial and acts of love.

5.10 Evangelization, which brings persons into life-giving communion with God and with others, requires both persuasive words and the effective expression of the new life being offered. Those who are led to profess the Gospel will also show lives truly turned from concern for self to love of neighbor. Such love today will issue in witness to the cause of justice. When the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S.A. and Canada approved new principles for its Division of Overseas Ministries in 1981, it stated that “Evangelism is incomplete unless deed matches proclamation. In fact, in some contexts the deed is the only possible proclamation.” Pope John Paul II stated that “Through the Gospel message, the Church offers a force for liberation which promotes development precisely because it leads to conversion of heart and ways of thinking, fosters the recognition of each person’s dignity, encourages solidarity, commitment and service of one’s neighbor, and gives everyone a place in God’s plan, which is the building of his Kingdom of peace and justice, beginning already in this life” (*Redemptoris Missio*, §59). Disciples and Roman Catholics therefore agree that the Church must be a community with structures which facilitate evangelization and one which is a credible witness to the Gospel it proclaims.

5.11 All Christians are called to the work of evangelization, although some take on special roles. Parents and teachers hand on the faith to children; religious orders devoted to evangelization emerge; missionary societies encourage and support the work; Christian schools, youth movements and lay adult organizations appear on the scene to do specific tasks. Through all of these efforts, the work of evangelization is strengthened. Ordained ministers have the special responsibility to lead and build up the community. Furthermore, the teaching office supports the work of evangelization by serving the church’s unity in faith and life. Thus the Church is extended by the establishment of new local churches of

those committed to the cause of evangelization. When all work together, the Church witnesses to the fact that the Gospel is not only a dream, that with the grace of the Spirit it is possible to live according to the Word of God.

5.12 Evangelization and the unity of the Church go together. The concern to link evangelization and the unity of the Church is a particular characteristic of Disciples of Christ and of Roman Catholics. The Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council states that the division among Christians “is clearly contrary to Christ’s will. It is a scandal to the world and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature” (§1). Pope John Paul II, in *Ut Unum Sint*, said that, “However true it is that the Church, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of indefectibility, has preached and still preaches the Gospel to all nations, it is also true that she must face the difficulties which derive from the lack of unity” (§98). Both Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, as well as later Disciples teachers, expressed in various ways the importance of Christians being united as they take up the task of evangelization. Stone, for example, wrote that Christian unity was “indispensable to the conversion of the world” (*Christian Messenger*, 1836). Thus we agree that the disunity of the Church undermines the proclamation of the Gospel.

5.13 The Church invites people into communion with God and each other, but because of its divisions it fails to manifest that communion fully. All believers gathered at the eucharistic celebration are sent out into the world to proclaim Christ, but we cannot celebrate the eucharist together. That proclamation is therefore weakened. In this dialogue, we have increasingly come to recognize that the structures and instruments for the visible unity of the Church of God are part of the necessary obedience to the command of Christ who said, “Go . . . and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28: 19).

6 Future Work

6.1 During this phase the Commission has taken up only one of the tasks set out in *The Church as Communion in Christ*, namely exploring the nature of the rule of faith in a changing history. The other tasks—exploring issues related to the understanding of the Eucharist, the structure of the Church gathered around it, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome—remain. As we have grown to understand each other better, we have also become aware that we often do and say the same things but for different reasons. There is a need to investigate whether there is mutual recognition of the legitimacy of different ways of arriving at the same practices or the same conclusions. We also sometimes do different things to

achieve the same purpose, and there is a corresponding need to reflect upon the legitimacy of that.

6.2 Because of the centrality of the eucharist in each of our traditions, we believe that the time may now be appropriate to return to that topic. Therefore we propose that there should be a further phase of our dialogue, and that its focus should be the presence of Christ in the Church, with special reference to the eucharist. In *The Church as Communion in Christ* we said “Even if we agree on the signification and function of the Eucharist, we feel that we still have to discuss our traditional teaching and practice concerning the presence of the Lord in the celebration of the Supper, its sacrificial nature, the role

of the ordained minister and the role of the community. This is important, given the emphasis that both Disciples and Roman Catholics put on the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper and its link with the visible unity of Christians" (§53a).

6.3 This third phase has seen some significant changes of membership in our dialogue. The Most Revd Samuel

E. Carter, SJ, (former Roman Catholic Co-Chairperson) and the Revd Dr Kilian McDonnell, OSB, have retired from the Commission. We have also lost by death the Revd Dr J.M.R. Tillard, OP, a founding member of the Commission. We place on record our debt to them for the contributions they made to our work.

May 22, 2002

Participants

Disciples of Christ

The Revd Dr Paul A. Crow, Jr., Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A. (Co-Chairperson)
Dr M. Eugene Boring, Fort Worth, Texas, U.S.A.
The Revd Dr Bevis Byfield, Kingston, Jamaica
Dr H. Jackson Forstman, Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A.
Dr Nadia Lahutsky, Fort Worth, Texas, U.S.A.
The Revd Dr William Tabbernee, Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A.
The Rev Dr David M. Thompson, Cambridge, England
The Revd Dr Robert K. Welsh, Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A. (Co-Secretary, 1999-2002)

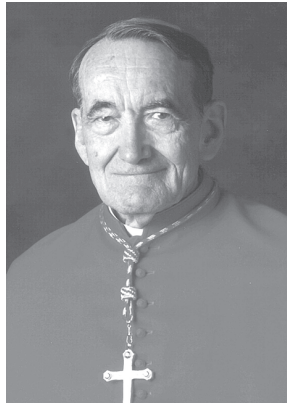
Roman Catholics

The Most Revd Samuel E. Carter, SJ, Kingston, Jamaica (Co-Chairperson, 1993-95)
The Most Revd Daniel M. Buechlein, OSB, Indianapolis, Indiana (Co-Chairperson, 1996-2002)
The Most Revd Basil Meeking, Chicago, U.S.A.
Monsignor Michael Jackson, Hove, England
The Revd Dr Kilian McDonnell, OSB, Collegeville, Minnesota, U.S.A. (1993-98)
Monsignor Dr John P. Meier, Notre Dame, Indiana, U.S.A.
Monsignor John Mutiso-Mbinda, Vatican City (Co-Secretary)
Dr Margaret O'Gara, Toronto, Canada
The Revd Dr J.M.R. Tillard, OP, Ottawa, Canada (1993-2000)
The Revd Robert D. Turner, Helena, Montana, U.S.A. (Consultant, 2000-02)



Notes

- 1 For this third stage of our discussions, the dialogue met ten times: in Rome, Italy (1993); Indianapolis, Indiana (1994); Bose, Italy (1995); Bethany, West Virginia (1996); Venice, Italy (1997); Aibonito, Puerto Rico (1998); St Meinrad, Indiana (1999); Halifax, Nova Scotia (2000); Rome, Italy (2001); and Bose, Italy (2002).
- 2 The word *receive* is used here (and later) in its theological sense to refer to the appropriation by the whole Church of the apostolic faith.
- 3 For many centuries Jews in different countries used slightly different collections of books as their Scriptures, depending on whether the language was Greek or Hebrew. These differences were debated in the sixteenth century among Renaissance Catholic humanists and eventually in the Reformation disputes. In 1546 the Council of Trent rejected Luther's view that the Jewish canon of Old Testament books should be decisive and repeated the list used by the Council of Florence. Roman Catholics affirm the decree of the Council of Trent where the canon consists of 46 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books. Disciples, following the Reformers, have a canon of 39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books. Because the Reformation churches did not receive Trent's decree on the canon but followed Luther's view, the Disciples inherited the canon used by the Reformers with seven fewer books in the Old Testament than in Trent's list. The seven books in question are sometimes called by Roman Catholics *deuterocanonical*. These books are today sometimes found in Protestant Bibles grouped together under the heading of the Old Testament Apocrypha.
- 4 The Westminster Confession (1646) was adopted by the Church of Scotland as its Confession of Faith in 1647, and subsequently became the standard confession in the English-speaking presbyterian world. The Secession Testimony was a statement by those presbyterians who seceded from the Church of Scotland in 1733 and was part of the doctrinal heritage in which Thomas and Alexander Campbell were reared in Ireland.
- 5 In some, such as the United Kingdom, it was emphasized that there should be a plurality of elders in each congregation, the minister being regarded as one of them; in others, such as the United States, the minister of the local congregation became the chief pastor. More recently, ministers have begun to exercise oversight of a number of local congregations in a given area. The way in which this has happened has varied, but some form of regional *episkope* exists in the United States, Canada, Australia, the Congo, North India, Jamaica and the United Kingdom.



“RECEIVING AND HANDING ON THE FAITH”

Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ

Comment by Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.

In the course of a dialogue that has been going on since 1977 the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Catholic Church have produced several important joint statements.¹ After issuing in 1977 its first document on *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, the dialogue published in 1992 its second document, *The Church as Communion in Christ*, which in its final section identified four areas for future exploration: the Eucharist, the episcopacy, the rule of faith, and the papacy. The present statement on *Receiving and Handing on the Faith*, completed in May 2002, is the response to the third of these agenda items (6.1).² Resulting from annual meetings in various parts of the world over the span of a decade, it is similar in tone to the previous statements, and partly overlaps with them even in content. On the whole it emphasizes areas of agreement or convergence, while taking note, almost in passing, of areas on continued disagreement. The tone is consistently irenic.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a loosely knit group of communities that originated in revival movements along the American frontier in the early nineteenth century. Associated with the names of Thomas Campbell, his son Alexander Campbell, and Barton W. Stone, the Disciples had a twofold aim: to overcome the denominationalism that was splintering the Protestant world and to work for Christian unity on the basis of the New Testament (5.12). The Disciples regarded Christian unity as essential for the mission of the Church and the conversion of the world.³ While seeking to be completely faithful to the apostolic Church of the New Testament, they were distrustful of the multitude of creeds, confessions, and dogmas that had accumulated in the course of the centuries.⁴

It proved possible for the present round of dialogue to call attention to many points of agreement that have never before been so explicitly stated. Catholics and Disciples concur in accepting the mystery of the triune God, and

the manifestation of that mystery in history through Jesus Christ (3.13). Jesus, they agree, is the living and incarnate Word of God, in whom God has unsurpassably and definitively revealed himself (2.1; 3.13). God has also sent the Holy Spirit upon the Church to give abiding efficacy to the work of Christ throughout the centuries (2.1).

The dialogue partners agree, furthermore, that the faith of the apostolic Church is normative for all generations (3.2) and that the books of the New Testament canon are those in which the Church of the early centuries heard the testimony of the apostles (3.3-4). Having discerned these books in obedience to the Holy Spirit, the Church has made them normative for herself and her members. The Word of God comes to later generations by hearing and interpreting the Scriptures in the context of its living tradition of prayer and conduct. The Holy Spirit guides the Church in such a way that it does not finally fail in its task of proclaiming the Gospel (2.4).

Disciples and Catholics alike recognize that the canonical Scriptures, councils of the Church, and creeds have developed under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit as instruments for preserving and proclaiming the faith (3.1). In particular they both accept the dogmatic teachings of the seven ecumenical councils of the first eight centuries as having defined the boundaries within which fruitful interpretations of the Gospel are to be sought (3.17). Quite remarkable is the common acknowledgment:

The councils were conscious that Christ is in their midst because they were gathered in his name. In their teachings received by the Church they always remained “under the Gospel”: the Holy Spirit was at work in the community to maintain it in an authentic communion with what Christ did and taught despite the sometimes questionable tactics of some participants (3.13b).

The two communions are at one, moreover, in holding that the Holy Spirit continues to enrich the Christian

community with diverse charisms. Ordained ministers, including bishops, are equipped for their ministry of teaching and governing the Church; scholars, for the tasks of study and research, and the body of the faithful, for their diverse roles in the Church's life of worship and witness (2.23-24).

Remarkable also are the agreements on the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist the only two sacraments commonly recognized by Protestants. Disciples, like Catholics, recognize the saving power of the sacraments, which bring believers into the Church and establish bonds among Christians of all times and places (2.5). Whereas some Protestants have regarded sacraments only as signs, the two parties to this dialogue see them also as efficacious instruments of grace (5.6). They point especially to the Eucharist as central to the life of the Church and as a source of strength for Christian witness (5.9), at least in the sense that the memory of the Eucharist sustains the Church's life.⁵

Another area of agreement is the primacy of evangelization among the tasks of the Church. Vatican II asserted that "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature" (AG 2); and John Paul II elaborated on this statement in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (RM 62). In similar language the dialogue asserts that "the Church is essentially a missionary community, a community of those sent into the world to proclaim the offer of God's gifts to all persons" (2.1). The authors likewise agree that the task of evangelization is incumbent not only on a special class of missionaries but on all the faithful, who through baptism into the Body of Christ partake of the dignity and mission of Christ prophet, priest, and king (5.1).⁶

The statement goes into some detail in specifying the ways in which Christians hand on the faith and form new generations in discipleship. It speaks about how parents in the home transmit the faith to their children by word and example, about Sunday schools and catechetical programs, about youth groups, preaching, and the apostolate of the pen (5.3-5). Echoing the words of John Paul II that "the witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission,"⁷ the document calls attention to the effectiveness of the lives and example of committed Christians as a means of bearing witness to the Gospel (5.9). Evangelization, moreover, should not be left only to the spontaneous initiative of individuals; it can be facilitated by the Church through its organized programs (5.10).

In this connection, the document warns against excessive individualism. Building on its own previous statements, the dialogue reiterates the fact that life in Christ is always life in the community of Christian believers, who are bonded to one another in the one Body of Christ (2.5).

The communion enjoyed by believers in Christ is not confined to their own denomination or tradition. The Disciples are already in full communion with several churches, including the United Church of Christ, and have, for the past forty years, taken active leadership in the initiative now known as Churches Uniting in Christ (formerly the Consultation on Church Union). They see the present dialogue statement as manifesting the real though imperfect communion that exists "in via" between Disciples and Catholics. Catholics, since they consider themselves to be in various degrees of communion with all baptized Christians, can gladly join in this affirmation, while recognizing that, as the statement itself says, the proclamation of the Church is weakened by the divisions that continue to exist among Christians (5.13).

* * *

While expressing satisfaction at the remarkable series of convergences just noted, I should like to call attention to some remaining areas where the agreement is incomplete and to propose some personal reflections on the remaining differences.

In the early years of their existence the Disciples often used the motto "No creed but Christ" (3.16). They have tended to eschew formal creeds because of the fear of dividing Christians against one another on merely verbal or theological issues.⁸ The present statement does much to overcome whatever may have been excessive in this reaction. The Disciples here show themselves willing to adhere to the creeds and doctrine⁹ of the early Church, notably those taught by the first seven ecumenical councils. They affirm that in their church it is unacceptable to deny the Christological doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon (3.12,17).

This more positive stance toward the early creeds and conciliar teachings seems very appropriate for Protestants who attach central importance to baptism and who affirm the inseparability between baptism and the profession of faith. The early creeds were intended to express the "rule of faith" already in use for preparing-candidates for baptism. Candidates on the occasion of their baptism were required to recite (or "render") the creed. It would be surprising for a Church that practices believers' baptism to become non-creedal.

While it is certainly of interest to find the Disciples so willing to affirm the authority of the ecumenical councils of the first eight centuries, a point of agreement, the restriction of conciliar authority to the early centuries is a point that calls for more explicit discussion than it receives in the present statement. Has the presence of the Holy Spirit to the Church and its pastors diminished since the first millennium?

It could perhaps be argued that the early councils, unlike later ones, articulated the consensus of the whole Church. At one point the statement mentions the attachment of Disciples to the rule of Vincent of Lerins to the effect that we are bound to believe what has been held always, everywhere, and by all Christians (1.5). But the teaching of the early councils would scarcely pass the Vincentian test. These councils were unitive for Christians who accepted them, but for others they were divisive. Nicaea expelled the Arians, Constantinople the Macedonians, Ephesus the Nestorians, and Chalcedon the Monophysites. As John Henry Newman demonstrated with numerous examples, the teaching of the early councils represented a doctrinal development beyond what had been generally held in the ante-Nicene era.⁹ Later councils such as those of Trent and the First Vatican Council, while embodying certain further developments, were well received by the Catholic Church. While they could not remedy schisms that had already occurred, they occasioned no schisms on the scale that the early councils did.

A more obvious reason for privileging the councils of the first millennium is that even though they were conducted on Eastern soil, they were received in the West as well as in the East, whereas the councils of the second millennium have not been accepted by most Eastern churches. This line of reasoning seems to be suggested at certain points (e.g., 3.13b and d). The question seems to be whether the Church, since the schism of the eleventh century, is still capable of authoritatively deciding doctrinal questions. From a Catholic point of view, this question has to be answered in the affirmative, since Christ promised to remain with his Church to the end of time. The lack of universal reception is regrettable, but it should not be allowed to prevent the Church from testifying to the truth and condemning views that it perceives to be antithetical to the gospel.

The meaning and force of reception appears to be still at issue between Disciples and Catholics. The statement tells us that "Disciples and Roman Catholics are not unanimous on the ways in which reception is achieved, but they agree on its necessity" (3.26). The lack of unanimity, I presume is connected with the question of papal and episcopal authority. For Catholics the magisterium consists of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him. The Holy Spirit gives validity and authority to their teaching, whether it be popular or unpopular. Reception is very important for the efficacy of conciliar decrees, but it can hardly be a condition for their authenticity. A council that condemns a heresy will almost inevitably fail to be received by those it condemns.

Intimating a third possible ground for preferring the

ancient councils, the statement declares that they "wished only to be at the service of Scripture" (3.13c). These councils did indeed see themselves as interpreting Holy Scripture, and orthodox Christians will hold that their interpretations were correct. But the heretics (Arians, Nestorians,¹⁰ and others) had their own favorite passages from Scripture and their own arguments, which did not lack a certain plausibility. If Disciples and Catholics deem it necessary to adhere to the conciliar interpretations, they do so because they trust that the Holy Spirit has directed the Church, as promised in the Gospels (3.1).

Medieval and modern councils, no less than ancient ones, have sought to be faithful to the Scriptures. Trent's teaching on original sin, justification, and the sacraments is supported by many quotations from Scripture, as is the teaching of Vatican I on papal primacy. Grounding in Scripture does not seem to account for the preference given to the ancient councils.

Still another argument for privileging the first seven councils is that "These councils articulated and defined the mystery of the Triune God manifested in history, revealed through Jesus Christ, which the Church has to proclaim 'until he comes again'", (3.13a). If I correctly understand this statement, it means that the early councils expressed the heart of the Christian faith. The basic Christian proclamation is that God is triune and that the second person of the Blessed Trinity became incarnate, died, and rose again for our redemption. In the Catholic tradition, the first four councils (and not just the first seven) hold priority of place, because they defined the most central truths of faith. In the ancient Church it was common to refer to them as the "four holy councils."

Some of the later councils, beginning with the fifth (Constantinople II of the year 553), became involved in subtle and complex questions that are not of concern to most of the laity, or even to most scholars. The same tendency is manifest in some of the late medieval councils, which delved deep into matters of scholastic theology. These refinements of doctrine are secondary in importance, but not, for all that, unimportant. In the language of Vatican II, we can say that there is "an order of 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith" (DR II). The faithful as a body need not be troubled by even the most authoritative teachings on subtle or minor points, since they will rarely if ever be tempted to embrace the opinions condemned.

The distinction between central and peripheral doctrines, however, is not the same as between patristic and later councils. The first council, that of Nicaea, adopted the technical term *homoousion*, which was beyond the understanding of many of the simple faithful. The creed

of Nicaea was intended as “a bishops’ creed,” since, it was primarily of concern to bishops as teachers in the Church. Although no one was permitted to contradict the creed, it did not have to be professed in its entirety by each and every believer.

It is important for the magisterium to have authority to pronounce even on subtle technical questions. The concept of essence (*ousia*) is a technical one, but there is a world of difference in import between the Nicene *homoousion* (of the same essence) and the semi-Arian *homoiousion* (of like essence), since the one is orthodox and the other heretical when predicated of the divine persons. The fact that a false opinion is not intelligible to every lay Catholic is no reason why it may not be condemned.

For the authority of any council, as I have said, Catholics rely on the promises of Christ to the apostles and, by implication, to the bishops as their successors. The agreed statement recognizes this in 4.10 and 4.12. It quotes Alexander Campbell to the effect that the Holy Spirit gives teaching authority to bishops and deacons (4.11), but in churches of the Disciples today the office of teaching would seem to be in the hands of ordained ministers, who are expected not to teach except in consultation with their congregations and with other churches. The Disciples place ultimate teaching authority in the General Assembly or Conference, comprising both ministers and other church members.

Another point of difference is that “Disciples are more reluctant than Roman Catholics to provide official teaching on a wide range of matters” (4.12). They often prefer to wait until time and discussion have led to a consensus. Even when its General Assembly makes doctrinal determinations, “their decisions do not bind the conscience of individual members” (4.16).

The concept of binding consciences merits further discussion that it receives in the statement. In a sense, my conscience can only be bound by what I perceive as true. But because I am a Catholic Christian, I must in consistency attribute truth to the word of God as it comes to me through the Scriptures and the Church. The faith by which I freely accept the Word of God obliges me to form my conscience from these sources. Catholics rejoice (or at least should rejoice) in having a divinely authorized teacher that can inform them what views are incompatible with their faith with an authority that outweighs mere private judgment.

It is possible for the Church to give premature answers to questions that are not yet ripe for solution, but the opposite danger is equally great. When the Church tolerates opinions that are incompatible with God’s revelation in

Christ, it falls short of its obligation to guide its members into the truth. It allows the Word of God to be obscured. Although one would like to think that the truth will prevail in open discussion, such hopes all too often prove illusory. Heresies often endure for many centuries and become compounded.

From the dialogue documents it would appear that the Disciples originally rejected some Calvinist formularies such as the Westminster Confession, with its celebrated doctrine of double predestination. Catholics would agree that in these confessions the churches overreached themselves. Many Presbyterians today would say as much. The Disciples had a sound instinct in seeking to rebuild the unity of Christians on the basis of the simpler confessions of faith found in Holy Scripture and the early baptismal creeds. That is surely the right place to begin, even if we cannot end there. The present statement, following up on *The Church as Communion*, acknowledges that Disciples as well as Catholics find in history “many developments which, because they are the work of the Holy Spirit, are normative for the Church.”¹¹ The continued disagreements seem to center about the problem of how to discern and implement these normative developments.

To bring this discussion to a conclusion, I suggest that there are three fundamental positions regarding the “rule of faith”—primitivism, limited development, and ongoing development. If the Disciples ever embraced primitivism, they have abandoned it in the dialogue statements of the past twenty-five years, which embrace the doctrinal developments of the early centuries. The present document gives some hints that the Disciples are inclined to limit the normative developments to the first seven ecumenical councils. This would be a mediating position, similar to the *via media* that Newman propounded during his years as a high Anglican. But at certain points the Catholic-Disciples Dialogue seems to point the way beyond this arrested development, and to acknowledge that the assistance of the Holy Spirit remains with the Church and its teachers throughout the centuries. The dialogue statements do not, however, achieve clarity about the way in which the Church can authoritatively proclaim what has become clear only in more recent times.

In general, the new statement gives a very encouraging report on the fruits of the dialogue. While differences are alluded to, the emphasis is on the points of agreement. These agreements can surely be applauded. But perhaps it will become advisable at some point, when mutual trust is at a sufficiently high level, to engage in a more rigorous discussion of the remaining differences.

Notes

- 1 All three of these dialogue statements are conveniently gathered up in *Mid-Stream* 41 (October 2002): 80-95, 96-114, and 51-77.
- 2 The figures in parentheses refer to section numbers of *Receiving and Handing on the Faith*.
- 3 *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, 8; *The Church as Communion in Christ*, 8.
- 4 *The Church as Communion*, 11.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 6 Without explicit reference to Vatican II, the dialogue statement is here paraphrasing the doctrine of the Council in *Lumen gentium* 34 and *Apostolicam actuositatem* 10.
- 7 John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* 42.
- 8 *The Church as Communion*, 13.
- 9 John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845).
- 10 In 1994, as a result of recent dialogue, Patriarch Mar Dinkha of the Assyrian Church of the East, which was traditionally known as "Nestorian," and Pope John Paul II have signed a Christological agreement professing together the same faith in Jesus Christ, thus resolving theological differences on this question with the Assyrian Church of today.
- 11 *The Church as Communion*, 34.



DISCIPLES—ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE:

The Promise of a Distinctive Dialogue

Comments on the Agreed Statement
*Receiving and Handing on the Faith:
The Mission and Responsibility of the Church (2002)*
Thomas F. Best

I. The History and Character of the Disciples—Roman Catholic Dialogue

It is a privilege and a pleasure to contribute these comments on “Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church” (2002),¹ the Agreed Statement from the third phase of the Disciples—Roman Catholic dialogue. This text is best understood in the context of the dialogue as a whole, and I would like to begin by noting the history and distinctive quality of these Disciples—Roman Catholic conversations. Following that I offer some reflections to the text, noting areas of special interest and drawing attention to points of contact between it and other current ecumenical work (especially in the multilateral setting). Finally I venture to suggest several possible topics and perspectives for the future work of the dialogue.

The dialogue with the Roman Catholic church is the oldest and most developed of the Disciples’ international dialogues with major confessional bodies, the others being with the Reformed tradition (through the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, WARC) and with the Russian Orthodox Church. Each of these dialogues has its own aim and process. The former has worked towards “a reconciliation of memories,” pursued in two meetings between the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC) and WARC, in 1987 and in 2002, with the recent meeting calling for “the development of comprehensive partnership in pursuit of the vision of the two eventually becoming one.”² The dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church has sought “growth in mutual respect” through meetings in 1987 and 1990 as well as the visit of a Disciples delegation to Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1998.³

These indicate the longevity and special intensity of the Disciples’ bilateral engagement with the Roman Catholic church. Some form of Disciples—Roman Catholic dialogue began as early as 1962 in the United States.⁴ The present international dialogue began in 1977; its first

phase was completed in 1982 with the publication of “Apostolicity and Catholicity,”⁵ covering the topics “Our Life Together,” “Spiritual Ecumenism,” “Baptism,” Faith and Tradition,” “Affirmations about the Unity we Seek” and, in conclusion, “Looking to the Future.” The second phase of dialogue covered the years 1983–1992 and culminated in the text “The Church as Communion in Christ.”⁶ This reviewed “The Specific Nature of this Dialogue” and then explored “Differences in Christian Faith and Life,” “A Convergence of Vision?,” “New Creation and Communion,” “Eucharist and Continuity with the Apostolic Community,” “Teaching and Continuity with the Apostolic Community,” “The Gifts of the Spirit for the Church,” “The Church.” The text concluded by identifying four areas for future work: the Eucharist; the “fundamental structure of the church,” including the issue of episcopacy; the “nature of the rule of faith in a changing history,” and the primacy of the bishop of Rome.

The third phase of the dialogue (1993–2002) has now concluded with the publication of “Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church”⁷. This takes up the third of the future topics named at the conclusion of the 2nd dialogue phase, namely the holding to—and handing on of—faith in the midst of “a changing” history. It focuses on the topics “The Word of God, Proclaimed and Received,” “Holding to the Faith: The Church in History,” “Receiving the Faith: the Individual in the Community,” and “Handing on the Faith: the Mission of the Whole Church,” and concludes by restating the intention to tackle the three remaining areas for future work in later phases of the dialogue.

Each phase of the dialogue has proceeded through annual meetings, central to which have been not only theological discussions on the similarities and differences between

the two churches, but also a shared life of fellowship and prayer, as well as encounter with local congregations. One particularity of the dialogue is that the churches concerned do not have a direct experience of division: when the Disciples were in process of formation their concerns were with other Protestant, most particularly Reformed, churches, and issues (whether theological, ecclesiological, or institutional) arising from the Roman Catholic church were not involved. Thus the special “common history” of the two churches, officially speaking and as evidenced by the present dialogue, began within the context of the modern ecumenical movement and has flourished within that context. It has benefited from the common engagement of both churches in multi-lateral ecumenical projects; the best-known is the development of the convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* by the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission—a body in which both churches have provided strong leadership over the years.

Several commentators have referred to the distinctive quality of this international bilateral. The building of mutual understanding, trust and respect, while important for every such dialogue, has perhaps been of special significance for this one. For even if the churches did not have a history of division there were, and are, very considerable differences between them, and some of these on fundamental issues of the faith. There was a need for the churches to learn to know each other, not just as theological and liturgical “systems” but as living faith communities. Thus it is scarcely surprising that the agreed statement from the second phase of the dialogue emphasised the notion of “ethos” (see para. 4–10), understood as “the social, mental, religious and philosophical atmosphere surrounding a group and influencing its way of life.”⁸

The dialogue has been characterised by a steady, patient sharing of each church’s faith and practise with the other. The aim, as Jean-Marie Tillard noted, has been not the construction of common theological formulations, but the discovery of existing (and often unexpected) areas of convergence between the two churches⁹—and, I would add, the identification, and clarification, of theological and ecclesiological differences between them. Tillard, whose special affection for this dialogue is well-known, attributed its fruitfulness to the commitment of the churches involved; to its realistic goals, stressing mutual exploration; and to the lack of self-imposed pressure to reach premature or artificial agreement. Speaking informally to the Faith and Order Commission, he said it was precious as one of the few dialogues for which the goal was not unity of these two churches in a formal or structural sense, but the discovery of one another as Christians and

churches, each living out the faith in its own distinctive way, and each with something to teach, and to learn from, the other about faithfulness to the Gospel.

Although the structural unity of these two churches is not the aim of the dialogue, unity has been central to its vision—the unity, that is, of *all* the churches, as a reality already given by God but, due to the division of the churches, not fully manifested in history. “Receiving and Handing on the Faith” begins by noting that at the beginning of the dialogue “the Commission accepted ‘as a basic principle of ecumenism that there can be only one Church of God (*unica Ecclesia*) and that this Church already exists’; furthermore it stated, ‘We see ourselves as having a communion *in via* . . . Now we have the task of giving external expression to the communion *in via*’” (*Apostolicity and Catholicity*, paras. 52, 57).

Each dialogue develops its own style of working and reporting on its work. This dialogue has proceeded through a demanding series of annual meetings, with no less than 5 for its first phase, and 10 each for phases 2 and 3. I would characterise the agreed statements as balanced, insightful, charitable; they breathe a certain gracious air. They have a habit of being well-written and clear—estimable virtues, by no means automatic in ecumenical texts. The explanatory notes are genuinely helpful (for example, Note 3 to para. 3.9 on the formation of the canon). And all this without skirting difficulties: Fr. William Henn, OFM CAP, began his commentary on “The Church as Communion in Christ” by noting that its authors “cannot be accused of ignoring important differences in belief and practice between their respective communities.”¹⁰ The style of work in the dialogue as a whole, and the tone of the agreed statements, is well captured in the Introduction to “Receiving and Handing on the Faith.” This notes that Disciples and Roman Catholics share a commitment to the Gospel, that they “place a similar emphasis on the Church as communion, and on the sacraments of baptism and eucharist,” and that “they share some common beliefs about the nature of the Church.” Then it continues:

yet there are also some differences, which reveal themselves in different structures. Perhaps the major query from a Roman Catholic perspective is how Disciples, with an apparent lack of structure and creedal formulations, have handed on the Gospel. For Disciples, on the other hand, the main question is whether the more elaborate hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, with an apparent emphasis on uniformity, gives people sufficient freedom of conscience in their response to the Gospel. (I.4)

I would like to mention in particular one quality of the dialogue which I think is of special importance for other bilateral and multilateral dialogues, and the ecumenical movement as a whole. Just because Disciples and Roman Catholics differ significantly in theology and Christian practice, yet are discovering significant agreement on some central convictions of the faith, the question arises again and again of the relation between the reality of the faith, and the diverse formulations used to express it. Significantly, this issue is mentioned in a well-nuanced way in the section on “Future Work” which concludes “Receiving and Handing on the Faith”:

As we have grown to understand each other better, we have also become aware that we often do and say the same things but for different reasons. There is a need to investigate whether there is mutual recognition of the legitimacy of

different ways of arriving at the same practices or the same conclusions. We also sometimes do different things to achieve the same purpose, and there is a corresponding need to reflect upon the legitimacy of that. (6.1)

When working towards mutual recognition, when seeking to discern the church in other churches, how do we know when a form of words or practice which differs from ours expresses, in fact, the same understanding of the faith? More troublingly, is it possible that the same form of words or practice in fact expresses, within another confessional or cultural context, a different understanding of the faith? It seems to me that this dialogue is well-placed to address these issues, which are of enormous significance for all the churches as they seek to extend their mutual recognition. We will return to this briefly at the conclusion of these comments.

II. “Receiving and Handing on the Faith”—A Creative Ecumenical Contribution

As noted above, “Receiving and Handing on the Faith” tackles the question of the “nature of the rule of faith in a changing history.” It does so by beginning with the Word of God as the record of how the faith was inaugurated (section 2). Significantly, this starts with an affirmation of “The Missionary Nature of the Church” (2.1-2.2), a theme which returns in section 5, “Handing on the Faith: The Mission of the Whole Church,” to conclude the body of the document. This *inclusio* strengthens the intention of the document “to renew the vital link between the mission and unity of the Church.” (1.7)

A section on “Hearing the Word of God” introduces the notions of proclamation and (at least implicitly) reception, which form underlying themes throughout the rest of the document. Then it explores how the Church throughout history has maintained the faith (section 3), with the formation of the canon (3.1-3.10) and the councils of the ancient church (3.11-3.19) serving in a sense as “case studies” of the process through which the Church may discern how to be faithful to the Gospel in a particular age and place. A further discussion explores issues of discernment “in every age” (3.20-26). This leads to discussion of reception of the faith as a process experienced by “the Individual in the Community” (section 4), pursued through discussions of the closely-interrelated issues of conscience and freedom (4.2-4.8) and “Teaching with Authority” (4.9-4.16). Section 5 on mission emphasises the themes of “Equipping the Faithful for Evangelisation” (5.1-5.7) and then “Evangelisation by Word and Witness” (5.8-5.13). Section 6 concludes by pointing to future work to be done in the dialogue.

I would like to offer a general comment, and then reflections on three specific aspects of the text. To my mind the

creative achievement of this document lies in its treating the question of faith in “a changing history” within the broad context of the life of the church as a whole, stressing that both proclamation and reception—however individual they are as primarily experience—happen within the community of the faithful, guided by the Holy Spirit. What could easily have led to a narrow discussion of inculturation and cultural equivalence (and all the more easily in connection with the theme of mission), becomes a sustained reflection on the nature of the church as a community of the faithful in mission. This enables the text to consider questions of “correct” teaching, individual conscience, and authority not as issues of freedom, control and church structures, but as part of a process belonging to the whole people of God to ensure that the faith which is being handed on, is in fact the faith received from the Apostles.

A first more specific comment concerns the relationship between the faith of the individual and that of the Christian community as a whole, and over time. This is discussed in complementary ways in the sections “Conscience, Freedom and Being in Christ” (4.2-4.8) and “Teaching with Authority” (4.9-4.16). The treatment of individual faith and the faith of the church needs, I believe, to be related to baptism, which is the classic point at which this question becomes visible for most believers, and the present text would I think, be further strengthened by reference to recent ecumenical work on baptism. Understandably the document does not delve deeply into baptism, that having been treated in some depth in “Apostolicity and Catholicity” (paras. 22-35). Thus “Receiving and Handing on the Faith” pauses only to affirm that “a believer’s Yes to Christ incorporates that

person into the Yes of faith spoken by the Church throughout the ages (cf. 2 Cor 1:20)" (1.6). This is close to the thought developed in the Faith and Order text-in-progress "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation."¹¹—a text which, incidentally, learned something from "Apostolicity and Catholicity"—and some interaction with that text could be helpful. By placing the once-for-all moment of baptism more clearly within the process of life-long growth into Christ, it seeks to help the churches gain a fresh appreciation of how the faith of the individual grows, however individually it may be experienced, grows within the Christian community and is nurtured and tested there:

As Christians mature, their faith grows into conformity with the faith confessed, celebrated and witnessed to by the Christian community, both locally and worldwide. The believer's faith grows and deepens in the relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and that faith finds its fullness in the faith professed by the whole church throughout the ages. Thus, the faith which the believer comes to confess as his or her own is *that* faith and no other. The "we believe" of the Christian community and the "I believe" of personal commitment become one.¹²

This raises the larger question of how far the dialogue should return to topics already dealt with, in cases where significant developments have occurred either ecumenically, or in the lives of particular churches. An example in this context would be the increasing frequency (for both faith-related and cultural reasons) of adult baptism also in churches which baptise infants. "Apostolicity and Catholicity" is aware of the phenomenon: "Catholics see the fundamental belief of their church regarding baptism as expressed with new clarity in the revised rite for adult baptism, which includes personal confession of faith" (para. 28). But it would be valuable to review that discussion of baptism in light of the 25 years' liturgical and theological experience since "Apostolicity and Catholicity" was published, and relate the churches' recent experience with baptism to the appropriate sections of "Receiving and Handing on the Faith."

A second specific comment relates to the extended discussion of "Councils and the Declaration of the Faith" (3.II-3.I9). The common affirmations made in this section are a remarkable example of how Disciples' thinking has grown and developed through our engagement with the ecumenical movement, and not least though the present dialogue. But the text is also helpful in pointing clearly to remaining differences between Disciples and Roman Catholics in this area: for example,

". . . Disciples are more reluctant than Roman Catholics to provide official teaching on a wide range of matters." (4.13) (That, it has to be said, is putting it mildly indeed.)

There is a great deal to be learned from the acute and perceptive commentary on the present text by Avery Cardinal Dulles S.J.¹³ He notes a fundamental issue arising from the agreed statement's treatment of the councils: "the restriction of conciliar authority to the early centuries is a point that calls for more explicit discussion than it receives in the present statement. Has the presence of the Holy Spirit to the Church and its pastors diminished since the first millennium?"¹⁴ The implication seems to be that just as the Holy Spirit's action through the councils is granted (insofar as we accept their authority, however that may be understood), so we need to grant the Holy Spirit's power and freedom to act later on in history. If I read the argument aright, in the context of this discussion that means: to act through the Church and its organ for the discernment of truth, the magisterium.

That is, of course, a very "Roman Catholic" reaction; and my reply is equally a "Disciples" one: Why, indeed, limit the Holy Spirit to the first millennium? That is a question which many of the churches stemming from the Reformation have asked; indeed in many cases they have claimed their own foundation, precisely as a separate ecclesial body, as a work of the Holy Spirit. They least of all would deny the Holy Spirit's activity throughout history; but the question is, where, in what capacity, and with what relation to the existing churches? My point is that if we are to gain urgently-needed clarity on "the way in which the Church can authoritatively proclaim what has become clear only in more recent times,"¹⁵ the question of the Holy Spirit's activity will have to be asked in the context not only of the Church, but of the churches in history. And, for that matter, in the context of the ecumenical movement, for many are convinced that that has been one primary *locus* of the Holy Spirit's activity throughout the previous century—including at moments when the ecumenical movement has challenged the churches in their continued separation from one another.

A third more specific comment to the text deals with the Disciples—Roman Catholic "joint understanding that no teaching of the faith can ever be a completely solitary task" (5.2). The "teaching of the faith" is then placed within the context of the life of the church, including the role of faithful parents in guiding their children into the faith, formal catechesis and Sunday School instruction, and in seminaries and church-related universities (5.2-5.5).

Importantly, the role of worship, particularly the Eucharist, as well as the liturgical year are recognised as central to the Church's teaching function.

The discussion of this teaching function should be developed, I believe, in relation to the practise of *ethical reflection*, in order to strengthen the link between faith, witness, and action for the sake of justice and reconciliation in the world. The text is aware of the need to relate these dimensions of the Christian life, acknowledging that the hunger for justice and reconciliation is intrinsic to true evangelisation: "Those who are led to profess the Gospel will also show lives truly turned from concern for self to love of neighbour. Such love today will issue in witness to the cause of justice." (5.10) That is a crucial affirmation. But the discussion could benefit, in my opinion, from the creative multilateral work done in the WCC's "ecclesiology and ethics" study and particularly in "Costly Commitment,"¹⁶ the report from a consultation held at Tantur in 1994. Picking up the theme introduced at Roende, Denmark in 1993 of the church as "moral community,"¹⁷ "Costly Commitment" urged the churches to acknowledge ethical reflection and engagement as intrinsic to their witness and mission, indeed to

their very identity. Further, it challenged the churches to *common* ethical reflection and, where possible, action as the most faithful expression of the mission of the one Church of God.¹⁸

But responsible ethical reflection and engagement are not matters for the structures and hierarchies of the churches alone, but for the *whole* people of God, and for this the task of the Church in *moral formation*—the inculcating of a pattern of life based on reflection on ethical issues in light of the Gospel—is essential. Furthermore, this moral formation takes place not only through the formal teaching activity of the church, but through its whole life of worship, fellowship, and witness, and in its own life as an institution within history.¹⁹ "Practices, structures and roles (like moral exemplars and like catechesis) are morally potent."²⁰ And this implies the possibility of *malformation*, when the life of the Church as an institution within history is distorted by the sinfulness of its members. In short: it is crucial to hold together faith, evangelistic witness, and action on behalf of justice and reconciliation; and the Agreed Statement could be strengthened through engagement with recent ecumenical reflection on ecclesiology and ethics.

III. The Disciples—Roman Catholic Dialogue: Prospects for the Future

To summarise, we have suggested in the above discussion some lines for further work: first, to pursue the question of words and meanings, in order to discern more truly when we in fact share a common faith despite different formulations and practises; second, to note the matter of developments in baptismal practise and understanding, and in ecumenical reflection on baptism; third, to address the question of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and the churches, throughout all of history; and fourth, to respond to the urgency of linking faith, evangelistic witness, and action for justice and reconciliation, through exploring the Church's role in the moral formation of its members.

As already indicated, the dialogue has identified three areas for its further work: the Eucharist, the structure of the Church including the matter of episcopal office, and the primacy of the bishop of Rome. I would like to mention two perspectives which could be helpful as Disciples and Roman Catholics approach these topics together, for their own benefit and that of the ecumenical movement as a whole.

First, in the work on Eucharist it will be important to clarify *the relation of the Eucharist to baptism*. This could be of considerable help to the on-going multilateral work on baptism,²¹ which is not far developed in this regard. Furthermore it would help everyone, I am convinced, if a clear and convincing description could finally be given of

the precise difference between baptism and the Eucharist, such that some churches which mutually recognise one another's baptisms are unable to meet together at the Lord's Table. I freely confess to a blind spot here: which of the restrictive arguments about sacramental office and succession currently applied to the Eucharist, could not also be applied to baptism? And why is it that—thanks be to God!—they are not so applied? Could the suggestion of the Churches of Christ in Great Britain and Ireland in 1954 be helpful here, to see the oft-repeated Eucharist as in some sense the "eschatological repetition" of the once-for-all act of baptism?²²

Second, the work on the structure of the Church and the bishop of Rome must inevitably raise the question of *the meaning of the unity we are given in relation to the unity we seek*. So far the dialogue between these two distinct churches has located itself within the overall unity of the Church, as given by God. But will it not eventually be necessary to ask: What visible shape may—or *must*?—this unity take? Or, to put it most sharply: is a particular organisational form of the church an intrinsic part of Christian revelation? The trust built within this dialogue could enable work on *structures and forms* of unity that would be helpful for the whole ecumenical movement. In this work I would hope that the self-understanding and experience of Disciples as a *uniting* church²³ would be prominent, perhaps more explicitly so than it has been in the dialogue so far.

Allow me to close with a related but more general, and more personal, comment. We are all familiar with the phenomenon whereby clear statements of one or another church's self-understanding, may be heard by other churches in a negative way, or as posing obstacles to ecumenical progress. My own conviction is that clarity is essential for genuine ecumenical progress, but it works best within a community of conversation where there is a shared understanding, or at least common exploration, of the possible *visible forms* which unity might take, and how legitimate diversities would be honoured within that unity. The absence of such an understanding invites us, when faced by perceived challenges, to fall back into

unhelpful stereotypes. Perhaps "communion" ecclesiology, for all its benefits to the ecumenical movement, has encouraged a certain neglect of questions of structure and form. Here we would be helped, I believe, by a renewal of the old discussion of "models of unity," in this context particularly of organic union and the communion of communions.²⁴

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Notes

- 1 "Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church" (1993-2002), Agreed Statement from the third phase of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue, in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 41, no. 4, October, 2002, pp. 51-77.
- 2 David M. Thompson, "Disciples-Reformed Dialogue," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 332-333; Report of the January, 2002 available from the Council on Christian Unity, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), P. O. Box 1986, Indianapolis, IN 46206, USA; on the internet at <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/documents/Disciples-RCC.docmeeting>; and from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 150, rte. de Ferney, 1211 Geneva, Switzerland; see also *Towards Closer Fellowship: Report of the Dialogue between Reformed and Disciples of Christ*, Geneva, WARC, 1988; "No Theological Obstacles: Report of the Disciples of Christ - Reformed International Dialogue," in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 27, no. 2, April, 1987, pp. 183-195; A. P. Sell, ed., *Reformed and Disciples of Christ in Dialogue*, Geneva, WARC, 1985.
- 3 Paul A. Crow, Jr., "Disciples-Russian Orthodox Dialogue," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, p. 334; "Communique on a Visit: Disciples and Russian Orthodox in Dialogue, 1987," in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 27, no. 3, July, 1988, pp. 295-298; *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, vol. 12, 1987.
- 4 J.-M.R. Tillard, "Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd edition, Nicholas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb, eds., Geneva, WCC Publications, 2002, pp. 333-334.
- 5 "Apostolicity and Catholicity" (1977-1982), Agreed Statement from the first phase of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue, in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 41, no. 4, October, 2002, pp. 80-95. See also Basil Meeking, "Review of the Dynamics and Issues in the Previous Five-Year Dialogue," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 23, no. 4, October, 1984, pp. 335-345; and R. K. Welsh, "Reflection on the First Five Years: A Disciples of Christ Perspective," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 23, no. 4, October, 1984, pp. 346-350.
- 6 "The Church as Communion in Christ" (1983-1992), Agreed Statement from the second phase of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue, in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 41, no. 4, October, 2002, pp. 96-114. See also J.-M. R. Tillard, "The Contribution of the Disciples of Christ / Roman Catholic Dialogue for the Ecclesiology of the Ecumenical Movement," *Mid-Stream*, vol. 31, no. 1, January, 1992, pp. 14-25.
- 7 "Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church" (1993-2002), Agreed Statement from the Third Phase of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue, in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 41, no. 4, October, 2002, pp. 51-77. See also Paul A. Crow, Jr., "Presentation of the Agreed Statement," in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 41, no. 4, October 2002, pp. 1-5.
- 8 "The Church as Communion in Christ," Note 1.
- 9 J.-M.R. Tillard, "Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 333.
- 10 William Henn, OFM CAP, "An Evaluation of 'The Church as Communion in Christ'," in *Information Service of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, No. 84, 1993/3-4, pp. 170-175.
- 11 "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation," FO/2001:24, Faverges, October 2001.
- 12 "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation," para. 48.
- 13 Avery Cardinal Dulles, "'Receiving and Handing on the Faith': Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ, Comment by Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.," in *Information Service of*

- the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, No. III (2002/IV) pp. 252-255.
- 14 Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Receiving and Handing on the Faith," p. 253.
 - 15 Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Receiving and Handing on the Faith," p. 255.
 - 16 "Costly Commitment," in *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, pp. 2-23, especially paras. 5-10.
 - 17 "Costly Unity," in Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1997, pp. 24-49. The study was conducted jointly by WCC Faith and Order staff and staff of the WCC Unit on Justice, Peace and Creation. In some respects, this picked up important work done earlier in Faith and Order's study "The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community." See *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, revised edition, Faith and Order Paper No. 151, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1990.
 - 18 "Costly Commitment," para. 17.
 - 19 "Costly Commitment," paras. 51-74.
 - 20 "Costly Commitment," para. 68.
 - 21 Cf. "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation," and Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper No. 184, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1999; Report, pp. 74-97.
 - 22 Report of the Commission on the Ministry [of the Annual Conference of Churches of Christ in Great Britain and Ireland], Birmingham, 1954, p. 16. I have begun to explore this theme in a Disciples context (where one could imagine not only baptism but also the Lord's Supper, to which all baptised Christians are invited by Christ as its host, as our "bond of unity") in Thomas F. Best, "Disciples Identity, Ecumenical Partnership, and the Ecumenical Future," in *Mid-Stream*, vol. 32, no. 3, July, 1993, pp. 18-21.
 - 23 I am thinking, for example, of the involvement of the Disciples in the Consultation on Church Union, the Ecumenical Partnership with the United Church of Christ, the participation of many Disciples churches around the world in the formation of united churches, and the leadership of Disciples in the world-wide family of united and uniting churches. This constant commitment to organic union, in the sense of the structural integration of previously-divided churches, has marked the Disciples deeply.
 - 24 See Thomas F. Best, "Unity, Models of," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 1173-1175 and "Unity, Ways to," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, pp. 1179-1181; Paul A. Crow, Jr., "Reflections on Models of Christian Unity," in Thomas F. Best, ed., *Living Today Towards Visible Unity: the Fifth International Consultation of United and Uniting Churches*, Faith and Order Paper No. 142, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1998; and *Mid-Stream*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April, 1998, pp. 116-134.

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Call to Unity

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

Issue 1 • August 2003



**Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic
International Commission for Dialogue 1977-2002**



FROM THE EDITOR

Serious Questions, Hard Issues, Tough Challenges – And Yet New Hope

Everywhere one turns in the ecumenical movement today, it seems there are hard issues and tough challenges being raised. Most councils of churches are struggling—not only financially, but also in terms of articulating a clear vision, a strong theological basis, and compelling goals for the future. Advance toward visible unity seems at best to be marking time. There is an emerging tendency to minimize the severity of the division within the church which, in the words of the *Decree on Ecumenism* of the Second Vatican Council, “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the gospel to every creature.”

Michael Kinnamon, a leading voice in the ecumenical movement for over 20 years, addresses the current state of the movement in a challenging, even provocative, book entitled *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends*. He states that, “The single biggest problem facing the ecumenical movement is a widespread failure to grasp and teach the biblically based vision of the church and its relationship to the world.”

Similarly, Peter Bouteneff, professor of systematic theology and spirituality at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, in *Beyond the East-West Divide*, sets forth the basic issues of ecclesiology that led representatives of the Eastern Orthodox churches in May 1998 to state their dissatisfaction “with the present forms of Orthodox membership in the World Council of Churches,” including its structure, style, and ethos.

And yet . . . the recognition, naming, and beginning approaches in addressing these serious questions, issues, and challenges is already a positive sign of a maturing ecumenical relationship and a deepening of communion that offers new hope for the future.

In launching this journal, *Call to Unity*, the Council on Christian Unity is seeking to provide an important resource to the church—not just to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and its congregations, regions, seminaries, pastors and laypersons, but to the whole church and to the ecumenical movement at large—to address the current ecumenical malaise. Beginning with this inaugural issue that offers the “results” of 25 years of official international dialogue between Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church, the aim of this journal is to provide important documents to this generation in teaching, analyzing, and reflecting upon the current direction and new initiatives within the ecumenical movement.

It is my hope that *Call to Unity* will invite its readership into new dialogue and engagement around current issues challenging all churches in the quest for unity and oneness in Christ. And, thus, that *Call to Unity* will serve as an important resource in re-claiming and re-igniting the ecumenical vision and passion for the 21st century.

Robert K. Welsh

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