

President's Report to the Board of the Council on Christian Unity

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The 7-month overlap between Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh and me has been proved its importance of having this kind of transition not only for the incoming president's sake and also for the sake of the entire church. I believe that this transition will definitely help the Council on Christian Unity (CCU) to sustain the integrity of this significant ministry of the church and will assure the continuity of the ministry between the outgoing and incoming presidents. My hope is that the CCU has set a good example for other ministries in the transition of leadership within the Disciples.

Personally, in this transition period, I have felt so blessed to learn from and to be guided by Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh and to be fully engaged in the life and ministry of the CCU as the President-Elect. While working with Rev. Dr. Welsh, I truly appreciate his commitment and dedication not only to the Disciples but also to the wider ecumenical communities and the Church of Jesus Christ. In the recent statement that was drafted by Rev. Dr. Welsh and released by the Council on the nature of the unity that we seek as a distinctive community of faith, he points out that Christian unity finds its life and reality in relationships with other Christians, and I believe that he has actually embodied his conviction in his personal and ecumenical life. I am certain that the many ecumenical communities will miss his presence and wisdom, and also, his incredible institutional memory. I have asked, however, that Dr. Welsh might continue his service to the Council in a different capacity, especially as a leading member of the Disciples and Roman Catholic Dialogue team and the Stone-Campbell Dialogue team; and he has graciously accepted those assignments. So he won't cease working for the ministry that he has loved for over three decades as an associate ecumenical officer and the president.

Now I feel my responsibility on my shoulder heavier than ever. Even though the transition of leadership has completed, it doesn't mean that the CCU will be settled in its own comfortable ministerial setting. The CCU will keep living out transitions. We must do so in order to be relevant in the world in which we are

called to bring God's good news of reconciliation and hope. I understand that there will be always the temptation to stay in where we are. God is calling us away from that temptation.

I understand that the Council isn't the only institution that has to deal with constant transitions. Our church, the Disciples of Christ, definitely is in transition, too. Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins is wrapping up her ministry as the General Minister and President (GMP), and the Disciples has launched a new program called, "Mission First!" which we hope will help us to focus on God's mission and to find new ways of governing the general church and restructuring the general ministries around that mission. The United of Church of Christ (UCC), our closest ecumenical partner for the past 26 years, has installed a new GMP, and there have been a lot of changes in terms of its structure, leadership, and foci in the UCC. The Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) will also go through a transition to embody its new purpose. From the news outlets, you may have already learned that, at the past plenary in St. Louis, the CUIC decided to focus more on racism from now on, while celebrating its ecumenical achievement, which is to make visible the mutual recognition of ministries in global and local setting. This implies, however, that the CUIC will no longer pursue for the "reconciliation of the ordained ministries" among its member churches. The Disciples of Christ and the Council have hoped from the beginning of the CUIC that it would become the ecumenical arena for the member churches to reconcile their ordained ministries. But God is giving a new purpose and a new direction for the CUIC, and the CUIC will more passionately address the issue of racism, which is now seen as the *original sin* of America that has divided the church and the society.

While I acknowledge that it is not easy to live out transitions, I believe that the fact that we are constantly facing transition could actually mean the life-fullness of the church. The ability of move is a physical sign of health. We can move because we understand the nature of transition, fluidity, which is a mental sign of good health. In these transitions, our calling as the Council on Christian Unity is to give leadership to our whole church, the Council itself, and the larger ecumenical communities in moving forward—not backward—in unity, with the clear sense of God's calling for the sake of the world.

We all would agree, however, that it could be a venerable time whenever we, as a collective body, face problems, challenges, and transitions. The Disciples of Christ, which was started as a movement for unity, has been divided when this movement for unity faced challenges and went through transitions. We as a nation have done the same.

Facing the strong current of transition, the CCU always reminds ourselves that unity is Jesus' "last will and testimony." Before his impending torture and death, Jesus prayed "that they may all be one." (John 17:20, NRSV) As Chimiste Doriscar, our board member, once reminded us, Jesus never stopped praying for the unity among his followers. He is still praying even at this moment!

Also, let us note that it is Jesus who is praying. It is Jesus who asks God to make his followers one in the spirit of unity. So it is God who will make us one. The church will be one by God's will. As Dr. Welsh states in his recent statement about unity, it is not we who vote in unity; it is God's gift in Jesus Christ. Therefore, our task is to constantly remind ourselves and other fellow Christians that we are already in unity through one Lord, one baptism and one faith (Ephesians 4:5), and that what we are called to do is to live our unity as the followers of Jesus while working together for people in this world.

If we understand the unity as God's gift that has been already given to us in Christ, then we should know what divides us and what hampers our unity. In this understanding, the Council has decided to address church-dividing and also community-dividing issues today. We recognize 4 major areas of injustice today

that totally divides the church and our human communities: 1) racial injustice; 2) ecological injustice; 3) economic injustice; and 4) international/intra-national injustice. If we believe that we are one with each other and with the earth in God, these injustices cannot prevail in this world in the very persistent way that we observe today. Interestingly, however, the church and the society are divided along the lines of racism and classism, and ecological viewpoints and political tendencies.

Has the church completely abandon God's calling to be one? Has the church habitually followed the way of the world which speaks the language of division and discord? The churches should work together to end injustices among us and the nations. The CCU now understands that its urgent task is to encourage the Disciples and other communions to work together and to put theological and structural differences behind us, not for the sake of the church itself but for the sake of the world in which the church finds its purpose and mission to exist. For this reason, at its meeting last November, the board decided to give priority to a new initiative called, "**Becoming Just Peace-making Church.**" First of all, the Council and its board will make sure that every expression of the Disciples reflects this timely calling in its life. Also, at ecumenical tables, the Council will urge other partners in Christian faith to tackle these huge community-dividing issues *together*.

Thankfully, major ecumenical organizations and institutions such as World Council of Churches (WCC), National Council of Churches (NCCCUA), Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) and Christian Churches Together (CCT) have taken on these issues. Of course, it seems that these ecumenical bodies are competing for the same agendas. So it gives us another task, which is to find the best way to bring our efforts together, avoiding the so-called "competing ecumenism." At least, however, it is very encouraging to see that these organizations have identified the same issues as community-dividing matters. Now it is very clear to me that, regardless of theological or doctrinal convictions, we can show to the world that we as Christians can work together to make a difference in the world.

Another huge challenge that we are facing in today's world is to learn how we as Christians engage in **interfaith or interreligious encounter**. In this election year, we have often observed the political rhetoric that condemns people of different faiths, especially, Muslims. We Disciples confess that we are the ones who have been welcomed by God, and because of this conviction, we believe that our calling is to welcome others as God has welcomed us. We welcome other people of faith as they are. Our hospitality doesn't imply *proselytism*. We won't ask other people of faith to change who they are, and we won't change our identity as Disciples and/or Christians. Our intention is to invite everyone to certain places of life and to become a community together. We will bring our gifts, as other people of faith will bring their gifts, and by sharing these gifts together, we, *again together*, can build a better community and as a matter of fact, a better world. Personally, I believe that this is the core message of the CCU's report to the General Assembly in Portland, titled "*Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement.*" For the next several years, the CCU will faithfully live out the spirit of this General Assembly report. The CCU will also resource, equip and empower our congregations so that we can continue building good relationships with our interfaith neighbors.

In sum, as the office for ecumenical and interreligious affairs of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Council will continuously make efforts to be a movement for unity in this fragmented world. I am glad that I can serve the church as the president of the CCU, and at the same time, I acknowledge that I have been called to serve the church and Christ with humility. I am pleased to know that I have a great board and the Disciples community who will walk and work with me in this new journey. Thanks be to God.