
President's Report

to the Board of Directors of the Council on Christian Unity

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Introduction

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Religious Reformation. Many churches in the Reformed tradition all around the world are busy commemorating this historic event. It should be noted that they are commemorating the Reformation, not celebrating it. It was actually an unfortunate occasion in the history of the Church.

Even though it was founded only 200 years ago here on American soil, the Disciples of Christ community “still owes a great debt to the Reformation,” especially theologically. (Toulouse, Holloway, and Foster, *Renewing Christian Unity: A Concise History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, 2015, p. 20) They saw their works in this newly established country as finishing the Reformation started by Luther and other Reformers.

The Reformation's motto, *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), had heavily influenced a group often referred to as the Campbellites in a way that pushed them to think about a more thorough

reformation of the church by returning to a purer form of the church in the New Testament. They used the word “restoration” for their thorough reformation. Was this Restoration Movement successful? The answer will depend on how we define the success of the movement.

Reformation, Restoration, and then what? What kind of church does the Disciples of Christ want to be today? Are we just one of the many mainline Protestant churches but with some distinctiveness in the practice of baptism and the Holy Communion? Are we still fervently pursuing unity among Christians as our founding fathers did?

Theologically Reflecting Our Time

It is difficult to be a church today—particularly in North America—but especially for a community such as ours because we were born out of the desire to seek unity. Divisions along the lines of political, economic, social, and religious affiliations have plagued every corner of the

nation, and the church is no exception. Even though we sit with one another in the pews every Sunday morning, we are afraid to engage in conversations. Many times, our conversations at church are superficial rather than meaningful.

What does it mean to be a church in our context? What is the good news of Jesus Christ? How can we be pursuing unity among Christians while ensuring diversity? What about those in the pews who belong to different religious bodies while maintaining their Christian identity? How can we maintain our integrity as Christians and at the same time engage in meaningful conversations with other faith traditions in a nonimperialistic way? What does it mean to be “missional” among non-Christians?

I strongly believe that our time and place require us to theologically reflect on who we are as a community of faith. For almost twenty years (1979–1997), the Commission on Theology implemented by the CCU helped the whole church in its attempt to “seek to answer the most basic and all-embracing question facing the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) today: what do Disciples think it means to be church?” (Welsh, ed., *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today*, p. vii).

The CCU is once again initiating the conversation about forming a Commission on Theology. The Reverend Terri Hord Owens, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), fully supports the idea of inviting church members to join in conversations about who we are as a community. The Reverend Chris Dorsey, president of the Higher Education and Leadership Ministries (HELM), and Dr. Jon Barnes, communication director of HELM, have also joined in this task. There have been overwhelmingly positive responses from Disciples theologians. I hope that this joint effort will be

viewed as a church-wide invitation to engage in a conversation.

Becoming a Just Peacemaking Church

The Becoming a Just Peacemaking Church Initiative continues with the joint effort of the Disciples Peace Fellowship (DPF). The CCU published a collection of documents titled *Called to Live Life in Unity: A Disciples of Christ Ministry for Christian Unity and Unity for All Humanity* last summer, which was distributed at the CCU's booth during the General Assembly. This publication includes the statement “Becoming a Just Peacemaking Church” and was used for the General Assembly joint workshop of the DPF and the CCU on Tuesday, July 11. The title of the workshop was “Just Peacemaking—God's Calling to Live Our Lives in Unity.” I wanted to help our church to understand that our calling to be a just peacemaking church is completely based on our core identity, which is to seek unity. The workshop had a panel of four people who had worked in the areas of racial justice, environmental justice, interfaith endeavors, and international justice. This workshop was well attended and received.

Because of my ethnic background, I have been engaged in conversations with various groups regarding the Korean Peninsula; I believe I can personally make some significant contributions and be a part of the Becoming a Just Peacemaking Church Initiative. I had a series of conversations with some of the members of the North American Pacific/Asian Disciples (NAPAD) and the Global Ministries about how to educate our church about the Korean Peninsula. Recently, I was part of an urgent virtual conference regarding Korea that was organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC)'s Commission of the Churches on

International Affairs (CCIA), and the participants were told that the US member communions should speak out to the US government to help to resolve the tension between the United States and North Korea.

As the general secretary of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC), a Worldwide Fellowship of the Disciples of Christ Churches, I will be in Colombia in November with other general secretaries of the Christian World Communions. I expect to not only learn more about the situation in Colombia but also make our presence a statement about how much the World Christian Communions are interested in the peace process in Colombia.

Interfaith Conversations

I was part of the bilateral dialogue between Christians and Confucian scholars in Seoul, South Korea, which was organized by the WCC's Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation Program. Christians have been actively engaged in various interreligious dialogues with other religions in the Abrahamic tradition such as Islam and Judaism, but dialogues with non-Abrahamic traditions such as Buddhism have been less frequent. So the consultation on the dialogue with Confucians was a significant step for the WCC.

Conversations with Other Communions

The ecumenical partnership meeting with the United Church of Canada was held twice in Canada this year, and the full communion agreement will be drafted by the end of this year. The goal is to have the agreement approved by and celebrated at the General Synod of the United Church of Canada in the summer of 2018 and at

the General Board of the Disciples of Christ in April 2018. The United Church of Canada will be the second denomination with which the Disciples will have a full communion relationship. Having a full communion relationship with another church is the first time since 1989. This full communion agreement will be a truly historic moment for the Disciples.

While the Disciples are having the bilateral conversation with the United Church of Canada, the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) will continue the conversation concerning its half-century-long purpose to reconcile the ordained ministries among member churches. At this point, it is not clear whether the nine member churches—plus one partner church in mission and dialogue—will agree to find a way to have full communion conversations.

The DECC hosted the fifth session of the fifth phase of the Disciples–Roman Catholic International Dialogue in Puerto Rico last June. Let me share with you what one of the Catholic members said about this meeting: “Our experience in Puerto Rico has been extraordinary. Not only were we treated to the most gracious hospitality by both our Catholic and Disciples hosts, but also we witnessed a high degree of real (if still incomplete) communion between our two churches on this island. Our study on ‘Christians being transformed by the Eucharist’ took on special meaning and impetus in the context of the Puerto Rican experience.”

Ecumenical Movement

The conciliar ecumenical bodies such as the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) and the WCC continue to strive to be the representative voices of their member churches in their contexts. The NCC will launch a

US version of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee on racism soon. The new chair, Bishop W. Darin Moore of the American Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, will be installed at the November Governing Board meeting. Rev. Owens will be a governing board member as a head of the communion at this November meeting. I also have been elected to be a governing board member at large, and my term starts after the November meeting.

The WCC will publish a document titled *Ecumenical Diakonia* soon. I had the privilege to review it while I was in Geneva for the Ecumenical Officers Network meeting last September. *Diakonia* is the main theological concept that the document introduces:

Diakonia aims at responding to contextual challenges when moving in changing landscapes. This document includes analysis of the social and political environment in which ecumenical *diakonia* is engaged. It refers to basic trends in today's world that challenge diaconal action and at the same time offer opportunities for innovative practice. It also reflects on the changing ecumenical landscape that affects ecumenical *diakonia*. (WCC, *Ecumenical Diakonia*, Revised Draft, April 21, 2017)

It seems clear to me that the ecumenical movement is turning its direction toward working closely together to respond to contextual challenges.

Resourcing Our Congregations

It takes longer than I would ever have expected to publish the interfaith Sunday school curriculum. I have contacted Chalice Press about this matter.

The CCU's ecumenical journals in the past have had a great influence on our congregations and ecumenical partners in interpreting the ecumenical vision. To continue helping our congregation members to expand their minds, the CCU has relaunched its journal under the new name *Sunesis*, which means insight and understanding in Greek.

Conclusion

The year 2017 has been very productive. There has been a learning curve for me in terms of how to work with limited resources while faithfully continuing our important ministry without dropping any significant parts of our work. What I realized is that cooperation with other Disciples ministries and ecumenical partners is the key to resolving the issue in our circumstances.

Thank you for your prayers and support for this ministry. My prayer is that the CCU is truly a Disciples of Christ ministry for Christian unity and unity for all humanity.