

Who Are We sermon series
#1 – Movement
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“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.” That is our denomination’s Identity Statement, crafted and adopted in the mid-2000s as a way of helping us understand what it means to be a Disciple. It’s a great statement. I really like what it has to say. But it still begs the question: Who ARE we? What does it mean to say those things about us? And what does it look like to live out this statement in our context?

Before coming to Lexington, I spent eight years pastoring in the Chicago area. Before that, I was in seminary in Indianapolis, which is also the general headquarters of our denomination. Both Indy and Lexington are big Disciples towns, with a rich history and vibrant presence. In fact, you may know that our denomination was founded right here in Lexington in 1832, making it the oldest American-born denomination. Both Indianapolis and Lexington have Disciples seminaries and a multitude of Disciples churches.

Chicago? Eh, not so much. Disciples never made much in-road in Chicago. In fact, the church I served was only one of two Disciples churches in the whole county, and the other one was about a half hour away. So imagine trying to be a Disciple in a very non-Disciple area. I always dreaded the moment in a conversation when someone would ask about my denomination. I would say, “We’re part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).” Long pause. Then the person would cock their head like a dog that’s just heard a high-pitched whistle and say, “What’s THAT?” One person actually grabbed my arm and said with great concern, “Is that a cult?”

How do you answer that question? Who ARE we? What I often found myself doing in those situations was describing who we were by talking about who we weren’t. We take communion every week, so we’re not Presbyterian or Methodist. We don’t baptize infants, so we’re not United Church of Christ. We ordain women, so we’re not Catholic or Southern Baptist. But you see, there’s a problem with defining yourself using only negatives. Not only does it create a sense of separation from other Christians, it doesn’t answer the original question. Who ARE we?

The Identity Statement I read earlier was an attempt to answer that question. It was crafted by a group called the 21st Century Vision Team, which was called together in 2006 to help our denomination put words of definition to our actions and faith practices, so that when someone asked about us, we had something substantial to say. I love our Identity Statement, but my guess is most of you have probably never heard it before. If you have, congratulations! You get to take two pieces of bread during communion. The challenge in writing such a statement is putting it into action, getting it into the hands of the individual congregations who make up this denomination. Because we are not governed in a top-down, hierarchical format, we don’t have a Pope or a Bishop who can say, “Here, take this statement, this is who we are, no arguments.” Each congregation is responsible for living out the statement in their own context.

But even that is made difficult by our congregational style of governance. When the final authority is the congregation, not some denominational executive, then what one church believes can differ greatly from what another church believes. The Identity Statement can be interpreted in a myriad of ways by congregations, depending upon context and leadership and core values. So this sermon series is my attempt to help Crestwood figure out who WE are in light of this

mission statement. I'm not attempting to offer the definitive interpretation, but I hope to start a conversation that will continue in our Crestwood University classes and beyond, and will hopefully help us better articulate who we are as a Disciples church as we discern our own vision for the future. We'll do that by focusing on four of the key words in the statement – movement, wholeness, table, and welcome.

Let's start with movement. Is the Disciples of Christ a movement? Is Crestwood a movement? Initially, I'd answer "no" to both those questions. When I think of a movement, I think of a loosely organized, somewhat unstructured collection of people who shared beliefs and come together to achieve common goals. The second part of that sentence fits: we share beliefs and we seek to live out those beliefs in common ways. But are we loosely organized and unstructured? If you think so, I have a couple Administrative Board committee sub-groups I'd like you to serve on.

I would say our denomination is not a movement; instead, it is an institution. Is that a bad thing these days? Maybe. But it wasn't back in the 1950s and 1960s, when our collection of churches (at that time called a Brotherhood) made the move to form ourselves into a full-fledged denomination. We resisted doing so for a long time, because we felt that organizing into a denomination would create layers of separation from our Christian brothers and sisters, and we Disciples are all about unity, not division. But we finally realized if it walks like a denomination, and talks like a denomination, and quacks like a denomination, then it's a denomination, even if you insist on calling it something else. So in 1968, we officially restructured into our current denominational form.

Notice anything curious about the timing there? Anything important happening in our country in 1968? The Vietnam War, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the election of Richard Nixon as president. Talk about bad timing. We decided to institutionalize at the very moment that institutions in our country were starting to lose authority, and we've been dealing with the ramifications of that ever since. So our Identity Statement is a chance for us to reclaim the essence of why we came together in the first place back in 1832. Our founders didn't say, "Hey, let's form an institution with regions and general units!" They came together because they shared common beliefs and a common purpose.

So, what DOES it mean to be a movement? How can we recapture the core of who we are as Disciples of Christ? For me, it starts with scripture. Have you ever noticed how often someone in the Bible is told to move? God comes to Abraham and says, "Go!" Abraham says, "Where?" And God says, "Don't worry about it, I've got it covered." God comes to Moses and says, "Go!" Moses says, "Where?" And God says, "I'll tell ya, but you're not going to like it." So Moses heads off to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh.

In the New Testament, Jesus says to a couple fishermen, "Come and follow me." Then he says to his disciples, "Go out into the surrounding villages and tell them about me." And after his resurrection, as he's about to ascend to Heaven, he says to them (and us), "Go! Make disciples of all nations." Do you know what the original church was called in the Bible, those Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah? They were called "the Way."

Do you see the pattern here? To be a believer in God means to be moving. I've said before that we are not called the Standers Still of Christ or the Loiters of Christ; we are the Followers of Christ, and that statement implies movement. That's very important to note, because what's the opposite of movement? Stagnation. Stuckness. Complacency. I don't remember a passage where God says, "Abraham, stand still! Don't move! Don't do anything!"

The Bible is full of calls to go, to come, to move, to leave, to seek, to embody the promises of faith through action.

But there's a difference between purposeful and purposeless movement. God doesn't call Moses to walk in circles around the burning bush; that's movement, but it has no purpose. Instead, when people in the Bible are called to move, they are called to move toward something. Therefore, our movement should be toward a goal. What is that goal for Crestwood? A bigger church? More money in the offering plate? A greater sense of status or more recognition? I hope not. Our goal, as a denomination, as a church, as people of faith, should be to make God's kingdom real here on earth. We move in faith for the purpose of helping people get a glimpse of what God's kingdom looks like, a kingdom defined by wholeness of creation, by the sharing of table fellowship, and by the hospitality of welcoming. Are we moving toward those things in our lives, or are we just moving?

If the Kingdom of God is our goal, how do we get there? I have no idea. I assume we get there the same way you eat an elephant, which is one bite at a time. Last week the choir sang this wonderful song called "Thy Word," which quotes Ps. 119, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." Think about it: you can drive great distances in the dark if you have your headlights on. Now, those lights only shine a couple hundred feet at best, but you can go thousands of miles like that. We may not be able to fully see the destination to which we're moving, but we don't need to. All we need to see is the next step ahead that God has illuminated for us. What is that next step for you? Is it a step toward service or leadership? Is it a step up in giving or commitment? Is it a step toward reconciliation with someone? As long as you are willing to take that next step, no matter how small or unsure, then you are still moving.

At our essence, at the core of our collective soul, we are not an institution; we are not a building; we are not a bunch of boards and committees; we are a movement with a goal. If we lose sight of that, then we stop moving forward. That happens a lot. Some churches just spin in circles, going about their routines the way they always have, until one day they realize they're not really moving at all. They were so focused on who they were that they forget to pay attention to who they were becoming. But that is not who we are as Crestwood or as Disciples. We'll talk more in the coming weeks about what we are moving toward. But for today, let's covenant together to keep moving, to keep following Jesus' call, to keep going along the Way. What next step is God calling you to take? To where is Jesus beckoning you to follow him? That's what our Vision Team is seeking to identify, the next step God is calling us to take. We'll never know if we don't keep moving. Let's go!