

# Denominational Polity From a Disciples Perspective

Richard L. Hamm

Former General Minister and President  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada





(CC) 2024 Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) License. You are free to share a copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. However, you should not modify, transform or build upon the contents without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada  
PO Box 1986  
Indianapolis, IN 46206

[www.disciplescuim.org](http://www.disciplescuim.org)



Denominational Polity from a Disciples Perspective

Richard L. Hamm

Former General Minister and President  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
in the United States and Canada

# Contents

A Very Brief Recounting of the Disciples Origins .....	03
The Current Polity of the Disciples of Christ .....	05
Power and Authority .....	07
A Final Note About Power and Authority .....	09
Current Challenges for Disciples .....	10

## A Very Brief Recounting of the Disciples Origins

The roots of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in a phenomenon called the Stone-Campbell Movement, which was at the heart of an even larger “Restoration Movement” (which began in Scotland and Ireland and was brought to the U.S. and Canada by immigrants). The Stone-Campbell Movement arose out of a reaction to the polity (especially the power of presbyteries) and theological assumptions (especially predestination) of the Presbyterian tradition of the British Isles, especially of Scotland and Ireland, as those were being lived out by Scots Irish immigrant churches on the American frontier. Similar ideas were influencing Scots Irish immigrant churches in Canada.

The Scottish Presbyterian Church was marked by numerous schisms, each resulting in its own mini denomination or sect. The primary Disciples founders (most notably Irish immigrants Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Maryland-born Barton W. Stone), all Presbyterian clergy, regarded these schisms as having been caused by non-Biblical arguments for this or that theological proposition or practice. Feeling that these divisions were destructive to the wider cause of Christian faith, they proposed a “reform” of the church of Jesus Christ that would *restore* “Biblical” Christianity. In turn, this commonsense<sup>1</sup> reform would, they believed, naturally reunify the whole church as those of various Christian sects would begin embracing this reform and setting aside the various Protestant divisions that had shattered the European church, and which, thus, divided the American and Canadian churches whose roots were in Europe.

While many Presbyterian polity practices would be discontinued by these reformers as the movement became increasingly *congregational* in polity, much of the Reform theology of John Calvin would remain very much a part of these former Presbyterians’ thinking. Disciples didn’t (and don’t) talk about Calvin much, regarding him as the founder of yet another “party” of

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, what appears to be “commonsense” to a person of one perspective may appear to be nonsensical to a person with a different perspective. But the “restorationists” thought it was commonsense.

Protestantism, but Calvinistic assumptions can be found throughout Disciples thinking. These assumptions include the “fallenness of all creation”, which justified and fostered a distrust of human structures and institutions, including church governance and, perhaps most notably, power and authority concentrated in the hands of a few and exercised over many.

This distrust of human power and authority exercised at a distance (almost *any* distance) from the local, perfectly matched the North American frontier spirit that rejected control from Europe and, eventually, from “back east.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Christian unity, the Movement’s “Polar Star,” would be based upon an assumed common understanding of New Testament (especially) practices rather than flowing from the pronouncements of any collective *denominational* polity, creed, or leadership.

The appeal of a church proclaiming the legitimacy of local leadership and eschewing pronouncements from far flung denominational headquarters, together with the fertile spiritual soil of the Second Great Awakening, resulted in phenomenal growth of the Movement on the American frontier. Often referred to as the first American-born communion, the Stone-Campbell Movement had thus been both created by, and tapped into, its cultural context and grew rapidly in West Virginia (where the Campbells were located) and Kentucky (where Stone was located). The Movement followed the frontier as it moved west and southwest (while also making its presence felt to a smaller degree in the East, the South, and in Canada). The Restorationist plea, reuniting the church of Jesus Christ on the basis of purely Biblical practices, was very appealing to Protestant Christians of all kinds on the frontier, including some Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. It also appealed to some people who had no church affiliation, but early on was more of a reform movement than an evangelistic movement.

However, it was soon demonstrated that there is no *single* pattern for congregational life and governance in the New Testament. Each congregation in the New Testament grew up within its own cultural and

---

<sup>2</sup> It must be admitted however that a corresponding distrust of *local* power and authority was not so marked within the movement. Thus, in some ways, the feared tyranny of denomination was replaced by a tyranny of the local.

geographic context and bore the marks of that context. As I like to say it, though early Disciples founders would never have said it this way, “the church was not created by the New Testament, the New Testament was created by the church.” Over the course of a hundred-fifty years or so, amid disagreements over how the Church of Jesus Christ should be *reunified*, the Movement eventually *divided* into three parts (as movements are wont to do): a right wing (which eventually became the Churches of Christ in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, officially in 1906, and was mostly located in the pro-slavery South); a middle (which eventually became the Independent Christian Churches during the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and a left wing (the Disciples of Christ, which eventually became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada<sup>3</sup>, considered a mainline denomination since restructuring in 1968).

## The Current Polity of the Disciples of Christ

There are of course three common forms of church polity: episcopal (featuring bishops), presbyterian (featuring a committee of presbyters replacing a bishop), and congregational (which replaces the committee of presbyters with the congregation as a whole). Our restructured Disciples denomination *looks* a little bit episcopal (we have a head of communion, called the General Minister and President, who *looks* a little like a presiding bishop), with regional ministers who *look* kind of like bishops. But we remain solidly congregational in our polity.

---

<sup>3</sup> The number of Canadian Disciples congregations (roughly 20) are a small proportion of the total in the United States (roughly 2500 now). But the fact that there are Canadians who are a part of the denomination is why we speak of the denomination as General Church rather than as National Church. Most of the Canadian congregations trace their roots directly to Scotland and Ireland rather than to the Campbells or Stone, though they later related to and joined with U.S. congregations.

There are Disciples of Christ communions in other parts of the world which relate to the Disciples in the U.S. and Canada, but which are freestanding. For example, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico is a freestanding denomination (though it was begun by U.S. Disciples missionaries in the early 1900's). There are also strong Disciples communities in many other places including India, China, and most notably, the Congo, all of which are now relating to ecumenical churches such as the Church of North India, the Church of South India, etc.

Our restructured denomination *looks* a little presbyterian, because we do have General Assembly and Regional Assemblies that have representative delegates, but those assemblies also have huge numbers of non-voting delegates as well who have the right to speak. Our General Assembly was once characterized by a writer in the Christian Century magazine as more closely resembling an “ice cream social” than a denominational governance body. That’s overstated, but not by much. Perhaps most important, the General Assembly speaks *to* the church but not *for* the church, a fact that is often lost on Disciples members who are not familiar with their own history and polity, but it is a fact, nonetheless.

Episcopal polities (at least in theory) *trust* higher human authorities (bishops, etc.); presbyterian polities *don’t* trust higher human authorities and so have representative government in place of bishops whom they don’t trust; congregationalists don’t even trust representative government (including presbyteries) and so insist that each congregation can make its own decisions with or without reference to what the “higher” bodies say.

With the current post-modern flattening of society, we see the same distrust of power and authority in the culture at large that we have always seen in the Restoration Movement in general and the Disciples in particular. As we have sought to elevate trust of our regional ministers for the sake of church order, I have heard Disciples sometimes say, “Regional ministers are becoming too much like bishops”. My response is always, “On the contrary, bishops are becoming more like regional ministers!” In many ways we see this “flattening” phenomenon across the various polities and denominational churches in the United States and Canada today as trust for institutions of all kinds diminishes and leaders of all kinds in all traditions are viewed with a hermeneutic of suspicion.

So, in the light of this overview of polities in North America, what is the basis of power and authority among Disciples? To address this question, allow me to refresh our memories of the following various categories.



## Power and Authority

The definitions I use for power and authority are as follows: power is the *ability* to do something; authority is the *right* to do something. One can have the *power* to do something in a system without the *authority* to do it. But without the authority, such an exercise of power will soon be repudiated by the larger group. On the other hand, if one has the *authority* to do something, the *power* (the ability to do something) naturally flows from that authority, the *right* to do something.

To go one step further, there is *formal* and *informal* power and *formal* and *informal* authority. Formal power and authority are generally written down somewhere: in a constitution and by-laws, in a letter of call, or in a formal statement by a board or other governing body. Informal power and authority are generally unwritten and are based upon a people's respect and trust for an individual leader.

In a congregational system (such as that of the Disciples of Christ), informal power and authority reign. That is, as a leader garners the trust and respect of the people, a kind of moral and popular authority grows and from that grows the power to do things. To put it another way, if a Disciples congregation senses that the pastor is a morally upright person who loves and cares about them as a people, they will allow that pastor to offer effective leadership of the congregation. In the absence of that sense that the pastor is morally upright and cares about the people of the congregation, resistance to that pastor's leadership will quickly grow. The same principles function in relationship to general and regional church leaders as well.

In a congregational system, formal statements of the power and authority of the pastor are important, but they mean little without the informal power and authority the pastor must develop in order to underwrite those formal statements. Thus, a new pastor must quickly learn who his or her congregation is and demonstrate that he or she cares about them. In the absence of that demonstration of authentic caring, a congregation can and most probably will rapidly turn against the pastor, rendering his or her leadership meaningless.

Our Disciples system is primarily congregational, though we brought a tinge of presbyterian polity into the picture through Restructure in 1968, claiming certain powers for general and regional leadership while holding those leaders accountable to representative groups (the General Board, regional boards, general and regional assemblies). Thus, for example, the ordination of ministers, which used to be left to individual congregations (when we were purely congregational), are now authorized by regions (through a regional commission or committee on ministry) in consultation with and sponsorship by a congregation or two of that region. The regional minister can intervene in the life of a troubled congregation, but only with the permission of that congregation's lay leadership. The General Minister and President can intervene in the life of a region or of a general ministry unit, but only with the permission of that entity's representative leadership.

As the "association" or "fellowship" of Disciples congregations restructured in 1968 to become a full-blown denomination, leadership desired to soften the hard edges of our congregational polity and hit upon the language of "covenant" to describe the hoped for result of restructure. "Covenant" meant that we retained our *rights* as individual congregations and other entities within the church, but that we also assumed *responsibilities* toward one another. Chiefly, "covenant" pointed toward our responsibility to act in the best interests of the whole and not just in the interests of the individual congregation or other entity (such as a region, a general ministry unit, an educational institution, etc.). Thus, we often say we have a "covenantal polity" rather than using the rawer term "congregational polity". To some degree this approach has worked, but the real test has come in recent decades as mission dollars given by congregations, which support regional and general ministries, have shrunk so that these regional and general ministries (each with "rights") are now often in competition for dollars. A fresh effort is now underway by denominational leadership to strengthen the covenantal quality of our life together, but it is an effort that is swimming against the cultural tide.

In any case, in all expressions of the Disciples church (whether a congregation, a region, or the general church), the less well known a new leader is, the harder and faster they need to work to establish informal

authority and the power which flows from it. Given our Disciples distrust (which comes in large measure from our Calvinistic roots) and our American distrust of formal power and authority (largely shared by Canadian Disciples as well), informal authority and power are key to effective leadership everywhere in this church.

This is why I counsel *any* pastoral leader of any expression of the church to refuse to accept a call to serve as a pastor unless they receive more than a 90% positive vote by the body confirming their call.<sup>4</sup>

## A Final Note About Power and Authority

As previously noted, one of the realities of the current era is that leadership is now distrusted in most every arena of North American life. This is partly due to many rather spectacular displays and exposures of irresponsible and immoral behavior by public leaders and to the current general distrust and suspicion directed toward institutions of all kinds. This has led to a phenomenon that has been called the “horizontalization” or “flattening” of structures that used to be more hierarchical and that commanded widespread trust of those being led. People now trust what they can *see* (or what they *think* they see....social media has made confidence in what *presents* itself as *fact* even more difficult).<sup>5</sup>

From an ecclesiological perspective, this means that *all* forms of church polity require the same demonstration of caring and trustworthiness from leaders, whether popes, cardinals, bishops, regional ministers, presbyters, pastors, or lay leaders. Thus, in a way, *all* forms of polity are becoming more congregational, flatter, and more accountable. This makes leadership more

---

<sup>4</sup> The only exception might be a congregation that is badly divided over matters that are not directly related to the pastor being considered. But even then, one should proceed to accept such a call with exceptional caution.

<sup>5</sup> Leaders sometimes exercise raw power without the authority (right) to do so. Ironically, these people are often referred to as “authoritarian” in style, yet they are unauthorized in any legitimate sense.

challenging, but it also means that we Disciples are *in our element* when we understand that we are in many ways well suited for such a time as this.

## **Current Challenges for Disciples**

Some say that we were once part of a movement, but have now become a denomination. There is truth in this, and unfortunately perhaps, it is increasingly difficult to hold together people who have a natural tendency toward localism, independence, and a wariness of too much vertical authority. As we Disciples have (1) become increasingly ecumenical in our perspective, being among the founders of nearly every modern ecumenical movement and council, thus encountering people of all denominational stripes and appreciating the gifts brought by each such group; and (2) become aware that there is no one pattern for congregational life in the New Testament; we have (appropriately, I would say) lost our passion for the idea of physically uniting all Christian bodies into one and now emphasize the development of ecumenical partnerships with other communions. Thus, we have had to seek another basis for becoming a movement again and not merely a denomination. A recent attempt has been to refer to ourselves as “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.” This certainly intersects with our historical commitments to Christian unity and has value in helping us remember our identity, and yet it lacks the specificity to rekindle a true sense of being a “movement.”

Increasingly, the denomination as a whole has moved toward social justice as its primary focus. This certainly has value for us as Disciples and for the world, but it seems to skirt any core commitment to evangelism, since few Disciples still believe in the old “fear of hell-based” evangelism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is, of course, a challenge for all the mainline denominations, which share our experience of diminishing offerings, numbers of congregations, and members. But it is a challenge we must address if we are to continue to exist (and given our theological and social justice commitments, I believe it is good for the world if we, and all the mainline communions, continue to exist).

A third challenge is rooted in the world's political and cultural divisions, which inevitably find their way into our congregations. These are existential threats to our church and the world.

Finally, the affiliative forces that have held us Disciples together and helped us feel like a family or a tribe, have diminished considerably, as is true to varying degrees for all mainline denominations. Pastor centered approaches to ministry in congregations and in regions has contributed to this diminishment as loyalties have been built around personalities, which inevitably and regularly change, instead of to the body as a whole. We must work toward connecting members and congregations to each other rather than simply to a pastoral personality. Likewise, we need to help Disciples clergy feel like a siblinghood of mutual support and purpose. Mere appeals to congregations for more mission offering dollars fail to address the underlying systemic *weakness of affiliation*, the sense of belonging to each other. Yet, our appeals for dollars become shriller instead of us addressing the underlying systematic weaknesses of our system/body.