

No. 9532

(Operational Business Item)

SEEKING TO BE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST: A STATEMENT ABOUT THE ETHOS (GUIDING VALUES, TRAITS AND SPIRIT) OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

Preface

The Vision Panel was called into being at the initiative of the Standing Committee on Renewal and Structural Reform and the General Minister and President, in the hope that the Panel could articulate a vision which would provide a context and direction for the constant process of institutional change taking place in the church. The Standing Committee received the following two focus papers that have been developed by the Vision Panel with enthusiasm and appreciation.

Context

Historical Values. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) came out of the Stone-Campbell tradition. The Stone-Campbell tradition subsumed several other rivulets into its stream, but identified the ministries of Barton W. Stone in central Kentucky and Thomas and Alexander Campbell in northwestern Virginia (now West Virginia) and Pennsylvania as its main contributors. The Stone-Campbell community might be looked at as a movement that:

1) affirmed the **liberty** they experienced on the American frontier in the early national period as a gift of God's Providence;

2) wished to use that liberty responsibly to effect a thorough-going reformation in the Church through the **restoration** of the primitive Church's faith and order;

3) believed that the repudiation of Old World "corruptions" of Christianity would allow the Church to emerge in its primitive purity and **unity**; and,

4) thought that this primitive purity and unity would prove evangelistically effective and that, in fact, converting the world to Jesus Christ and, thereby, transforming it (including socially) was their millennial **mission**.

These four values (liberty, restoration, unity, and mission) have been those around which the **Disciples ethos** has taken shape. The statements that follow do not present a hierarchy of beliefs or dogma; rather they describe this ethos—the interconnected matrix of values, traits and spirit that forms and expresses our life together as people of God. We don't want to define how

others must seek God; rather, we want to describe how we are seeking to respond to the beckoning grace of God and invite others to join with us.

We believe that God, through Jesus Christ, has graciously invited us to be part of God's people and purposes. Our response tends to be a straightforward piety: we believe that God is and that God is at work in the world and we want to be part of it. We love God and the world that is God's; God's mysterious nearness and majestic greatness evoke our awe and respect.

We seek to be followers of Jesus Christ. We like this term "disciples" because it points to a significant personal relationship which is central to our salvation and calls forth from us a lived response. Thus to make "the good confession that Jesus is the Christ" is first to confess that we desire to orient our lives to Jesus Christ. In other words, we are Christ-centered without being dogmatic.

We have joined together as disciples of Christ. It is neither code nor creed, but rather the common confession that we share. The ties that bind us to each other are primarily ties of common care and concern, of affection and respect. Thus, our common life at its best is marked by the joy of association and establishes a covenant built on mutual respect. We endeavor to take others at their own word-to make a 'good faith assumption' about the sincerity of each others' lived response to God. At our worst, this can result in an irresponsible individualism. At our best, when we respect each others' lived response to Jesus Christ, we also acknowledge and foster the diversity of Christ's disciples. And through the diversity of Christ's disciples, we are returned again to the surprising abundance of God's grace.

We are people of the open table. When we gather in worship, we experience God's gracious invitation to life and the joy of our association. We remember and celebrate God's relationship with us and the whole world especially in our regular observance of the Lord's Supper, to which all who accept Christ are welcome. We believe that our worship life is sacramental, that God truly acts on and with us in worship, and particularly in the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

We are a biblical people. We love the Bible and take it seriously, but we do not demand a uniform approach to scripture. We believe the Bible bears decisive witness to the gospel of the living God. We are not easily convinced of things that seem to be contrary to biblical truth, even if we are not always as informed as we should be about the Bible's contents.

We center our discipleship in the broad, common affirmations of Christian faith. In other words, our life together is not defined by doctrinal, ethical, or ecclesiastical boundaries so much as by central affirmations of faith. We are drawn to moderation and civility; we are suspicious of excesses and extremes. We have a high commitment to intellectual liberty and, at our best, rely on the Bible, prayerful discernment of the Holy Spirit, and common sense to guide our responsible use of freedom. We prize the freedom we have been given through God's prior claim on our lives. We don't like to be told what to do or think-especially not in God's name. At their best, these are characteristics born of a sense of the limits of our efforts and knowledge in comparison with the fullness of God.

We believe in the ministry of the whole people of God. This means at least two things. First, we take seriously the priesthood of all believers and disdain sharp distinctions between the roles of laity and clergy. In every aspect of our common life and mission, lay and ordained ministers serve side by side. Second, we prize the way that congregational life has formed us, shaped us, and embodied our identity and vocation. Sometimes, however, clergy fail to equip the congregations they serve or unrightfully exclude laity from central aspects of mission and ministry; and sometimes congregations foster distrust of clergy and fail to stand with persons whom they have called as pastors. At our best, we-lay and ordained ministers of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)-hold each other in mutual regard as we share different abilities and tasks in ministry. And at its best, congregational life enables mission by calling forth and forming diverse persons into a variety of mutually enhancing ministries.

An essential part of our vocation is to seek the unity for which Christ prayed. We have always known that having the great Creator/Redeemer God in common greatly diminishes all human differences. Though an important distinction may need to be drawn between the quest for Christian unity and any particular ecumenical activity or organization, Disciples still believe in the overall quest. Disciples are welcoming, hospitable, and inclusive.

Our vocation as disciples of Christ makes us mission-minded. We came into being as a movement because we were drawn by a common cause, the gospel of Jesus Christ. We remain hopeful that the gospel of Jesus Christ can make a difference. We want to extend Christ's influence in the world and to live toward the fullness of God's promised reign. Those of us who became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) insisted on our right to cooperate and organize for mission. We continue to join in common cause with leaders and efforts that seem to us to be faithful to the gospel. We also insist on being left free to experiment and shape our own patterns of participation in, and support of, God's mission. At its best, our engagement in mission, including its leaders and structures, remains "light on its feet"-ever responsive to God's gracious invitation, our call to discipleship, and a changing world.

We are people of generous spirit, because God's Spirit is gracious. We do not wish to become sectarian, withdrawn from the world and standing arrogantly against it. Rather, because the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all ("for God so loved the world"), we have understood our mission as "outreach." This word, "outreach," is beloved among us because we want to reach out, to be generous. God has made us able to respond to the gospel and therefore we want to be responsive to how the Spirit of God is already moving in the world and to be responsible in mission and in service. We want to be faithful, just, and loving to each other and to the world which is God's.

Structural Imperatives for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

The preceding statements suggest certain "structural imperatives" which ought to shape our church's "structural reformation." It is imperative that each general unit, related organization,

region, and congregation give serious and prayerful consideration to these principles.

Principles

1. The Mission Principle: The structures of the church exist to carry out God's mission. This is the overarching and first principle.

2. The Congregation Principle: Any restructure of the church must have as a central and guiding priority the enhancement of congregational life and mission.

3. The Covenant Principle: There is a unity of purpose to each part of the church's ministry, and an extension of trust by all those parts to all those parts.

4. The Participation Principle: Structures must enhance participation in, and support of, mission and must embody a commitment to the priesthood of all believers and to "the equipping of the saints".

5. The Accountability Principle: Structures must enhance mutual accountability among all parts of the church.

6. The Inclusivity Principle: Structures should be designed in such a way as to be responsive to the diversity of those served by the structures.

7. The Stewardship Principle: Structures must be designed to free the church to carry out its mission effectively and efficiently.

8. The Christian Unity Principle: Structures should be designed to facilitate collaboration and cooperation with other communions.