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A REPORT ON A "PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT" FOR THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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In the United States and Canada**

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Background Information

Suggesting something other than, or in addition to, "sense-of-the-assembly" resolutions has resulted in strong emotional reactions which imply both that many are hungry for a new way to do public witness and that many people do take the church's public witness seriously. Though sometimes painful, I have deeply appreciated the substance of many of the conversations I have had with individuals and groups regarding the matter of public witness over these first 24 months of my ministry as General Minister and President. Especially helpful have been conversations with the Council of Ministers in 1993 and 1994, and the excellent two-hour conversation in Administrative Committee this year. All of this together has convinced me that we must find new ways of seeking and expressing faithfulness in regard to our public witness. The general manifestation is truly church (not simply and only an extension of congregations), but the General Assembly is not the only means through which the general manifestation can and should perform its public witness and otherwise express its churchliness.

A summary of my hope for our public witness in this time of "disestablishment" (a concept I have discussed at length in an article in the journal of the Council on Christian Unity, Midstream, October 1994) is that we could 1) help congregations as well as individuals engage in more effective witness, 2) provide individuals, congregations, and the whole church opportunities for serious study and dialogue regarding the "weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23), 3) foster reflection and action rather than merely issuing statements, and 4) make more effective use of our church's educational resources (including college and seminary faculties, for example).

Having spent considerable time and energy on this issue, I believe we need no immediate changes in the Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly. I believe we need to retain the option of sense-of-the-assembly resolutions because some issues do require bold and immediate judgment and voice. However, we do need to be more creative in our use of these provisions. Also, we need to halt the occasional use of sense-of-the-assembly resolutions as weapons (which is what abstract reified truth tends to become) in ungracious confrontations in which each "side" assumes "bad faith" or unfaithfulness on the other side (this, of course, is as much a matter of attitude as of process). We should use the various classifications of business items currently provided by the rules as tools to sharpen our understanding as a church, to foster

meaningful dialogue and effective action, and to build trust in a time when trust is low across the life of the church, even as it is within North American culture generally. We may wish to make some changes to the Special Rules later; but, for now, we can try some new approaches without changing the rules.

With these words of prologue, I offer the following revised proposal for consideration and implementation under the current rules.

A PROPOSAL FOR ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Disciples of Christ)

The Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly currently provide for five types of General Assembly business items: (1) reports; (2) operational, policy, and organizational items; (3) study documents; (4) items for reflection and research; and (5) sense-of-the-assembly resolutions. Reports, study documents, and the results of reflection and research have often languished on dusty bookshelves and in bottom drawers soon after the General Assembly that authorized them. Thus, we have more often used the fifth category (sense-of-the-assembly resolutions) in our efforts to decide what constitutes justice and righteousness, and what the church's action should be in the light of these judgments.

I readily affirm that the sense-of-the-assembly resolution (as we have called them since 1989) has had value as the church has shaped its response to issues of faith and justice over the years. Further, I affirm that the sense-of-the-assembly resolution process helped shape my own ethical understandings as a young minister in General Assemblies; and I have personally participated in the resolution process by helping get sponsorship for some resolutions and by coming to the microphone on a number of occasions. The resolutions that have come before the General Assembly have not been uniform in quality, but they have certainly helped the church face up to issues that we might just have "swept under the rug" (or might otherwise have waited until a particular issue became moot). Certainly it has been appropriate for the church to stand together publicly through General Assembly resolutions against racism and other threats to civil rights, for example. Thus, it was important for us to "go on record" in a timely fashion in support of civil rights in South Africa; and a public word of support for a threatened community of faith has often been experienced as a sign of encouragement and solidarity.

Nevertheless, over the years I have felt that most sense-of-the-assembly type resolutions were generally accomplishing less and less. Since entering this office in July 1993, I have repeatedly asserted that we need to find a more helpful way to arrive at common understandings (to the degree this is possible) of how the Gospel applies to particular contemporary issues in our church life, in North American culture, and in the world at large. We must not step away from the Biblically mandated responsibility of addressing injustice in our world. However, in the face of our diversity and the current cultural tendency toward polarization and the politicizing of issues, I believe we need to find a more constructive means of being a faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our society and world than that which is now afforded by the sense-of-the-assembly resolution. This document is an effort to lay out such a process.

It is hard for some of us Disciples to imagine life without sense-of-the-assembly resolutions because we have always had a tradition of debate as a way to gain understanding of differing perspectives on issues. Alexander Campbell was himself a noted debater. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) arose shortly after the American Revolutionary War and is firmly grounded in a populist form of North American democracy. To this day, our populist grounding is evident all across the life and ethos of the Disciples. From committees to congregational meetings, regional assemblies to general assemblies, we Disciples like to have our voice and vote. We prefer processes that enable us to participate personally in the discussions and decisions in which we are interested, rather than empowering others to represent us. While there is nothing wrong with this in and of itself, it does seem clear that there are limitations to the sense-of-the-assembly approach as practiced for decades, especially in a day when people easily feel attacked and when chronic rage and mean spiritedness get mixed into legitimate debate (this is not the first time we have seen such a day, nor will it be the last, nor will it last forever). Also, it must be acknowledged that the debate and vote style is somewhat culture- and gender-bound: it seems most often to be white males who come to the microphones. Many women and some ethnic minorities (and not a few white males) feel uncomfortable with it. Some of the limitations of the sense-of-the-assembly approach which I would identify are noted below.

Problems With The Sense-of-the-Assembly Resolution

1. Interpretation

Most Disciples hear about General Assembly actions not from their pastors or through congregational channels, but from secular press accounts which often stress the most controversial aspects, and which sometimes misrepresent the action taken. Meaningful and useful dialogue and response is difficult if the press has framed the issues in secular terms and set a polarized tone for the discussion.¹ This problem also points up a problem in our life together as a church: how we communicate (or don't communicate) with one another.

2. Representation

While the General Assembly is designed and authorized to speak to the church, not for the church, this distinction is lost on both the press and the membership. Individuals persist in believing that the General Assembly speaks for them whether they agree with the substance of the statement or not, and this is exacerbated when the press incorrectly characterizes the General Assembly as speaking for Disciples generally. (Of course, the fact that we Disciples have not completely understood or communicated the nature of our own church polity is a problem we must address no matter how we choose to do public witness!)

3. Prejudging

Many voting representatives (laity and ministers) believe they know what they "should" think about most issues before they arrive at General Assembly. It is hard to imagine that 12-24

minutes of debate (the typical time given debate in Assembly business sessions) will result in much learning occurring around complex issues.

4. Forced Choices

In the current practice, by the provision of only red microphones (for those who wish to speak against a motion) and green microphones (for those who wish to speak for a motion), only those with a definite opinion seem to be encouraged to engage in the debate. Though "the Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly" and Robert's Rules of Order, Revised do provide for questions and answers from the floor (regarding both procedural matters and the factual content of resolutions), the perception is often that they do not. This incorrect but frequent perception simply exacerbates the division and alienation already encouraged by the current cultural context.

5. Alienation

Because of the rules of debate that have been established to deal with resolutions, General Assembly business sessions have frequently become polarized, complete with cheering and applauding of particular speeches and voting outcomes, thus creating the impression and feeling that there are "winners" and "losers." In Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul appeals to us with these words: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (RSV). Our procedures and attitudes themselves work against maintaining "a Spirit of unity in the bond of peace."

6. Lack of ownership

Sometimes, the first word the church speaks on an issue should not be to the wider world, but to itself. Only when the church has worked through an issue in a significant way can its word to the world be relatively united. Then the church can attempt to speak a collective word to the world. In other words, resolutions for the purpose of witness to the wider world should represent "what we can say together." If the church's pronouncements to the world do not represent significant agreement of perspective within the church, the church's public witness lacks integrity and credibility. When there is no such significant agreement, pronouncements would better come from individuals and groups within the life of the church who do share significant agreements.

7. Lack of responsibility

In some cases, resolutions have become "cheap prophecy" for which no one takes individual responsibility. Voting representatives come to General Assembly, vote, and go home. But when they get home, relatively few accept responsibility for the General Assembly's statements. Rather, many remain remarkably and safely quiet and distanced from the Assembly's work. Instead of individuals taking responsibility for prophetic witness, the institution pays the price in

terms of community and trust. The institution may be required to pay a price for legitimately prophetic activity, but it ought not be manipulated into paying the price for cowardice or lack of commitment on the part of individual members. Group prophetic proclamations, without individual ownership and responsibility, lack credibility.

8. Changing context

Historically, the resolution process has been used to "push the envelope" of understanding among members. However, in the current cultural context of fear and suspicion, people no longer easily trust or respond to pronouncements made by bodies like General Assemblies (or the U.S. Congress). Consequently, the capacity to lead through resolutions in terms of education and changed values and commitments is diminished. Indeed, in the current context increased alienation is more often the result of the resolutions process. Other models for education and for deepening the understanding and the commitment of members are more effective and less destructive of the faith community.

9. Disunity

What positive public witness our resolutions have engendered in recent years has been diminished by the negative spectacle of the church fighting in public. Passionate opinion and disagreement is part of any group discernment process, of course, and my goal in offering alternatives to the sense-of-the-assembly resolution is not to eliminate passion or disagreement, or constructive conflict. But there is a difference between constructive conflict and mere "fighting" that is born of what the Apostle James calls "party spirit". Sadly, the spirit often found in recent Assemblies is opposite that commended by Jesus in John 17: 20-21 when he prayed, "that they may all be one.....so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (NRSV).

10. Lack of effective impact on political leaders

Though resolutions have been seen as a way of effecting government policy, US and Canadian politicians care little about Assembly pronouncements because they know these are not necessarily representative of the church's constituency. Today, politicians have more sophisticated methods of measuring constituents' attitudes, which are known often to be far removed from the pronouncements of mainline churches.

When we do pass resolutions regarding matters of public policy, we often do so on the basis of a political rationale, which is beyond the scope of our competence and which makes our resolutions indistinguishable from secular culture. Such resolutions regarding public policy as we do make should be made on the basis of a Biblical and ethical rationale, which is our area of competence.

11. Capacity for manipulation

Resolutions are frequently based on non-verbalized and unexamined assumptions. Because any group (as described by Paragraph 17 of The Design), from any perspective, can submit a resolution, the church can be forced to deal with their assumptions about the nature of the faith in their language and frame. This has made it easy for the church to be politically manipulated and to force decisions with inadequate preparation and consideration. The church needs to have the right to decide what issues it will or will not take up and in what manner and framework it will do so.

12. Isolation from congregational life

In a time of cultural disestablishment, when congregations encounter the mission field at their doorstep as well as across the globe, discussion of theology and contemporary issues in congregations needs to be strengthened. The present resolution process does not engender such discussion. In reality, many congregational pastors "protect their people" from the General Assembly docket in order to avoid controversy, or because they regard the resolutions as poorly written, or because they consider the resolution process itself to be non-helpful. More than a docket is needed to engage us in helpful discussions of the issues that challenge us; we need a process.

A NEW APPROACH

The Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly (II.C.) assign the General Minister and President the responsibility to recommend how proposed items of business will be categorized. The GMP's recommendation is then reviewed by the Executive Committee, which makes the final decision. As GMP, it is my intention to recommend, when I think it is appropriate and would help the church be more effective and constructive in its public witness, that items not requiring immediate decisions be diverted away from the sense-of-the-assembly resolution category and toward the research and reflection category, which permits a broader range of options for churchwide dialogue and action (including the possibility of a sense-of-the-assembly resolution after a period of research and reflection). Thus, it should be possible to try new approaches without changing the "Special Rules" while retaining the sense-of-the-assembly resolution as a continuing option when it seems most appropriate.²

So, what new approach or approaches might we use? I suggest that, rather than a "debate and vote" format, we may often find a "process of discernment" to be a more helpful approach. What do I mean by discernment? Norman Shawchuck and Gustave Rath define discernment as an essential part of the spiritual life. Quoting them, "Discernment is a decision making process that seeks faithfully to involve God in the decision making. Discernment is both a group process and a way of life. It involves both the head and the heart."³ "The ancient church fell back upon this faithful listening process whenever it seriously desired to know God's leading."⁴ The fifteenth chapter of Acts shows us a process through which the early church sought to discern the mind of God regarding the conditions under which Gentile believers were to be welcomed into the church. Had a sense-of-the-assembly resolution been brought to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem and voted upon after 24 minutes of debate, it is likely that Christianity would have

been no more than a sect of Judaism! Rather, there was time given for thorough discussion and consideration and the development of consensus around the matter.⁵

Discernment is more than getting the facts straight, though correct facts are essential to any process of discernment. It is also a matter of being attuned to and led by the Spirit of God, which may lead us to different conclusions than those we have already reached, no matter where we may be presently on the spectrum of thought about a particular issue and no matter how convinced of the correctness of our position we may be. Moving into this kind of openness to the Holy Spirit in the midst of highly charged opinions and feelings requires the help of a process that can help us feel secure enough to explore new possibilities together. This points to processes that go beyond Robert's Rules. In fact, all of us would have to admit, I think, that business meetings ordered only by Robert's Rules have sometimes yielded spirits that could hardly be called Holy! Discernment is a matter of seeking to be led by the Spirit so that, as Paul says (Ephesians 4:3), we may "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

What might a process of discernment look like for an entire denomination? I offer the following as a model.

- I. Proposal of Subjects for a Process of Discernment (requires General Assembly action).
- II. Reflection and Research Phase (two years or more).
- III. Study Document and Development of Statement of Discernment Phase (two years or more).
- IV. Acceptance of Statement (requires Assembly action).

A closer look at the parts of the model follows.

I. PROPOSAL OF SUBJECTS FOR A PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT

1. Any group listed in paragraph 17 of The Design (congregation, region, institution of higher education, general administrative unit or organization with recognized relationships with the general manifestation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), or the governing board of any of the above) can submit a proposal that the church take up an item for reflection and research in regard to a particular subject. The General Minister and President can give advice and counsel to any such group in regard to the shaping of their proposal in order to enhance the clarity of focus and purpose of the statement (Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly, II.A.). Furthermore, within the category of items for reflection and research, the business item could express the intention that a process of discernment format could be used in doing the reflection and research.

2. By the rules, the General Board considers such proposals and offers recommendations

and/or substitute proposals for consideration by the General Assembly. The Board might recommend that the Assembly accept or reject the proposal as submitted, or may offer a substitute proposal that would offer a broader or narrower definition of the subject (Special Rules, V). Nevertheless, the General Assembly retains the right to overrule the General Board's recommendations or substitute proposals.

3. The Special Rules (I.B.4.b.) state that, "When an item is accepted for reflection and research, the Administrative Committee of the General Board shall in its next meeting establish, in consultation with the submitting entity, a process for moving the reflection and research forward. One element in the process shall be an interest group during the next General Assembly. Other options might include, but not be limited to:

- Encouragement of individual inquiry and reflection
- Organization of response from local study groups
- Incorporation into ongoing educational programs
- Suggestions of input-feedback in retreats
- Enlistment of constituted bodies in regions
- Preparation of articles for denominational publications
- Assignment to an existing group
- Formation of a task force
- Proposal of a study document
- Request for research by particular scholars
- Consultation with ecumenical/non-denominational agencies
- Arrangement of seminars or conferences"

This paragraph does not prohibit a process from being designed in advance, subject to the General Assembly's action. Furthermore, by permitting other options, the rules provide for the possibility of a process of discernment such as that described below.

II. THE REFLECTION AND RESEARCH PHASE

1. This phase would begin as soon as possible after the General Assembly has agreed to enter into a process of discernment within the category of reflection and research regarding a particular subject.

2. A steering committee of six persons would be appointed by the GMP in consultation with the Moderators, the submitting group (or groups) and such other persons as may seem helpful. The committee would be appointed with attention given to achieving an adequate measure of the kinds of diversity we ordinarily seek in constituting committees (geography, gender, lay/clergy, race, ethnicity, etc.) and especially created to provide diversity of theology and opinion in regard to the subject itself. A different steering committee would be appointed for each subject being considered.

3. The steering committee would design a process for reflection and research which

would ordinarily include the following:

- a) a broad examination of the Biblical witness related to the particular subject.
- b) a church-wide survey designed to identify current points of agreement and disagreement, interests and questions around the subject, and other pertinent information. Such a survey might include, for example, "hearings" such as those recently held in the US by the World Council of Churches concerning the issue of racism.
- c) a research process that would engage scholars and other interested persons in writing papers that would further clarify positions and issues in the matter including identification of positions held historically outside and inside of the church (including past and current thinking among our ecumenical partners who inevitably face the same issues we do).
- d) a dialogical process that would give interested persons a fair and reasonable opportunity ("fair" in terms of a breadth of positions presented and "reasonable" in terms of, for example, specific travel times and distances) to reflect on the results of the research process and to talk to one another in public settings about the subject. Such events should incorporate prayer and worship in their design. Minutes of these events would be recorded in order to preserve the essence of relevant comments and questions. Such a dialogical process would include some provision for open discussion of the subject at General Assembly (perhaps through a forum, for example).

III. THE STUDY DOCUMENT AND STATEMENT OF DISCERNMENT PHASE

The steering committee would oversee the development of a Preliminary Statement of Discernment document based upon the results of the reflection and research phase. This Preliminary Statement of Discernment would be distributed across the church for reaction and carefully documented response. A revised document would then be created based upon responses to the initial document. The purpose of the "final" document would be to identify what we Disciples can say together, to identify points of significant disagreement, to identify significant current programmatic and/or other missional responses to the subject across the church, and to identify actions that might be implemented by the church in any or all of its manifestations or by various groups within the life of the church. The resultant document, a Proposed Statement of Discernment, might include a minority report if the steering committee (in consultation with the GMP and Moderator) deemed it to be helpful. It is also possible in regard to a particular issue that the Proposed Statement of Discernment may simply state that the church as of yet has no clear discernment of the mind of God in regard to a particular subject.

IV. ACCEPTANCE OF STATEMENT

The Proposed Statement of Discernment would then be acted upon by the General Assembly as a sense-of-the-assembly resolution, submitted by the Administrative Committee, as a statement of the church's current discernment in regard to a particular subject. In case of failure to obtain an

affirming vote, the Proposed Statement of Discernment would be automatically referred back to the General Board for further consideration. The General Board could decide to (1) abandon the subject altogether, (2) delay further consideration for a time, (3) refer the document for further work and re-consideration by the General Assembly, or (4) direct the appointment of a new steering committee to begin the discernment process anew.

Presuming that the reflection and research phase and the study document and development of a Statement of Discernment phase each took two years, the process of discernment would be completed in four years. However, depending upon the complexity of the subject and the urgency of the matter, the process might be designed in a particular case so as to take less or more time to complete.

In Conclusion

In the January 1993, *Ecumenical Review*, Mary Tanner wrote, ". I hope we shall grasp at a deeper level that difference, tension, and even conflict will always be a part of the life of the church this side of the kingdom. We are called to stick with the pain of difference and to live through it: 'Sharp things that divide us can paradoxically turn out to be gift....The world with all its divisions is not used to such a possibility such as this: that those on opposing sides should stay together, bear each other's burdens, even enter one another's pain.' If we are able, by grace, to live together in visible communion while bearing the cost of difference, never again saying 'I have no need of you,' we shall get hold, at a deeper level, of a communion with a God who suffers and we shall be rewarded with an experience of reconciliation and unity grounded in the unity of God the Holy Trinity at whose heart is forever a cross."⁶

It is my fervent hope that this process, or something similar to it, will enable us to engage in meaningful biblical, theological and ethical discourse while also curtailing the current emotional, spiritual and ecclesiological violence that is sometimes engendered by the present sense-of-the-assembly resolution process. I would envision a maximum of three or four subjects for discernment being before the church at any one time.

In order to provide ongoing counsel to the General Board and coordination of the processes of discernment (and of ongoing groups for dialogue that will enhance Disciples' understanding without necessarily leading to sense-of-the-assembly resolutions or other business items), I propose that a General Board Standing Committee for Discernment be appointed by the Moderator in consultation with the General Minister and President and approved by the General Board. This committee of persons would constitute one of the sections of the General Board so that it could meet during regular General Board meetings and thus limit cost. As a section, it would also deal with other business (like other sections). It would include a representative from the Council of Theological Education and a representative from the Council of Colleges (DHE), and others chosen to reflect the kinds of balance we ordinarily seek in such committees. The Office of General Minister and President would provide a person to serve as staff to this committee.

In addition to this process of discernment, it is my intention to encourage through the General Board Standing Committee for Discernment mentioned above regular ongoing forums on issues of faith, social justice, and theology at various locations around North America. Assuming interest and support on the part of regions, I would hope there would be at least one dialogical session in each region biennially.⁷ These regional forums could be designed and implemented by the Standing Committee for Discernment, if a region so desired. Or, a region could design its own forum, or forums, as a contribution to the discernment process. Also, forums on subjects other than those which are being addressed by a formal process of discernment, should continue to be a feature of General Assemblies. In addition, "electronic forums" can be continuously held on Discipenet.

Of course, general units, regions, congregations and other institutions within the church retain the right and the responsibility to make their own statements from time to time regarding particular issues. Likewise, individual Disciples always retain the right to exercise their own judgment and conscience regarding particular issues and concerns.

This proposal comes from the General Minister and President and provides for extensive initiative and leadership by the GMP. I believe this is appropriate and needed. The GMP must not simply be an administrator, as important as administrative leadership is, but must also take seriously the responsibility of providing pastoral leadership that helps the church face up to its biblically mandated responsibilities, including the prophetic responsibilities. It is also my intention in giving counsel as GMP to help shape proposals so that they enhance trust and community rather than tearing it down, so as to "build up the body of Christ."

POST SCRIPT

It would be helpful if there could be a staff person in the Office of General Minister and President to give time and energy to coordination of the work of the Standing Committee for Discernment, resourcing of such steering committees as may be appointed from time to time, and the regional forum process. Since there is no budget for such a position, it is my intention to seek funding for such through a grant proposal.

However, if taken seriously, this discernment process actually represents a fairly radical new way of "doing church." It would require some change in the way we operate in each of the three manifestations and changes in specific portfolios and priorities. Ultimately, a grant will not suffice in moving us toward this new model; we will need to find funding sources from within our regular life. As daunting as that task may seem, I believe it would be worth the struggle to do so because it represents a whole new approach to Christian education and helps us become a "teaching church" (or perhaps it would be more accurate to say a "learning church"); and in a time of cultural disestablishment, we need such an ongoing means by which to clarify our Christian values and to choose meaningful and well-grounded Christian action.

¹ There are many hard-working members of the press who strive for accuracy in their reporting and who help the church's story get heard. However, due to limitations of time and staff, it is not unusual for some news organizations to print stories that are based on incorrect information and/or incorrect assumptions about how the church is organized.

² If a group submitting an item of business is dissatisfied with the Executive Committee's ruling, the Special Rules permit the group to appeal to the Administrative Committee.

³ *Benchmarks of Quality in the Church*, by Norman Shawchuck and Gustave Rath. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, pp. 47-52.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a helpful discussion of discernment as a decision-making process, see Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, pp. 150-159.

⁶ "The Time Has Come: A Vision for the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order," by Mary Tanner; in *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 45, Number 1 (January 1993), page 11. The extended quotation in this passage is from E. Templeton, "Response to the Archbishop of Canterbury," *The Lambeth Conference 1988*. London: Church House Publishers, 1989.

⁷ Rod Parrott of the Disciples Seminary Foundation at Claremont is currently offering a program designed along these lines. Such regional forums could be financed by people paying their own way, plus some sort of scholarship system worked out to make it possible for those needing assistance to participate.