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**THE CHURCH FOR DISCIPLES OF CHRIST;  
A PROGRESS REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY (1995)**

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This progress report is shared with all expressions of the Church in the hope that it will be studied seriously and responses sent to the Commission on Theology through the Council on Christian Unity. The studies and responses will, we believe, bring maturity to our thoughts about the Church.

Since the 1993 General Assembly the Commission on Theology has been at work on a statement on the nature and the purpose of the Church. This statement in 1995, entitled "The Church for Disciples of Christ," will embrace and extend the Commission's previous work on the theme. The final text is to be completed in advance of the 1997 General Assembly and formally presented as a report for that General Assembly's consideration.

In this work the Commission deals with a number of key concerns relating to the meaning of the Church for Disciples today. These include: (1) a review and appraisal of the understanding of the Church in the Disciples heritage and in the contemporary context; (2) an exploration of the biblical testimony basic for understanding the nature and purpose of the Church; (3) an account of the practices by which the true identity of the Church is constituted and the signs by which that identity is recognized; (4) and an analysis of the character and quality of the Church's corporate life, with special reference to issues of church polity (i.e., relationship and organizational structure).

The Commission is mindful that while clarity about the nature and purpose of the Church is always important for Christians, the need seems especially urgent once again, at this juncture of our church's history. From our study and discussion to date two lines of thought emerge which we share now with the wider Church. Our hope is that they may serve to stimulate further reflection and discussion throughout the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We invite Disciples to consider, first, "The True Identity of the Community Called to be Church" and, second, "Principles for Adapting the Structure of the Church in Faithfulness to its Calling."

**Part 1: The True Identity of the Community Called to be Church**

The Church is that community called into being by God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ, and given life through the power of God's spirit, in order to praise and serve the living God who creates, redeems, and sustains the world. All those-of whatever race, nationality, or culture-who respond to this calling are joined together as one people and signify their corporate identity by . . .

- their shared confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,

- their incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism,
- their thankful celebration of Christ's saving work and abiding presence through the Lord's Supper (Eucharist),
- their common commitment to direct their lives in accord with the testimony of Scripture, and
- their shared experience of the Holy Spirit who empowers them for ministry as disciples and ambassadors of Christ to and for the world.

This community, through its life of unity in diversity and through its witness in word and deed, exists to glorify the name of God, to proclaim from generation to generation and to the ends of the earth the Good News of God in Jesus Christ, to participate in God's work of liberation, redemption, and reconciliation for all people, and so to be a sign of God's coming Reign.

This statement-drawn from Scripture, ecumenical dialogue, and our particular experience as Disciples of Christ-focuses attention on the distinctiveness of the community called to be Church. Disciples, like all Christians, must seek to focus on the distinctiveness of the Church, both because powers of this world-legislatures, law courts, tax codes, news media, and others-are always ready to define the Church according to standards of their own and because even the most dedicated of church members at times become forgetful or uncertain of the true identity of the community to which they belong. When members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) focus on the community which God has called forth to be Church, will we all not weigh the following points carefully?

1. The Church is first and foremost a gift of God. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the Church primarily as the product of a human urge for fellowship?
2. The Church is essentially a community formed by its members' relationship to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit and thus to one another. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the Church as the building in which the community meets?
3. The Church is a community-a people-whose life together is essential to its character as a sign of God's reconciling purpose for all creation. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the Church as a loose-knit association of individuals or a coalition of groups?
4. The Church exists for the sake of praising God and participating in God's mission in and for all the world. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that the Church's sole or primary purpose is to satisfy the needs and desires of its own members?
5. The Church's essential unity is founded, and utterly dependent, on the reconciling love of God in Christ. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that the unity of the Church can be formed by human agreement or may be broken because of human disagreement?
6. The Church witnesses to God's intended wholeness for all creation by transcending in its own life those barriers of race, sex, culture, and nationality that divide persons from one another. Is it

not then a misunderstanding to think that the Church may exclude any of the God-given diversity of the human family or limit leadership in the Church on the basis of race, gender, culture, or national background?

7. The Church is a universal fellowship that "appears wherever believers in Jesus Christ are gathered in his name" (The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), par. 2). Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the Church only as a local congregation of believers?

8. The Church must develop an organizational structure in order to fulfill its God-given mission, but no one form of organization is essential for its true identity because the Church "in faithfulness to its mission . . . continues to adapt its structure to the needs and patterns of a changing world" (The Design, par. 2). Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that some particular structure of the Church is ordained by God for all times and all places?

9. The covenant on which the Church is founded is initiated and sealed by God. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the Church's covenantal bonds of love solely in terms of contractual obligations toward present or future organizational structures?

10. The Church extends across time as well as space, binding together all who confess Jesus Christ in whatever age. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that we may make the Church what we will, without regard for the witness of the faithful who have come before us and for our responsibilities to the faithful who are to come after us?

11. Membership in the Church is a matter of humble gratitude to God and joyful responsibility rather than privilege and has nothing to do with human merit. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that belonging to the Church is a cause for boasting of special status before God?

12. The chief end of the Church, like that of life itself, is to glorify God. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the Church as an arena for human aggrandizement?

## **Part 2: Principles for Adapting the Structure of the Church in Faithfulness to its Calling**

The needs and patterns of a changing world pose for Disciples in these times many challenges of ministry and questions regarding the meaning of faithfulness to our God-given mission. By our Design, we affirm the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to be a community formed by covenant relationship with God and one another. In response to that covenant, God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ, we have fashioned a structure for a sharing of life together in ministry. Hence, each of the challenges and questions we face today brings with it another question as well: Is the structure of our Church capable of serving its intended purpose?

This question about structure calls for more than a simple yes or no answer, and for more than ad-hoc responses to institutional emergencies. It requires evaluating the total structure of the Church in light of the character and obligations of our covenantal calling. This, we believe, is to be of paramount concern to Disciples in response to what are perceived as stresses, strains, and

shortcomings of our Church structure. Neither maintaining nor altering our present organizational structure can be truly justified on any other basis. Thus the concern is not only paramount but urgent, and deserves churchwide attention.

Discussions about organizational change are already underway within our Church. Others will surely follow, and in due course action will be proposed and taken. From the study of the nature and purpose of the Church that the Commission on Theology has undertaken, there have emerged a number of points we regard as worthy of close consideration by all during this period of churchwide deliberation:

(1) The covenant conception of Church set out in the Preamble of The Design is an apt expression for the foundation, nature, and mission of the Church. The particularities of organizational structure set forth in The Design, however, must be understood as the timely means by which our life-in-covenant with God and one another was given an institutional embodiment in "earthen vessels." Timely as they were, and surely in many instances still of value, those means are of human design and therefore reformable. The Design is open to amendment, and in any case allows considerable latitude and flexibility for reorganizing structural bodies, relations, policies, and practices.

Neither the desire nor the pressure to reform the organizational structures of our Church should blind us to significant, hard-won gains made by the adoption of The Design. Among the gains that are too precious ever to be "reformed" away, even in the name of dire practical necessity, are these critical acknowledgments:

- that God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ is the prior and final reality of our lives;
- that God's covenant draws us into covenant community one with another;
- that the covenant community into which we are drawn is the Church, and hence one body
  - which, through sacred vows of union in local (congregational), regional, and general spheres of association, participates in the Church Universal;
- that the character and activity of this community are to be fitting witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for the benefit of the world, to the glory of God.

Acknowledgments such as these are standards to be used in evaluating proposals for the maintenance or the alteration of our church structure. In adapting organizational forms and relationships, care must be taken that we reinforce, not weaken, the covenantal ties which bind us to God and one another.

(2) In addition to the acknowledgments outlined above, other concerns of covenantal faithfulness ought not to be overlooked in dealing with issues of church structure. One of these is a lesson coming from Scripture, the Disciples heritage of checks-and-balances among power centers, and the experiences of women and minorities among us. Organizational structures have the power to liberate or to alienate. Therefore, we should examine church structure in order to determine when, where, and who it liberates and when, where, and who it alienates. And it is essential to seek those structures which empower every member of the body as well as the body as a whole

for ministry.

Another, equally important lesson has to do with maintaining a finely balanced, creative tension between tradition and innovation. Each has value. A Church that hastily jettisons tradition will be easy prey to fads and demagoguery. A Church that is too resistant to change risks failing to heed the Holy Spirit which, speaking through the cries of those outside established circles of power and privilege or through the still, small voice of conscience within, directs us beyond the status quo. Therefore, we should examine church structure in light of its capacity to discern those elements of tradition worth preserving and those innovations worth accepting. And it is essential to seek structures which conserve the best of the Church's heritage while allowing for fresh insights and new initiatives.

Structures of this sort value inclusivity, diversity, tolerance, and flexibility. They aim at maintaining a balanced, creative tension between the power of the individual/congregation and the wider Church. Whatever decisions are finally made must be subject to appeal and reconsideration, and conscientious dissent must be allowed. Yet on occasion the Church must take a clear stand, and once taken, firmly held-until with greater wisdom we are shown a still more perfect way. All those we entrust with leadership and decision-making authority in the Church are fallible. Blind obedience and servile submission to others have no place in covenant community. But each of us is fallible too, no less so than the covenant partners to whom we have entrusted leadership and decision-making authority. Unyielding insistence on having our own way and withdrawing from or inflicting pain on our brothers and sisters when we disagree with them are breaches of our covenantal promises.

(3) The evaluation and adaptation of church structures in keeping with our covenantal obligations are matters of judgment which call for wise collective decision-making. Hence, it is imperative that we structure and conduct the process of collegial decision-making in our Church in a manner befitting a covenant community. The voices of all in the Church are to be heard. Each member and each group needs opportunity to share in shaping the life and work of the Church. Because it is impossible for all Christians to gather together to make every decision, even in our congregations, the Church is well-advised to rely on methods of representative self-government, and to embrace basic democratic values which honor open, reasoned debate, respect the will of the majority and the integrity of the minority, and invite the common consent of all. This is certainly a part of what it means to live and serve in covenant together.

(4) The collegial decisions that Disciples make are decisions about whether and how we will be the Church. These are decisions regarding the understanding of the Christian faith we share as a covenant community, and so-as the word "theology" refers to "faith seeking understanding"-they are theological decisions. Collegial theological decisions are made constantly, and routinely, by the community of faith, among Disciples within and across the local, regional, and general manifestations of our Church. Many of these decisions are by now so much part of our own church tradition-for example, "as Disciples, our congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper every Sunday, and this is what we say and do"-that we are hardly aware that they are indeed collegial and theological decisions. The same holds for the many decisions

customarily thought of as simply practical, or perhaps even worldly. It is common, for example, to hear it said that our church assemblies deal, or should deal, only with items of "business" rather than of "theology"-as if the teaching of the faith were not the business of the Church and the business of the Church (including the stewardship of funds) were not bound up with our understanding of faith, that is, our theology.

To these examples of the collegial theological decisions we make, many others can be added. It is unfortunate when such decisions in the Church go unrecognized for what they really are, and even more so when they are made without benefit of the wide-ranging, open, and earnest theological dialogue they deserve. Disciples are by no means to be singled out in this respect. There is no foolproof system of church self-government; and given the humanity of the Church (and the persisting power of sin among us), none is to be expected. For its part, the structure of our Church provides for collegial decision making in the manner of a demographically-inclusive, representative democracy. There is nothing in or about our organizational structure to prevent us from engaging in theological dialogue and in theologically-deliberative decision making. We need only to resolve to do so.

Disciples, like Christians in every Church, certainly have good reason to keep close watch over church decision making and its outcomes. We want the process and its decisions to be fair and wise. Theological opinion in our Church is certainly varied-so much so that the popular image of a single spectrum of positions ranging from conservative to liberal or from traditional to innovative is doomed to misrepresent it. By its heritage and ethos, our Church commends unity, freedom, inclusiveness, openness, tolerance, non-judgmentalism, and anti-authoritarianism. These qualities of shared life as Church are in keeping with the gift and claim of the Gospel. They are in fact to be counted among the theological strengths of our Church, regardless of their public appeal at any given moment in history. Enforced uniformity in every detail of church teaching and church practice (creedalism, dogmatism, ecclesiasticism, and parochialism) is always a clear and present danger to the Church. Equally dangerous, however, is a theological indifferentism which grants that "anything goes" and that "diversity of opinion" is without limit-in short, that faith and faithfulness amount to whatever any individual or group chooses to make of them.

(5) It is therefore incumbent upon congregations, regions, and the general units of our Church to encourage theological dialogue and to exemplify the importance of theological deliberation by the way decisions are made and their outcomes are reported. Above all, members of our Church should be equipped as well as encouraged to take on the theological responsibility which falls to us because our church structure is that of a representative democracy. It would be well for Disciples to assess whether our organizational structure makes sufficient provision for channeling our diversity of theological viewpoints along paths leading to unity and the upbuilding of the whole body. Over the years efforts have been made, some quite fruitful, to help our Church become a community of theological conversation-through, e.g., churchwide conferences, study commissions, and workshops at assemblies. Even so, merely occasional efforts are no substitute for established organizational structures promoting study, reflection, dialogue, and constructive debate about issues of faith and the meaning of faithfulness

throughout the Church.

In this regard, there is need for Disciples to clarify when and how our Church might best express its corporate judgment on basic issues of faith. People wish and in any case deserve to know the beliefs and practices that are upheld by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Faithfulness to the Gospel and effectiveness in ministry demand clarity on this matter. This need is as critical to congregational life and to regions as it is to the general church. But precisely because it is more comprehensive and representative, the general church-especially the General Assembly-is the high-profile, churchwide arena in which we demonstrate our unity or our disunity. It is important, then, that Disciples clarify the role of the General Assembly (as well as the general administrative units and their officers) in discerning and expressing the common teachings of this Church. It is likewise important to set forth the theological underpinnings and theological implications of what The Design refers to (in apparently theologically neutral terms) as the nature, purpose, functions, responsibilities, and rights of the general, regional, and congregational manifestations of this Church.

(6) As these comments indicate, to speak of the collegial theological decisions of the Church is not to speak of any one individual or group legislating and then trying to enforce a totally uniform understanding of the meaning of faith throughout the Church. It is to say, instead, that the Church as a whole is responsible for providing means, through its structure, for making collegial theological decisions about the teachings and practices of this Church. Our covenant conception of Church requires that in devising these means we acknowledge that congregations, regions, and general units function as inseparable, interdependent, and complementary parts of the one body. It also requires that whenever collegial decisions are made, we carefully distinguish between those few truly "essential" matters which the Gospel obliges or forbids us to affirm and those many "non-essentials" on which wide diversity of thought and practice is embraced within the life of our Church.

This wording calls to mind a maxim that Disciples long ago incorporated into our heritage: "In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Although neither strictly biblical nor especially trendy, it is wise counsel nonetheless. As Disciples, we can learn from the course our journey in faith has taken that it is wise counsel with too little practical effect unless and until it finds its way into our Church's organizational structure. The only truly timely, and truly faithful, means by which to give our life-in-covenant with God and one another institutional embodiment in these times will be those which make this maxim a guideline for our Church's every undertaking.