Imagine With Me: Covenant with Bill Lee
August 6, 2021

Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another episode of Imagine With Me where I have the opportunity to talk with so many leaders and creative people across the church. Today I'm excited and honored to have with us the Rev. Dr. Bill Lee, the retired former pastor of the Loudon Avenue Christian Church in Roanoke, Virginia. Bill is well known to so many of us across the church. His leadership has been shared on boards, including regional board, general boards, and Bill also served as the moderator of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) for the biennium 2005-2007. And so, Bill, we are just so excited to have you with us today. Bill is a friend and mentor to many, including myself, and so it's just an honor to have you with us this morning.

William “Bill” Lee: Thanks, Terri. It's always a joy be with my general minister and president. Thank you.

THO: Great. We could talk all day, but we have about 15 to 20 minutes here. I wanted to talk with you about the work that you've been involved with on the governance committee of the general board. And that committee has three subcommittees, one of which is covenant education. And we've been talking with the church about this covenant conversations curriculum because, as the governance committee, as you know, we were in retreat. And as we thought about where God is calling the church, one of the things that we felt we needed to do is to sort of remember who we say we are, and then to live into being who we say we are. And covenant was that really important theological grounding that we all felt we needed to have. And I know that's been a big part of your own ministry. Could you share with us the importance that you saw in helping your congregation understand what covenant means? Why was this so important to you? And then maybe even further, what benefits did you see of that embrace of covenant in the life of Loudon Avenue?

BL: Yes, sir. I try to always let people know that I'm not a generational Disciple, though I've been a Disciple so long I ought to be a generational Disciple, being that I've been a Disciple for 50 plus years! When I came to Loudon Avenue, which is a very traditional Disciple church. In my early years there - actually my first two or three years - it was clear that the church had a understanding of Discipledom, but it was oral. And mine was from a lot of reading, because I had to do all of the positive work in order to get through licensing and ordination. And I just felt that we were in two different places, and the best thing to do was for them to go through what I had been through. So I
introduced them to all of the books, all of the writings, the stuff that I had read, with, not watered down, but more digestible. And one of the things I discovered was indeed the Preamble to the Design. In those days it was not the Design but the affirmation effect. Yeah, it was actually the Provisional Design, original, right, provisional, so that Preamble became, for us at Loudon Avenue, the affirmation of faith.

And the line that really helped us was, "by God's covenant of love, we are bound to one another." And that was the problem, the hook for me at Loudon Avenue. In elders' meetings, elders' and deacons' meetings, board meetings - trying to unravel what does it mean to be a people who declare that we were people together under God's covenant of love.

And so I helped the church understand that those days are three manifestations of the church, and discovered that we had more manifestations, because we were also part of an all-Black group called Piedmont District Convention. And the district, and so the covenant helped me link us to the whole church. And so the Loudon Avenue membership, especially the leadership, became acutely aware of what it was to be part of Indianapolis - and not in a negative sense because, you know, sometimes people say "Indianapolis said." Oh no. Indianapolis became our Vatican in the sense that there was a place where we could get resources, a place where we became whole church. So that's what I did in those early days, teaching the whole concept of covenant.

THO: So how did you go about that? If a pastor wanted to think about important ways to kind of break down that idea of covenant and open it up? How did you go about doing that?

BL: Well, I did two things. Once I wrestled with what covenant was for me from a Biblical standpoint, and because we are People of the Cup, the Lord's Table became so critical. And I would say to them, "Every time we do this, every Sunday, we're in covenant. We talk about covenant, this new covenant." And so I said, "Let me try to unravel what it means." So using Ronald Osborne's book, The Faith We Affirm, that breaks down each of those segments of the affirmation of faith. Well, the Preamble, which we have made as an affirmation of faith and printed that in our church bulletin, we learned to recite it verbatim without ever reading it, because it was part of us. And then teaching that, piece by piece, what each of those paragraphs meant for us as a church.

And then, pre-personal computers, trying to show the church how we were connected through the Pension Fund, Christian Church Foundation, Disciples Missions, NBA - how all of those ministries, higher ed, how all of that helped us be a better church.

What probably helped us most in the covenant was Week of Compassion. There was a flood in '85. I was by then eight years in as pastor. We were affected by the flood. Week of Compassion stepped in in a mighty way, not just with money but the fact that someone called and said, "we care about what you're doing." And I went to the pulpit
the next Sunday and said, "That's why we're covering the church. That's what it means to be in covenant." And then I always will tell them that your pastor one day will be able to retire, and retire with a decent pension because of the covenant that you pay into the Pension Fund and that, in turn, enables me come to a place of retirement. But also the literature, the information we would get from DHM in the educational material - anything that helped us as a local church be church. I had reminded them that was part of covenant.

So the big piece was making sure that missions was in our budget. You couldn't talk about covenant and not talk about money. So I said we have got to make sure that, based on what we are capable of doing as a church, that we be mission minded. And therefore the church to this day has that mission mind. And makes sure those checks are in Indianapolis on a regular basis, because that's what it is to be in covenant. Not just to say it, but you have to actually be it. And for us, putting that in the budget and making sure we did that, especially in all the special days. We try to make sure we adhere to that, because each time we did a special day (offering) was reminding the people this is what covenant does. Reconciliation - that's part of covenant. Our Easter offering - part of covenant. Christmas offering - part of covenant. And that money is then used.

I thought something - I really forgot sometimes to show - is that we would get the print out of where what percentage of our money went and I would share with the board. The money you sent; this is where it goes. And so it's really helped the church be cohesive and understand that the church is bigger than Loudon Avenue Christian Church, at the corner of Eighth and Loudon Avenue.

**THO:** You mentioned reciting and sharing, not just reciting but really sharing, almost in litany fashion, the affirmation of faith and knowing the Preamble. My home church, formerly Second Christian, now Light of the World - I know there are other churches where that practice is done. What would you say to Disciples who say, "Oh, we're not a creedal people?" How do we distinguish the learning of that Preamble from some sort of creed or declaration of faith that you have to sign? How would you help people distinguish what you mean by that that doesn't offend our Disciples sensibilities?

**BL:** For me, it's catechism. It's a way to teach our members basically what we believe as a church. One of the things that non-Disciples will ask Disciples, "Now what do y'all believe?" And when people were coming to Loudon from Pentecostalism, Presbyterianism, even Catholicism, they wanted to know what did we believe. And I said, "Each Sunday we rehearse to each other, this is what we believe. And this," I said, "no one is forced do this." I said this is a basic statement. This is what we affirm. This is the faith we affirm.

So it became catechism for me, a way of teaching, especially a new person. New person came to Loudon Avenue - this is who we are and this is how we be the church. The beauty of that is that the members, when they had it down, then all I had to do was
pair them with a new person, say, "Take them through it." And so it became a teaching tool. Every new person came to Loudon Avenue, I went through that affirmation of faith - this is what we believe. And I'll tell them, I said, "This is not - there's no doctrine. This is no mandate, but this is how Disciples generally, across the life of our church, we all pretty much believe this, and it's a faith we affirm." So it's catechism for me.

THO: Right. I remember telling students when I was at the University of Chicago Divinity School as dean of students, and, of course, we have a Disciples divinity house there. And one day at orientation for the new academic year, I just happened to sit at a table where there were other Disciple students. And one of the non-Disciples said, "So what exactly is it that you Disciples believe?" And the Disciples students simply chuckled.

But I think sometimes our theological diversity, the fact that we hold that as very sacred, that that diversity does not mean that we don't believe anything, right? Yes, we affirm, right, that the Preamble says we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and proclaim him the Lord and Savior of the world. Period. I mean, if you just took that sentence, that's the heart really of what we believe.

And I think there's so many important things in that affirmation that it's the floor. It's not the ceiling or the walls, or it doesn't tie us into our own constructs. So, that's really helpful to think of it as catechism. You were going to say something. I think.

BL: Yeah, so when I say catechism, it is the most foundational Biblical theological piece that I think we have in our church. And it's not offensive. How do you get upset by saying we believe that Jesus is the Christ? Or how do you get upset when we say that we are communal? How do you get upset when we say that we live by God's covenant of love? How do you get upset? And basically, we're saying that before we came up with the statement "from our doorsteps into the world," that's what we say in our affirmation. So I just think it's a marvelous teaching point for us.

THO: Yeah, I think we've had a wonderful conversation and engagement with the members of the administrative committee and with the general board. We've done some small group discussions around that Preamble. And it's amazing how many people are unfamiliar with it and how many people are finding new inspiration, I think, from it. I remember in our retreat where we just kept going back over that line - "the covenant of love that binds us to God and to one another." And so those are the powerful pieces.

You recently retired a couple of years ago and I know you've been very, very intentional, right, about how you are the retired pastor and that clergy ethic that allows you - you've allowed your successor to develop that relationship, etc. How do you think that legacy of what that congregation has learned about covenant has served them since you left? Have those things stuck? Do you think, I mean, are they, you know...
BL: Yeah. I preached at Loudon this past Sunday. It's the first time I have been with them since September of last year. I preached there when the pastor became ill for a period of time. He asked would I come back for a month. And so I've stayed away. But one of the things that he and I talked about yesterday, and then the officers, they all called after worship. It was a wonderful worship experience and they said thank you. And I said for what? You served us 39 years. It could have been a big mess for whoever followed you if we were not a church that had believed in covenant. I said, "So y'all unraveled that for me, that, you know, that made me excited."

Yeah, and they said that, "We have not had any big fights, no big arguments, because you said before you left that we needed to know who we were, and we knew that we were connected to this larger church." So the work they have been doing is helping my successor, who's non-Disciples, to understand why Loudon does what Loudon does. And not to be a hindrance to him or of the work that he - the excitement and imagination he brings but it - he says himself, he said this has got to be the most grounding I have seen in a church in my life, that the people actually know what the church is supposed to do.

And therefore, when I shared with them - he's in the Pension Fund - I said, okay, let's make sure keep all this stuff straight. You have been to Loudon Avenue to preach.

THO: Yes, yes.

BL: That's serious business, the constant connection. Bill Spangler-Dunning, the new regional minister, has preached at Loudon Avenue because the people understand the connection. And they're helping the new pastor understand the connection, which in a real sense, has kept argument away. So I said this to them yesterday when they asked me how am I doing. I said, your pastor called me a week ago. I checked him how are you doing. I said I'm doing wonderful because Loudon Avenue is doing wonderful. I do not hear in the streets about fight, argument and though I want you to become a different church because you don't need to live in the years I was pastor, but the foundation is there. So I tease them. I'm delighted that mission money's still coming, the church is growing.

But it is Disciple, so the most wonderful thing that happened yesterday is that they did something - and they, I know, they winked at me. I had the old affirmation, the whole affirmation of faith, the old - okay, so I didn't have the updated language before I left - so yesterday they had the latest version of it and I had to now read from the monitor until I got the new rhythm that they had. That was wonderful - the fact that rather than discard it, they have now picked up the latest version with all of the language that we should have in this day and time.

So it just says to me, the fact that they updated the affirmation says to me that they are still hooked in this covenant piece and things are going well. So I would say to anyone, the covenant will really cement the life of that congregation. So when pastors
come and pastors go, the congregation knows we are Disciples of Christ, and it's a wonderful church to be part of. It's just wonderful.

**THO:** And, Bill, thank you for saying that. We always joke and say we're the best kept secret, and, of course, you know, as GMP, some of the questions you always get are, "Well, how are you going to help the church grow, right, and how are we going to get Disciples out there?" And I think one of the things that we've been saying, and what we're calling those four reimaginings, that in order for us to have that courage to imagine and the way to have the permission to change and even to walk in freedom from fear is that permission to change is already in that document. Yes. That Preamble is an important theological statement, but that Design, not even going back as far as Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, but in the '60s when they were creating this vision for the Design - even the Merger Agreement - the idea was that we would continue to grow and change and so the permission that we have to change is grounded not only in those documents but in our understanding of covenant.

And I would also say that it's so important that pastors, you know ... The excitement that we have from new pastors like you were once a new pastor to the Disciples - I became a Disciple at 20 and I happened to join a church. I didn't realize that what I loved about that church was its Discipleness, right, until I went to divinity school, or in regional events. And I was around other Disciples outside the congregation, and I could recognize that DNA. And my prayer for the church is we have so many people, so many congregations who have a chalice on their door, or on their side, that they would come to understand the richness of what that means. Yes, we're self-governing, but all of our general ministries were created out of a sense of covenant that together we could take care of widows and retired pastors; that together we could have health and social service ministries; together we could have a ministry to higher education. All of these things - we could do together things that we couldn't do individually. And so I think that's just a powerful reminder.

I hope that people will also check out the workshop during this Saturday's virtual gathering. You and other members of that covenant education curriculum group will be there to talk about how congregations can use the covenant conversations curriculum.

So, Bill, thank you so much.

**BL:** You're welcome.

**THO:** For spending these few moments with me. I always look forward to sharing time and space. I thank you for your leadership, the wisdom that you always share so bountifully with so many people.

Disciples, covenant: this is the heart of our story. We don't have legislation and laws and rules that tell us who gets to do what. It's as Rev. Nadine Burton says, "it's a want-
to church, not a have-to." I hope you’ve been blessed by this testimony from the Rev. Dr. Bill Lee.

Again, that covenant education curriculum is available. You go to disciples.org and just search for the covenant conversations. I hope you are registered for our virtual gathering this Saturday, August 7th, starting at 11 am Eastern. We have two wonderful Bible lectures - the Rev. Yolanda Norton and Dr. Eric Smith - and we'll have a time of workshops in the afternoon, including a workshop on covenant education. And in the evening, we're going to have a worship service where I'll be privileged to bring the Word.

So let's be church together. Let's remember that we are in this covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another. That's at the heart of who we are. and as I always say, let's be the church that we say we are.

God bless you, Disciples and remember that God loves you and so do I. See you next time.