

A Response of the Lexington Theological Seminary Disciples Faculty to the Churches Uniting in Christ Document on Mutual Recognition and Mutual Reconciliation of Ministries

March 10, 2006

Dr. Robert Welsh, President of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), asked Lexington Theological Seminary to submit a response to the CUIC document on ministry.

In preparation for creating a response, a convocation was held at the Seminary on February 2, 2006, at which the six Disciples teaching faculty each spoke about their reactions to the document. In addition, the faculty met on February 20 for a thorough discussion of the document in order to formalize the response.

Disciples are ecumenical people. We have a great love for the unity of the church and our participation in the ecumenical movement is important to us. That makes our response to this document more difficult and painful for us. We do not like to oppose unity efforts, but we see a number of serious problems with the proposal. Many of us have hoped that the ecumenical movement would produce something new and exciting for the universal Christian community. However, this proposal simply proposes implementing a very old system that has had a mixed history. Therefore, with appreciation for the many good things the ecumenical movement has brought us, we offer our concerns.

We recognize that CUIC is the result of an effort that has gone on for over forty years and are aware that a General Assembly in Pittsburgh passed Resolution 9519 which committed the Disciples to continuing “the process of covenanting” as presented in *Churches in Covenant Communion* and *The COCU Consensus*.¹ However, we are not convinced that this resolution was approved after widespread discussion in the church. It is our perception that what many approved was to continue the process of covenanting, not the development of an Episcopal polity.

While Disciples are an ecumenical people, we are now living in a different time in history. There is a new appreciation of pluralism that calls for a different response to many issues than what may have been appropriate in the past. The original idea of COCU was laudable,

but since the 1960s there have been many new insights and understandings about what the unity of the church means.

We see serious differences between the background material for Resolution 9519 and the most recent document on the reconciliation of ministries. In that background material we are told that “there is no intention of making creeds a test of fellowship.” However, the new ministry document states that the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds will be “the doctrinal basis of our full communion” and that we agree to “use these creeds in worship as acts of praise and allegiance to the triune God, thus binding ourselves to the apostolic faith of the one Church in all centuries” and that we promise to “teach the faith of these creeds.”² There is significant difference in tone between the material for the 1995 resolution in the *Yearbook* and *Mutual Recognition and Mutual Reconciliation of Ministries* of 2005. There was an openness in the old documents that we do not see in this one.

Historically, Disciples have seen creeds as sources of division, not unity, in the church. The one thing that most Disciples appreciate above everything else is their theological freedom, the freedom to pursue their spiritual quest without rigid doctrinal definitions or restrictions.

In addition to our rejection of the adoption of creeds, our Disciples faculty members are unanimous in their opposition to the historic episcopacy as the means of reconciling ministries. Language is a powerful instrument. To designate someone as a bishop is to call to mind the history of that office which has sometimes been oppressive, restrictive, power hungry, elitist, and, of course, hierarchical. We do not, as the document suggests, “welcome the reception of the historic episcopate,”³ nor do we “hereby seek to receive that gift.”⁴ This proposal creates a church structure that we do not recognize and runs counter to the reason Disciples exist.

We are not interested in the historical succession of bishops with its implication that the ministries of those outside of that succession are somehow not as legitimate. The historical episcopacy does not appear to us to have any more benefit to the church than any other form of ministry. The term “bishop” carries much baggage with it, and to give someone that name implies a level of power that Disciples have always resisted.

We further object to the idea that bishops have the responsibility “for maintaining the apostolicity and unity of the worship and sacramental life of the church,”⁵ something that has always been the prerogative of the local congregation. We object to the notion that

bishops have the power to “guard the apostolic faith.”⁶ Disciples have always believed in the right of the individual to interpret scripture in light of his or her own study, experience, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This statement entails a loss of theological freedom.

We object to bishops being responsible “for the orderly transfer of ministerial authority.”⁷ That, once again, has always been a congregational matter along with helpful suggestions from regional officials. The statement that bishops are responsible for discipline⁸ also makes us uncomfortable. What does that mean?

The background statement for 9519 said, “Our participation in the covenanting process may help us find our own version of the ministry of oversight that is not hierarchical,”⁹ yet this whole ministry document is predicated upon a hierarchical system. In fact, it makes clear that ultimately all Disciples bishops would have to be ordained by bishops in the historic succession. Paragraph 79 reminds us that “full communion will not occur until all active bishops are included in the historic episcopal succession.”¹⁰ Once again, there is an implication that the ministries of clergy outside the historic succession are somehow less than legitimate.

The Disciples faculty are also uncomfortable with the idea that presbyters are ordained for the ministry of Word and Sacrament.¹¹ We have a long tradition of lay preaching in the Disciples. Beyond that, the idea of sacrament has crept into our church life without any serious discussion among our people about the difference between a sacrament and an ordinance. We are puzzled by the statement that in the Eucharist Presbyters offer “spiritual sacrifices.”¹² There has never been an element of sacrifice in the Disciples understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The document does not define what kinds of “spiritual sacrifices” are offered.

Among Disciples, the Lord’s Supper has always been a lay responsibility, and the implication that only Presbyters can preside at the table is contrary to our heritage. At youth camps, retreats, various kinds of meetings, and in Sunday worship, lay people have always been able to conduct the service of the Lord’s Supper and proclaim the gospel. Disciples have emphasized spiritual gifts, not hierarchical office.

Disciples have understood ordination not as a sacrament, but a setting aside of a person who has been appropriately educated to provide leadership in the church. We have not created a separate class.

We note that in paragraph 65b we are taken back to the seven sacraments of the medieval church.¹³ Disciples have never seen these as sacramental.

We applaud the CUIC effort to combat racism, but we do not see that hierarchy has anything to contribute to that. In fact, the concept of a hierarchy of power could make the situation worse.

One of our major disappointments is that nothing in the document indicates that the Disciples have brought anything to the CUIC table. Our tradition is completely ignored all the way through this document. While there is some mention of Presbyterian elders, there is nothing about what happens to Disciples lay elders and deacons in this scheme. We have been told that Disciples brought the concept of corporate episcopate, but it is not defined and disappears from the document after page 8.

Although the ministry document states that “none of our churches seek to remake the others in its own image,”¹⁴ we cannot escape the impression that this whole proposal was designed to satisfy one of the CUIC participants. The historic Disciples traditions of “no creed but Christ,” open communion, and confession of faith in Christ without creedal affirmation as the only requirement for church membership, still have validity. We are concerned about an attitude that we must have unity at all costs, that we have to give up our whole tradition to participate in CUIC. We have heard phrases like “unity in diversity,” but we do not see diversity here. We see bishops with doctrinal authority, presbyters representing a ministry that is of a different class from the laity, and the diaconate moving from a lay position to an ordained one.

In short, this proposal simply does not represent anything of who we are as Disciples. We treasure our theological freedom, our congregational autonomy, our openness to all Christians on both sides of the table, and our emphasis on the priesthood of the believer.

We have heard some of our leaders say that these offices are for ecumenical purposes only. We do not see that in this document. What we see is an effort to reconcile ministries in five churches that are episcopal in polity and four that are generally congregational with varying degrees of connectionalism. These two polities simply do not fit together. The duties of bishops, presbyters, and deacons, are spelled out so extensively that they could not be just for ecumenical occasions, especially when the document says that “each church pledges thereupon to make those legislative, canonical, constitutional, and liturgical changes that are needed and appropriate for the full

communion that will then exist among them.”¹⁵ It is disingenuous to present such a thorough and comprehensive description of the duties of the various offices and then say that they only apply in ecumenical situations.

The ecumenical movement can take pride in great accomplishments. There is now less hostility between denominations. There is marvelous cooperation in ministry and mission among the churches in the movement. The days of denominational suspicion and attacks are over. We give thanks for these accomplishments, see a real sense of unity in them, and hope for more in the future. There is much to celebrate. However, we do not see this proposal as contributing to unity. It will likely create more disunity, not to mention denominational membership losses, and we are unhappy about our own sense of alienation from CUIC. However, we are grateful for the many ways in which the nine churches have grown closer together. We pray for an even greater closeness, but this proposal demands too much of us. It represents neither who we are, nor why we exist.

It would be a mistake to interpret this response as opposition to ecumenicity. Each of us has strong commitments to the ecumenical movement. It would also be a mistake to regard our response as being opposed to CUIC’s commitment to end racism. We are absolutely opposed to racism in any form.

What we would like to see is a new vision, a new approach to unity, rather than falling back on a very old system and insisting that it apply to every church in the consultation.

We appreciate the Council on Christian Unity providing us with this opportunity to respond.

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Daisy Machado, Dean

Tim Browning, Librarian

Lisa Davison, First Testament

Ola Harrison, Church Music and Worship

Steven Monhollen, Director of Field Education

William Paulsell, Church History

Jerry Sumney, Biblical Studies

Sharon Warner, Educational Ministry

End Notes

¹*Yearbook and Directory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) 1996*, p. 305.

²*Mutual Recognition and Mutual Reconciliation of Ministries*, 2005, p. 6.

³*Mutual*, p. 22.

⁴*Mutual*, p. 8.

⁵*Mutual*, p. 23.

⁶*Mutual*, p. 24.

⁷*Mutual*, p. 24.

⁸*Mutual*, p. 24.

⁹*Yearbook 1996*, p. 304.

¹⁰*Mutual*, p. 34.

¹¹*Mutual*, p. 26.

¹²*Mutual*, p. 26.

¹³*Mutual*, p. 27.

¹⁴*Mutual*, p. 5.

¹⁵*Mutual*, p. 5.