

Facing the Disciples Leadership Challenge on the Front Edge of the 21st Century

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“We should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—problems that require us to learn new ways.”¹

The Commission on Restructure met to formalize its first recommendation of the Provisional Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in July 1966. As church historians McAllister and Tucker point out, the eventual approval of this plan “shifted the Disciples into a new concept of what it meant to be the church.” Rather than a movement of “individuals, congregations, and agencies working together in an annual convention,” we were to “become a church. Based on a solid theological foundation the way was prepared for a renewal of the church and a deepening of its commitment to its Lord and its mission.”²

I entered seminary in September 1966, as the church was considering that Commission on Restructure recommendation. Thanks to the vision of that generation of competent, determined leaders, I began ministry just as the Disciples prepared to jettison our frontier identity as a mere religious movement. We were becoming a church. It was a heady, exciting time, filled with hope for the future. The common understanding was that this new flexible governance structure would provide our leaders with means by which to confront our challenges and make the decisions that would renew the whole church.

As we move into the fifth decade after Restructure, I think we can safely say that renewing the church is not going as well as hoped. In recent years, one of our fine educational institutions, Phillips University, closed. The Christian Board of Publication pulled back from the edge of bankruptcy. The National Benevolent Association, the crown jewel of Disciples social services, for all intents and purposes was broken apart and sold.³ Some of our once proud and effective general units have been reduced to mere shadows of their former selves and many of our regions struggle with serious issues of size, funding and mission.

Present Disciples difficulties are not, of course, limited to regions and general units. Since I was ordained in 1971, we have lost 48% of our participating membership and about 25% of our congregations. The number of people who annually join Disciple congregations has declined by 60%. The Disciples are in such a state of decline that we only have some 600 congregations⁴ with 125 or more in worship.⁵ Each year Disciples congregations give less and less money to the Disciples Mission Fund (DMF), which funds the work of regions, general units, constituency groups, General Board, Office of General Minister and President and Disciples related higher education institutions.⁶

This does not mean that everything about the Disciples is a problem to solve. There is much joy to celebrate. We have long-established Disciples congregations that flourish and an explosion of vital new church starts. Some regions and general units have never been more effective. Our historic Disciple laser focus on the Christ which leads to unity, liberty, a welcoming table, and the valuing of different theological perspectives resonates with the needs of the today's world.

As Disciples, we can and should take time to count our many blessings. Merely assessing the positives does not, however, resolve the negatives. Disciples have issues that demand more substantive responses than changing the DMF allocation formula, tinkering with our structures of governance or by making alterations in our Order of Ministry.

Stopping and, prayerfully, reversing the free-fall of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) will require faithful, effective, visionary leaders, working not only for the good of the congregation, region, higher education institution, constituency group and general church unit closest to them, but working for the good of the whole church. That which we face has "no simple, painless solutions." We have "problems that require us to learn new ways."⁷

Unfortunately, the task of even the most faithful, effective, visionary Disciple leadership is significantly complicated by a plethora of intensifying and interrelated issues that result from the peculiarities of our governance structures, that emanate from the ethos particular to Disciples and that leak into the church from the wider culture. In order for leadership to challenge the church to face its problems and to learn new ways to deal with them, each of these intensifying and interrelated factors must be acknowledged and addressed. Leadership ignores these factors at peril.

Six Factors Complicating A Renewal Strategy

First, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is not structured for ease of leadership, particularly for leading all three expressions of the church, congregations, regions and general units in their work together.⁸ Basic leadership questions like “Who is in charge?” “Who has authority?” “How is accountability maintained?” “How is substantive change enacted?” “How is planning accomplished” receive vague, diffuse answers.

Contrary to what some may think, the General Minister and President is not the Disciples commanding General in a command and control military sense nor the executive branch President in a U.S. Constitutional sense. As the late Kenneth Teegarden, guiding force in Restructure and two term GMP put it, the office of General Minister and President is “primarily ministerial with appropriate administrative”⁹ duties.

Rather than invested in one or even a few offices, Disciples leadership responsibility is spread across the entire church with the General Assembly being that place where we come together for “worship, deliberation and work...to manifest the unity and wholeness of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)”¹⁰ The General Board and Administrative Committee have the delegated responsibility to carry out the “broad policies of the General Assembly.”¹¹

In other words, the Disciples are structured to be “led” by decisions of a General Assembly of several thousand delegates (where most laity are present because of a willingness to attend and clergy attend when they have an adequate travel allowance). The General Assembly decisions are then to be overseen by the General Board, a group chosen primarily for reasons of fitting some constituency category, which comes together only for a few days each year. This falls far short of an effective, efficient leadership schema. In fact, it is easy to see how a strong argument can be made that we have a governance structure that thwarts the task of leading rather than facilitates it.

Second, one of the corollaries of the Disciples understanding of the priesthood of all believers is that leadership is something in which every person has a say and for which every person has a responsibility. Consequently, Disciples leadership offices are not invested with a great deal of authority. For Disciples “a strong leader”

is a designation earned by an individual who has a proven track record of providing strong leadership.

The Disciples Church was born in the first flush of the American democratic experiment. This new nation contended that it did not need king, queen or ruling class. Ordinary people claimed the capacity to think and decide for themselves and thus to take charge of their own lives.

This principle proved marvelously liberating. Frontier Disciples resonated to it and brought it into the church, not only by refusing to establish extra-congregational hierarchy, e.g., Bishops, Executive Presbyters, District Superintendents, etc., but also by reserving nothing for the ordained minister to do that cannot be done by laity.¹² As articulated from the pews, “Disciples do not have Bishops, Creeds, a list of beliefs we have to accept or any other form of intrusive hierarchy that tells us what we have to think or do. We may have ordained ministers, but we do not have laity. We are literalists when it comes to the priesthood of believers.”¹³

Those called to positions of leadership quickly learn that one’s authority to lead a congregation, region, general unit or the entire denomination does not come from being elected, ordained, paid, or installed as a leader. Authority to lead, of course, comes from Christ, but that authority is empowered, not by the office, but by the quality of relationships one maintains with the people, demonstrated competence in ministry, and the perceived strength of character and depth of one’s faith.

We can alter the Design of the Christian Church to state that anyone who has the office of General Board member, Senior Minister, Regional Minister or even the General Minister and President will have enormous authority to lead and that this authority shall reside with any person who holds this office, but that will not make those offices powerful. Any Disciples leader who fails to heed this reality will be frustrated, unhappy, ineffective and/or unemployed. As one pastor said, “You may think you are the leader, but if you turn around and no one is following, you are just out for a walk in the woods.”

Third, we may call the relationship among the various parts of the church a covenant, but it is lived out as a confederation. A covenant is a solemn agreement that is binding on all parties. Covenants offer benefits, but those benefits entail certain obligations. A confederation, on the other hand, is merely an alliance in which parties keep their independence but agree to act together for certain purposes, under specific circumstances.

The ancient Greeks developed a type of confederation, called amphictyony, in which they maintained their independence, but banded together for the care of a specific shrine or temple. Twentieth Century biblical scholar Martin Noth applied that term to the relationship among the tribes of ancient Israel in the era of the Judges. In the Israelite amphictyony, each tribe maintained its own identity and independence but banded together to care for the shrine at Shechem. They relinquished their freedom only in rare circumstances.¹⁴

Rather than a covenant, Disciple relationships better fit the definition of an amphictyonic confederation. Our clergy, laity, congregations, regions, institutions and general units function as though they have simply banded together out of a common history and heritage, a confederation. They have not pledged to a binding agreement of mutual accountability, a covenant. This explains why a congregation does not feel obliged to fall in line behind a General Assembly resolution, why a general unit does not necessarily seek prior approval for its business strategy, and why a region can decide its own terms for participating in the funding system. We function as a confederation, an amphictyony.

Certainly the Design calls for a covenant. Restructure was to move the Disciples beyond a collection of loosely affiliated congregations, state societies and agencies, i.e., beyond a confederation. Covenants, however, require a willingness to relinquish certain freedoms for the good of the whole. Forty years after Restructure Disciples still rail at the thought of relinquishing freedom. The General Assembly may have stricken the terms “free and autonomous” from the Design, but those constructs are still deeply imbedded in Disciple DNA.

Rather than a value judgment, this assessment describes the reality. Any strategy for challenging the church to face its problems must deal with the fact that we still function as a confederation. Calling it a covenant does not make it a covenant. As Aldous Huxley put it, “Refusing to face the facts does not change the facts.”

Fourth, the aforementioned notions of leadership, its nature and authority, make Disciples particularly vulnerable to what Gil Rendle calls “norms that can be described as assumptions” which need to be challenged if problems are to be addressed and changes made.¹⁵

- *The assumption of scarcity*: that there are only so many resources, particularly mission dollars from the common fund. Regions, general units and higher education

institutions must, therefore, compete with one another for these limited resources.

- *The assumption of egalitarianism:* that every region, general unit, higher education institution, constituency group, and all subgroups must be given a fair share of resources — regardless of effectiveness or even relevancy.
- *The assumption of representative democracy:* that every person, region, general unit, institution and constituency group has both a decision-making voice and the responsibility to use that voice. Furthermore in the practice of this principle of democracy run amok, by implication, the whole church must be responsive to the wishes of every person and group. “If I/we say it, it must be done.”
- *The assumption of entitlement:* that every congregation, region, general unit, etc., has the right to survive and the right to be sufficiently resourced to ensure survival. It matters not if the congregation has no members under ninety, if the region is too small to be economically or missionally viable, or if the general unit has no clear vision for ministry into the 21st Century, it is entitled.
- *The assumption of harmony in which harmony in Christian community is defined as agreement.* As Disciples we value the absence of strife, or at least the appearance that we are getting along with one another, almost as much as we value freedom.

Rendle makes the point that these assumptions lead the church to believe that as a whole it cannot move ahead until all parts are ready and able to move ahead together. Such unanimity is probably not possible and is certainly not likely. Rather than facilitating change, insisting on, waiting for and/or working for unanimity, strengthens the maintenance of the status quo.

Fifth, accountability among Disciples leaders, expressions/manifestations and constituencies is certainly lacking, is much needed, but, given our circumstances, will be incredibly difficult to institute, even though we have no shortage of people who think others should be accountable to them.

A colleague recently observed, “I knew the Disciples had no hierarchy, but I had assumed we had a system of accountability.” We do not, at least not in the sense of having church wide agreed upon

standards of performance, measurable goals, a method to track effectiveness, and a way to make one another answerable for institutional performance.

The possible reasons for this are legion. Our “free to be you and me” stance may trump restrictions imposed by accountability standards. Some may consider being accountable to one’s own board of directors sufficient, making church wide accountability unnecessary. Others may claim the uniqueness of their ministry means they cannot be evaluated by others. “I/we are the only ones who know this job. No outsider can assess this work.” This helps explain why among regions, general units, congregations and even institutions of higher education one can probably find more Disciples leaders who see wisdom in others being accountable to them than one can identify as willing to be accountable to one another.

Accountability, quite simply, will be a serious problem in any complex system that believes every part of the organization has a right to survive, where all are entitled to adequate resources for that survival and where all are to have a deciding voice in every matter. The accountability deficit is even greater if that organization claims faithfulness only to God, while extending freedom from ecclesiastical authority to every participant--yet anticipates the organization will continually manifest harmony as agreement.

Six, obsolescence of loyalty¹⁶ is a serious issue for the church as well as the economy and wider society. There was a time, not all that many decades ago, when a town could rely on the jobs provided by the local manufacturer. It was an era when loyal customers regularly purchased name brand products and when employees expected to spend their entire career with the same company.

That era has passed. Now, when it becomes more profitable to manufacture in China the company moves, regardless of the impact on the local economy. The comment, “I will always drive an American car and refuse even to ride in a foreign automobile” is seldom, if ever, heard. Today, workers anticipate, not only moving from company to company during their careers, they anticipate changing careers from time to time. Loyalty is not valued in the new economy as it was in the old.

The same can be said of loyalty in the life of the church. As a local church pastor once commented, “If we sacrificed a goat on the communion table, the older generation would say, ‘I don’t like it, but it’s my church and I will keep coming.’ If we sing two consecutive

songs they don't like, younger members are likely to leave this congregation in hopes of finding one that sings only what they like."

General Motors cannot expect people to buy Buicks because they are American made and the various expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) cannot expect congregations to fund them simply because they are Disciples causes. Today reliance on denominational loyalty does not raise much more money than national loyalty sells Buicks. On this front edge of the 21st Century, society is driven by the desire to "get the best deal."¹⁷ Whether one is going to buy an automobile or fulfill a philanthropic desire, the question people ask is, "Where am I going to get the most bang for my buck?"

The recent discussions on allocating DMF dollars missed this principle. Instead of focusing on "What can we do to demonstrate the value of what we offer?" most allocation system change conversations simply intensified competition for a larger slice of a shrinking pie by assuming a shortage of available money.

In point of fact, the problem of funding for the Disciples for regions, general units and institutions of higher education is not one of scarce funds. DMF, it is true, has declined each year for more than a decade, but outreach giving from Disciple congregations to all outreach causes has continued to increase. Comparisons between 1996 and 2005¹⁸ are quite revealing. In the past decade, total Disciple giving to all outreach causes *increased* by \$6 million.¹⁹ In 2005 Disciple congregations provided 11.3% of their congregational giving, to outreach causes beyond the local church — an arguably fair, even generous amount.

The present financial crisis is not one of a shortage of available funds. It is a matter of where congregations are sending their dollars. Between 1996 and 2005, total Disciple outreach increased from \$43 million to \$49 million.²⁰ DMF²¹ giving, on the other hand, decreased from \$19.9 million to \$16.9 million. This means \$3 million less was available for the work of regions, general units, constituency ministries and higher education institutions than a decade ago. At the same time, 2005 Disciple congregational giving to non-Disciple causes reached an all-time high of \$18 million, \$1.1 million more than given to DMF. Today, a full one-third of Disciples outreach dollars are given to ministries ranging from the local food bank to Habitat for Humanity to dozens of causes congregations considered worthy that are not directly related to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It would seem that in this era of the obsolescence of loyalty, DMF recipients

have simply not done an adequate job of demonstrating the value of their mission and ministry.

Let me chase this into a corner and summarize. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is at a critical juncture. Many of the expressions of the church are struggling, declining and/or showing serious signs of unraveling. We need strong, decisive leadership to challenge the church to face these problems which have no simple, painless solutions. In order to be effective, however, leadership must develop a strategy for renewing the church that takes the particularities of Disciples reality seriously. For instance, leadership must deal with the fact that:

- Disciples have a governance structure that is simply not designed for ease of leadership. Instead of facilitating the task of making positive change, our governance best maintains the status quo.
- Disciples have little tradition of investing authority in ecclesiastical offices. We tend not to have powerful offices and we do not follow persons simply because they hold a certain office.
- Disciples have a tradition of strong leaders. Throughout our history that designation has been earned, not by those who hold particular offices, but by those who offer faithful, competent, trust building leadership practices over time.
- Disciples have no church wide system of rigorous accountability. It might be argued that even the willingness to be accountable is in short supply. This fact significantly intensifies the difficulty of overcoming inertia and making positive change.
- Disciples cannot build a case for support based solely on loyalty to denominational affiliation. Lamenting that this practice should not have leaked into the church from secular culture does not change the reality.
- Disciples have a method of relating to one another that is more like a confederation than a covenant. Claiming “it’s a covenant” does not make it one.

On the one hand, the challenges facing Disciples leadership on the front edge of the 21st Century are enormous. On the other hand, everything is not a problem. Disciples have many areas of strength and possibility that give reason for hope. The task of leadership is to get the church to face these

problems which have no easy or simple solutions. It is also the task of leaders to be dealers in hope.

End Notes

¹Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 2.

²Lester McAllister and William Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, (Saint Louis: Bethany Press, 1975), p. 442-443.

³While NBA continues to own and manage a handful of facilities, the vast majority of its ministry units were closed or sold.

⁴Source: *2006 Yearbook and Directory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, Published by the Office of the General Minister and President.

⁵This is the number used by Lyle Schaller as a minimum needed to support a living wage and pay escalating hospitalization premiums. (Quoted in a conversation with Herb Miller, 10/20/06)

⁶Statistics from 1971 and 2006 Yearbooks of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) compared.

⁷Heifetz, p. 2.

⁸In a paper, "A Mosaic of Transformational Leaders," presented at the Hal Watkins Lectureship, National City Christian Church, September 2002, I contended that while leaders of our congregations, Regions, and General Units can function quite effectively, we are not designed for ease of leadership for the whole church.

⁹William McKinney, editor, *The Responsibility People: Eighteen Senior Leaders of Protestant Churches and National Ecumenical Agencies Reflect on Church Leadership*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 305.

¹⁰The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), paragraph 11.

¹¹Ibid., paragraph 21.

¹²Although the non-ordained may be excluded from these activities in certain other denominations, technically speaking, any member of a Disciple congregation can serve at the table, preach the sermon, read the Gospel, chair the governing board and baptize. In many states, marriages must be performed by an ordained or licensed minister, but that is a legal and not ecclesiastic requirement.

¹³A compendium of statements collected from different church members with life-long Disciples affiliation.

¹⁴Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1960 English Translation), p 87-109.

¹⁵Gil Rendle, "Leadership Under Constraints: What Does It Mean To be Asked for Leadership In a Managerial Institution?" (Unpublished manuscript of the Alban Institute, 2006), p. 13-16.

¹⁶This is the term used by Robert Reich, *The Future of Success: Working and Living in the New Economy* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), p.69-87.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁸The 1997 and 2006 Yearbooks of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) report the finances from 1996 and 2005.

¹⁹Most of this increase in total Disciples outreach can be attributed to contributions to Week of Compassion.

²⁰Total outreach given by Disciples congregations is significantly higher in 2005 than in 2004 due to incredibly generous contributions to Week of Compassion in response to Gulf Coast hurricanes. In 2004 Disciples gave closer to \$46 million to all outreach causes. This aberration strengthens the argument. When a case for giving is made, Disciples respond with generosity. Hurricane relief did not so much cause money to be diverted from DMF as it simply increased total giving.

²¹DMF includes giving from the church, Sunday School, youth groups, CWF groups and Special Days offerings.