

# Ministry on the Margins: Themes for Understanding Disciples Ministry

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Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School, grew up in a Jewish family in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood near New Bedford, Massachusetts. When she was seven, in addition to going to Hebrew school two days a week after school, Levine decided that she wanted to join her Catholic friends for catechism the other two days. Her parents agreed to let her go and gave her these words: “As long as you remember who you are, go learn.”<sup>1</sup>

## *On the Boundary of Distrust and Trust*

“As long as you remember who you are, go learn.” I want to put our discussion of Disciples and ministry in the context of our founding myths and how they have changed over time. As we look to the future, our questions about who we are called to be will then be shaped by a response to what has mattered to us.

Disciples trace our Euro-American origins to the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century on what our founders saw as the margins of society, where freedom often resembled license more than liberty. The pursuit of happiness bore little resemblance to a concern for the welfare of society that was intended in our Declaration of Independence. The egalitarian spirit of the new country brought with it both a suspicion and a fear of hierarchy. Out on the frontier. On the margins.

The principles of our founders were formed as a result of a process of cultural challenge and religious response. These principles were shaped by a special kind of distrust that was born in a frontier ethos, a quality that is in the DNA of Disciples. Our distrust was informed by a reflection on scripture that would lead to a deepened trust in the transforming love of God. The interplay of distrust leading to a deepened trust took form and developed in several distinctive ways.

Our founders emphasized three values that were to be in service of a fourth, according to Tony Dunnivant. Christian (1) unity

and (2) liberty combined with (3) reflection on and implementation of New Testament Church contours were to be in service of (4) the evangelization of the world. The church was something to be restored, unified, structured in a free way so that the gospel could be extended to embrace all the world.<sup>2</sup> Clark Williamson distills these into three important founding principles: 1) the unity principle; 2) the restoration principle; and 3) the interpretation principle.<sup>3</sup> These principles form components of our myth, even as our myth has evolved during the past two centuries, under the influence of our context.

- *An Evolving Egalitarian Movement*

The founders distrusted “European hierarchical practices,” particularly in the aftermath of our country’s revolution, and expressed a trust in liberty of structure in the context of a belief that we were a movement rather than a denomination. This movement flourished with an intuitive understanding of itself as an egalitarian ethos in which each member is empowered as a ministering person. Thus our emphasis on the priesthood of all believers developed as an implementation of the unity and restoration principles. Alexander Campbell saw that some states had formed established churches. He and was afraid that the practice would work its way into the frontier and tried to prevent it.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of an egalitarian ethos shapes current Disciples understandings of baptism. Our Order of Ministry conveys that baptism recognizes the ministering capacity and responsibility of those who are baptized.

By baptism all Christians are inducted into the corporate ministry of God’s people and by sharing in it fulfill their own callings as servants of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Some Disciples also understand Communion in ways that reinforce an egalitarian understanding of ministry. As I have traveled to different churches, I have heard one theme that suggests that Communion re-affirms the commitment to ministry that began with baptism. A sampling of invitations to Communion is instructive:

We are called by God’s love to gather around this Table as a community of care.

This meal invites us to come out of our isolation and into a community of faith and service.

This is an open Table, a welcoming Table. The openness of this Table is our invitation to rehearse here what we are called to practice each day: hospitality to the stranger.

Disciples recognize through baptism that each person is called to be a ministering person through the corporate ministry of the congregation. Disciples renew this commitment each week through the practice of open Communion.

In order to empower this priesthood of all believers, Disciples identify and nurture members who will serve as leaders.

Within the ministry of the whole people of God there is and has been from the beginning a representative ministry called of God and authorized by the church.<sup>6</sup>

Our founders developed an order of ministry that still informs our structure and function. Alexander Campbell, suspicious of clerics, initially identified a three-fold order of ministry within the priesthood of all believers. The principle of restoration led Alexander Campbell to identify three roles of ministry in the New Testament: deacon, elder and evangelist. The evangelist was an itinerant who would form congregations and then leave after the congregation developed the leadership roles of deacon and elder. As the churches developed a need for more educated leadership, the movement called for congregational leaders who engaged in effortful study to prepare for special tasks – to be a servant to the community of faith we call the body of Christ, the church. Our commitment to an educated, settled ministry has evolved to its current two-fold order: licensed and ordained ministers, even as we have retained the role of deacon and elder as important ministries within congregations.<sup>7</sup>

- *Ministry as Contextual and Experiential*

Restructure in the 1960s in effect declared the end of our formal self-understanding as a movement. Yet if we look at the ways in which clergy and congregations function, we discover that the ethos of a movement continues to some extent beneath a more formal structure.

In his article on Disciples and ministry, Mark Miller-McLemore, Dean of the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt Divinity School, identified Disciples perspectives on ministry using historical documents, documents from the ministerial placement process and interviews with a diverse group of Disciples clergy. He notes, with Clark Williamson, that “It is ‘notoriously difficult’ to do normative theology among Disciples.”<sup>8</sup> In a denomination that does not have a theological consensus, experience is the norm for theological reflection, notes Miller-McLemore. For example, the univocal era of male Eurocentric theological dominance that defined Disciples identity

for generations is evolving into a multi-vocal era that is informed by the voices of women and racial ethnic leaders in ministry.

Miller-McLemore interviewed a diverse group of Disciples clergy to gauge how they understand ministry. They noted that a context-based, congregation-centered orientation to ministry is predominant.<sup>9</sup> Ministry is situation-specific and develops over time in relationship. Ministry is profoundly meaningful and faithful to the quest for understanding life lived in the light of God.<sup>10</sup>

Their descriptions are akin to an understanding of servant leadership that has developed during the past two decades. Robert Banks identifies some of these qualities in his book, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models*. “For such leaders,” he writes, “ministry is about service not status, authority is a consequence of function rather than position, and the main task is the eliciting, equipping, and empowering of others’ gifts.”<sup>11</sup> Miller-McLemore’s assessment is that it is not possible to characterize Disciples clergy. The commonality of ministry, he notes, is context and experience.<sup>12</sup> Ministry develops inductively in particular settings rather than deductively from denominational structural expectations.

One can see how the context shapes ministry in a sampling of Disciples churches in Kentucky.

- Some congregations expect their ministers to wear robes and stoles; others do not;
- Some congregations follow the liturgical calendar of high church western Christianity, using vestments and seasonal colors; others do not;
- Some clergy follow the lectionary for preaching; others do not;
- One congregation places the minister in the central chair behind the Communion table so that the minister can represent the presence of Christ; another congregation leaves the chair empty to symbolize that we are each to make room at the Table for the invisible yet present Christ;
- Some congregations observe Lent, beginning with the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday; others do not;
- At one congregation, the minister processes and upon ascending to the chancel, bows before the cross;
- Some congregations stand up for the reading of the gospel passage each Sunday; others do not.

It is not clear in what ways these decisions are informed by or explained with a theological rationale or that the rationale is congruent with Disciples heritage. We do not have a Book of Order that sets the expectations for how worship and ministry will be structured and who will be permitted to do what. Nor do we have a polity that invests authority in a particular way of doing ministry. We also do not require that clergy and congregations will articulate a theological rationale for adopting practices from other denominations, practices that have a tradition and scriptural basis that may or may not be congruent with Disciples self-understanding. In each case, ministry unfolds in a congregation in ways that are particular and distinctive to the context and experience of the minister and congregation. Disciples congregations are communities that are diverse and distinctive in service, thought and spirituality.

- *Reason as an Interpretive Authority*

The founders did not want to trust that clergy provided the normative interpretation of scripture and developed the expectation that each Christian should be responsible (Campbell called it a duty) to interpret Christian faith (which is not the same as having no ideas or thinking whatever one wants to think, two common misunderstandings of Disciples tradition.). As Williamson notes, “The interpretation principle is the theological principle. By rejecting creeds as “terms of fellowship,” the room for free and responsible interpretation or theological thinking was opened up.”<sup>13</sup>

- *Christian Unity in an Ethos of Openness*

The founders distrusted what they saw as a closed and selective communion. They grew to trust a community process that centered around an open table, with “open,” and “welcoming” carrying a culturally transforming quality on the frontier. The founders believed that Christian divisions impeded the spread of the gospel and therefore trusted in the importance of an irenic spirit that would unite Christians in the service of a transforming mission.

*There’s Nothing Like a Good Disagreement to Focus Your Thoughts*

Clark Williamson maintains that “Over the course of two centuries, of these principles (unity, restoration, reflection), today’s

Disciples mostly retain only the unity principle. In effect, not to think critically and constructively about matters of faith leaves the Disciples concern for unity and inclusiveness often in the position of saying that we don't want to stand for anything lest we seem to be exclusive."<sup>14</sup>

The principle of unity without the principle of reflection reminds me of some students in college who major in communications. When I was a college chaplain, I would sometimes ask those students, "What do you hope to communicate? "and why?" I would then encourage them to consider a double major or a minor in a subject that would provide them with substance. "Something like history or philosophy or even religion," I might kid them before inviting them to imagine a subject that caught their interest.

A unity principle alone can leave us without something to bring to the relationship other than a matchmaking role. I certainly believe that someone needs to be a matchmaker in this process. On the other hand, without a reflective principle, how do we respond to the question, "What do we hope to unite and why?"

I think that the value of liberty is still strong among Disciples. While liberty enables us to adapt to changing circumstances, without the principle of reflection that reminds us of our history, we are vulnerable to pressures to adapt in ways that ironically are counter to the value of liberty of thought and structure. Disciples seem to live with the paradox of adaptability. On the one hand, we can respond deeply to a particular context of ministry. On the other hand, adaptability can cause us to forget who we are, as Tony Dunnivant noted in an abstract he wrote shortly before his death,

From the middle twentieth century forward Disciples ecumenical involvement, which increasingly favored communions with highly clerical traditions of ministry, exacerbated the negative effects of the adoption of functional church organization. Cut off from their own roots, Disciples have recently tended to attempt to order their ministry, to a great degree, by imitation — by the superficial appropriation of symbols and practices adopted from admired ecumenical conversation-partners.<sup>15</sup>

I offer the following example to explore Dunnivant's assertion.

The Disciples are a part of the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), a cooperative body of ten denominations, some of which have an Episcopal and some a congregational polity.<sup>16</sup> CUIC is a legacy of over 40 years of commitment to express the unity of the church.

Disciples have been and remain deeply involved in this process. In June 2005, CUIC issued for study and response a document entitled “Mutual Recognition and Mutual Reconciliation of Ministries.” The CUIC document proposes that ministry of the member denominations would be connected to the historic episcopacy as the means of reconciling our ministries. The document proposes that each communion would develop a version of a three-fold ministry of deacon, presbyter and bishop, each of whom would be ordained or, in the case of bishops, be consecrated. Bishops would have the responsibility for maintaining the apostolicity and unity of the worship and sacramental life of the church.”<sup>17</sup>

A critique of the CUIC document by Lexington Theological Faculty at the end of this issue of the Quarterly notes that the maintenance of the unity of worship life “has always been the prerogative of the local congregation.” Although Disciples clergy are expected to bring learned insight to the formation of worship, they are not, as are some of our ecumenical partners, universally given the final authority for shaping worship. Disciples clergy are not given authority and responsibility to “guard the apostolic faith” as represented by the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds as the document proposes for the member communions. Interestingly, the Disciples theological and historical foundations for ordination note that with ordination, clergy enter into the apostolic ministry. The statement notes that, because the first Christian ministers were the apostles, those who enter ministry are linked to these apostles and are therefore a part of the apostolic ministry in every generation.<sup>18</sup> This explanation uses language from traditions (e.g., Catholic and Episcopal) that have very different understandings about the meaning of apostolic succession and the authority of clergy. To be sure, Disciples have inherited both the creative and the destructive elements in the legacy of Christianity. That is different from tracing a direct lineage through ordained clergy across successive generations to the first apostles and connecting that lineage to the apostolic faith as represented by the Apostle’s and Nicene creeds. In addition, Disciples vest authority in congregations whose members are empowered to do what ordained clergy do – preach, baptize, interpret scripture, serve communion. It is not clear how this egalitarian practice fits with a more hierarchical understanding of ordination.

This brief look at current Disciples exploration of ministry suggests that Tony Dunnivant’s assertion has merit: when Disciples forget our past, we are prone to adopt models from other denominations without reflecting on how they are congruent with Disciples identity.

This practice creates dissonance in our efforts to define ministry more clearly.

There are other tensions among us that call for responses. How, for example, will we respond to current congregations and new congregations that do not allow women to serve as elders or women and gay and lesbian candidates to serve as clergy? As some regions make it possible for someone to be ordained with only a high school diploma, how will those regions implement the responsibility to learn that is as old as our denomination? How will our denomination empower and be empowered by our Latino, African-American and Asian-American congregations with their rich and distinctive faith traditions? How will we examine the influence of socio-economic factors on our identity and on our choice of ecumenical conversation partners?

In addition, our country is in the midst of religious and societal developments that challenge our ability to prepare clergy who will lead on this new frontier. There is no pure Disciples identity. Disciples churches and clergy are influenced, for example, by thought and practices from Asia (yoga, Buddhist meditation), Europe (St. Thomas Mass), Judaism (*tikkun olam* – to mend the world), Central America and the Caribbean (Santaria) and Africa (oblation – remembrance of ancestors). A populist mentality places less value on reflection than on experience. A consumer ethos creates a shopper and entertainment approach to finding a community of faith.<sup>19</sup> Within this context, what might be the future shape of ministry for Disciples? How might our myth serve us on this new frontier?

#### *A Future on the Margins*

At Lexington Theological Seminary, we secretly register our students in a special course through our athletic department. This course sets its own agenda, so it can interrupt a student's reading or challenge a student's self-confidence in the midst of a pastoral call to a dying child or question why a student is interpreting scripture according to critical reason rather than family tradition. Our athletic department stays very busy with this course. The course is wrestling.

Clark Williamson recommends that,

...in place of the restoration principle what we should have (and in many cases do, happily) is a serious wrestling with the scriptures and a commitment to the gospel of God's unfathomable grace and our responsive obligation to love all

those whom God loves; to be disciples of the One who is Friend of all (as Jesus uses the metaphor of "friend" or "companion", particularly in John's gospel). Disciples should like that emphasis on "companionship," since "companion" comes from two Latin words--"cum," meaning "with," and "panis," which is "bread;" companions are those who break bread together.<sup>20</sup>

As we consider the shape of Disciples ministry, I would concur with Miller-McLemore's judgment that, because of how ministry develops for Disciples,

It is probably unwise to attempt to impose on such a mixed, experience-based, contextually-generated, grassroots tradition a singular model, uncritically appropriated from other traditions, without more compelling reasons than we have been offered as yet.<sup>21</sup>

I would offer the following suggestions for crafting our understanding for ministry in a Disciples context.

*Affirmation of Our Frontier Identity*

As a working first principle, we would acknowledge our identity on the margins and explore it as a paradox. On the one hand, plummeting membership combined with shrinking and disappearing units of the church are among the significant signs that show us to be in crisis as a denomination. How, centrally, will we deal with a fear of oblivion and the concern that as a denomination we might follow the path of the Springfield Presbytery and disappear into the larger body of the church?

On the other hand, some of our most creative times have been when we have been on margins of cultural certainty. Interestingly, that is how we began: on the margins of Euro-American society; on the frontier. The interplay of distrust and trust is at the heart of ministry, something that a wilderness experience sustains and enriches. I suggest that we consider the model that was developed by the Dalai Lama when he wondered how he could lead Tibetan Buddhism in exile. He looked at the history of religions to find examples of religions and peoples who had learned how to survive in exile. He recognized that Jews and Judaism have such a capacity. He invited rabbis and Jewish scholars to come to Dharamsala to teach him and his monks about how to survive in exile. The book, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Re-Discovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* by Rodger Kamenetz, recounts this incredibly rich encounter.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to Jewish resources for our exploration, I recommend that Disciples draw for guidance upon the insights of our Latino, African-American and Asian-American churches.

### ***Renewal of the Reflection Principle***

Clark Williamson reminds us that the interpretation principle is the theological principle for Disciples. In a religious and general culture that de-legitimizes critical learning, why would anyone want to come to such a church? Stated positively, how might our identity on the margins of the dominant culture be an attractive strength to people who hunger for meaning?

Although Disciples have let the restoration principle fall quietly away, what might we learn about our own era by studying the Jewish culture in which Jesus grew up and its influence on Christian origins? How might this deepened understanding of Christian origins strengthen how we read the First and New Testaments?

The reflection principle will guide us to develop an understanding of the relationship between our distinctive roles of deacon and elder and our expectations of our set-aside ministers.

An Appalachian description of caring leadership might be worth considering as a model for renewing the reflection principle. In a conversation not far from Cane Ridge, a small group was discussing the importance of a family leader who had watched over a large extended family for half a century. When asked what made him such a good leader, one of the older people in the group replied, "He was the smartest person we knew and he looked out for people." This particular family valued the interplay of its leader's knowledge with his responsiveness; they cared about what he knew because they knew that he cared. The reflection principle assumes that Disciples, including our leaders, enter into effortful study as a key component of being trustworthy people of faith.

### ***Evaluation of the Unity Principle***

How might we understand Jesus' prayer, "That they may all be one" for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Friends in other denominations express a kind of envy at how naturally Disciples assume that we will work with other Christians. In many ways, Christian unity is also in our DNA. Although cooperative work is by now second nature, we are not in

agreement that Christian merger is our polar star. That remains a source of tension for Disciples.

What kind of unity do we need to pursue in this century? If we understand ecumenical in its original meaning, “the inhabited world,” how might a Disciples self-understanding of an open table be offered to people in other religions or no religion? How might a Disciples commitment to an open table prepare us to receive welcome at other tables? How might this same hospitality be extended to the natural world as well?

As Disciples consider the shape of our ministries, I believe that we will be enriched by following the dual blessing that Amy-Jill Levine’s parents gave her: “As long as you remember who you are, go learn.”

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 1-3.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony L. Dunnivant, *Restructure: Four Historical Ideals in the Campbell-Stone Movement and the Development of the Polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (New York: American University Studies. Series VII, Theology and Religion, Volume 85, Peter Lang Publishers, Inc., 1993), pp. 245 & 248. I will limit my explorations to the experience of the Anglo churches. Disciples in the U. S. have a rich history among African-American, Latino/a and Asian American congregations that needs specific exploration concerning understandings of ministry.

<sup>3</sup>Clark Williamson conversation Re: *Essentials of faith* on [DOCDISC@LISTSERV.TCU.EDU](mailto:DOCDISC@LISTSERV.TCU.EDU), Tuesday, September 27, 2005, 9:13 P.M.

<sup>4</sup>Clark Williamson conversation Re: *Essentials of faith* on [DOCDISC@LISTSERV.TCU.EDU](mailto:DOCDISC@LISTSERV.TCU.EDU), Tuesday, September 27, 2005, 9:13 P.M.

<sup>5</sup>“The Corporate Ministry,” Disciples Home Missions, <http://www.discipleshomeissions.org/Ministers/MinistryGuidelines/Order1.htm> 2/22/2007

<sup>6</sup>“Offices within the Order of Ministry,” Disciples Home Missions. <http://www.discipleshomeissions.org/Ministers/MinistryGuidelines/Order1.htm> 2/22/2007

<sup>7</sup>“Offices within the Order of Ministry,” Disciples Home Missions. “The Order of Ministry in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) includes two offices: the office of ordained minister and the office of licensed minister. <http://www.discipleshomeissions.org/Ministers/MinistryGuidelines/Order1.htm> 2/22/2007

<sup>8</sup>Clark Williamson, “Theology and Forms of Confession,” *Encounter* 41 Winter 1980, p. 53, as quoted in Mark Miller-McLemore, “Ministry: How Disciples Understand It,” October 15, 2006, forthcoming article for an introduction to theology to be published by Chalice Press. Used with permission of the author.

<sup>9</sup>Miller-McLemore, “Ministry: How Disciples Understand It,” p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 224.

<sup>12</sup>Miller-McLemore, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Clark Williamson conversation Re: *Essentials of faith* on [DOCDISC@LISTSERV.TCU.EDU](mailto:DOCDISC@LISTSERV.TCU.EDU), Tuesday, September 27, 2005, 9:13 P.M.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Anthony L. Dunnivant, “The Historical Development of an Ordered Ministry,” *The Order of the Ministry: Equipping the Saints, Lexington Theological Quarterly* (Lexington, Kentucky: Lexington Theological Seminary, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup>The Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the International Council of Churches, the Moravian Church Northern Province, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church. In addition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is a Partner in Mission and Dialogue. See <http://www.cuicinfo.org/members/members.html> (April 12, 2007)

<sup>17</sup>*Mutual Recognition and Mutual Reconciliation of Ministries*, (Cleveland, Ohio: Churches Uniting in Christ, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>18</sup><http://www.discipleshomeissions.org/Ministers/MinistryGuidelines/Ordination1.htm>

<sup>19</sup>Nancy Jo Kemper, “The Future of Denominations,” Convocation, Lexington Theological Seminary, 3/1/07.

<sup>20</sup>Clark Williamson conversation *Re: Essentials of faith*.

<sup>21</sup>Miller-McLemore, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup>Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet’s Re-Discovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1997).