No. 8523

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY

RECEIVED by the General Assembly

A Word to the Church on Ministry

Work of the Commission

Over the past five years our church's Commission on Theology has been working to develop a comprehensive statement on the nature of the Church. The primary impetus for this study has been to reflect theologically upon the kind of Christian community we have become as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) twenty years after our "restructure" process. Our overall purpose is to bring a deeper understanding and greater commitment to what it means to live as church in witnessing to the gospel in today's world.

Each year the Commission has addressed a specific theme related to a growing understanding of the nature and calling of the Church. We began in 1979 by looking at the theological foundations of The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to see both its strengths and weaknesses as a carrier for our life together in the three manifestations of congregation, region, and general church. Our work focused upon the meaning of being a covenantal community. From that material James Duke prepared a booklet published by the Christian Board of Publication for congregational study entitled, What Sort of Church Are We?

In 1980 the Commission took up the important theme of mission and evangelism. T. J. Liggett prepared a major paper for the Commission's reflection and discussion on "The Biblical and Theological Perspectives on the Nature of the Church as an Agent for Mission." Out of that session the Commission issued "A Word to the Church" outlining both the nature and calling of the Church. That statement was sent as an official report to the 1981 General Assembly in Anaheim. (See General Assembly Docket, 1981)

The next topic addressed by the Commission was the issue of authority in the church. Again "A Word to the Church" was sent as a preliminary report on this most difficult and delicate issue for Disciples to the 1983 General Assembly meeting in San Antonio, Texas. In addition, William R. Baird prepared a booklet, What Is Our Authority?, which was published in 1983 as the second in the study series of materials on "The Nature of the Church".

The fourth major topic taken up was that of ministry. At its 1983 meeting, the Commission received a major paper by Newell Williams on the "Historical Development of Ministry Among Disciples", as well as statements on the ministry of the eldership and the diaconate by Peter Morgan and Nancy Helmer. At its 1984 meeting, the Commission completed its initial work on the complex issues surrounding an understanding of ministry within the church, and now sends forth this "Word to the Church on Ministry" for study and response all across the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The Character of This Document

This report should be seen as a contribution to an emerging theology of ministry among Disciples. It is neither complete, nor fully adequate. And, it is clear from our discussions and the different points of view within the Commission itself (made up of seminary professors, local pastors, regional ministers, lay persons, and general unit staff) that even with a common theological understanding on the nature of ministry, we will continue to maintain a diversity in our practices of ministerial offices — a diversity to be celebrated and affirmed. It is hoped that this document will engender responses and further conversation. Any comments or reactions from across the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) will be appreciated. Please contact: Council on Christian Unity, P.O. Box 1985, Indianapolis, IN 46206.

And so, this "Word to the Church" should be received as one further contribution in developing a wider understanding of the kind of church toward which we believe God is calling us. It is shared in the hope that it will stimulate discussion on some critical issues which we face in coming to a clearer understanding of the church's ministry.

MINISTRY

I. The Ministry of God's People
II. The Meaning of Ordination
III. Development of the Ordained Ministry within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
IV. A Proposal for Discussion: One Order — Three Offices
   - Licensed Ministers
   - Congregational offices: Elder and Deacon
   - Issues for Discussion
V. The Ministry of Oversight
   A. The Meaning of Oversight for Disciples
   B. The Ministry of Episcopate and the Region as Church
I. The Ministry of God's People

As members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we acknowledge the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a ministry of God to all humanity. Through the Holy Spirit, the whole Church is called to share in Christ's ministry and are empowered to fulfill what Christ accomplished through His grace, the love of Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit in all of life. Through word and deed, we embody God's continuing work of creation and redemption.

As individuals and as a church, we respond to the Word of God made known through the ministry of Christ. We recognize our daily work, our use of natural resources, and our relationships with others as a way to live out the authority of Jesus Christ in our lives. We place our trust in the power of God's love at work within us.

Disciples of Christ have always believed that ministry belongs to the Church as a whole, and that all who are the body of Christ, regardless of age, gender, or cultural background, are called to participate in the ministry. This conviction has found expression in our early opposition to viewing the ordained ministry as a class of Christians separate from the rest of the Church.

The ministry of God's people, the laos, is that group of people who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and live according to His example. This group is made up of the Jews, who are the chosen people of God, and all those who are included in the body of Christ through faith in Jesus Christ.

In claiming the laos as the primary context for understanding the nature of ordained ministry, Disciples have been reminded of the importance of the ministry of the laos, which includes all those who are included in the body of Christ through faith in Jesus Christ. The ministry of the laos is characterized by the fact that all believers are equal in the sight of God, and that all are called to participate in the ministry of the Church.

1. How do we understand the relationship between the ministry of God's people and the struggle for justice and liberation in our society and our world? What does it mean for us as Christians to offer the ministry of Christ in situations of conflict or controversy?
2. Should ministry be understood as daily work, whether it be as a homemaker, or teacher, or store clerk, or farmer? What then distinguishes the daily work of a Christian from that of a non-Christian?
3. If we identify ministry with every aspect of daily life and work, do we make the concept of ministry too broad to lose any content or meaning?
4. How are God's people to understand our role as ministers/priests to one another and to non-believers? How do lay persons share the gospel and care for the spiritual needs of individuals?

II. The Meaning of Ordination

In the thinking of the Disciples of Christ, and in growing ecumenical understanding, all baptized believers are "ordained" to ministry. In baptism they become members of a royal priesthood, a holy "priesthood of all believers" — the persons who live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world.

Traditionally it has also been common to speak of ordination, and of ordained ministries, with regard to a set apart leadership. Ordination does not set one apart from the laos, rather, in recognizing purposes necessary for the health, vitality, and effectiveness of the Church's corporate life, by the Spirit, the church appoints persons to particular ministries. Ordination is thus a rite of the Church in which the person ordained receives, by God's gracious action, a special calling to ministry.

Since the earliest era of the Church's history, there have been a variety of patterns of ordained ministry, a rich and diverse terminology applied to these ministries, and many different experiences of the theological basis for ordination. For this reason, it is important to understand the nature of ordination and to be able to discuss it in a way that is both meaningful and helpful in our current context.
To say that ordained ministries are representative does not mean that the ordained take on personal or official status superior to that of the non-ordained. There are no differences of status or worth between lay persons and ordained persons for in their diversity these different ministries are mutually dependent, mutually complementary, and mutually enriching. Neither does it mean that they undertake ministries so that those who are not ordained may be relieved of their own ministerial responsibilities. Rather, they are ordained to re-present (i.e., to present again, to show forth to the whole people the ministry that it has received in Christ Jesus. In this way those ordained carry a special ministry which is not different in kind, but distinctive in its focus in equipping, nurturing, guiding, and setting before the church the ministry shared by all.

Ordination sets one apart for leadership in the life and witness of the church. While the ordained ministry cannot be reduced to any mere listing of tasks, it may be identified by leadership with regard to three fundamental aspects of the church’s life and witness:

1. Acting in obedience to God’s commandment of love in self-sacrifice on behalf of others and in a servant life in the world;
2. Proclaiming the gospel by word (teaching and preaching), by sacramental actions (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper), and by deed (mission and service);
3. Overseeing the life of the community in its worship, education, witness, mission, fellowship and pastoral nurture.

In selecting men and women for ordination, the church thus seeks to ensure that its ministry of service, proclamation, and oversight shall be constantly held up before its members and furthered by good order.

In ordination the church gives grateful acknowledgment to God who in every age grants to women and men the spiritual gifts necessary for such ministry. In making decisions about whom to ordain, the church looks to the personal, inward call from God which leads persons to seek such ministry, to the given gifts, to the personal characteristics and aptitudes, and to the background and promise (e.g., education skills, etc.) that candidates have for effective ministry. On these judgments the church issues its approval, appointment, and ordination.

In light of this understanding of ordination, the Commission on Theology believes that Disciples might well consider the following questions:

1. Should Disciples ordain persons apart from a call to a particular re-presentative assignment? Is there value in the present practice of ordaining and setting persons apart for leadership in the church prior to their receiving a call to service from a particular expression of the church’s life (congregation, educational institution, regional ministry, etc.)? Are there dangers in this practice?
2. Who should be responsible for the service of ordination by which the church sets apart its leaders? Can there be any justification for assigning this task to the person being ordained since ordination is the action of Christ through the Church? Should this not be the responsibility of the church and its regional commissions on the ministry?
3. How can Disciples make greater use of the gifts for representing the church’s identity and calling in Jesus Christ that God gives to women and ethnic minorities?

III. Development of the Ordained Ministry within the Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)

In the history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), there have been several orderings of the ordained ministries. For Barton Stone the pastoral office of ministry included persons identified as “bishops,” “elders,” “pastors,” and “evangelists.” Stone also recognized the offices of “deacon” and “ruling elder.” For Stone and the early congregations of the “Christian movement,” the understanding of the offices of pastor, deacon, and elder was closely parallel to that of the Presbyterians.

For Alexander Campbell and the “Disciples movement,” the ministry of the Christian community consisted of a three-fold ordering which was seen to be set forth in the New Testament: bishops, deacons, and evangelists. Bishops, also identified as elders or pastors, were the chief officers of the congregations and carried duties of teaching, presiding at all meetings of the church, ruling matters of discipline, and shepherding the members of the congregation. Deacons were to be the servants of the church, including the duties of “supplying the tables of the poor and widows,” and keeping the treasury of the church. Evangelists were those sent out by a congregation or group of congregations to preach the gospel, baptize converts, organize congregations, and teach them until they were able to elect their own bishops/elders/pastors.

Barton Stone and the “Christian movement” believed that only ministers who stood in the succession of those ordained by the apostles were authorized to ordain others to the offices of the church. Alexander Campbell, who opposed all measures that tended to separate the ordained ministry from the laos as a special class of persons who alone had responsibility for ministry, believed that every congregation was authorized to ordain persons to the offices of the church. For both Stone and Campbell, ordination, or the setting apart to ministry, was always to include the laying on of hands.

As the two movements united to become the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the differences between the orderings of ministry led to a wide diversity of practice and understandings within our congregations. In recent years, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has assigned the responsibility for developing the policies and criteria for ordination and licensing to the order of ministry to its General Assembly, and authority to confer the offices of the order of ministry to its regional and national agencies. Services of ordination are normally held in sponsoring congregations which participate with the Region as it confers the office of ministry on behalf of the whole church. Congregations continue to have responsibility to set apart persons to the congregational offices of Elder and Deacon.
In 1968 the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adopted a single order of ministry with two offices: the ordained minister and the licensed minister. As set forth in The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ):

91... the church recognizes an order of the ministry, set apart or ordained, under God, to equip the whole people to fulfill their corporate ministry. To this end, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) inducts into the order of its ministry men and women holding the following offices:

92 (a) The office of ordained minister, bestowed by ordination, including such persons as: pastors, associate pastors, chaplains, ministers of Christian education and missionaries; teachers with ministerial standing; administrators and ministers serving the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) beyond the local congregation and in ecumenical relationships;

93 (b) The office of licensed minister bestowed by license and an appropriate act of dedication. Licensing permits the exercise of ministerial function in specific situations with periodic review, in such cases as the following: (1) a worker who is duly commissioned by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to a specialized full-time church vocation; (2) a theological student not yet fulfilled all qualifications for ordination, but who may be authorized to serve under supervision in ministerial capacity; and (3) a person who has not fulfilled educational standards for ordination but in whom the church discerns manifest gifts for ministry and who may be licensed to serve under appropriate supervision as pastor of a particular congregation or in ministerial capacity on the mission field...

In addition, the offices of the diaconate and the diaconate are identified as offices ordered by confession for particular ministerial functions and services in the pastoral, sacramental, liturgical, and spiritual leadership of the congregation.

IV. A Proposal for Discussion: One Order — Three Offices

The history of the church has been marked by several different patterns, or orderings, of ordained ministries. The exclusive warrant of the New Testament Scriptures cannot be claimed for any one. Each form is adapted to the needs of the churches in different times and places. And no single pattern was set down by Jesus or the authors of the New Testament as the model of the church's ministry or its authority.

Growing out of its discussion regarding the meaning and practice of ministry within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as we look to the future, the Commission on Theology commends for consideration a single order of ordained ministry which would include three offices. This pattern appears to be in line with the emerging consensus within the ecumenical movement and is the current pattern accepted by many churches throughout the world, e.g., Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and United Churches. It thus appears to offer a strong possibility for wider ecumenical relationships in the future. This pattern of ministerial leadership corresponds to the three aspects of the church's life identified by the Commission as fundamental (refer to Section II, paragraph 7): (a) the ministry of proclamation by Word and Sacrament (the presbyterate, or priests or ministers); and, (c) the ministry of oversight (the episcopate, or bishops).

The three-fold order of ministry proposed for consideration is not three different orders of ministry with three different ordinations, but one order of ministry with one ordination. The three offices proposed would supersede the current office of the ordained minister now identified in The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in recognition of the different tasks fulfilled by those ordained to ministry in the church. Although Disciples do not commonly use the terms deacon, presbyter, and bishop when referring to those ordained ministers, and would probably not do so in the future, the fundamental tasks associated with each of these orders are currently performed by ordained ministers. For example, Disciples have deacons — that is, persons who give leadership to the ministry of service to church and world — but we call them "Administrator of the Week of Compassion" or "Executive Director of Christian Life," or "Fraternally Worker in Africa." Disciples also have presbyters — persons who give leadership to the ministry of proclamation by Word and Sacrament — but we call them "Minister," or "Minister of Education," or "Pastor." Similarly, Disciples have bishops — persons who give leadership to the ministry of oversight — but we call them "Regional Minister," or "Area Minister," or "General Minister and President."

Several issues speak to this proposal for a three-fold order of ordained ministry. First, there is some biblical precedent for such offices in the life of the church (Acts 6:1-6; 15:1-22; 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28; Phil. 1:1). Second, in the history of the church this pattern has emerged as predominant, but in different forms, for example, among Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Methodists, and Lutherans. Third, in the theological discussion of the World Council of Churches and within the Consultation on Church Union, this pattern has been offered as an invitation to all churches to move toward the full mutual reconciliation of ministries. Fourth, and perhaps most significant theologically, it embraces the various types of representative functions essential to the identity and calling of the church in its service, proclamation, mission, and unity.

In each of the offices of the three-fold ordained minister being proposed, one aspect of the church's life and witness comes into particular focus:

- In the ministry of the deacon, the active witness and mission of the church as servant is assisted and advanced.
- In the ministry of the presbyter, the proclamation, preaching, teaching, and sacramental dimensions (presiding at the Table and administering Baptism) of the church are lifted up.
In the ministry of the bishop, the oversight of the life of the community comes into focus. Thus, within a single order of ordained ministry, there can be three distinct offices which are at the same time mutually supportive and interrelated. The three-fold ordained ministry, taken as a whole, thus represents the fundamental characteristics of ministry shared by all baptized believers.

Licensed Ministers

The three-fold order of ordained ministry being proposed for consideration does not include "the licensed minister" as an office. The Commission believes that licensed ministry would need to be continued as part of the total ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); however, greater clarity needs to be given to the relationship between licensed ministry and ordained ministry—that is, licensed ministers would be persons preparing for ordination, or serving as ministers in special circumstances. The value of this arrangement is the identification of the order of ministry with the act of ordination. Although The Design currently identifies licensed ministers as an "office" in a two-fold order of ministry, the understanding of licensed minister being recommended here for consideration is consistent with the Disciples tradition which has always distinguished "licensed ministry" from "ordained ministry".

Congregational Offices: Elder and Deacon

The recommendation of a three-fold order of ministry that would replace the current office of the ordained minister leaves unaddressed the congregational offices of elder and deacon. There is a great deal of diversity in our present practice and understanding of these offices, especially the office of elder. For some of our congregations, elders are ordained and carry responsibility for leadership at the Lord's Supper. For other congregations, elders are elected and installed— but not ordained— and carry similar functions of ministry at the Table.

This issue is not simply one of consistency or order; indeed, Disciples cherish their freedom to have a rich diversity in practice in such matters (and as a Commission, we want to underscore our support for such diversity in the life of the church). However, in ecumenical discussions it is difficult to know how to describe our eldership in such a way as to be claimed by other churches as part of the larger theological understanding of the church's ministry.

We believe that the congregational offices of elder and deacon (i.e., non-professional, non-full-time) have a valid place within the total ministry of the Church Universal. The Commission believes these offices represent a valuable contribution by Disciples to the emerging theological consensus within the ecumenical movement as they bear witness to the essential ministry of lay persons. We want to celebrate the participation of such offices within the sacramental ministry of the church.

Issues for Discussion

We believe this proposal for one order of ordained ministry with three offices raises the following questions which have not been addressed:

(1) How do you respond to the proposal of a single order of ordained ministry with three offices? Could such a three-fold order enable Disciples to grow in our understanding of the calling of the church to ministries of service, proclamation, and pastoral oversight?

(2) Do you believe we could have a three-fold order which would continue to use a variety of titles for those holding different positions in ministry?

(3) How fluid are the three offices within a single order of ministry? In other words, would one move from presbyter to bishop, and back again in the course of one's ministry? Or is such a move (from presbyter to bishop) seen to be "for life"?

(4) Given the identification of licensed ministry as a category in relation to ordained ministry, what responsibility do our regional Commissions on Ministry have for the nurture and care of licensed ministers, both persons preparing for ordination and persons serving as ministers in special circumstances?

(5) Are congregational elders and deacons to be ordained? If so, should they be ordained for life, or for a set term?

(6) How can greater collegiality be expressed between the ordained pastor and the eldership within a congregation in order to assure that these ministries are not seen to be over against one another?

(7) How may we expand our current understanding and practice of the eldership and diaconate to include a ministry of teaching, shepherding, and governance beyond the limited role of most Disciples elders and deacons as those who "pray or serve at the Table"?

V. The Ministry of Oversight

As the Commission discussed this proposal of "one order-three offices", the focus of our work centered upon only one of the three offices: the ministry of oversight (episcopate). It is here that Disciples have often had the most difficulty, for our history has often been marked by a rejection of any authority for church life beyond the congregation, as well as a fear of abuses of power and authority which have taken place in other denominations or communions which have a recognized ministry of episcopate. This document does not, therefore, set forth detailed descriptions of the ministry of service (deacons) or the ministry of Word and Sacrament (presbyters). Those will be dealt with in detail in the future work of the Commission.
A. The Meaning of Oversight for Disciples

Oversight (episcopos) has been an aspect of ministry since the beginning of the New Testament church. After Philip had preached the gospel in Samaria, the leaders of the Jerusalem Church sent Peter and John to confirm the mission and pray for the converts (Acts 8:14). When Paul and Barnabas visited the churches which they had founded in Asia Minor, they appointed elders (presbyteros) in each congregation (Acts 14:23). According to Acts 20:28, Paul exhorted the elders of the Ephesian Church to guard the flock for which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. Paul admonished members of the churches he had founded to respect their leaders who were "over them in the Lord" and who were responsible for their admonition and instruction (cf. 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12). In addressing the church at Philippi, Paul gave special attention to the bishops (episkopoi) and the deacons (diakonoi) (Phil. 1:1). Titus is instructed by Paul to appoint elders (presbyteroi) or bishops (episkopoi) in every city of Crete (Titus 1:5-7). These leaders were to be chosen according to well-defined standards, and were qualified to be overseers of the church's life and teachers of the apostolic faith.

As the church moved into the second century, and the distance from the event of God's disclosure in Jesus Christ and the normative witness to that event in the proclamation of the apostles became greater, there arose a need for a more deliberate ordering of the church's life to insure faithfulness in the observance of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and for maintaining the continuity with the apostolic message. To this end, the ministry of oversight (episcopos) became more formalized in the life of the church.

The shape of that ministry was well-defined by the two terms which Paul had used for the Philippian leaders: episkopos (lord bishop) and diakonos. The former was borrowed from the Greco-Roman economy where it represented oversight as exercised, for example, by the steward of an estate. The latter was used in New Testament times for an ordinary household servant: a waiter on tables. Thus, the ministry of oversight in the early church was characterized by a type of supervision which was designed to serve.

Although early Disciples leaders were rightly opposed to a clericalism which dominated the church, at the same time they recognized the importance of the ministry of oversight or episcopos. This recognition rested on the acknowledgment of the biblical witness and their conviction that all things should be done decently and in order. For example, Alexander Campbell did not hesitate to use the term "bishop", and by it he stressed the responsibility of the "bishops" (in Greek, episkopoi) or "elders" of the congregation for shepherding and teaching the members and for leading in worship and in ministering baptism and the Lord's Supper.

As early as the 1850s, Disciples had state evangelists (later called state secretaries or executive secretaries) who exercised some oversight in the life of the congregations by offering instruction in local church management and the practical meaning of the Christian faith. In 1886, Black Disciples in North Carolina met in assembly to set standards for their pastors and to authorize recommended standards and procedure for ordination as a part of their responsibility for overseeing the general life of their congregations. In the 1930s, as a legitimate function of the total church in assembly, International Conventions began to recommend to all Disciples congregations' standards and procedures for ordination, for the church's well-being.

In the 1960s ordination was recognized to be the responsibility of the whole church, with established state (regional) or area committees as the locus for supervising all ordinations. Executive Secretaries of the state organizations (later to be called Regional Ministers) played a major role in the location and relocation of ministers. They also functioned in various informal ways to provide leadership and supervision to congregations in their states.

We have seen in Scripture, in the early church, and in our history as Disciples of Christ that the ministry of oversight (episcopos) is an important dimension of the re-presentative character of all forms of ministry: pastors, elders, deacons, congregational and regional boards; the General Assembly and General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); regional and general unit staff, etc. We are also aware that this ministry is already being exercised among us: members of congregations oversee programs in Christian education, in evangelism, in administration and stewardship, Christian witness and mission, and in worship and the fellowship life of the total congregation. Many congregations have also developed "shepherding programs" so that the ministry of oversight is one extended to, as well as exercised by, all members of the church.

The ministry of episcopos is thus shared by the whole people of God, the laos. At times, however, it comes to greater focus and expression in some forms of ministry than in others. For the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with our strong emphasis upon the congregation as a primary place for the experience of church, the focus for oversight is most often centered around the ministry of pastors, elders, and deacons. Just as there is the need for a focus of ministry in particular persons within a congregation, there is a similar need for such a focus in persons responsible for the care, nurture, growth, and teaching of congregations within a region, as well as the need for a ministry of pastor-to-pastors. One may also identify the ministry of oversight in relation to the general manifestation of church in its congregations and regions and the wider programs of overseas ministries, higher education, benevolent work, ecumenical involvements, and Christian education. However, for our discussion at this time in our history, primary attention to the exercise of the ministry of episcopos needs to be focused upon understanding the ministry of oversight in its regional manifestation.

B. The Ministry of Episcopos and the Region as Church

Perhaps one of the clearest areas where the ministry of oversight (episcopos) finds expression within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as we have developed through the restructure pro-
cess is that of the regional manifestation of church. It is in the regional minister where elements of the episcopal ministry are currently lodged, and yet, at the same time, where that ministry needs to be more clearly defined and understood.

The Commission has identified six elements which we believe should mark the ministry of true episcopate throughout the whole ministry of the church, but particularly in relation to the regional minister. These elements would ensure and guide oversight throughout the church in all of its manifestations in the church’s efforts to be a faithful and continuing witness to the apostolic word and worship — where the Word is preached and the sacraments observed.

1. Those who are appointed to the specific ministry of episcopate within a region are charged to serve as personal representatives of the given unity of the church in all places and all ages. Regional ministers should seek to make visible to the church its unity, and to call it to greater unity within and among the congregations in a region, as well as the reconciliation of all the churches and communions globally with one another.

2. Regional ministers have the task, individually and collegially, to proclaim, teach, and pass on the apostolic Christian faith as it is witnessed to in Scripture and Tradition, thus assuring continuity of witness from generation to generation. They also bear the responsibility of helping the church to understand different manifestations it faces in its own life and in the world, and to interpret the Christian faith appropriately and intelligibly in ever-new situations. They will understand themselves as teachers of the faith in the region.

3. One task of the episcopal office is that of general pastoral oversight of all members of the church in a given region. This entails a regular and frequent presence in each congregation for the purposes of preaching, teaching, celebrating of the Lord’s Supper, and participating in services of baptism and ordination. In this context, the regional minister has a direct responsibility to be a pastor to the pastors in the region.

4. Regional ministers should bear responsibility for leadership in the church’s mission to the world. Theirs is the task of voicing and articulating the command of God that justice be done. More than ever before, Christians are now aware of the unity of the whole world — we sink or swim together.

5. The organized life and work of the church in a region also requires oversight. However, the regional minister is not just a programmatic functionary comparable to the secular executive who seeks to that the job gets done. As a teacher of the Christian faith, the regional minister bears special responsibility to reflect theologically upon this work, and by delegation to and cooperation with other members of the church, to see that it is done properly.

6. Working collegially with congregations and members of the church, the regional minister has a particular responsibility to oversee the ordination of candidates for the order of ministry. Regional ministers should either be present or represented at services of ordination. It is also their responsibility to exercise care and oversight for all candidates to the ordained ministry through regional commissions on ministry.

One of the carry-overs from our historic concerns about “clericalism” in the church and the abuse of the power and authority of bishops as seen in other denominations has been a strong reluctance among Disciples to use the term “bishop” or to see the ministry of oversight (episcopate) as part of the wider ministry of the church. And yet, we are also aware that in the establishment of regional offices, we have in fact developed an episcopate which may be functioning without a clear theological or constitutional foundation. Any understanding and practice of episcopate among Disciples must be developed in terms of its ministerial and pastoral functions, and not in relation to magisterial or hierarchical exercise of authority. In the best of situations regional ministers function collegially and exercise authority as that of a “shepherd” or “pastor to pastors”.

There is need, therefore, to understand the practice of episcopate within the Disciples as we develop a fuller statement on ministry and the Church. The following questions are set forth as beginning points for such consideration:

1. Are we able to see the “ministry of oversight” as set forth earlier in this report as a primary function of the total ministry of the church which is exercised by several offices of ordained ministers in the different manifestations of our church — sometimes as a local pastor; sometimes as a regional minister; sometimes as a general unit executive?

2. Can we pursue this discussion about episcopate in some fresh ways which would bring our Disciples strong commitment to collegiality in ministry to be a part of the wider ecumenical discussions of the office of bishop?

3. In the light of Scripture, Tradition, and our own history, are we as a church, ready to own and name the ministry of episcopate that is already being exercised by and among us? Should we begin using the title “bishop”? Or, could we identify the functions and the tasks of the episcopal ministry, and then worry about the title?

4. How would the structure of our present regional ministries need to change in order for regional ministers more fully to exercise the ministry of pastoral oversight? Are our regions too large for effective pastoral oversight to congregations and pastors by the regional minister?

5. If regional ministers are to exercise episcopate collegially with one another (as well as with the whole church), should the Council of Ministers occupy a more important place in our polity?
(6) Do those who are ministers in the general manifestation of church also bear a responsibility for the ministry of episcopate? Do they not show forth the unity of the church, teach and pass on the apostolic faith, serve as pastors to the whole church, and lead it in mission to the world?

(7) In which office of ordained ministry would campus ministers, chaplains, and full-time staff to ecumenical organizations and agencies be located? Are these diaconal ministers of service? or ministers of oversight?

NOTES
1. Papers prepared for the Commission’s work on developing a statement on the nature of church have been published in Mid-Stream, the quarterly ecumenical journal of the Council on Christian Unity (See Mid-Stream, Vol. XIX, No. 3, July, 1980; Vol. XXI, No. 2, April, 1982).
3. For a more detailed review of the historical development of the ordained ministry within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), see Ministry Among Disciples: Past, Present, Future, by D. Newell Williams (ST Louis, CBP, 1985).

Members of the Commission on Theology and Christian Unity

William R. Baird
Paul A. Crow, Jr.
Arla J. Elston
Thomas Fountain
Beverly R. Gaventa
Ronald W. Graham
Joe R. Jones
Vance Martin
A. M. Pennybacker
Ann Updegraff-Spleth
Clark K. Williamson

Walter D. Bingham
James O. Duke
Wallace R. Ford
H. Jackson Forstman, Chairperson
Howard B. Goodrich, Jr.
Kenneth E. Henry
Michael Kinnaman
Ronald E. Osborn
Narka Ryan
Robert K. Welsh, Staff

Council on Christian Unity