Introduction
In the 180 year history of the Disciples of Christ, one concern that has always been close to our hearts and minds is a deep commitment to and belief in the unity of Christ's Church. We have a right to expect that division within the Church is sin, and that all Christians have a responsibility and an obligation to work for reconciliation. It is therefore with joy and anticipation that Disciples respond to the call of the World Council of Churches, which was over 50 years in the making, and the Faith and Order movement. All churches have been asked to prepare an official response to this unique ecumenical document by December 31, 1985. If Disciples are bold in our commitment, we are also painfully aware of the depth of divisions, and the difficulties which lie ahead of the Church.

While it is with realistic eyes that we look at BEM, at the same time we see in this document an extraordinary opportunity for the Church to move beyond the status quo, to accept the demands of the gospel for unity and the resulting opportunities which should come for the church to witness to the gospel, to preach and teach God's love, mercy, justice, and forgiveness.

Disciples recognize that what BEM offers is not a blueprint, a road map to re-union for Christians. It is, rather, a call to convergence, a coming together of theological perspectives, but not yet consensus. In this there is expressed a sense of unity, a commitment to unity, an awareness of the validity of the diverse expressions of the faith without endorsing the divisive history of some of these expressions.

Because of the unity already represented in BEM, and in the ways in which differing theological positions are stated, Disciples join other Christians in appreciation for the significance of this document. Indeed, we see here a witness to the apostolic faith through the ages. If the churches will take this seriously, we may find the Holy Spirit renewing the Church together towards new levels of witness, and this is a sense of the world. Disciples note with pride the international character of the document, a factor that by its very nature speaks a word of peace and hope to the world.

Disciples also observe that the vision of the church in BEM is congruent with that expressed in the theological consensus proclaimed by the nine-church Consultation on Church Union and by the Disciples of Christ. This international Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic Commission on Dialogue. Disciples believe that this indicates something of the breadth and depth of the convergence of views in BEM, and it is evidence that the ecumenical movement is proceeding in a common direction.

Further, Disciples see wisdom in addressing the three issues of baptism, eucharist, and ministry. For it is in and over these issues that Christians have been most divided throughout Christian history. It is only as changes in the issues are addressed that progress towards visible unity can be achieved. There is a painful irony in the fact that baptism, the act through which we are brought into Christ and the Church the Lord's Supper, through which we share in the one body broken for us, and the ministry, through which the office and function of servanthood is expressed, are the very places where our sins of disunity are most evident.

The consideration and reception of BEM is an opportunity to face directly the founding ideals which called the Disciples into being. If we believe in the unity of the Church, we must take this document seriously, engage it with rigor, and speak a word of response to the Church universal.

I. Disciples Engaging BEM: A Process of Consideration
Soon after the publication of Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry in 1982, the Council on Christian Unity designed a wide-ranging process for study and consideration of the text across the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). A series of resource materials were developed, especially for use in Disciples of Christ. Disciples engaged in congregations by pastors and laypersons, to help understand the importance of BEM and to enable congregations to consider the issues at stake in the theological convergence. First, A Guide for Study was prepared by Dr. Michael Kinnamon and Dr. Robert K. Welsh for use in Disciples congregations and ecumenical study groups. The purchase of 5,350 copies of this guide, published by the Christian Board of Publication, revealed the eagerness of Disciples to study BEM. Second, five video-tape presentations by Dr. Paul A. Crow, Jr., were prepared by the Disciples Seminary Foundation of the Claremont School of Theology to open up the issues and implications of BEM. Copies of these video-tapes have been available to study groups for purchase or rental since September, 1984. A special issue of the quarterly publication of the Council on Christian Unity, Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal (July 1984), was devoted to exploring the meaning of BEM for North American Christians.

In seeking widespread and active participation in this initial stage of response to BEM throughout the Disciples of Christ, personal letters inviting individuals and groups to join in study of the text were sent to over 150 congregations, to each Disciples seminary and seminar foundation, to professors of religion in Disciples colleges, to all members of the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), general unit staff and their Boards of Directors, and to the network of twenty-three Christian colleges. The positive replies received to these letters were encouraging, and continue to reassure the Disciples in their commitment to ecumenical concerns.
well as the large number of response forms returned from groups which had used the Guide for Study, indicate that Disciples across the life of the church are, in fact, engaging in discussion and consideration of the text. Often these studies have taken place in the context of ecumenical groups or programs designed by local or statewide councils of churches (e.g., the Washington Association of Churches, the New Mexico Conference of Churches, the Greater Dallas Community of Churches, the Canadian Council of Churches, the Greater Cleveland Interchurch Council, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon). In many ways the responses received from these ecumenical settings and studies have been the most positive and, at the same time, the most critical. The importance of BEM is thus seen most clearly in its wider ecumenical context of enabling reconciliation among Christians and renewal within the churches.

One of the key learnings reported in many study groups was the importance of linking the study of BEM to occasions of worship, especially to celebrations of the so-called "Lima Liturgy". Special services using this order of worship for the Lord's Supper have been held at the 1983 General Assembly, the 1984 meeting of the General Board, regional assemblies, and local communities across the United States and Canada. Many Disciples have come to an appreciation of both the potential and the promise of BEM as they have experienced the theological convergence set to the language of worship.

In designing this study process among Disciples, it was clear that consideration of and reaction to the BEM text would be only a first, initial stage in a much longer term process that will require claiming the theological convergence in its implications for our church's education, witness, worship, ethical and spiritual life. This report will seek to identify specific areas where such on-going tasks and opportunities may now be pursued by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

A general assessment of this first stage of study of BEM is that it has generated a new appreciation and much-needed interest in serious theological reflection among Disciples regarding fundamental aspects of our faith in the areas of the Church, sacraments, and ministry. And, we have seen that the vision of the Church articulated through the BEM text is in some sense the same vision which Disciples wish to claim in our ecclesiology and our pursuit of unity.

II. BEM and the Faith of the Church through the Ages

The basic question posed to all churches in consideration of BEM is to state "the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages" (BEM, Preface).

From the responses and reports received across the life of our church — in its congregations, regions, institutions of higher education, and general administrative units — it would appear that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada is prepared to affirm that Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry does reflect the faith of the Church through the ages. The extent to which this general recognition is qualified may be discovered in the specific items noted in the material which follows on "Issues on the Way Towards Reception" (e.g., the importance for Disciples to claim the ordination of women in any movement toward the reconciliation of ministries).

In making this affirmation, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) wants to underscore and highlight five specific aspects of the BEM text:

1. Disciples affirm the themes of baptism, eucharist, and ministry as central theological issues for ecumenical advance among the churches in overcoming historic divisions among Christians.

2. Disciples find that some of the language and terminology in the convergence text is not familiar to our tradition, and therefore, we are challenged to grow in our understanding of the faith as it has been expressed in different traditions and histories.

3. Disciples applaud BEM's concept of "unity with diversity" as a model for ecumenical growth, i.e., a unity which offers an openness to a variety of interpretations of the faith without diluting the essential understandings of the meanings of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and ministry. Unity is never achieved by conformity in language and practice, but in allowing our diversities and gifts to be shared in communion.

4. Disciples understand that the greatest challenge of BEM is finally not in the approval of a document, but in the spiritual process of moving to live out the implications of the one faith in its call to ecumenical action, new church-to-church relationships, and mutual accountability to our sisters and brothers in other traditions.

5. Disciples claim BEM as a theological convergence while recognizing it is not yet a full statement of theological agreement or consensus. There are several issues in which we would welcome further ecumenical discussion as we move with other churches in pursuing mutual recognition of members, reconciliation of ministries, and sharing at the one Table.

III. Issues for Disciples on the Way Towards Reception

Part of the Disciples response to BEM has been to point to those levels of agreement as well as disagreement or hesitancy. Many of the problems which Disciples have with BEM are related to questions of language which is simply unfamiliar in our tradition. In some cases Disciples are confronting language which has been self-consciously rejected at various points in our history.

One such usage is the word "sacrament." The early Disciples leaders made a strong case for overcoming division by trying to follow not only New Testament patterns of church life, but also New Testament language. "Bible names for Bible things" was a frequently used motto in the nineteenth century. Thus the word "sacrament" was seen as problematic. Because baptism and the Lord's Supper were clearly understood to be commanded or ordered by Christ, the early Disciples chose to use...
an alternative word for "sacrament." That word was "ordinance," a word widely used in the Reformed tradition (from which most of the early Disciples came). However, in the past thirty years, many and more Disciples have returned to the language of "sacrament." The Disciples understanding of sacrament/ordinance has always been essentially that of the broader Christian community: visible signs of spiritual graces, avenues of God's grace. Even more important, the Disciples have always seen the Church as a community in which these graces of God are mediated, and baptism and the Lord's Supper have been central to the life of the Disciples community.

A. BAPTISM

Disciples of Christ find in this section a witness to the essential meaning of the sacrament of baptism. BEM, as well as The COCU Consensus (1984), goes a long way in bridging the differences which have divided the churches for centuries.

The Disciples teaching on baptism is not an isolated doctrine, but is seen in the context of the Church and its unity. Baptism is the sacrament of unity. Through the waters of baptism the Holy Spirit binds all Christians together and impels them to make real and visible their unity in Christ. We celebrate the theological meaning of baptism articulated in the five aspects developed in BEM in paragraphs 2-7: as liberating participation in Christ's death and resurrection, as conversion of the heart, as a seal of the Holy Spirit, as incorporation into the Body of Christ (not a denomination), and as a sign of the Kingdom of God and the life to come.

Disciples greet with appreciation the emphasis upon the dynamic relation between faith and baptism (paras. 8-10, 12). The personal profession of faith of the believer is for us essential for responsible membership in the Church. At our best we know such faith is neither a momentary act nor is totally individualistic, but is an expression of the faith lived in a believing community, the Church of centuries.

While Disciples affirm believers' baptism as the practice of the apostolic Church, we look toward a united church in which - as BEM teaches - both believers' baptism and infant baptism/infantism can be fully practiced. Most Disciples believe both witness to the same faith and can be shared in the same fellowship (koinonia). Indeed, by official action of our General Assembly (San Antonio 1975), our church practices the mutual recognition of the baptism and membership of our partner churches in the Consultation on Church Union.

At the same time Disciples value the deliberate affirmation of immersion as a vivid expression of the reality in baptism the Christian participates in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (para. 18). Our witness to immersion is not a sectarian principle by which we seek to exclude other practices or persons. Rather, it is offered as a witness to the full understanding of baptism and the catholicity of the Church.

Disciples historically baptize by using the trinitarian formula, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," which BEM points out is the common practice and confession in Christian history. Alexander Campbell believed that according to the New Testament we are baptized not only "in the name of" (by the authority of) but also "into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Such an interpretation emphasizes the profound union with God that comes by virtue of our being baptized "into the name."

BEM's clearest challenge to Disciples practice comes in the brief paragraph 13: "Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as "rebaptism" must be avoided." Disciples do not consciously practice "rebaptism." Our spiritual growth since the 19th century has led the majority of Disciples congregations to receive into full membership those from other traditions which practice infant baptism and confirmation. A minority of congregations, however, do require immersion of adults who were baptized in infancy. Other congregations will immerse those who were baptized in infancy but whose conscience now leads them to ask for believers' baptism. Such a service is performed as an act of pastoral care for those persons and as a witness to the New Testament practice (which BEM acknowledges).

Clearly Disciples must confront the ecumenical implications of this act which others interpret as "rebaptism." Our practice must seek to be inclusive. Educational materials must be developed which teach the common Christian witness of the diverse forms of baptism. Liturgical services can be prepared which both reaffirm a person's earlier baptism and serve his or her pastoral and spiritual needs. Disciples are learning about this duality as they live in united churches in North India, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. Surely an important part of transcending this difficulty will be a genuine acceptance and practice of both forms of baptism as belonging to the fullness of the
include the five aspects set forth in relation to the meaning of the eucharist (paras. 2-26); Disciples, however, need to be clearer in teaching an understanding of the eucharist as "Invocation of the Sacred Meal of the Kingdom" (paras. 22-26). Third, we strongly endorse the paragraphs which point to the importance of the frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper as a means to deepen Christian faith: "As the eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday" (paras. 30-31).

The text offers several areas for theological growth among Disciples of Christ as we seek to build upon our historic teachings related to the Lord's Supper, and as we seek with other churches to reclaim the eucharist as central to the Church's life and witness. One specific area is related to recovering the meaning of an anamnesis or memorial of Christ. In the New Testament anamnesis is not an inspirational recollection or remembering a past event, but rather a bringing into the present of a past act in all its significance and reality. Christ is truly present at the Lord's Supper, but Disciples affirm that the text does not require any particular metaphysical interpretation of "real presence". Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper was usually articulated in the understanding of Christ as "the host at the meal". The rediscovery of the biblical meaning of anamnesis in the ecumenical discussion offers a way in which "real presence" may be widely embraced.

A second challenge is found in the strong linkage made between the celebration of the eucharist and participation in "restoration of the world's situation and the human condition", that is, between celebration of the Lord's Supper and "participation in God's mission to the world" (paras. 20-21, 24-26). Too often Disciples have seen the Lord's Supper either as only a personal act of worship (between the person and God) or as an internal activity of church life (worship separate from mission).

BEM challenges us to an understanding of church which is both sacramental and in mission.

Our responses expressed some difficulty with the list of elements included in an eucharistic liturgy. Are all these elements necessary? Of equal value? Disciples affirm six of the elements as important parts in a celebration of the Lord's Supper: the prayers of the people, the proclamation of the Word, the offering of gifts, the unfailing use of the words of institution, prayers for invocation of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis) in the community and the elements, and the receiving of the bread and the cup.

Further ecumenical discussion and work in the preparation of eucharistic services of worship will be a constructive phase in the years to come.

C. MINISTRY

It is not surprising that the section on "Ministry" presented the greatest problems and raised the most serious questions for Disciples. The text itself, with a length almost equal to the sections on baptism and eucharist combined, and the frequent paragraphs of commentary which in themselves indicate disputed issues which are still in need of further dialogue and reconciliation, illustrates that this section has not reached the level of mature convergence as that of baptism or the eucharist. Further, it should be noted that many of the sharpest divisions and most intense controversies among the churches have centered upon the issues, interpretations, and practices of the ministry. Nevertheless, Disciples of Christ view as important the significant, though partial, degree of convergence which has been achieved in the text. We recognize our responsibility to continued ecumenical discussion and action on the unresolved issues as Christians seek further consensus-building on these critical areas related to the nature and calling of the Church.

Disciples celebrate the recognition that the whole people of God is called in baptism to serve Christ and to proclaim and show forth the Kingdom of God. It is important to understand that the authority of the Church's ministry is founded upon the faithfulness of the whole people — both ordained and lay — and upon an hierarchical understanding of authority which is given to the ordained alone. An implication from this view of ministry is that the ordained ministry is seen to be interrelated and interdependent with the calling to the whole people of God.

We also affirm the setting forth of the essential character of the ordained ministry as representative. They are persons publicly and continually responsible for pointing to the Church's fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ. They present again and again the calling of the whole Church to service, witness, and proclamation. Ordained ministers are thus more than enablers or reflectors of "public opinion". Their ministries are to be expressions of the ministry of Christ to the whole Church and of all the baptized to the whole human community.

Disciples respond favorably to the relation between ordained ministry and authority (paras. 1c, commentary, and 15-16) which teaches ministerial authority as that of a servant life offered for the up-building of the whole body and responsible to the whole Church.

Disciples of Christ are coming to see the value of the three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters (pastors) and deacons. We know these three dimensions are already present in our own life, and need to be clearly expressed in persons and offices. We also realize these three offices constitute the possible ministry of a future united church. For us, this growing appreciation of the three-fold ministry is conditioned by two insights: (1) In the midst of the diversity of patterns which are often reasons for and expressions of continuing division among churches, we affirm the three-fold ministry as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means of achieving it; and (2) We understand that affirming the three-fold pattern is not merely to accept any existing or previous pattern, but is to claim a pattern which both expresses the ministries of all churches and challenges all churches to reform and renewal.

In recent decades in our own reflections about the Church and through our participation in the ecumenical movement, Disciples have increasingly come to appreciate the ministry of shared over-
sight (episcopate) in the teaching, sacramental, and pastoral care of the Church. Our emerging theological understanding of episcopate sees the role of the “bishop” as not simply identified with administrative oversight or some external exercise of authority beyond the congregation, but as a ministry which is primarily pastoral and sacramental, related to the continuity and unity of the Church, and leading in the Church’s mission. Our contacts with churches in the Consultation on the Church Union who have bishops and with the Roman Catholic Church have opened for us some of these wider theological understandings of episcopate in the practice of oversight, nurture, pastoral care, and continuity.

With our particular historical roots in the 19th century we were among those churches which reacted against any view which defined apostolic succession through bishops as the only valid expression of guarding the continuity of the faith. Nevertheless, Disciples applaud BEM’s understanding of apostolic succession which grounds continuity not only in ministry but in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole (para. 35) in its faithful teaching, preaching, and witness. We understand that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a part of this apostolic Tradition. We are coming to accept the importance of the oversight beyond the congregation — national and general representatives — participating in the laying-on-of-hands in ordination. This sign of the continuity and unity of the Church is a critical area for growth as Disciples reflect about the Church and its ministry. We welcome the suggestion that all churches experience the possibility of reconciliation of ministries as a witness to seeing our present patterns of ministry as differing forms of continuity. The reconciliation of our ministries would thus involve the uniting of our different expressions of continuity of the apostolic tradition.

Another issue for serious theological reflection among Disciples is the ministry of congregational officers who share in leadership at the Lord’s Table, namely, elders. For Disciples, elders are sacramental officers chosen by the congregation because of their spiritual gifts. Our consideration of BEM challenges us to discover the place of elders in the understanding of ministry as set forth in the ecumenical theological convergence.

One of the most critical unresolved issues in BEM is that of the ordination of women. For Disciples it is not simply a matter of practice but of theology. If the churches are to move ahead towards reconciliation of ministries, this issue cannot be left open. While we understand the reasons for caution expressed in the document, especially in relation to the Orthodox church, we applaud the call for further ecumenical consideration of this critical issue (para. 54). We cannot, however, accept any interpretation which could view the ordination of women as a “hindrance”. Rather, we see the ministry of women as a gift to the Church from the Holy Spirit.

IV. Implications of BEM For The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

There are at least four specific areas of work and dialogue which stand as a challenge to the Disciples as immediate implications for our reception of BEM. First of all, BEM as a document and as a fruit of historical process represents what may be the moving of God’s Spirit in the Church of the twentieth century. By this providential document Disciples may find themselves able to reclaim Christian unity as their “polar star,” to quote a much beloved phrase of Barton W. Stone.

Specifically, the unity of the Church will be served as BEM is accepted as one of the teaching documents for Disciples. This would suggest that BEM be used in such areas as the development of curricula, materials for membership classes and lay study groups, teaching in theological seminaries, providing direction for the work of regional commissions on Ministry, and the on-going work of the Council on Christian Unity.

Secondly, BEM offers help as Disciples enrich their worship through liturgical renewal. BEM will come to life for Disciples by its use in the development of services, celebrations, and orders of worship, and in our teaching the meaning of baptism, eucharist and ministry.

Thirdly, Disciples are called to relate the ecumenical theological convergence represented in BEM to our present efforts in understanding and articulating the nature of the Church. This is especially true in such areas as statements on the order of ministry, the meaning of ordination, and the work of the Commission on Theology. Further, other ecumenical relations and activities of the Disciples, e.g., in local, regional, and national council of churches, will be deepened and enhanced by a careful consideration of BEM.

Finally, BEM calls us to greater faithfulness in pursuing justice in the world and reminds us of the ethical dimensions of the faith, the life of the Christian in society. In its call for acceptance of diversity, the celebration of community, the centrality of the Table, and the fundamental character of Christian ministry as service, BEM calls all Christians to proclaim and live a gospel of love, a message of reconciliation and forgiveness. This gospel of Jesus Christ is preached out of unity; it is grounded in God’s justice and mercy. If in baptism we are buried and raised up to be one family, and in the Lord’s Supper Christ leads us in sharing the fundamental necessities of life and eternity, and in ministry we enact the gospel, then we will know what it means to be Church. BEM gives us an opportunity to move towards being God’s Church, Christ’s Body. For this reason, BEM is indeed an extraordinary document in which Disciples discover both their heritage and calling to be God’s people.

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