

Thomas J. Liggett

A Profile of the Disciples of Christ^{*}

Preface

This profile is excessively brief and utilizes generalities which are not universally valid, nor do they represent the consensus of Disciples leadership. It is, rather, the summary of one person's evaluation of the present status of the Disciples of Christ. Hopefully, it will serve the purpose of stimulating the dialogue which we are initiating and which will provide multiple opportunities for assessing the accuracy of these generalizations and the relative importance of the salient features of the profile.

Introduction

1. The Disciples of Christ emerged very late in the history of the Church, and it needs to be underscored that the Disciples inevitably reflect the date and circumstances of their origin.
2. Important developments in church history which had already occurred:
 - The Protestant Reformation; of the four principal currents within that reformation, it is the Reformed (or Calvinist) current which was most influential.
 - The post-reformation struggles between Christians (Catholic-Protestant), state churches vs. dissenters, fragmentation, tension, and friction.

^{*} This paper was prepared for the first meeting of the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, which was convened in Indianapolis, Indiana, September 22-27, 1977. The theme of this conference was "The Church and Elements of Its Unity." This paper and others presented at the conference were published in *Mid-stream* 18.4 (October 1979). Thomas J. Liggett was president of Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.

2 A Profile of the Disciples of Christ

- The evangelical/pietist movement had already made its impact in both Great Britain and in the American colonies.
 - The enlightenment/*aufklärung* had already occurred, leaving its legacy of science and empirical thought in western Europe.
3. The English-speaking context: the rootage of the Disciples of Christ is found in Great Britain and in the United States of America (a nation formed from former British colonies).

I. *An Outline of the Disciples of Christ Internationally Identified*

Great Britain

- The movements in Scotland and Ireland which led to the formation of the Churches of Christ in Great Britain date from the late 18th century. They were characterized by a critical stance with regard to the established churches, and by a search for an understanding of the Gospel and a church life-style which would be based exclusively upon the New Testament.
- From these origins in Great Britain, the movement began to spread to some of the overseas dominions of the empire: Canada, 1811; New Zealand, 1843; Australia, 1845; South Africa, 1900.
- The churches in Great Britain and in the dominions engaged in missionary work, usually by separate initiative, which resulted in the emergence of mission churches, principally in India, Rhodesia, in other British colonies in Africa, and in Thailand.

B. United States of America

- The Disciples of Christ in the USA have a dual rootage: (1) the initiative of immigrants from Great Britain (Thomas Campbell and Alexander Campbell), and (2) an entirely separate and indigenous movement on the western frontier (Barton W. Stone). These two movements merged in 1832. They shared such important elements as a search for Christian unity, a desire to return to New Testament Christianity, and

This reformatted, electronic edition, published online in 2012, is authorized by the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), publisher of *Mid-stream*.

reflected many of the values and attitudes of the early 19th century American frontier.

- From this beginning in the USA, the Disciples of Christ enlarged their international horizons in two ways: (1) they established fraternal relationships with Churches of Christ in the British Empire (Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa). The relationships were cordial and fraternal, without any international structural patterns of dependency or control between the churches. (2) The second pattern of international expansion was through the foreign mission work. In the 19th century. "Mission churches" came into being in India, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, China, Puerto Rico, Africa (Zaire). In the 20th century, other Disciples churches emerged in the Philippines, Argentina, and Paraguay, and relationships were established with some churches which were started by the British Disciples, such as in Thailand.
- C. In the first half of the 20th century, there were some contacts and fellowship with churches in Poland and Russia whose general character and perspectives were similar to the Disciples in countries already mentioned.
- D. With improved transportation and communication and increased contact between the churches, there emerged an awareness of being a movement with worldwide dimensions. However, the strength of the church was predominantly in the English-speaking world and nearly 80% of the members were in North America. Only in the "mission churches" had the movement transcended the cultural context of its origin.
- E. The ways in which the Disciples have transcended the limits of these countries where there were identifiable Disciples churches will be recognized at a later point of this paper.

II. *Selected Continuing Themes with New Expressions*

A. Dealing with the God-given unity of the Church.

- Early founders understood that Christian unity was both a gift and a goal; they affirmed that the Church of Jesus Christ on earth is inten-

4 A Profile of the Disciples of Christ

tionally, constitutionally, and essentially one. They sought to give expression to this oneness through a simple process of “restoring the New Testament Church,” bypassing most of Christian history and eliminating “human things” (creeds, confessions, structures, etc.) which were seen as the real cause of division. Some would see this restoration approach to Christian unity as overly simplistic and naive. History certainly demonstrates that it did not achieve the unity which was originally sought.

- With the rise of the modern ecumenical movement, the Disciples responded with enthusiasm, that is, the majority of them. A minority separated from the main stream and continues the “restorationist approach,” understood in legalistic and scholastic terms. But the record is clear that in most parts of the world, the Disciples welcomed and gave early support to the ecumenical movement. We participate in cooperative ventures and church councils on every continent, were founding members of many national councils of churches and of the World Council of Churches.
- Mission strategy was altered in keeping with this new understanding of the reality of the one church. We have ceased efforts to found new “Disciples churches” in new countries, but rather have chosen to work with existing churches in many parts of the world where there are no identifiable Disciples churches (Zambia, Kenya, Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, etc.). Encouragement has been given to “younger churches” to explore the possibility of Christian union in their respective countries. Increasing amounts of resources are channeled through ecumenical agencies rather than denominationally, and a formal position has been taken indicating a preference for an ecumenical approach to mission.
- The oneness of the church has impacted the internal life and structure of the church. In our earlier history, we tended to speak of the local congregation as the “church” and to refer to national expressions as “conferences” or “conventions” of churches. Increasingly throughout the world, the national entity is referred to in the singular, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) rather than the plural, and structures and methods of decision-making are giving expression to this new under-

standing of the “one church.” This is especially true of the process of restructure of the church in the USA and Canada, but is not limited to this particular church.

- The oneness of the Church has also led us to the serious consideration of actual church union. We are participants in the Consultation on Church Union in the USA, and will be making a decision within a few weeks on the proposal for serious union conversations with the United Church of Christ. Overseas, the Disciples churches in Zaire, South Africa, Philippines, Japan, India, and Thailand are already a part of a United Church in each country. (In the Church of Christ in Zaire, denominational groups continue as identifiable communities within the united church.)
- Participation in bilateral conversations with Christians of other traditions is another important dimension of our contemporary dealing with the God-given unity of the Church.
- The whole church tradition has achieved a new importance for the Disciples. In our early history, the emphasis on restoration tended to eclipse the post-biblical history of the Church. We were impoverished by our ignorance and nonuse of the treasures of this history. Now, the unity of the Church—both the Church triumphant as well as militant—has brought a new sense of “ownership” to the historic Church. This is clearly seen in the hymnbooks, symbols, liturgy, architecture, and the curriculum of theological schools.
- Christian unity is an old theme for Disciples—but it has many new and fresh expressions in our recent history and present reality.

B. Thinking about religion in new, creative, and relevant ways:

- The Disciples appeared in history after the beginning of modern science. Scholars have demonstrated how important for our beginnings were the influences which came from early scientific thinking. Especially we are indebted to John Locke and English empiricism. We have long known the value of holding a proposition as an hypothesis and the importance of continual reexamination of evidence and new light.

6 A Profile of the Disciples of Christ

- After the early years of our founders, the Disciples had a period of “scholasticism” which was limited to the reiteration of the early formulae without any authentic creativity. But near the end of the 19th century, there was a resurgence of the early spirit in new forms. Historical criticism was increasingly embraced and used and the Disciples began to participate actively in the development of “liberalism” as it sought to think about religion in creative and relevant ways.
- The rise of neo-orthodoxy made an impact upon Disciples seminaries and brought a healthy chastening to the more audacious forms of liberalism. But it did not have a lasting impact on Disciples thinking.
- For a brief time in the 1960s, Disciples (along with other Christians in the West) were confronted with the radical theologians. Attention was given to their seemingly nihilistic onslaught on traditional Christian doctrines, but generally Disciples did not enter the camp of the radical theologians.
- Today, there is a growing and promising exploration in what some would call neo-liberalism. A better term is “process theology.” It is rooted in the philosophy of Whitehead and represents the most promising attempt to state the meaning of the Christian faith in terms and categories which modern men can understand and accept. While it is still too early to assess its capability of becoming a major trend, it does fall clearly within the Disciples tradition of thinking about religion in new, creative, and relevant ways.

C. Dialogues and debates:

- The early history of the Disciples was characterized by a special interest in the public debate of what were, at that time, issues of great concern for church leaders. Most of these debates were characterized by a confrontation of opposites, and would not properly fall into the category of dialogue. Most of these debates were with other Christians (there was the notable exception of the Campbell-Owen debate of 1829).
- Since most of our debating was with fellow-Christians, the better term would be “polemics” – discussions between persons where the spirit of the discussion tends to be one of antagonism and in which relatively

minor topics are dealt with, rather than major topics. Polemics can lead a religious movement into developing unwholesome attitudes and inordinate expertise in relatively minor issues.

- Apologetics, on the other hand, are developed in an encounter with other persons or movements in which the discussion deals with major themes and fundamental issues.
- It would be fair to say that in our earlier history, Disciples were excessively engaged in debates among themselves and with other Christians which were polemical in nature and tended to exaggerate the importance of relatively minor issues and to over-emphasize the beliefs and practices which separate Christians from one another.
- In our recent history, the Disciples have increasingly developed a concern for and participation in dialogues in which differences are not ignored, but in which there is a spirit of mutual understanding and common search. Disciples have entered broadly in dialogue with fellow-Christians. The General Assembly of the Christian Church in the USA and Canada will consider within a few weeks a formal declaration of encouragement of a Jewish-Christian dialogue. Disciples have participated in the program of the World Council of Churches in the Christian/Marxist dialogue program. The literature of the WCC explorations in dialogue with Muslims and Hindus is to be found in the libraries of Disciples seminaries.
- In our early history, we had considerable competence in the skills of debate and polemics, which often led us to distort the relative importance of the topics and to overemphasize our differences, among Disciples and between Disciples and other Christians. Today, we discover a new dialogical posture in the Disciples church which gives great promise because of the spirit of mutual sharing and discovery which it contains, and because of the depth and importance of the issues which constitute its agenda.

D. Rethinking mission:

- In the early history of the Disciples church, much of the writing and preaching seems to have been directed toward other Christians and there were actually instances in which whole congregations who were

8 A Profile of the Disciples of Christ

formerly of another denominational tradition, were “converted” and became a part of the Disciples church. It is difficult to distinguish between evangelism and conversion in certain periods of our history and proselytism. A prophetic mission to the “people of God” is a legitimate mission, but the prophet ought to be aware of its character.

- Along with this element of proselytism, there was also a genuine evangelistic thrust. However, evangelism tended to be defined in individualistic terms, and on many occasions, in an other-worldly way. The Disciples participated in and were influenced by the “revivalism” which has characterized American protestantism in important periods of its history.
- In recent years, great attention has been given in the Disciples churches to a rethinking of mission in its broadest and biblical sense. In this process, the Disciples have been deeply influenced by ecumenical thinking. The result has been to redefine mission in very broad and inclusive ways. This new “missionary thinking” has had significant effects in the life of the church.
- The present Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the USA and Canada states that its purpose is “to enable the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to participate faithfully in Christ’s mission of witness, service and reconciliation in the whole world, by serving as the division through which the Christian Church relates to overseas communities in order to: engage in forms of ministry that invite a prepare persons to receive and manifest the new life a relationships offered in Jesus Christ; develop relationships a structures through which persons and resources are shared in mutual ministry in the world; and respond to or initiate programs which equip people to understand and foster conditions supporting health, justice and peace.”
- The concept of mission which underlies this statement purpose will enable the Christian Church to engage in a broad range of programs and activities in cooperation with other churches and/or non-church organizations, as a means participating in God's mission in the whole world—which embraces the redemption and welfare of all human-kind. It reflects the fruit of the Disciples rethinking of mission and at-

- tempts to give institutional and programmatic expression of this more inclusive missionary perspective.
- The rethinking of mission has had other consequences in church life. Our approach to church structures has been altered. In our earlier years, we were attempting to “restore” the New Testament church; church structure was assumed to have been revealed in a once-for-all and definitive way, and the model for that structure was to be found in the New Testament church. But modern Disciples tend to look upon church structure in a functional way: it is a means whereby the mission of the church is accomplished. The way in which a local congregation is organized and the way in which national board and administrative units function is in relationship to the definition of mission. For more than 30 years, we have advocated a “functional approach” to local church organization. In the restructure of the national church, the definition of mission was crucial. While the understanding of mission can and does change with altered world realities, the basic approach to church structure and life continues to be “mission oriented” rather than an excessive concern for the retention of inherited patterns and structures.
 - Such a stance might well say to us in this bilateral dialogue that we should give primary attention to our understanding of God’s mission in the modern world and the best ways of church participation in that mission, rather than prolonged comparison of inherited structures and practices, all of which now stand under the judgment of the “mandate to mission” which is the very reason for being of the church.

E. Responding to the cultural context:

- The majority of the members of the Disciples of Christ are North Americans and the character of this church can be understood in part as the result of the North American context in which the church developed. Both its strengths and its weaknesses can and must be seen from this perspective.
- During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Disciples tended to be uncritically aware of this fact. One of the popular histories of the church bore the title, *An American Religious Movement* and there was a

10 A Profile of the Disciples of Christ

general sense of satisfaction in the church with a feeling of “belonging” in the American scene. In a sense, the Disciples were (and to a degree continue to be) a “very American Church.” During most of our history, this was affirmed with pride. Most of our early missionary endeavors abroad tended to reproduce, in varying degrees, this “American Church.” The Year Book of the Canadian/American church carried statistical data from their mission fields as if they were integral parts of the North American church. There was little awareness of any significant defect in this procedure.

- In recent history, there has been a growing sensitivity among Disciples to the relationship between church and culture. The early and promising signs of this awareness emerged from the overseas mission fields as the first steps of indigenization were taken.
- Following the Willigen Missionary Conference in 1952, the Disciples took seriously the new realities of the modern world, especially the end of political colonialism. A new official policy was adopted in 1954 which affirmed the right of the younger churches (Third World churches) to self-determination and categorical encouragement was given for the formation of united churches which reflected the cultural realities of each country.
- In more recent years, the Disciples have given strong support to the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches, the central thrust of which has been the “contextualization of the gospel and the church” in each nation and culture. The latest developments in this direction have witnessed the early beginnings of new theologies, new church styles, new forms of liturgy, etc. which reflect the categories, literary and art forms, and general characteristics of the world. It is frankly recognized that this development will inevitably lead to increased diversity, greater differences between these younger churches and the older churches and, in some instances, very radical new theologies. It will also pose for us a new understanding of catholicity, which does not presume a common cultural origin nor rootage in western theological traditions. The formal stance of the Disciples is to encourage this contemporary “incarnational” style of church life and to seek

- for ways to maintain the bonds of Christian fellowship even as the new theological and ecclesiastical forms emerge.
- Another, and equally serious, dimension of this consideration of the cultural context is a new sensitivity among North American Disciples of the ambiguities which characterize our “contextualized church,” with its ethical insights and church life-styles so heavily shaped by the values of our own cultural setting. We can no longer speak of our church as “an American religious movement” without having an uneasy conscience. The new mood of reexamination, questioning and reassessment probably had its beginnings in the civil rights movement of the 1950s, and it was further stimulated by the crises in the 1960s and by the war in Vietnam. We now know, as we never knew before, the depth and the anguish of the prophetic conscience. The popularity of “liberation theology” in North America today may be a subtle, but important, sign of our recognition of our own bondage.
 - In this theme of church and culture, the Protestant-Catholic dialogue could be very fruitful. Protestants seem to have been successful in contextualizing the Gospel in each culture, but we have done so at the expense of catholicity. The Roman Catholic Church has sought and achieved an expression of catholicity, but often at the expense of the indigenization of the Gospel in each place. Each of us is now striving to recover the “lost dimension,” and we could be mutually helpful.
 - The Disciples: born of a passion for Christian unity and acknowledging the normative character of the Church of the New Testament, with involvements in 28 nations of which only nine have identifiable “Disciples churches” (the other 19 are united churches), and with organic church union being seriously considered in three of these nine (Great Britain, New Zealand, and United States), enter into dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church not with pride in a growing denominational strength, but in the evidences of the emerging *oikoumene*.