

A Movement for Wholeness in a Fragmented World: Recasting the Historic Disciples Plea

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Institutionalizing a Movement for Wholeness

In the early 1800's, a new Christian movement swept across the North American continent. In some places the people were called Disciples, in some places Christians. They were an anti-creedal, anti-hierarchical people. They were also a pro- restoration of the New Testament church, pro-unity, pro-kingdom of God people. According to Jesse O. Hale, Jr, "The basic notion was that...unity based on the scriptural pattern would lead to the evangelization of the world, and this unity could usher in the millennium."¹

It was Thomas Campbell who first spoke of "the plea" – in his case – "for reformation." Later (again according to Hale) Disciples "used 'the plea' as shorthand for the movement's basic message" about *unity, evangelism* and *eschatology* all based on a simple reading of the New Testament and restoration of New Testament practice.

It is now commonplace among Disciples to note that eventually the movement for unity split into at least two camps. One was more clearly focused on restoration of the ancient order of things even if that meant separation from large parts of the Body of Christ. The other camp was more focused on seeking visible unity with the whole Body of Christ even if it meant giving up some of the movement's central conclusions about proper New Testament practice.

The unity group came to be known as Disciples. For Disciples, any remaining echo of the "the plea" has related to unity, unity for the sake of mission, now, more than evangelism. Talk of "millennium" has also largely

¹ Jesse O. Hale, Jr. *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 598.

disappeared from common usage. It is replaced now among Disciples, by a desire to represent in our communities God's vision of justice and shalom.

A consistent mark of our Disciples identity has been our practice of gathering weekly around the communion table where we come freely and without barrier to be forgiven and healed as individuals, where we know again God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, where we are made whole as community, joined with other followers to become the Body of Christ for the world. Unity, mission, God's vision of justice and shalom—these ideas describe the people whom Disciples understand themselves to be.

It was natural that by the mid-twentieth century Disciples were fully involved in the global ecumenical movement that had been active since the early part of the century. This movement was rooted in a world-wide commitment to mission which was understood as evangelism and service to people everywhere. It focused attention on issues of ecclesiology—church, ministry, and sacraments—in order to move beyond the issues that kept the church divided. It pioneered new forms of cooperation in Christian life and work in the world. It was a twentieth-century reshaping of the same concerns that had created Disciples in the first place: a passion for unity as a manifestation of God's new realm of peace and fullness of life.

In the United States, the Consultation on Church Union gave new impetus to these concerns. Major American churches sought to create an American form to the vision of the world-wide ecumenical movement. COCU strengthened the emphasis on the ethnic, economic, and cultural factors that, as much as traditional ecclesial issues, have kept the church fractured and handicapped in its efforts to make manifest God's new age.

Disciples have been integral to this process throughout. Of course we were! Through our participation in the ecumenical movement, we were making new the vision of our founders. Using the insights and instrumentalities of the era, we were working to evangelize the world, through a church united, so that God's new world – a world of peace and justice – of *wholeness* – would come into fuller view.

Two thirds of the way through the century, Disciples undertook a process—unfortunately labeled *Restructure*—that was intended, in part, to move us more fully into this twentieth-century form of Christian unity, for the sake of mission, to reveal the underlying wholeness of God's created world. An essay by Ronald

E. Osborn, published in 1954 when he was beginning his career as the Disciples' most articulate spokesperson, anticipated themes that would begin a few years later. After discussing some of the Disciples' ecumenical achievements, Osborn identified "five serious inadequacies in our life and thought." Much of our ecumenicity, he proposed, has been sentimental, based on a "shallow romanticism" rather than on "the biblical doctrine of the church" which is its proper foundation. What Disciples need, he continued, is an ecclesiology that truly expresses the "New Testament concept of the church universal" and, at the same time, is adapted to "the present historical context."²

Culminating in 1968, this process brought into consciousness an ecclesiology—a doctrine of the church—and sought to embody that ecclesial organism in a structure that would work well in the complex world that had developed in North America. Henceforth, Disciples would understand themselves as more than a movement among the churches, more than a brotherhood of likeminded people, more than a cooperative network of agencies

In his 1964 lectures that provided a theological rationale for the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure, Osborn described where its architects were heading. What we seek is "something far more than a convention, far more than a policy of cooperation, far more than an association of churches; it is the church, as surely as any congregation is the church. It is not yet the whole church, but it is the church."³

What was new to Disciples in 1968 was the way that the re-shaping of our life together broadened our understanding of the church's embodiment in the world. We already knew that each congregation was a church. Now we realized that the same church is manifested when Disciples worship and work together in regions and in the broader (general) aspects of church life and work.

Disciples, a movement for unity in church and world for the sake of God's reign of justice and peace, was now a covenanted community of congregations and other ministries. They were going to have to learn to function together as "church."

And Then the World

² Ronald E. Osborn, "Problems of Disciple Participation in the Ecumenical Movement," *The Shane Quarterly* 15 (1954), 13-23.

³ Osborn, Ronald. "On Building the Church," *Toward the Christian Church*. (St. Louis, Christian Board of Publication, 1964), 54.

Moved On

Common wisdom now has it that just at the minute Disciples fixed their structure into what had been developing for decades – a structure that was pretty well adapted to those decades – the world moved on. In fact, 1968—the very year in which we approved the work of the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure—is viewed by many as the watershed year in US culture where the assumptions of the WWII generation and before came unraveled.

It took a little while before any of the mainline denominations realized that their own cultural moorings had been loosed as well. Since then, the process of change has continued at an accelerated rate.

Globalization, under the guise of increasing efficiency so that all people of the world may benefit, is rendering the nation state passé. It concentrates wealth in a tight circle of elite citizens of the world, resulting in the impoverishment of an ever increasing portion of the world's population.

“The clash of civilizations” is how Samuel Huntington graphically describes this new phase in world history. Although nation states will continue to be major actors on the world scene, still going to war, the increasingly dangerous battles will be between “nations and groups of different civilizations.”⁴

Thomas Friedman, in his popular book, suggests that we describe this rapidly changing world as “flat” – a level playing field for the technologically savvy.⁵ With electronic information and communication winning out over print, even transnational corporations have to reckon with loose networks of isolated individuals logging onto computers – or cell phones – to resource each other out of their own experience and to draw from anonymous stores of information and new processes of information manipulation.

This global, flat, clashing world increases the challenge to churches like ours. How do we minister in a world like this? Surely a vision of the wholeness of humanity can be a beacon in this kind of world. The lonely person sitting before the computer screen, separated from human contact, seeking community

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993). His book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, was published in 1996 (New York: Touchstone). Edward Said, however, describes the book as “The Clash of Ignorance” (*The Nation*, October 22, 2001), accessed on www.mediatransparency.org/personprofile.php?personID=114).

⁵ Thomas L. Friedman. *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

through chat rooms and list serves needs human contact and community. Masses of isolated individuals need strengthening against their vulnerability to abuse by systems that are organized enough to take advantage of their isolation.

Those for whom the world is not yet flat, who are outside the digitized, computerized world of technology – caught in the wake of a global economy forging ahead – victims of war, raids on natural resources, human trafficking and forced migration, need advocacy, accompaniment and justice.

Disciples have much to offer in a time such as this! Our own traditional emphasis on a personal confession of faith, on the responsibility of the believer to study scripture and pursue a lifetime of faithful maturing, adapt well to the new individualized flatness of the day. But we have value added! Our ministry to individuals does not take place in an isolated, exclusive manner. We understand that individuals finally mature only in the context of Christian community, and that God’s purpose for calling communities of faith into being is to witness to God’s vision of one, whole humanity. We long for individuals to be made whole, to be reconciled with their community, so that together they witness to the wholeness that God has already created into the fabric of the universe.

Our insistence on community is shown by our weekly gathering at the table for reconnection with the risen Christ and with each other. At the table, we understand anew that all of the earth (as Alexander Schmemmann wrote in a 1963 book for students affiliated with the National Student Christian Federation) is intended to be a means of communion with God. “The world,” Schmemmann wrote, “was created as the ‘matter,’ the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrifice.”⁶

The story is not over at the table with the gathered community of individuals. The story continues as we go forth from the table, reconstituted once again as the Body of Christ for the world. Disciples don’t stop by ministering to individuals. Disciples don’t stop by gathering at the table. Disciples go forth to serve God’s purposes in the world, to represent by our own witness, the zone of hospitality we have experienced at the table, to live already resonating with the wholeness of creation as God has already called it into being.

So for a world of lonely individuals needing nurture and care, for a world of isolated individuals vulnerable to exploitation in their separateness, for a

⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: National Student Christian Federation, 1963), 5. The book was later republished with the title *The Sacraments and Orthodoxy*.

world of whole communities abandoned and abused and on the move in the wake of globalization, our Disciples insights about the unity of the church as a sign of the wholeness of God's created cosmos are needed more than ever. Our traditional insistence on the value of the individual within communities of faith for the sake of the world makes us a church whose time has come.

Time for Us to Do It Again

As times have changed around us in the past, we have adapted and retooled. It's time for us to do it again. Time for our movement to reclaim a passion for the unity of the church as a sign to the world of God's reconciliation in Christ; time to seek the oneness of all Christians as the framework for engaging God's mission in a divided world; time for our movement for wholeness to bloom again.

Our founding vision still enlivens Christian discipleship in our time. The joining together of the good news, the unity of the church, and the coming of God's new era still makes sense. The word, spoken in today's language, that God is still at work in Christ to reconcile the world is a welcome word. The unity of church communities can still model how God hopes everyone can live beyond pestilence, disaster, cruelty, hunger, and untimely death, where the morning stars sing their joy to God. In this twenty-first century, we can still draw upon our founding vision.

We can also draw upon our ecumenically inspired 1968 renewal of Disciples ecclesiology. The church is decidedly real when we experience it in the congregation. It is also real when we experience it in other, broader forms—in assemblies, in work-centered organizations, in theological endeavors, in the processes of oversight and pastoral care. The larger settings remind us that each individual, each congregation, each tradition is part of the bedrock of the universal church; each one is a member of the whole Body of Christ. In those larger settings we remember with particular force that the unity of the church is for the sake of the world, a sign to the world of God's intention that we all live in justice and in peace, in wholeness.

Our early willingness to challenge the conventions of church and society that artificially divided Christ's followers into conflicting ecclesial groupings was key to our original identity. That same willingness to challenge convention

continues as an important part of our witness in a time when civilizations clash, when humanity is divided by national border, race, class and religion.

As we retool-rethink-re-imagine what it means to be Disciples in the twenty-first century our context not only challenges us but also gives us new tools to use in our witness. A look around us brings into view not only the needs of lonely individuals and isolated communities ripe for exploitation but also the potential resources for building community that go beyond anything we have ever known before. In some ways, now more than ever, we have the means to be the very connected community of individuals and congregations we have imagined theologically.

The original insight and consensus about the church that helped the Disciples plea to spread across the North American frontier was so strong that it could overcome difficulties of mass communication in a pre-industrial era. Today, in a post-industrial time, technology allows us to function in our various communities but remain connected: missionaries in Congo email stories to Indianapolis of a new orphanage, and, with a click of a computer key, those stories are spread round the church. Our many communities today can be knit together by amazing, worldwide communication networks.

Disciples, since the beginning have been many and diverse, but one – “Not the only Christians, but Christians only”. Today’s world – many in culture, language and creed, but increasingly one in economics, ecology and information – stands in need of just such a vision. In *Restructure*, we envisioned one church in many places – congregations, regions, general ministries – joined by covenant, not hierarchy – a part of the larger Body of Christ. Each one would have the responsibility to carry out its mission as God called it, but all would share common values of oneness in Christ, an inclusive Lord’s Table, a ministry of all believers, and a longing to live out God’s vision of justice for all the earth.

Our time has come again.

Restating the Plea – Reworking the Structure

As we go forward in this time, a vibrant part of the Body of Christ for a new era, our historic plea for unity, mission and the in-breaking Reign of God continue to inspire. We may need some new language, however.

Recently, I called together a group of Disciples to work as the Twenty-First Century Vision Team and identify next steps for our church. Half of its members

are younger than I. This team is helping me identify the both the power of our plea and the need to make it sing in our time. It has created a brief, contemporary statement of who we are as Disciples.

**We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.
As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.**

Two phrases in this statement are especially attractive to me. First, “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world,” suggests a way to reconceptualize two of the elements in our classic plea. Wholeness is one way of describing unity. It also evokes the reign of God as an echo of the millennial dream. The text most often used by Disciples, then and now, to talk about unity is from the Gospel of John (17:20-21). In this prayer, sometimes referred to as his high priestly prayer, Jesus prays: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, this “oneness” for which Jesus prays takes on a connotation of “wholeness” through the many stories of healings of body and soul wherein wounded, sick, possessed, sinful people are restored to their community. Healing is an integral part of the restoring of community. Jesus, in the synoptics, again and again, restores the individual and the community to “wholeness”, a oneness or unity which involves healing of the brokenness of spirit and body.

In the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, the prophets call for the community to live in justice and peace. The now-familiar concept of Shalom provides the framework for much of the prophetic voice in scripture. In this tradition, the individual never exists apart from the family whose true head is the living God. All actions of family, clan and nation are a reflection on the God they serve, a God who desires justice and peace for all of creation. A serviceable rendering of the word, “Shalom” is “wholeness”. God desires the world to live in *wholeness*.

In a world such as ours, where alienation and fragmentation are so much a part of the human experience, where we need to be clear that oneness/ unity does not connote uniformity but rather a mosaic that is complete only by the inclusion of all the varied pieces, where the word “unity” itself in mainline Protestant circles is associated with a particular set of strategies from the mid-

twentieth century, the word “wholeness” captures both the unity prayer of Jesus and the reconciling/ healing touch of Jesus. It embraces the voice of the prophets, and the description of creation as God has already created it and invites us to live it.

The second aspect of this contemporary statement is its strong emphasis upon welcoming all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us. Disciples have always been a table-centered church, but the table spread week after week is not our table, it is Christ’s. It is a remembrance of Jesus’ life among the ordinary people of the world and of his giving his life that they—and we—can receive the living water and bread of heaven that will sustain us evermore. This table, to borrow language from Psalm 23, is spread in the face of enemies. It provides a place of refuge for people who are besieged by all of the torments of life in our time. But even more, this table anticipates the great feast in the heavenly realm when we join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven singing “Holy, holy, holy.”

We are Disciples of Christ: a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.

As we become clear on who we are, we gain clarity on what we are to do. We can see how we are to carry out our mission of wholeness in this time. With this new clarity, we discover – sometimes to our surprise – that new ways are already emerging to embody our plea.

Take, for example, the way that two disparate priorities actually fit together in a way that few people could have imagined and by their union have the possibility of transforming our church. The two priorities are the new church movement (we’re already half way to our goal) and the anti-racism initiative.

I don’t think it was intentional (at least I didn’t get it back when I was a member of the General Board voting on it), but our pro-reconciliation/ anti-racism priority is completely entwined with our new church priority. It is also in perfect alignment with our original vision of moving past artificial human divisions in church and society for the sake of mission and ultimately of the sake of being part of revealing the wholeness of humanity as God created us.

The goal of becoming a pro-reconciling/ anti-racism church is huge. The great American sin is racism. But the first step in solving a problem is admitting it. And we have done that and adopted a plan to address it. Some may have thought that the anti-racism initiative grew out of nostalgia for the 60’s or a later

political correctness. But look how God has blessed our first goal – the one about new churches – with such a rich harvest of diversity, that we are becoming more and more like the face of twenty-first century North America – Hispanic, African American, Asian, Haitian – and Anglo.

The task before us now as church is not so much how to welcome these new brothers and sisters into what is, but how to join together to become the church that serves God best in the world that is being born.

The priorities of welcoming one thousand new congregations and becoming a pro-reconciliation/ anti-racist church are integrally linked. They are also linked with our original commitment to render irrelevant the false divides of humanity, in order to show to the world that God has already reconciled all the world in Christ Jesus, to make clear that God envisions a world of oneness and wholeness and peace.

There are great divides in the human family today –race, culture, language—which threaten the oneness of humanity and of the church. The passion for unity, which has inspired Disciples in the past, is needed now more than ever. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) lives, in part, to proclaim the conviction that that the unity of humankind for which we labor is God’s creation rather than our achievement.

In a time of when people are literally killing each other in the name of God, we Disciples need to be true to our original calling, to stand up and say that the human family is one – created as one by God in the first place, reconciled by God through Jesus Christ and heading toward the full expression of that wholeness some day. As a people with this calling, we need to live as one and join hands with whoever will, to show that we mean it. The entwining of our new church movement with our will to be a reconciled church show that our plea for unity, mission and the Reign of God, our longing for wholeness still drive us.

To be a vibrant part of the Body of Christ today, we need clarity on who we are – a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. We need clarity on what we are to do – join in witness to the wholeness of creation and to the reconciliation of humanity to God and to each other in Jesus Christ.

**Reinstitutionalizing A
Movement For Wholeness**

We also need to reach some clarity on how we do what we do. How we conduct ourselves within our communities of faith is part of our witness. If we are going to call the world to wholeness, we also need to cultivate habits of wholeness in our own life as church. As we have done again and again, it is time for us now to give attention to the institutional form of our mission.

Since starting to serve as your General Minister and President, I have been surprised to discover that an important part of my call (and of others in our church) is to get clear for a new era on how we function as church. I have tried to avoid using the word “structure” for this conversation and especially have tried to avoid the word “restructure.” I have talked instead about “reconfiguring” or “re-ordering” or “streamlining” our life for mission. But eventually it does get down to institutional, structural, procedural issues. Once we have clarified who we are in the larger Body of Christ, once we have identified our mission, we have to get organized to accomplish that mission.

Of late, our structure and our procedures have been inhibiting our witness. We now have a set of institutions that developed in a church twice the size we are today. This is a commonplace observation. These ministries are loosely configured into the corporate-like structure of 1968, a structure that doesn’t work as well as it once did in our flat, digital, mass communication, democratization of information, networking society. Most of us know that many of the institutions in their current structural configuration are not working as well as we wish that they would in helping us be faithful and effective in our mission.

We set our four priorities– but we have no mechanism to direct whole-church resources toward those ends. We’ve been creative in finding ways to link important ministries with the divisions of our church that continue to have steady sources of income. We’ve lodged the new church effort in Church Extension that is not supported by the common fund but has its security in its point spread according to the laws of the state of Indiana and the other states where it does business. The new church ministry, supported by the Pentecost offering, is lodged within that venerable established ministry.

Another priority – pro-Reconciliation/ anti-Racism – lodged in a 100% DMF-funded entity, the OGMP – goes without staff because of a combination of bureaucratic overreach and a poorly timed major natural disaster. (Thanks be to God, we see amazing accomplishments anyway.) Regions and educational and general ministries are taking a strong interest in the anti-racism initiative; local

congregations are longing to be part. And thanks be to God the Reconciliation offering was back up this year, so we anticipate being able to hire staff again.

The other two priorities of transformation and leadership development make do as they can as various ministries pick up the ball. But, as a whole church, we have not been organized in such a way that when we discern priorities, we have a mechanism for directing resources that way.

We have ministries that have been around for years but in this day and age are seeking their reason for being, struggling to stay alive, maintaining their income stream, and we have other ministries in the full flower of their mission starving for resources.

This no way to run a church – much less to manifest wholeness in a fragmented world. We have the tools to do better. As one church, a part of the larger Body of Christ, in many congregations and ministries joined in three expressions that go forward together in covenant, we do have a mechanism, a perfectly good governance document that describes how we might function together as a whole – if only we would use it.

In 2005, that document, the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was revised and strengthened in several important ways. The role of congregation as core to our sense of church was reaffirmed. At the same time our covenantal ecclesiology was made more explicit. The role of racial/ ethnic constituencies as fully part of one whole church was lifted up clearly for the first time. Issues of accountability within covenant were addressed through a more detailed ministry description for the general minister and president. And the general board and administrative committee – bodies of the General Assembly – were both downsized and re-constituted as bodies representing the church's many ministries in order to be of a size to effectively carry out their responsibilities on behalf of the whole church as assigned by the Design.

In an effort to get on with our mission, I think it's time to take our Design out for a test drive. In particular, I think it's time to see what the General Board can do.

In his Harold Watkins lecture in 2001, Robert Cueni offered an important interpretation of where we stand as a church:

“With Restructure the Strategic Planning function was supposed to be done by the General Board. In 1992, Ken Teegarden commented that the General Board had yet to find a way to perform that function . . . [S]pending most of the

General Board's time and energy discussing General Assembly Resolutions was a far cry from the 'authoritative' leadership/ planning envisioned by Restructure."⁷

I couldn't agree more. Our Design assigns church-wide responsibilities to various different ministries and entities. The General Board has responsibilities for planning the ministry and program of the church, for arranging for funding, for seeing to on-going structural renewal and reform. The General Board represents the fullness of the church (the Disciples part of the church, that is). It is the most basic, most complete body of the church except for the general assembly which it represents. It has never been able or willing to carry out its responsibilities very well – mostly because of past habits that still live on – habits of strong independent ministries responsible to autonomous boards that may or may not pay attention to the church's General Board or to congregations.

It's time to see if we can act like one church made up of many ministries (including congregations) who align ourselves with one common mission and go forth together embodying the wholeness we proclaim about the world.

With the new General Board, we have an opportunity for board members from other ministries to take on a whole church perspective. They will bring the lens of their ministry to their General Board deliberations, but also will develop a whole church lens to take back to their board. This moment that is way over due. Since every person on that board is also a member of a congregation, including the members who are specifically nominated by the general nominating committee to represent the church at large, the congregation will be well represented on this General Board – as they should be.

In 2007 and beyond, as we seek to fulfill our mission of wholeness in a new global context, it is my hope that in the next period we will refer to our Design as an actual governance document, that we will respect the covenantal theology contained therein, that we will relax into its guidance, stop our fighting over funding and release energy for mission.

In our history so far, as Disciples, though we have proclaimed unity as our core witness, we have lived often in division. It's time to get our act together. I think we can do it.

⁷ Robert Cueni

It will take some discipline. And it will require us to give new attention to the accountability part of living in covenant. This is the ecclesiology issue of our time: *accountability in covenant*.

Often in the past we have talked about the autonomy of congregations and persons within Disciples tradition. Sometimes the conversation has been carefully couched in terms of “freedom” and “responsibility”. We have thoroughly outlined the contours of the “freedom” side of that dichotomy. It is past time to get a handle on the “responsibility” part. It is time to figure out how to be appropriately accountable to God and to each other in covenant, in ways that honor our individuality, that respect the separate missions of our various ministries, but that acknowledge that as one community, what one does affects the other and – more importantly – how we act together reflects on the God we serve, the God we claim to be made known most fully in the reconciling person of Jesus Christ.

If we are to witness to wholeness we need to cultivate habits of wholeness in our church life. A decent respect for the governance documents we have devised will help us get on with the work at hand, spending more time on ministry and less time figuring out how to do it.

Leaders for the New Century

One last question is this: What kind of leaders can help us to go forward from here, true to our identity, clear as to our mission, organized as a whole people of God?

Leaders for the new century will be steeped in our calling as Disciples. They will love God deeply and feel God’s pain at the broken world, so different from God’s intention made known in the reconciling life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our leaders, out of their love for God and God’s children, guided by a vision of shalom as described by the prophets, by the joy of healing and community restored as described in the synoptic gospels, compelled by the words of Jesus’ high priestly prayer in the gospel of John, will live out of a vision of wholeness.

Leaders for the new century will care about the context. Their hearts will break over a fragmented church and world, and they will call their congregations and the ministries that they lead to witness to the wholeness that is already in the

fabric of creation, just waiting to be revealed in us. Our leaders will challenge their people whose vision is too small, whose horizon is too close, who participate too fully in the isolation and individualism of our age. Our leaders will care, cajole, challenge and confront the people with the realities of our context. Our leaders will call us to mission, to be the active Body of Christ. They will keep the pressure up.

Our leaders will call us to be the church – a sign of God’s created wholeness. Every time we gather around the table, when ordinary bread and juice become for us the presence of the living Christ, they will remind us of the extraordinary power of life to win over death. They will remind us that as church, we, too, are ordinary reminders of the extraordinary power of God for reconciliation and wholeness in our lives. As church we are a living sign of the reality of oneness that is already created in the fabric of creation. Our leaders will call us as church to function as a sacrament of the wholeness already worked by God. Our leaders need to call us to be the Body of Christ in the world.

Our leaders will be people who lead. They will teach, call and encourage the people to lift their eyes to the vision of a world revealed in its wholeness. They will nudge and empower people to accept their mission of witness to that wholeness in word and deed, from within the church and beyond the church’s walls.

Even as leaders rise up where they are, in the myriad of places where the church comes to life, they will keep an eye toward the whole. They will help us align our work and witness to a common vision of God’s world revealed in its wholeness, reconciled and healed. They will take their cue from Christ’s table – where we come as individuals, broken and weary, remembering the death of Jesus, where we find forgiveness and healing and are restored to each other as the Body of Christ for the world. They then will usher us forth in the light of the Risen Christ to be witnesses to fullness of God’s desire that we be whole.

Our traditional value for the individual and for the local work for us in these times. Our respect for the personal spiritual journeys of individuals undertaken responsibly, our insistence on lay leadership within the church, our clarity that the missional rubber hits the road in the congregations where people

gather for worship, mutual challenge and nurture and for witness – all of this is consistent with the anti-hierarchical, decentralizing spirit of the age.

But, for Disciples, that individualizing, local leaning spins in energizing tension like the particles of a molecule with our clarity about the oneness of the Body of Christ. The passionate belief that the church is “essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one” remains core to our ongoing identity and mission. The oneness of the church stands as a witness to the wholeness of creation as God has already made it. The oneness of the church calls out as an announcement of God’s intention that humanity should live in justice and peace. The church is one, not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of a fragmented and hurting world – so that the world may know the reconciling love of God through Jesus Christ.