Introduction

In this report the Commission on Theology of the Council on Christian Unity seeks to answer the most basic and all-embracing question facing the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) today: what do Disciples think it means to be church? This question is more basic and all-embracing than any other our church faces because when Disciples are unclear, confused, or mistaken about our answer to this question, everything else we say or do ends up hit-and-miss at best. A sound and vibrant awareness of what it means to participate in the community God calls forth to be the church of Jesus Christ brings joy, strength, comfort, challenge, guidance, and hope even in times of adversity. Cultivating such an awareness within the community of faith-by thinking together long and hard about the meaning of the church--is a vital aspect of faithful discipleship.

The Commission on Theology recognizes full well that many others in this church deal with this question too. Its report stresses this is precisely as it should be. For Disciples, church means a community of faith in which every baptized member is called by God to give serious thought to the nature and purpose of the church and, by active and responsible involvement in church life, contributes to making the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a whole become ever more truly the community that God intends the church to be. The Commission therefore sets forth its account of the meaning of the church for Disciples in order to contribute in its own way to the church wide task of cultivating among the whole body a faithful and vibrant awareness of what it means to be truly church.
The account presented here offers our church several resources rolled into one. It is meant to be helpful, first, to anyone interested in learning about "what Disciples believe about the church." One finds here, then, an overview of the chief characteristics of our church's life, teaching, and practice, and with it explanations of why our shared faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ had led us, as Disciples, to become a church in some ways so very much like and yet in others ways so unlike other Christian churches. The statement touches on most if not all of the standard topics discussed in accounts of "ecclesiology." I.e., the doctrine of the Church. We propose that these issues be studied in ecumenical dialogues with other traditions, church membership classes, church school classes, CWF groups, ministers groups, seminary courses, and many other places including day in and day-out conversations about "what goes on in your church and mine."

At the same time the document offers a resource designed to help Disciples in particular grow in our understanding of our common calling to be and become truly church. It is therefore not at all the same in content or form--as a typical newspaper, sociological, or public opinion survey of current trends and problems within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It attempts rather to speak of the church, Disciples to Disciples, in light of our church's avowed commitment to faith in God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ and to ministry in Christ's name and by his grace. Being helpful to Disciples in this way involves evaluating the state of our church in terms of faithfulness to the gospel. Honest self-assessment of this sort reminds us that many aspects of church life, frequently taken for granted as "business as usual," are in fact reflective of crucial decisions we make as a community of faith. It also points out that in various ways our church must press beyond the status quo if it is to fulfill its God-given calling.

The document is a resource for the church in yet one other sense. It is intended to invite and enable its readers to think along with the Commission on Theology from beginning to end, and therefore become more comfortable, skilled, and confident in our efforts to enlarge our understanding of the meaning of the church. This, the Commission believes, is critically important for our church as a whole and for each of its members and ministers. To be a community of mutual edification, as it should, the church is obligated to equip its members to become searching inquirers, eager learners, and conscientious dialogue partners. Sadly, all too often church resource materials are handled on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, and discussions in the church degenerate into point-counterpoint deadlock or mutual shrugs of indifference. It is hoped that this account of the church encourages Disciples to engage both in further study and well-informed as well as lively conversation about what it means to call the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) "church."

With these aims in mind, the Commission's report opens with an affirmation regarding the identity of the church, similar in format to the opening of the Preamble of The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It then lists several key concerns arising naturally from these convictions about the church. The sections that follow guide readers along the entire process of thinking, step by step, that led the Commission on Theology to formulate its affirmations as it did. The process begins by noting why Disciples, like all Christians, must
constant re-examine our understanding of the church, and why too the meaning of the church is for Christians a question of faith which demands us to answer in faith. Attention then turns to significant lessons about the church drawn from the Scriptures and the heritage of the Church Universal, concluding with a capsule summary of the meaning of the gospel, which is at the heart of the church's faith. There follows a searching, fresh look at the manifold practices by which the church shows itself to be faithful to the gospel and true to its God-given calling. The final section discusses issues relating to the proper role of organizational structures and relationships among those structures within the life of the church.

One other point should be made. Here the Commission on Theology gathers up fundamental points about the church it has shared before with the wider church even as it moves on to address, for the first time in print, a number of topics taken up in its long-term study of the nature of the church. That study was begun in 1978 by the (then) newly constituted on Commission on Theology with a mandate from the General Assembly and implemented by the Council on Christian Unity. The Commission has pursued that mandate ever since, responsive to the changing demands of the church's ministry and benefitting from the continuity and change of its own membership over the years. In this major text the Commission now offers an "overview" both of its work and of "the Church for Disciples".

Hence the Commission's earlier reports to the General Assembly--each called "A Word to the Church" provide supplementary as well as background reading for this new document. The ongoing study and conversation that has taken place between our church and the Commission on Theology are shown in "words to the church" on issues of ecclesiology (1979); witness and mission (1980), authority (1982), ministry (1984), baptism (1987), salvation in Jesus Christ (1989), the Lord's Supper (1991), relations between Jews and Christian (1991, 1993), and a progress report on "the church for Disciples of Christ" (1995). Five booklets, which have found wide use within our church, are also of value in this regard: What Sort of Church Are We? By James 0. Duke; What is Our Authority by William R. Baird, Ministry among Disciples by D. Newell Williams, Baptism: Embodiment of the Gospel by Clark M. Williamson, and The Lord's Supper by James 0. Duke and Richard L. Harrison, Jr.

Those who have labored these seventeen years are among the leading theologians of the Disciples tradition (See their names at the end of the list). Across these years the Commission has been led by two chairpersons--H. Jackson Forstman (Vanderbilt University Divinity School) and James 0. Duke (Brite Divinity School)--two distinguished theologians among us.

Their leadership has sustained the members of the Commission in a task that has been arduous and rewarding. The Commission on Theology offers this foundational book in the assurance that it will lead all Disciples and our partners in other churches into a deeper understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ.

James 0. Duke

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PREAMBLE

The Identity of the Community Called to be Church

The church is that community called into being by the Gospel, which is God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ, and given its life through the power of God's Spirit in order to praise and serve the living God. All those who accept this calling--of whatever race, nationality, or culture--are joined together as one people commissioned by God to witness by word and deed to God's love for the world. They signify their corporate identity by:
  - their common confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,
  - their incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism,
  - their thankful celebration of Christ's saving work and abiding presence through the Lord's Supper,
  - their common commitment to direct their lives in accord with the will of God as made known through the testimony of scripture, and

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- their shared experience of the Holy Spirit who empowers them for ministry as disciples and ambassadors of Christ to and for the world.

This community, through its life of unity in diversity as well as its witness in word and deed, exists to glorify God, proclaiming from generation to generation and to the ends of the earth God's good news in Jesus Christ, participating in God's work of reconciliation, liberation, and redemption for all people, and thus living as a sign of God's coming reign.

This statement seeks to describe the identity of the community called forth by God to be the one, universal church of Jesus Christ. It focuses on the essentials which unite all those who participate in this church and which distinguish this community from every other in the world. It is drawn from scripture, ecumenical dialogue, and the particular experience of the community of faith known as Disciples of Christ.

The statement gives rise to affirmations and questions worthy of careful consideration by members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

1. The church is first and foremost a gift of God. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the church as no more than the product of a human urge for fellowship?

2. The church is essentially a community formed by its members' relationship to Christ and thus to one another. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the church only in terms of the buildings in which the community gathers?

3. The church is a community whose life together—as one people—is essential to its character as a sign of God's reconciling purpose for all creation. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the church as a loose-knit association of individuals or coalition of groups?

4. The church exists for the sake of praising God and participating in God's mission in and for all the world. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that the church's sole or primary purpose is to satisfy the needs and desires of its own members?

5. The church's unity is founded, and utterly dependent, on the reconciling love of God in Christ. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that the unity of the church is formed simply by human agreement and so may be broken simply because of human disagreement?

*The terms Disciples and the Disciples refer to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and its members, as well as those formative of its heritage, beginning with the early nineteenth-century groups calling themselves Christians and Disciples of Christ.

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6. The church witnesses to God's intended wholeness for all creation by transcending in its own life those barriers of race, sex, culture, class, and nationality that divide persons from one another. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that the church may exclude any of the God-given diversity of the human family or limit leadership in the church on the basis of race, gender, culture, class, or national background?

7. The church is a universal fellowship that "appears wherever believers in Jesus Christ are gathered in his name" (Design, 2). Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the church only as a local congregation of believers?

8. The church must develop an organizational structure in order to fulfill its God-given mission, but no one form of organization is essential to its true identity because the church "in faithfulness to its mission ... continues to adapt its structure to the needs and patterns of a changing world" (Design, 2). Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that any particular structure of the church is ordained by God for all times and places?

9. The covenant on which the church is founded is initiated and sealed by God. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the church's covenantal bonds of love solely in terms of contractual obligations toward present organizational structures?

10. The church extends across time as well as space, binding together all who confess Jesus Christ in whatever age. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that we may make the church what we will, without regard for the witness of the faithful who have come before us and for our obligations to the faithful who are to come after us?

11. Membership in the church is a matter of humble gratitude to God and joyful responsibility rather than a privilege and has nothing to do with human merit. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think that belonging to the church is a cause for boasting of special status before God?

12. The chief end of the church, like that of life itself, is to glorify God. Is it not then a misunderstanding to think of the church as an arena for human aggrandizement?

PART 1. SEEKING TO BE TRULY CHURCH

Faithfulness calls Christians in every age to examine our understanding of the church's identity. By this means the church seeks to refresh its awareness of its God-given nature and purpose and so to live in more perfect accord with the will of God. This task falls to Disciples at the end of the twentieth century as it has to each preceding generation.

The preamble entitled "The Identity of the Community Called to be Church" is the result of study Yearbook pages 276-303
and reflection on the meaning of the church for the Disciples carried out by the Theology Commission of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). All that follows in this report is in one sense commentary on the preamble. It is also—in another, larger sense—an open invitation to all Disciples to join the Commission in its work by retracing, reviewing, adding to, and improving upon the account offered here. This report is therefore designed not only to record the Commissions's thoughts about the church but to aid others in their own efforts to understand the identity, nature, and purpose of the church more clearly and fully.

**Toward Understanding the Identity of the Church**

Questions about the nature of Christian community and church life arise all the time. For example, when Disciples speak of Christian unity, what kind of unity do we envision? Why bother to work and pray for the oneness of the church when the effort seems so unpopular, untimely, or unproductive? Should Disciples stay together in fellowship even when we disagree on issues of faith? Which matters are "essentials" and which are "non-essentials" in the Christian life? How can we attend to the diversity of voices in the church and still proclaim the one gospel with clarity and boldness? Is mission something the local church does or something we support others to do in our name? If it is both, where is the priority? Granted that regional ministers are more than administrators and regional offices more than consultative agencies, how are we to understand their roles in our church overall? Is it ever proper for congregations to develop along distinctive racial-ethnic or cultural lines, and if so, when, where, and why? Should Disciples pay any attention to the witness of the church in the past, and is that witness in any sense authoritative for us today? How are Disciples to discern the common mind of the church when we disagree about matters of belief, personal morality, or social issues? When asked if Disciples permit people to repeat their baptism or invite young, unbaptized children to the Lord's Table, what are we prepared to say about the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper? How should Disciples view our relationship to Christians in other parts of the world and make that relationship real?

These, and countless others we could name, are questions of ecclesiology. This is to say that they have to do with our understanding of the identity, nature, and purpose of the church (the ecclesia, "assembly"). Our answers as well as our silences to such questions disclose something about our understanding of the church. Each of us already carries some understanding of church—our understanding of church—even if we have never tried to state it in just so many words. Such common but pressing questions about the church prompt us to express at least bits and pieces of our ecclesiology.

We disclose much about our understanding of the church simply in the course of taking part in its life and work. Joining and participating in the church surely indicate our understanding that faith in Christ draws us out of isolation and into community and express the importance of the church—certainly for us the particular church to which we belong—for living out this faith. Even without
explicitly saying so, we show by our actions that we understand the church to be where Christian faith is awakened, shared, nourished, guided, and expressed in manifold ways. This is, after all, why we join and participate in the church, isn't it?

Maybe it would be more accurate to say we understand that all this (and surely more) is what the church is supposed to be, what it ought to be, what it is called to be. The church is called by God to be the community in which Christian faith is awakened, shared, nourished, guided, and expressed in manifold ways. A church that fails to live, to speak, and to act as it should is a church that falls short of its calling. It is not altogether what it is truly called to be by God, and therefore somehow something less or other than truly church.

What then of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): is it truly church? This is a question of faith, and one with important practical consequences. Faithfulness calls us to examine our understanding of the church, our ecclesiology, with care. How should we understand what God is calling the church to be?

As persons called together by the beckoning grace of God and members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it falls now to us to give an account of our best understanding of the identity, nature, and purpose of the church. On this basis we are to determine in which respects and to what extent the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to which we belong is truly church, part of the universal Church of Jesus Christ. At the outset, we recognize that our understanding of the church is already, and inevitably, shaped by both our own church's heritage and its contemporary situation. We take these influences seriously. But, God willing, we are not so bound by them that we are unable perhaps to see some things more clearly than our forbears did, to recover valuable old resources hitherto overlooked or set aside, and to envision new possibilities for our church in God's future. Thus our heritage and our current situation deserve at least a brief review.

The Church for Disciples Past

Throughout their history, Disciples have sought to discern the true identity of the church by searching the testimony of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament, in light of the best resources available to them and in response to changing situations of opportunity and peril. Three dominant conceptions of church followed one another over the course of time: Church as Citizens of the Kingdom, the Brotherhood, and Covenant Community.

Each conception is based on a prominent biblical theme--the reign of God, fellowship, and covenant. Around each leading theme, many others cluster to form a more richly and fully textured view of the biblical record. The polity (the organizational structure) of our church has been adapted in keeping with the these themes and the church's desire to remain faithful to its God-given calling. Our history also reveals that these efforts to understand the identity, nature, and purpose of the church were inevitably shaped by situations and values common in the times.
Citizens of the Kingdom. The conception of church as citizens of the Kingdom came to prominence in the era of our church's origins. The movement led by Barton Warren Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell arose in an age when people of the United States celebrated citizenship in a new nation of independence, equality, and self-government. There was also great fear of a return to tyranny, resistance to any attempt to restrict the freedoms of individuals or groups, and impatience with claims of special rank and airs of superiority. What it meant to be a free citizen in a free nation was a topic of constant discussion.

The separation of church and state in the Republic broke the hold of once established churches. One result was the proliferation of churches, old and new, each claiming to be the one true church of Jesus Christ. The situation raised serious questions of faith: How is the true church to be recognized? and What does it mean to belong to that church? The early Disciples relied on the New Testament as the primary authority for answers to these and other issues of faith.

They read the New Testament with care, but also with the eyes of those thankful for newly-won freedom, wary of authoritarianism, and confident of their impartiality and accuracy. They discovered in their reading what they perceived to be the few and simple essentials of the church of the apostles, in effect the "original" design of the church. To them, it followed that no power on earth, not even established churches, could rightly deny earnest disciples of Christ their right to form congregations in strict conformity to this design. And they were certain that every church would--or should--agree to require the biblical essentials alone as a test of church fellowship and precondition for Christian unity. In short, at the heart the "Nineteenth Century Reformation" led by Stone and the Campbells was a vision of the church's true identity.

Their conception of church as "citizens of the Kingdom" permitted Disciples to hold several ideas together. Foremost was the New Testament witness to the fulfillment of God's intended purpose for the world, as stated in political imagery--the government, kingdom or reign of God. Alexander Campbell described the church as a constitutional monarchy, with Jesus Christ as the King, and Christians as the "naturalized citizens" of the realm. The Kingdom was founded by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and inaugurated through the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. To become a citizen of this Kingdom requires an oath of allegiance and a formal ceremony of naturalization. The oath is "the Good Confession." The formal ceremony is baptism (by immersion), a symbolic act of union with God in Christ which, performed by the Kingdom-Church, signifies giving up of (dying to) citizenship in this world and entering into (rebirth) new life by the remission of sins.

Local congregations are settlements or outposts of God's Kingdom. Taken together they form a great community of communities--"one congregation, one mystical or spiritual body." Its citizens live under a common constitution, a "system of grace," which God ordains for the well-being of the whole body. Citizens witness to the unity of faith in corporate worship on Sunday, the Lord's Day. Here they read and proclaim biblical testimony to the Good News of God's unfailing love, and offer up thanks and praise. Their worship reaches its climax with the celebration of the
Lord's Supper, when all join with their Savior in table fellowship. In these ways, this immigrant community--of varied racial-ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds--participates in a reality which extends from the throne of God and the cross of Jesus to the local place of worship, around the globe, and throughout the ages.

Early Disciples saw in the New Testament numerous self-governing congregations that faced little if any restraint from other Christians beyond the local community, and they formed their churches on this model. In some cases, decisions were made by general consent or majority rule. In most cases, voting members elected--and, in regular order, ordained--several leaders (elders or bishops, along with deacons) to exercise representative authority over congregational life. This form of church organization was, they held, in strict accord with biblical precedent and in keeping with their experience of political life generally. Typically, only white male members had voice and vote, as in society at large.

The early Disciples found that they could not do all they should as the Kingdom of God in utter isolation from each other. Cooperation was necessary for congregations to get their start, to survive in times of need, and to minister effectively. Conflict arose over the question of whether any other form of organized church body was permissible and if so, how it should relate to local congregations. Yet it became increasingly evident that evangelism, education for ministry, and even decisions about ordination required a broader vision than that of one, isolated congregation. And as their vision of ministry began to expand beyond their own localities, many came to the realization that just as no one individual can be a Christian in isolation from others, so too no one congregation could be a church--or the Kingdom--all by itself.

Their New Testament model of the church specified only essentials. It left many matters to human discretion, to "expedient" means for furthering the ministry of the church. Frontier-style pragmatism--"if it works, it has value"--did the same. And thus Disciples began to organize, first in regional conferences or associations, then in state meetings. National and even international assemblies soon followed, as Disciples from the United States and Canada gathered together to promote outreach programs--evangelism, medical care, and education--near and far.

Their historical context made early Disciples sensitive to aspects of biblical faith which enabled them to challenge prevailing traditions and witness to Christ with fervor. It also limited their vision in other respects. It is a painful fact that even as the new nation praised liberty, equality, and representative democracy, most African Americans were kept in slave bondage and counted as only three-fifths of a person in census tallies for congressional districts. Disciples recognized that God welcomed people of every race and from every land into the Kingdom, and many of those disenfranchised and otherwise disadvantaged in the American Republic accepted God's invitation and served as faithful followers of Christ and as co-workers in his church. Nonetheless, our church's record on the issue of slavery and its treatment of African-Americans rarely differed from patterns set by society generally. Likewise, stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes common to the time relegated women to second-class citizenship in the church.
The Brotherhood. From the middle years of nineteenth century, Disciples made a shift in their understanding of church that would guide them for almost a century. More and more they began to speak of themselves as "the Brotherhood." A key element in the new model was its emphasis on the personality, life, and teachings of Jesus, which brought with it a more expansive understanding of discipleship. Although unwavering in the conviction that local congregations were truly church, they could no longer rest content to think that these alone could perform the many and varied ministries to which disciples of Christ were called by their Master. Just as Jesus served others, so his disciples are called to serve them--to address the great needs and spiritual longings of people both near and far. Christ's disciples fulfill their calling by following his teachings and life example. The church itself is only the first stage of the coming Kingdom. Christians must work together to complete its upbuilding on earth. In all this, the church marches forward--not necessarily in lockstep with the strict letter of apostolic law but imbued with the selfless spirit of Jesus and inspired by the high ideals with which the apostles set out to "win the world for Christ." The call to build up the Kingdom motivated brothers and sisters in Christ to develop a vast network of cooperative organizations for wider service at home and abroad, including ecumenical ventures, and led Disciples to reconsider their corporate identity.

The concept of "Brotherhood" struck a deep and responsive chord among many Disciples. Congregational independence, now joined with an emphasis on warm fellowship with the Savior and his followers and a grand vision of worldwide ministry, contributed to remarkable growth during this era. Yet there were troubling issues to be faced. Some were by now no longer new. Those Disciples who were among America's racial minorities--African Americans constituting the largest number in this day--made invaluable contributions to the church's witness. Even so, opportunities to experience a sense of genuine "brotherhood" with were rarely afforded them by their European-American co-workers. Female Disciples, who often pioneered "Brotherhood work," nevertheless had to struggle to have their leadership recognized within the whole church. Indeed, the term "Brotherhood" itself in effect passed them over.

Other issues were new. The character of the Brotherhood as a way of being church left much to be desired. So many program agencies and institutions were formed that all of them were hard-pressed to gain adequate backing. "Brotherly" cooperation often gave way to duplication of effort and unhealthy competition. Stormy, often bitter, arguments broke out over the biblical justification for many--or even any--of the "innovations" of the day, and so too over how to interpret the Scriptures responsibly. Cooperation or non-cooperation in Brotherhood organizations and causes became in effect a test of fellowship. The "family" suffered two break-ups during the period from 1865 to the 1920s.

Covenant Community. Twentieth-century Disciples have attempted a series of organizational adjustments--realignment, downsizing, expansion, consolidation. Advances on one front were frequently matched by reversals on another. The need to bring order out of chaos and at the same time embody the reality of the wholeness of church led them at mid-century to reappraise their understanding of the church. New language--language in fact as old as the faith of ancient Israel,
and on occasion cited by our church's founders--came into frequent use. To be church, it was said in Disciples circles, is to be a community in covenant with God and with one another. The biblical accounts of covenanted more than working side-by-side in a more or less cooperative fashion. A covenant is a vow, a solemn pledge, of loyalty among two or more parties. Entering into covenant with God and with one another means that we have sacred promises to keep: promises of unfailing dedication to a common mission, promises of mutual support, care, and accountability, promises of fidelity.

The conception of church as covenant community came to institutional expression in a process called Restructure, leading to the adoption in 1968 of a formal Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Design structures us as one church with local congregational, regional, and general (including international) manifestations. These are not levels of power, as in a hierarchy of dominance and subordination. They are distinct but inseparable and interpenetrating spheres of association and activity, each relating to each other, serving with each other, and fulfilling certain special obligations on behalf of all. The services of every member of this one body, the church, are joined—so the Design states—by unbreakable covenantal ties of equality, complementarity, and mutual responsibility.

The initial fears of some that Restructure would spell the loss of important freedoms to a new, larger form of organization proved over time to be unfounded. Yet Restructure did bring changes, and it has served Disciples well in many respects. Our covenantal polity has enabled us to embrace many and varied ministries as our own. Our church has become more representative in its organization. For example, prior to Restructure, any and all could attend state and international meetings and then vote. Now most of these meetings, and our General Assembly particularly, provide for voting representatives from congregations and regions. Any who register may speak, but only voting representatives can vote. The weight of responsibility for oversight of our churchwide ministry shifted from individual discretion alone to collective decision-making and accountability. Above all, under the Design we proclaim that we are united as one church whose varied members, viewpoints, and services contribute to the life of the whole, not just an assortment of individuals, congregations, and organizations in occasional affiliation.

This is not to say that our church's health is problem-free. Not even a covenantal polity provides immunity from fallibility and fallenness. Our diversity of opinion—a historic hallmark of Disciples and a resource of great potential—leads at times to timidity and confusion and at times to factionalism and acrimony. The inclination to vie for power and prestige persists, and struggles for turf control are played out among and within our structures. Some in our church experience marginalization, powerlessness, even oppression. Certainly women and people of color still encounter barriers to full participation and equal opportunity. Our church has not yet vanquished prejudice or eliminated power elites. Challenges of ministering with covenantal faithfulness to God's Gospel in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world face us at every turn.

This quick review of history reminds us that the question of the church's true identity has been a
serious concern of Disciples in the past, and several times subjected to probing churchwide examination. It also reminds us how much time has passed since our church last dealt with the question in a deliberate way.

The Contemporary Context

Since the days of Restructure, people have walked on the moon, torn down the Berlin wall, redrawn the map of Europe, ended apartheid, entered into a "global economy," and ushered in a communications revolution. The population center of world Christianity has shifted from Europe and North America to other continents. Many new theological emphases, including theologies of liberation, have emerged, within the churches. An awareness of the diversity of cultures and religions is a striking reality in our times.

Our thinking about the church must take note of changing circumstances in which we find ourselves. Of the many to be considered, we cite a few.

The context of diversity and globalization. Several trends are simply matters of fact to be kept in mind, such as the increasing racial-ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of the United States population and the "globalization" of experience due to such things as international information networks and faster transportation. The key point to be made, however, is more fundamental. We are already in a period marked by the coexistence within North American society itself of deep and honest differences, even among those most dedicated to the church, about interpreting life's reality. This diversity can be a source of the church's renewal, reminding us that the church is to be a community embracing "Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free." Certainly insights arising from groups of people who have been excluded from leadership in the church and society in the past are needed to enrich our understanding of the church. Still, the new context puts difficult questions before us each and all. How are we to discern the truth and give a persuasive account of it in the midst of so many differing voices and perspectives? How can we hold together as communities when common purpose seems so hard to find?

A new hunger for spiritual depth and community. Evidence abounds of widespread disenchantment with the individualism, shallowness, moral confusion, and secularism of our times. Many set out in quest of "roots connections," and "something more in life." The quest has led some to a new, or renewed, commitment as Christians. Others have been led elsewhere, or wander without apparent direction. The questing itself, however, calls to mind what is spoken of in the Christian heritage as that restlessness of the heart which finds its true peace only in God. The church should not tailor its message or life to consumer tastes. Yet it must take seriously and seek to address the longings for spiritual depth and community among people, many of whom have limited knowledge of the Christian story.

Threats to the future of the planet. Since 1988, the "Doomsday Clock" of nuclear destruction has been turned back, but many threats remain. The world is marked by massive poverty and
periodic famine; by pollution, deforestation, and other indications of environmental degradation; by pain, injustice, and oppression inflicted upon masses of people, especially racial-ethnic minorities and women on every continent; and by savage conflict involving terrorism and ever-more sophisticated weaponry following the post-Cold-War breakup of nation states. If the church is called to be a sign of God's justice and peace, then our understanding of the church dare not ignore or minimize these developments.

A "crisis" of mainline Christianity. The phrase is headline news; its meaning, well-known and well-documented: a decline in numbers and money, and apparent failure of nerve; a loss of cultural influence; the erosion of established channels for the flow of mission funds; a reliance on local (chiefly congregational) associations as the preferred carriers of identity and mission; a growing percentage of unchurched among those born into so-called "mainline churches"; and a disturbing factiousness within the churches themselves. Disciples have firsthand experience of this social trend: it has already led us to make some response and to anticipate more to come. In fact, the greatest danger here may be that in panic reaction to the the immediacy of the crisis we will jettison some things and grasp onto others without adequately evaluating the impact of our actions in light of our best understanding of the church's true identity.

The Church, A Question of Faith Seeking Understanding

Analysis of its heritage and current situation teach us a great deal about our church--about who, what, and where we are. But it will not suffice to look at our church alone and make historical and sociological observations about its condition in the world. Indeed, if this is all we were to do, we will never come to an adequate understanding of the meaning of church. Why is this?

One reason is that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is only one of "ordered communities of disciples" (Design, par. 2) in which the universal church of Jesus Christ appears. Its past and present are only one small part of the life of the church as a whole. Faith in Jesus Christ leads Disciples to seek to learn more about the nature and purpose of his church than we can possibly ever know by looking at ourselves alone.

The other reason is that the question of the identity of the church is a question of faith. As such, it can never be answered rightly by examining churches from the viewpoint of history, sociology, politics, economics, or culture alone. Legislatures, law courts, tax codes, news media, telephone directories, political strategists, market analysts, research scholars, and many others give certain

For further study of the authority of scripture and norms for church life generally, see William Baird, What Is Our Authority? (St. Louis: Published for the Council on Christian Unity by the Christian Board of Publication, n.d. [1983]). Baird's study guide concludes, pp. 39-44, with a reprint of "A Word to the Church on Authority: Report of the Commission on Theology and Christian Unity," which was submitted to the Disciples General Assembly.

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groups the name "church" and assign them a place among other social institutions. In this sense we must recognize that the word "church" is not something that we and other Christians can control. Economic, political, and other social and cultural forces have always demonstrated their powers to define not only "church" but much of the rest of human life. Hence social scientific and similar investigations may grant us genuine and important insights about the church's placement in human cultures. But only when we are led by faith to seek the church's God-given identity can we gain a proper understanding of what the church is truly called to be. Faith seeks an understanding that requires a normative definition of the church; an account of what the Christian church is if and when it becomes what God calls it to be. Such an account is based on criteria (norms) set by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not by "the world."

This is not to deny that the church is very much "in the world." On the contrary, if and when the church exists truly, it exists as some specific, historic community or communities of people in the world. It is important, then, that we try to be clear about the relationship between the church and the world. The word "world" has three distinct but interrelated meanings in the language of faith: 1) the world as the cosmos created by God; 2) the world as the sphere of human existence, activity, and relations—that is, human culture; 3) the world as the sphere of human existence, activity, and relations that is burdened, infected, and distorted by human sin. The church is a community (or community of communities) of people located in the world in all three senses of the term "world." The church is in God's cosmos, within specific human culture, and amid cultural conditions and forces that are burdened, infected, and distorted by sin. Further, the world enters into-shaping and otherwise influencing—the life of the church in innumerable ways. Thus we must say not only that the church is in the world but that the world is in the church.

The ever-present threats to the church's integrity are (1) that it will allow itself to be defined by the world in which it exists—embracing as its very own the identity the world gives to it, accepting the place and role assigned to it by the world, honoring and serving and conforming to the world and (2) that it will presume to define itself as a community apart from the world which is God's and into which God has called it. The ever-present challenge for the church is to be in but not of the world. The fact that the church is in the world and the world is in the church (in all three senses of "world") makes it an earthen vessel, and continually in need of reform, renewal, and God's grace. In order to identify what makes a church truly church, we cannot simply describe the worldly state of the church. We must instead give an account of our understanding of the church in light of faith in the Gospel, which is God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ—a reconciling love directed towards the world that God loves.

**PART 2. LESSONS FROM SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION**

What has God called, and by the power of the Spirit empowered, the church of Jesus Christ to be, to say, and to do? To understand the church's God-given identity, we must seek to understand the church in light of faith in God's Good News in Jesus Christ. "Faith seeking understanding" is a task that the church calls "theology." Thus our search for the church's true identity is a
distinctively theological undertaking rather than a report of current church affairs. In this
undertaking, we will look first and foremost for guidance from the scriptures, exploring several
prominent biblical images with decisive significance for an adequate understanding of the
church. We will then look at what are commonly called the four historic ecumenical "marks" of
the church. Finally with these materials in mind, we examine the distinctive social character of
the church.

The Witness of Scripture

Why do we turn to the scriptures? Disciples have certainly always done so, and by this means (as
well as many others) we acknowledge our participation in the one, universal church of Jesus
Christ. But the church's reliance upon scripture is due to more than custom alone. The call that
the church is to heed is a call from God--God's self-communicating Word--in the history of
Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the birth of the church itself by the power of the Holy Spirit. The
Holy Scriptures witness to this Word through the testimony of the faithful of ancient Israel and
the ancient church. This Word, which calls persons to faith and the church into being, is to be
heard and heeded still through the scriptural writings of their testimony--and hence the church
affirms the scriptures to be of unique and normative significance for its own life and witness.

We seek, then, to understand what scripture teaches regarding the community that God calls to be
church. Diverse as it is, scripture is emphatic on certain points. The church is a community called
forth by God--the faith of Israel at its roots, the gospel of God's covenant of love in Christ Jesus
its cornerstone, the Holy Spirit its animating power, and the fulfillment of Jesus's prayer "that
they all may be one" (John 17:21) its hope and goal. Such statements attest to essentials of the
church's identity. But Scripture does not set forth any one, detailed, and complete blueprint for
living out this identity. It provides, instead, many snapshots of Christian origins and an array of
images of communities of faith which, taken together, are touchstones for Christian reflection.
One biblical scholar has identified more than ninety such images, including the bride of Christ,
the branches of a vine, disciples, salt of the earth, new creation, household of God, and holy
temple.

These scriptural images and themes--as well as the ecumenical marks derived from the biblical
witness--form an indispensable framework for the life of the church through history and for our
reflections. The identity of the church is shaped and corrected by these images and marks as each
generation of Christians accepts the task of interpreting them as wisely and adequately as
possible for its own time and place. The church today, for example, is compelled to ask anew
what the church of Corinth considered in the first century: how is the community of faith which
we know like or unlike a body of many parts that sometimes hurts and sometimes rejoices, which
sometimes squabbles bitterly and sometimes responds to the Spirit in common rhythm?

It should be noted that the biblical images and the ecumenical marks alike highlight what God
has called the church to be, and hence they convey a normative definition of the church by
describing Christian communities in terms of what they already are and are not yet. Again, Paul's letters to the Corinthian Christians illustrate this point. Paul dared them to believe that God in Christ was so present among them that their common life was like "the body of Christ." Yet he also urged that they anticipate a future glory of life in God that was immeasurably fuller than anything they could begin to know now. This was demanding, even audacious, counsel. Paul taught them that they—a faltering, squabbling community—were a continuation of Christ's ministry and an embodiment of God's grace, among whom the Spirit dwelt.

When considering biblical images and ecumenical marks of the church, readers today may be tempted to exclaim, "But that's not the way the church really lives." They would not be altogether wrong. The church has often been triumphalistic, believing that it and its duly appointed officers alone control sure and true access to the divine, when it should have been humble. It has often been timid, neglecting those who cry out in hunger and thirst (Matthew 25), when it should have been bold in seeking Christ in the outcast. At its best, however, the church welcomes these images and marks as ways of measuring and correcting the course of its common life. To put the matter more directly, unless we respond soberly and humbly to scripture's demanding witness that the Holy God dwells within and over our often faltering communities and institutions, we will not gain a true understanding of the church in our time and place.

Three key images—around which many others are clustered—command attention here, both because of their prominence in scripture and their importance throughout the church’s history. We will consider images of the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the community of the Holy Spirit. In each case, a passage of scripture will sound the theme before it is opened up for discussion.

**The People of God.** "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.... Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

To recognize that we are the people of God is to acknowledge, first of all, that the church is a gift and creation of God, not a community of our own making. Members of the church are incorporated into the people of God not because of who we are or what we have done but because of what God has made of us and done for us in Jesus Christ. This is why we, as sinners who by God's grace have become Christians, are humbly thankful to God and, out of genuine caring and over-flowing joy rather than pride, proclaim God's Good News in Jesus Christ to other sinners. This is also why individuals and groups who are unlike, and even opposed to one another, in other respects find themselves brought together by the Gospel in the church. We are a people graciously constituted by God, not an institution built on entrance requirements of our own making.

This image reminds us, second, of our continuity with Israel, the community whom God has claimed "to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 7:6). When Christians assume
that the church has now taken over the calling once given to Israel, we miss the point that 1 Peter is making. "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." To be called to be Christian, and hence called forth as the people of God, is to share in the mercy that God promises first to Israel and then extends even to "the gentiles" such as ourselves. "Peoples" are usually defined by a particular national boundary, language, or ethnic identity. This is not true of the church as the people of God. God's call creates Christians as a peculiar kind of people, a community that cuts across all worldly divisions and embraces persons from all the peoples of the world.

That God calls people into such a community is a demonstration of God's mercy. The mercy of God, repeatedly attested in the Scriptures, is referred to in The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as "the covenant of love which binds us to God and one another" (Design, 1). And in issuing this covenantal calling, like that of Israel, God proposes to bring forth a community that will be "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6) and "good news of great joy to all the people" (Luke 2:11).

**The Body of Christ.** "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one spirit we are all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

This image is perhaps so familiar that its full significance is often lost. It speaks of a unity so intimate that the loss of any member is a cause of great pain. But it also speaks of a unity constituted by an amazing diversity of gifts and functions. If the body were all hands or feet, says Paul, it would not be a body at all. Beyond that, it speaks of a unity such that each part can fulfill its intended purpose only by working in harmonious cooperation with the others. Interdependence--diverse members working for "the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7)--here means, also, that none of us can tell another in the church "I have no need of you." It speaks of a unity such that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

The church, however, is here spoken of not merely as a body but as the body of Christ. His body, "given for us," defines the nature of our life together--a life that is a continuation of his ministry in the world. This ministry is, in addition to preaching and teaching, a ministry of compassion, intercession, and selfgiving service on behalf of the true well-being of others. That this is what it means to be the body of Christ is attested in the sacramental meal we call the Lord's Supper: "The Bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one Lord, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf." (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). And because the church is his body, Jesus Christ is ultimate authority for the community of faith.

**The Community of the Holy Spirit.** "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come

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upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." "When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly from Heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (Acts 1:8; 2:1-4)

The story of Pentecost shows a double movement that characterizes our life in the church: the disciples were brought together through the Spirit's presence and sent out for mission through the Spirit's power. The Spirit who moved across the waters of creation moves creatively through the church; its community-creating power multiplies understanding and contrasts vividly to the confusion of tongues and fragmentation of community in the story of Babel. We are again reminded that it is God who directs our life as a community of faith. When the church submits itself, through disciplined study and discernment, to the leading of the Spirit, it is empowered for worship, authentic witness, and inclusive mission. Our common dependence on the Holy Spirit is often expressed in our worship services through the apostolic benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:14).

These three images make us aware that the purpose and mission of the church is not defense or gain or entertainment or even comfort and companionship. It is based on and dedicated to God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ. And it is not a community that merely remembers God's love in the past or hopes for God's love in the future, but one called to embodiment of a love such as this in and by the church is made possible by God's self-giving, reconciling life in Jesus Christ, which grants freedom from slavery to sin and power for a new, redemptive course of life. To be a Christian, a disciple of Christ, is to participate in the community of his disciples, exhibiting the reconciling, liberating, and redemptive power of God in the world. The community called to be church is itself part of God's Good News in Jesus Christ.

Further, these images indicate that the life of the church is bound up with the very life of God and thus reflects the nature of the God upon whom it depends. God is the one who forms us as a people, who calls and reconciles us in Jesus Christ, and who sustains and leads us through the Holy Spirit. In keeping with the scriptural images of the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the community of the Holy Spirit, Disciples confess with the church throughout the ages the reality of the living God: the One God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the One God--Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the world. We confess, with humility and boldness, that Christian life together as church begins and ends in the gracious fullness of God.

What is affirmed by these three images of the church, as elsewhere in scripture and tradition, is the threefold self-revelation of the One God as gracious love in the creation and the history of Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the calling of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Among Disciples, this affirmation is made in solemn moments of worship, most notably by the
threefold formula used at the time of baptism. Christians must recognize the inadequacy of our human efforts to find words capable of expressing the reality of the living God. Yet we must also recognize that the church is called to witness to this reality nonetheless—and this means seeking to witness to this reality in its fullness.

To do so here, we will speak of the threefold self-revelation or self-communication of the One God and on occasion, as an apt synonym, of "the living triune God." The point that is being affirmed may, of course, find expression by the use of other terms, as indeed it has in the witness of the Disciples and the worldwide church. The strengths as well as the limits of the language Christians use to speak of God always demand careful consideration. In any case, the ministry of our church can only be enriched when Disciples learn more about the language of affirmation in the heritage of the worldwide church and so gain a more vital sense of its meaning and usefulness.

**Four Ecumenical Marks of the Church**

Ever since the first Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., Christians have confessed in what is called the Nicene Creed that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Comprised of four scriptural terms, this affirmation of "the marks of the church" has come into widespread, honored use among Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Christians over the centuries. The phrase "the four marks of the church" appears in Disciples teaching materials only occasionally, but the four marks themselves are certainly familiar to Disciples, who have been—and are—passionately concerned for the church's unity, holiness, wholeness (or catholicity), and continuity with the message of the apostles.

**The Church Is One.** The oneness of the church is first and finally a gift of God which creates unity amid diversity. As a unity amid diversity, the oneness of the church refers not to total uniformity but to utter inseparability. It is a oneness which is organic, recognizing, celebrating, and depending upon the diverse character of the many members who are brought into unity by God's grace in Jesus Christ. It is also a oneness which is visible, extending beyond warm feelings of affection to become plain for all to see in the church's acts of confessing its faith, celebrating the sacraments, caring for one another, and ministering to others in the world.

In ecumenical discussion today, the favored term for speaking of the church's oneness is *koinonia*—a Greek word usually translated as fellowship or participation or communion (and underlying the image of the church as the community of the Spirit). The term reminds us that our communion with one another is rooted in our shared communion with Christ Jesus. Because the church is one, Christians are called to contend against racism, sexism, economic oppression, militant nationalism, and other forces which divide the followers of Christ. Because the church is one, the burden of proof always rests with those who hold that the purity of their teaching or practice justifies their separation from other parts of the body.
In New Testament usage, *koinonia* focuses our attention on our relatedness, that is, on the way we are actually present with and concerned for one another. Indeed, it was the term Paul used to refer to the collection he was gathering from the churches for the support of "the poor" in Jerusalem. Thus, *koinonia* is a word having to do with communion in the dynamic sense of an ever-growing process of exhibiting love for one another even as Christ has loved us.

**The Church Is Holy.** The holiness of the church stems solely from God's gracious presence in its midst, a presence that is not a cause for boasting but an occasion for humble thanks. Indeed, an acknowledgement that the church is holy should lead us to confess our sinfulness and to recognize that our life as a community is dependent on God's grace and forgiveness.

This community of forgiven sinners is also called to costly obedience in response to grace, to ministry in the world for the sake of the Holy One we worship (a point Disciples seek to highlight by the practice of believers' baptism). The church understands itself to be a community that nurtures and practices the virtues of faith, hope, and love. In a world in which these virtues are often scorned, these practices can--and at times do--set the church in opposition to the surrounding culture. Yet the holiness of the church is most truly expressed, Disciples have maintained, through continued engagement with the world for the sake of its transformation rather than withdrawal from it. In sum Christians are called to be a people ever-becoming holy and sanctified through their maturation in the Christian life.

**The Church Is Catholic.** The term "catholic" comes from a Greek word meaning "whole." It has generally been used to signify the whole faith as opposed to that which is partial or one-sided and so too the whole church as opposed to that which is provincial or divisive. In one of its senses, then, it is closely associated with a word much more familiar to Disciples--ecumenical, which highlights the worldwide comprehensiveness of Christian faith. "Catholic" also means being inclusive of people of all sorts and conditions. All of these references are reminders that exclusivism always reflects an over-emphasis on either some part of the whole faith or some part of the whole church, and thus betrays the church's true identity.

This mark of the church points us toward a crucial tension: the church is at once local and universal. The community that gathers faithfully in each place to break bread and share life in memory of Jesus Christ is truly the church catholic--an expression here and now of the church's wholeness and integrity. They express this by joining the whole church in confessing the one faith, by sharing in one baptism, participating in the one ministry of Jesus Christ. The Lord's Table around which we gather extends beyond our local place of worship to encircle the world and to span the ages of time, because the faith we confess binds us in a universal fellowship. In other words, each congregation is truly church, but it cannot be this apart from its unity with the sisters and brothers in Christ gathered as worshipping and serving communities in other times and places.

**The Church Is Apostolic.** The church is apostolic when it is faithful to the gospel message.
transmitted to the church through the proclamation of the apostles. This mark is a way of acknowledging that we did not invent the gospel, but received it. It attests that the church we know is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). Concern for the apostolicity of the church reminds us of the continuity of the church from its beginnings to the present day, and it keeps us from adapting too easily to the spirit of our particular age.

Some parts of the church have historically placed great emphasis on the transmission of ministerial authority--"apostolic succession"--as the chief sign of apostolicity. Certainly ordination invests ministers with special responsibility to teach the apostolic faith. But Disciples emphasize, in line with their Protestant heritage as well as ecumenical discussion, that apostolicity is expressed by the whole church, not just its ordained ministry, as we turn again and again to interpret the apostolic witness of scripture. To be apostolic is not assured by reproducing every detail of the church of the apostles; it requires that we commit to live out the gospel (which we received from the apostles) in our times, even as those in apostolic times sought, through the power of God's spirit, to live it out in theirs.

There is another meaning to this mark of the church. An apostle is literally one who is "sent forth." The apostles were those commissioned for missionary witness in the name of Jesus Christ--caring for the poor, the suffering, those bereft of hope, the unbelievers. When Disciples emphasize that apostolicity is expressed by the whole church (joined together as one "priesthood of all believers"), not just its ordained ministry, we are committing ourselves as individuals and as a whole to go forth and make the Gospel known by our words and deeds to all the world.

These biblical images and ecumenical marks provide invaluable insights into the true identity of the church. Yet not even they tell all there is to be told. Other terms sometimes put the same points in fresh ways and sometimes offer added insight. One recent study suggests a number of images of the church which are especially instructive for our age, such as the church as a caring community, a community of and for the poor, and a community of repentance. The image of the "Believers' church" highlights the importance of responsible commitment to Christ on the part of each individual, lest church membership come to mean little more than a function of background, birth, or social status. Historic peace churches, e.g., Friends and Brethren, have long argued that peace-making is an essential mark of the community called forth by the Prince of Peace.

The Eschatological and Social Character of the Church

One additional scriptural theme deserves special attention, we believe, because it sets all the others in proper perspective: the church as an eschatological community. Eschatology is based on the Greek word eschaton, meaning "the end time" or "final things," when God's intended purposes for creation come to ultimate fulfillment. The church is rightly concerned to recall and celebrate what God has done in the past. It is rightly concerned for the nurture and well-being of its own members, and also rightly concerned to mend and heal the present brokenness of the
world. Yet the Gospel of Jesus Christ always points the church beyond the past and beyond the present and indeed beyond itself—toward the reign of God.

To be an eschatological community is to live in anticipation of that day when God's promise of shalom for all creation is fulfilled. Such a community is at once a pledge of God's intention for the world and a provisional demonstration of God's power to make it happen. Few humans have even dreamed of a community in which Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female live in truly committed relations of love, honoring one another's uniqueness, dignity, and equality. The church, despite its sinfulness, is called and empowered to be just such a community.

The church which understands itself as an eschatological community will not confuse itself with the reign of God. Indeed, precisely because the church is God's eschatological community, it will not make itself the center of its message and its activity but will point beyond itself to God's designs for history and creation. It will not give the impression that its teachings and structures are everlasting but will witness to the hope of God's everlasting reign. When the church is truly church, its life overflows with such eschatological hope.

**The Social Character of the Christian Life.** In discussing lessons from scripture and tradition, we have repeatedly affirmed that the church is a **community** of persons. The church is often spoken of in this way in church circles—so often that the import of the phrase is perhaps hardly noted. A few of its important implications deserve comment.

The church is the **community** of Christ's faithful, not the places or the buildings in which that community gathers. To "go to church" for worship, weddings, and other activities is to participate in the witness of this community of God. Unless this witness is made, activities are taking place in the church's **building** rather than **in the church**. A somewhat less sharp and more subtle but equally significant distinction is to be made between the community of faith and the propertied, legally incorporated "institutional entities" called churches. Neither scripture nor the marks of the church define the church in such terms. Scripture gives us clues as to how the early church ordered its life, but it does not specify one particular form of organization necessary for all subsequent generations. From its multifaceted materials, we conclude that the church is a re-ordering of human life into a **community** and that this community bears the responsibility for developing institutional structures by which to carry out its witness to the Gospel in the world.

Issues relating to the church's development of institutional structures will be dealt with at a later point (Part 4). Here, however, we focus on the communal character of the church. What we can say on the basis of scripture is that the Gospel has the power to reform human relationships into a shared social life with a distinctive character shaped by God's work of reconciliation, liberation, and redemption. The distinctive character of this social life can be summarized by stating that the church is:

- a community of love in which members join in common devotion to the upbuilding of the whole body;
-a community of unity amid diversity in which the particularity of each (in every respect excepting our sins) is received as gift of grace to be shared;

-a community of both local and universal reach, linking our "Hometown Christian Church" to faithful followers of Christ in Kenya, Russia, and elsewhere and linking the twentieth century church to that of the first century and to that of centuries yet to come;

-a community of shared ministry in the name of Jesus Christ in keeping with his work of reconciliation, liberation, and redemption.

These four features of the distinctive social character of the church are constitutive elements of church life. To the extent they are lacking, the church falls short of its God-given calling.

The fact that Christianity is inherently social, that the gospel is news with community-creating power, has often proved difficult for Christians to appreciate. Our preference, were God to have asked our advice, may well have been for a message that comes only as a set of simple moral instructions or as one that comes directly into our hearts. Surely it complicates matters that in accepting Christ we have to accept other Christians as well. Our wish might well have been for a community untroubled by diversity, without mutual respect and care, or perhaps devoted to some work other than reconciliation, liberation, and redemption. In sum, the church depicted in scripture presents us with obligations and challenges we might readily forgo. But God, we must confess finally and in truth, has not willed that this be so. The true identity of the church is not a proposal on which we get to vote. It is a given to which we are to respond with praise and faithfulness to God.

Christians have also never found it easy to deal with the "mixed" reality of the church: a community that is already a sign of God's purposes but not yet fully conformed to God's will, a community called to be in the world but not altogether of it. We are constantly tempted to release the tension by focusing on one side or the other. Some Christians tend to divinize the church, making exaggerated claims about the power, glory, and perfection of its members or its visible institutions. Others tend to think too little of the church, describing it merely in terms of its programs, functions, or organization. The images and marks we have explored remind us that both tendencies are misunderstandings of the church's true identity.

**The Gospel that Calls the Church to Life**

Our discussion of the images, the marks, and the social character of the church could of course be extended. Its various points might be reordered, put differently, supplemented by other materials, and, if corrections are in order, improved upon. This is as it should be, for continued study and churchwide dialogue can surely aid all of us in our common efforts to understand the true identity of the church. Yet some points that have emerged here are, we believe, so fundamental and so
amply warranted as to be beyond all reasonable doubt. Primary among them is this: in light of the witness of scripture, faithful Christians realize that the church is a community of persons called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If the church is to have any say in its own self-definition in the midst of the reigning cultural powers. It is necessary to recover the sense of the church as called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whenever the church's awareness of this calling--and indeed of its distinctiveness--dims or wavers, the church loses its moorings, drifts off course, and falls prey to one or another of the identities conferred by and bound to its surrounding culture. We can become clear about church's true identity only when we become clear about the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here, then, we must insist that the Gospel cannot be separated from Jesus Christ. Whenever the church hedges on this point or settles on some other "gospel," it reveals that it is confused in its understanding of its identity, and hence everything it undertakes to be and to say and to do becomes suspect. It seems painfully evident that North American churches at least are suffering just such an "identity crisis." Critical distinctions--those, e.g., between righteousness and self-righteousness, between popularity and faithfulness, and between "No Creed but Christ" and "No Creed or Any Creed, as you please"--are frequently overlooked.

What, then, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Of course, the whole of the church's theology is but an attempt to answer and then explain its answer to the question. Christians surely realize that the Gospel is more than a matter of words and ideas. It is the power as well as the message from God, and so cannot be reduced to or captured in any formula. Yet the church dare not, has not, and finally cannot avoid acknowledging the Gospel. Disciples do so by confessing, "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and Lord and Savior of the world." In making this confession, the church dare not and finally cannot avoid the task of offering our best understanding of what these words mean, i.e., the content of the Gospel.

Let us propose, then, the following as a succinct summary of the Gospel:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News that the God of Israel, the creator of all things, has in freedom and love identified God's being and life with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Son, to enact and reveal God's gracious reconciliation of sinful humanity to Godself, and calls humanity through the Holy Spirit to participate in God's liberative and redemptive work by acknowledging God's reconciliation, repenting of its sin, receiving the gift of freedom, realizing authentic

*For further study of the sacraments or ordianance of the church, see Clark Williamson, *Baptism, Embodiment of the Gospel; Disciples Baptismal Theology* (St. Louis: Published for the Council on Christian Unity by the Christian Board of Publication, 1987), which includes, pp. 46-60, The Report of the Commission on Theology to the 1987 Disciples General Assembly, A World to
the Church on Baptism; also, James O. Duke and Richard L. Harrison, Jr., *The Lord's Supper* (St. Louis: Published for the Council on Christian Unity by the Christian Board of Publication, 1984), which reprints, pp. 41-48, the Theology Commission's Report to the Church on the Lord's Supper to the 1991 Assembly.
community by loving the neighbor and the enemy, caring for the whole creation, and living in hopeful anticipation of the final triumph of the gracious God as the Ultimate Companion of all creatures.

What is affirmed in this statement has already been touched on at least briefly in the course of discussion so far. It will guide all that we have to say about the church from this point on.

**PART 3. THE DEFINING SIGNS OF THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY**

In this part, we focus on the relationship between the Gospel's call to life and mission and the various practices which the church undertakes in fulfilling this calling. Our goal is to understand what a community of people actually is and says and does when it is truly the church of Jesus Christ. Are there defining signs we should look for? The lessons we have gained from scripture and tradition—chief among them, our summary statement of the Gospel itself—will inform and direct our efforts to answer this question. We will look, then, for defining signs of the church's true identity in the way a community acknowledges, lives out, and communicates its God-given life and mission.

**The Gospel's Call to Life and Mission**

The testimony of scripture makes clear that Christian community is called into being by the Good News of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church exists because it has been called out and gathered together by the gracious, reconciling, self-revealing presence of God in Jesus Christ through the movement of the Holy Spirit. This call gives to the church not only its life but also its reason for living: its distinctive purpose, its defining mission, is to witness in word and deed to the living triune God.

The Gospel which calls the church to life and mission defines its identity as well. Acknowledging that it is brought forth into life and sent forth for mission by its calling from God is constitutive of the church's identity. The church embodies this acknowledgement in works and deeds; indeed the church can be said to live in and through its practices of faithful witness to God's call. Therefore, the defining signs of the church's identity are to be sought and found among those activities in which a community acknowledges its calling from God by witnessing to God on the basis of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What do we mean by witness? First, it is a living testimony to the living triune God. A vital awareness of being called and sent out, by the power of the Spirit, on a mission of witnessing to the wondrous, gracious mystery of God's redemptive actions in the history of Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth suffuses the New Testament. The community called to be church actively engages in this mission of witness to the reality of the one God. The church has its true life only in the complex richness of its ongoing response to God's call to life and mission. Where acts of living are missing, there is actually no true church.
Second, the church witnesses to God by *word and deed*. Both words and deeds are proper and necessary. Indeed, they are inseparable, for word without deed is hypocritical, vain, deadly, and a lie, and deed without word loses its defining content, intention, and luminosity. The two are also intertwined insofar as the church's deeds of witness speak loudly and its words of witness are themselves activities, deeds.

Third, the church engages in its mission of witness *for the sake, the benefit, of the world*. It is this world--past, present, and future--which God loves with an unfathomably gracious, reconciling love that liberates and redeems. The church is a community of persons who, in saying "yes" to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, know that by God's mercy their own lives are liberated and are being redeemed. But they know too that the church does not exist simply for itself or as an end in itself, for God's loving mercy is not for themselves alone but for the whole world. Thus the church bears witness to God's love *for* the world.

That said, we can proceed to identify the defining signs of the church among its acts of witness in word and deed. We will call these acts *practices of the church in the world*. This way of expressing the matter highlights that these are human activities, that they are regularly performed, and that they always take place in some specific historical setting, communal tradition, and social location. These practices are the means by which the church exhibits the signs of its identity; that is, by engaging in them the church becomes and makes itself known as be truly church. They are also the abiding *means of grace* by which the Holy Spirit sustains the life of the church as the pilgrim people who witness to the gracious life of God.

We will describe the signs in only broad strokes. Let us begin by distinguishing between two sorts of activities by which the church carries out its mission of witness to the Gospel: *nurturing practices* and the *outreach practices*. Nurturing practices are activities of the church which are directed primarily toward the community itself, toward the cultivation, the upbuilding, of its faith. Outreach practices are activities of the church which are directed primarily outward, toward the transformation of the world.

This distinction is not meant to imply sharp boundaries between these practices. On the contrary, we must insist that the church lives in the dynamic interaction between nurturing itself for witness and engaging the world in concrete works of love for the benefit of the world. Most church practices have dual faces, one directed toward the community of faith and the other directed toward the world. In any case, in witnessing to and for the world, the church is itself nurtured by the Spirit, and in the nurturing of its communal life, the church is witnessing to and for the world.

There is in addition a third group of church practices, necessary accompaniments of the church's nurturing and outreach practices. These are *administrative practices*: activities by which the church organizes itself for the fulfillment of its mission of witnessing through nurture and outreach.

**Nurturing Practices: Worship, Education, and Communal Care**
Looking first at the *nurturing practices* of the church, we can see three spheres of inner-church activity: *worship, education*, and *communal care*. We will discuss each in its turn, although we must stress that these are actually overlapping moments of the church's life which cannot be segmented and separated sharply. Moreover, they are always related to—shaped by and contributing to—the outreach activities that the church undertakes in and for the world.

**Worship.** The defining signs of the church found in worship are striking illustrations of how word and deed are intertwined in the life of the church. The community called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a community with a distinctive self-understanding. The call it hears is that of God's self-communicating Word in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ as recorded in and transmitted to us through the writings of the Holy Scriptures. Through these writings the church receives not only the essential content of its faith but as it were the distinctive language of that faith—images, concepts, beliefs, teachings, and practices—which both shapes and critiques its own life. Therefore, two of the *defining signs* of the church are the *practices of listening to Scripture as the Word of God* and *of being called, authorized, shaped, and judged by this listening*.

The worship of the church is centered upon and formed around the Scriptural witness. Worship itself is fundamentally the activity of praising God as the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of humanity and all of creation. In communal worship the church makes four other defining signs of its true identity: *it proclaims the Word heard in Scripture, it confesses its sin and embraces the forgiving grace of God, it celebrates God's gracious life in sacramental acts of Baptism and Holy Communion, and it communicates in prayer with God*. The church worships by engaging in these multi-dimensional practices of praising and conforming to the living triune God.

Classic Protestant formulas spoke of the word and the sacraments as the only defining signs of the church, affirming, e.g., that the church is where the word is preached and heard and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Jesus Christ. To reformers like Luther and Calvin, this formula meant that hearing the word and receiving the sacraments in faith were events in which one participated in the person and work of Christ crucified. The effect of this participation was a radical reorientation of one's life. One was drawn out—and wanted to be drawn out—of self, directed into right relationship with God and the neighbor, and so empowered to live in the world on behalf of others and the world.

In this sense, hearing the Word and participating in the sacraments embraces within itself the whole of the Christian life both personally and corporately. We acknowledge this connection between these practices and the whole of Christian life, and therefore affirm that *word and sacrament are defining signs of the church*. But recognizing that this connection is not everywhere acknowledged, we will specify other defining signs amid the church's nurturing, outreach, and administrative practices.

The proclamation of God's Word given in Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the early church, as attested in Holy Scripture, is critical to the church's life. Where it is heard in faith people find that we are not our own but God's, we die to ourselves, and we are turned outward to the neighbor...
and the world. This is the central aim of the sermon in worship. But proclaiming the Word takes place in numerous other ways as well—whenever and wherever the testimony of the Scriptures shapes the life of the church.

Understanding "sacrament" to mean a living and effective sign; we regard the celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as practices by which the life of the church is conformed to the gracious life of God and the faithful are both called and drawn out of their bondage to themselves. In these practices, the church recalls and encounters here and now the wondrous grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Baptism is a sign of God's grace in Jesus Christ, an acknowledgement of that grace, and a promise to live in faithful—thankful and obedient—response to that grace. The church acts as community in baptism to recognize a person's entry into the life of faith as a life of witness to the grace of God lived in the church for the world. By our baptism we do not purchase the forgiveness of sin. Rather, we make a public acknowledgement of our dependence upon God's grace and our reliance on forgiveness and justification in Christ; we give thanks for the liberation of ourselves by faith in Christ; and we proclaim our commitment to live in thanksgiving for God's gift and on behalf of our neighbor and the world. In sum, in baptizing the new believer the church declares the grace of God, confirms the believer's commitment to Christ, and pledges to nurture the person in a life of faith.

In the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the church remembers God's act of reconciliation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and through the Spirit it receives the living grace of the crucified Christ. In this sacrament that makes present for the church the gift of God's transforming grace offered to all human beings, the church finds the center of its worship. The sacrament neither repeats the self-giving of Christ nor adds to it. It celebrates what Jesus Christ has already done, his continuing life in the Spirit for the church, and the coming of the reign of God. In the common realities of the bread and the fruit of the vine, the church knows itself sustained by the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

It is Christ Jesus, rather than the church or its officers, who invites the church to the table, and the whole church is invited. In this act, the church is itself enacting the practice of being invited, of receiving through the Spirit God's gracious reconciliation of the world. And in being invited, the church is empowered to invite the whole world to know and receive God's reconciling love. In being invited and in inviting, the church also engages in the practice of hoping in the Spirit for that future with God in which the world will finally be redeemed. Hence, thanksgiving and hope are the persistent themes of this event.

Praying ceaselessly is another of the characteristic activities of worship. Praying is the individual and communal practice of intentional communication with God's graciously self-communicating life. The church prays in the name of Jesus Christ, and its practice of prayer expresses the conviction that God is living and loving—that God solicits, hears, is affected by, and responds to human prayer. In the many moments of praying, the church gives thanks and praise to God, confesses its sin, lifts petitions and supplications to God, seeks God's guidance, makes
intercession for the world, listens silently in reverent openness, cries out in pained lamentation, and groans in "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). In its practices of prayer the church makes another of the defining signs of its true identity in the world.

In the practices of worship the church finds its life nurtured by the living triune God. Without the practice of reading Scripture and proclaiming the Word heard therein, the church inevitably gives itself over to some other supposedly life-conferring and life-directing "good news." Without the confession of sin and reliance on the mercy of God's forgiveness, the church is tempted to become presumptuous and self-righteous. Without the celebration of baptism, the church forgets that the Gospel is a gift of God which brings about renewal of life and conversion from ways of sinning to a new way of living, a new self-understanding, and hope of life eternal. Without the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper, the church forgets that its very life depends upon the reconciling life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God. Without prayer the church presumes to give itself its own guidance day by day and neglects to live intentionally before the loving Spirit who calls and directs the church into God's future. In these many acts of worship the church becomes truly church—but never in isolation from the outreach practices in which the church exists for the world.

**Educative Practices.** The practices of educating and being educated pervade the life of the faithful church. As a community of persons called into being by the Gospel and sent on a mission of witness, all the members of the community are called to be conformed in the totality of their lives to the living triune God. This is a conformity of faith. By its very nature faith seeks constantly and in every way possible to understand God more adequately, and so also to understand itself and the world rightly Faith seeks understanding. This is true for each individual Christian and the community as a whole. Hence, faithfulness leads the church to engage in numerous practices by which it teaches both the what and the how of faith: what the church most fundamentally believes and understands about God, human life and destiny, and the world; and how persons live in the world sanctified lives of understanding and action in keeping with the ethics of grace. In a vital faith, the what and the how cannot be separated. The how is aimless without the what, and the what is abstract and detached without the how. No member of the church ever advances beyond the imperative of grace to learn--more fully and personally--how to live before God. Hence none of us can ever do without participating in the educative practices of the church. And the church can never assume that the task of educating its members in faith is altogether completed.

Although much Christian educating occurs indirectly through loving relationships, it is essential that the church engage in explicit practices of teaching the faith. From the enlightening and upbuilding power of preaching which explicates scripture, to the intentionally designed classes and conversations dealing with faith's meaning, to the silent but wise observations of saintly examples in its midst, the church educates and is educated by the Spirit. The church's teaching of the faith is necessarily theological in character. And distinctively Chittitan education is impossible unless the church is a community of theological discourse--discourse in which all things are referred to, examined, and evaluated in the light of faith in the self-communicating life of God. When the church's discourse becomes empty or vain or unfocused or weakened by
counterfeit substitutes, the church loses its capacity to educate persons in the faith which lives from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The teaching of the faith is itself a witness to God, and as such one of the defining signs of the church's identity.

Additional defining signs of the church appear in those educative practices (carried on usually by speaking together) concerned with being critically responsible for the authenticity and effectiveness of church witness. This responsibility arises from the awareness that because the church is called by the Gospel, it is accountable to God and even questioned in its witnessing by the life of God. The church knows itself to be subject to constant questioning by God regarding whether its many practices of witness in word and deed are genuinely faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and luminous, truthful, and transformative for the world. This questioning and answering goes on until the end of time. In the life of the church, responsible, theological questioning is a sign that the church is called, sent, disturbed, and enlivened by the Spirit of the living God.

Its educative task also makes it beneficial for the church to develop practices by which it can arrive from time to time at a common, public confession of its faith. Without these practices, the church is in danger of being tossed to and from by the winds of public opinion: it exposes itself to outside forces because the vital center of its faith remains unacknowledged before the world and to itself. Such confessions are limited in scope, timely rather than timeless, and always reformable. They need not be considered as tests of fellowship or preconditions for church unity. Their chief value is instructional. They give focus to the church's efforts to educate its members with regard to the meaning of its calling in the midst of a clamorous and powerful world.

**Communal Care.** Worship and education are inseparable from the totality of ways in which the church is itself a community of mutual love engaging in practices of *communal caring*. As Christians, we love because we were first loved by God in Jesus Christ. Christian love is that peculiar openness and self-giving to another, which seeks the good of the other as one's neighbor before God. This love, and the practices of care that go with it, is always particularized—a loving of this person, these persons. In *loving one another through mutual self-giving and care*, the church attests that it truly a *koinonia*, a fellowship and communion of mutual upbuilding. Without works of love within the community, the church is hardly capable of performing the works of love in and for the world to which it is surely called.

Indeed, the love which Christians have for one another, empowered as it is by the self-giving Spirit of God, is what empowers love for the world of neighbors and strangers. This communal love is neither exclusive nor restricted. In being open to the neighbor-in-the-church, the church becomes the school in which Christians are trained in loving the neighbor-in-the-world. In all these ways this communal love is an ethics of grace made possible by God's self-giving life in Jesus Christ. By ethics of grace we mean the imperatives of Christian living which spring from the forgiveness of sin and the justification by grace in Jesus Christ and which confer a liberating freedom for the neighbor and for God.

**Outreach Practices: Evangelism, Vocation, Prophecy, and Projects of Love, Justice, and**
Peace

We turn now to the outreach practices of the church. At the outset we must recall that the church is a liberative community. The word "liberative" has two distinct but interrelated meanings. First, the church is a liberative community because the Gospel of Jesus Christ that calls it into being is liberating. Being liberated in Christ is rooted in the acknowledgement of God's forgiveness and justification of sinners in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God's judgment is accomplished, and it is revealed that sin will not have the last word in determining the meaning and destiny of humanity. Christians--the church--are persons who say "yes" to this liberation in Christ and who experience by the Spirit newness of life and direction: they are granted release from the controlling force and ultimate consequences of sin.

Second, the church is a liberative community in that it is the bearer of a liberating witness in word and deed for the world. Even as the church celebrates the gracious liberation of God, it is called and sent to take this liberating good news to the world. Hence the faithful church is continually engaged in the liberative practices of witnessing to God's liberative and redemptive work. In all its life the church is engaged in the ethics of grace: an ethics which lives from God's grace and justification, which does not seek just reward, and which reaches out into the world by liberative works of love on behalf of the neighbor. These outreach works of love in and for the world are carried out in several different spheres of activity.

Evangelism. The first sphere to be mentioned is that of evangelism. The term "evangelism" refers to all of the church's efforts to take the Gospel to the world and invite the world to respond to this news with a renewal of life and a change of direction. Even though some practices of the churches have sullied and obscured the true meaning of evangelism, faithfulness to its calling requires that the church engage responsibly-in the multiple practices of sharing, interpreting, and applying the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the world. Making declarations about the Gospel is one form of evangelism. But evangelism also involves practices of persuasively interpreting the Gospel in conversation with the world. The church enters into dialogue with the world in the conviction that God loves the world and calls it into a redemptive relationship with God's own life. In undertaking this task, the church must speak in terms that the world can understand even as it preserves the distinctiveness of its own message.

Since evangelism aims at sharing the Gospel with others, care must be taken that the church is indeed sharing the Gospel and not something else. The church must continually test its evangelistic practices for possible contamination by the messages, interests, and values of any given controlling nation, class, racial-ethnic heritage, or gender. Further, the church must remember that although its evangelistic practices often involve speaking or writing, evangelism can never be separated from appropriate nonverbal works of love on behalf of the world.

In sum, though the church may be ashamed of certain forms of evangelism, past and present, it can never be ashamed of the Gospel itself, and the Gospel beckons the church to share the news

Yearbook pages 276-303
**For further study of this topic, see D. Newell Williams, Ministry among Disciples: Past, Present and Future (St. Louis: Published for the Council on Christian Unity by the Christian Board of Publication, 1985), including, pp. 45-56, the Commission on Theology's 1985 Report to the Disciples General Assembly, "A Word to the Church on Ministry."
of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ with the world which God loves. The church confesses, professes, and demonstrates in works of love the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world, and is not ashamed.

**Daily Outreach.** The second sphere of outreach practice is formed by the ways in which the individual Christian lives in the world day-by-day and witnesses to the reality of God for the particular neighbors and the particular social institutions we deal with. The Gospel calls each and every Christian to live in the world on behalf of our particular neighbors, seeking their good and standing caringly at their side. Although the worldly powers of privilege, enmity, fear, and violence tempt and threaten us, Christians find in the Gospel a freedom and courage to live for their neighbors in the world. Christians know that each person they meet and relate to each day is created and loved by God. *Practices of Christian caring for others* in their particularity and in specific circumstances are among the defining signs of the church’s true identity in the world.

**Prophecy.** Outreach practices include prophetic practices of the church. In these practices the *church calls the principalities and powers of the world to account*, especially where the world is infected and distorted by sin, and names the oppressive and unjust arrangements of those powers. These prophetic practices have to be rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for sheer denunciation independent of the Gospel is neither truly Christian prophecy nor a pathway to genuine human reconciliation, liberation, and redemption. As prophet, the church speaks best for the oppressed when it seeks freedom, justice, and mercy for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Oppression is incompatible with the Gospel of peace, justice, and love. And being an oppressor is itself a form of slavery, for oppressors are captive to the illusion that the power of determining life, death, and destiny rests in their hands, not God's. Thus oppression is not good for anyone involved. Hence the church prophesies to the world by word and deed, and must continually engage in critical self-examination to detect and avoid various ways in which it collaborates with and supports the powers of injustice and oppression.

**Projects of Love, Justice, and Peace.** The fourth sphere of outreach practices is comprised of those communal and collaborative activities the church pursues in and for the world on behalf of the love, justice, and peace envisaged in Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom of God. The reign of God itself will finally be realized through God's redemptive action alone. But the Gospel of the coming of this kingdom, which measures and judges all human kingdoms, calls for the church to *seek justice and peace and so to collaborate with others in specific projects in pursuit of these goals.* Yearning for the realization of God's peaceable kingdom of mutual love, the church moves with resilient hope toward the world through these work-projects. In its various locations, the church pursues projects which feed the hungry and empower the poor for full social participation in life's goods, which bring to the center of life those who are pushed to the margins by the principalities and powers of the world, and which enable persons to be nonviolent neighbor-keepers. Although these practices do not usher in the reign of God, they are signals of its coming, and they are further defining signs of the church's true identity. Communities which do not engage in such practices fall short in their witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All that we have said makes it clear that the tendency to pit the practices of nurture and outreach
against one another e.g., evangelism versus social involvement--is improper and harmful to the life of the church. These practices can no more be separated from one another than witness in word and witness in deed. And in its outreach practices especially the church confesses, professes, and demonstrates its hope for the world's redemption, and its witness to hope pulls the church forward into God's future for the world. By the multiplicity of its nurturing and outreach practices the church itself becomes a signal, a parable, of the coming reign of God.

**Administrative Practices**

We turn now to the *administrative practices* by which the church organizes itself for its distinctive mission of witness in nurture and outreach. Historically the churches have disagreed about the organization and proper administration of church life. We will address many key concerns relating to this topic in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in particular--in the next section of this report, Part 4: Issues of Relationship and Structure. Hence the aim here will be limited: we wish to clarify in which respect(s) administrative practices are among the defining signs of the church.

The administering of church is an unavoidable necessity, and its proper role is to equip the whole church to fulfill its calling as the people (*laos*) of God. And the whole church is organizationally involved in the ministry of witness to God for the benefit of the world. Every church member has a vocation of witness. Yet the church's practices of nurture and outreach can only be sustained through a social organization which prepares, arranges for, teaches, facilitates, and coordinates these practices. Hence, *administering* this social network of persons and practices and the relationships between the two is integral to the church's capacity for faithful witness. For this reason the church entrusts tasks of administrative leadership to certain of its members, the goal of which is to enable the whole church to fulfill its God-given calling.

In light of historic, and current, disputes about administrative leadership in the church, we must stress two points that follow from this account. First, since the church's administrative organization is to enable the whole church to fulfill its calling, it is also secondary to and judged by that calling. Second, since the church's administrative organization is secondary and judged by the church's calling, the church is not defined as church by any particular arrangement of offices, officers, or process of leadership selection.

For the sake of this whole ministry, and in conformity to the servanthood of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God from time to time calls out particular persons suitable for functions and tasks of servant leadership. Some of these servant leaders are formally ordained by the church as persons who represent to the church its own identity and mission in Jesus Christ and in this capacity assume certain specific ongoing responsibilities of leadership. It is in the practices of *ordaining-by-the-church* and the practices of persons *providing-servant-leadership* that the church exhibits further defining signs of its God-given identity. But the signs are in these practices, not in the characteristics of the persons or their offices.

These ordained leaders go by various names in scripture and tradition, e.g., pastor, elder, bishop,
priest, deacon, or simply minister. Whatever their title, they are called by the Spirit and 
examined, approved, and ordained by the church to serve as representative ministers entrusted 
with servant-leadership roles in many of the practices of the church's witness. The church seeks 
out for its ordained ministries those most fitting to fulfill them, and fitness to serve cannot be 
determined on the basis of racial-ethnic heritage, class, or gender.

Trained in sound biblical interpretation, critically aware of the traditions and practices of the 
church, adept and discerning in their articulation of the Gospel, and skilled in practices of 
communal leadership and care, ordained ministers are invested by the church with real authority 
and responsibilities. Leading the community in worship through preaching and sacramental 
celebration, the minister regularly engages in practices of worship administration. As wise and 
educated theologian for the church, the minister teaches both the what and the how of Christian 
faith. As spiritual leader, the minister counsels the community in its individual and collective 
growth in faith and self-understanding. As supervising administrator of the life of the community 
as a whole, the minister is entrusted to exercise timely initiative, patient coaxing, and bold 
challenge in the various ways the church organizes its life and work. In all these tasks, the 
minister must function as the primary visionary of the church, keeping alive the animating hope 
of Christian witness for the benefit of the world. Unless the administering practices of ordained 
leadership are exercised dynamically and sensitively, the health of the church's life suffers and its 
capacity for faithful, effective witness is impaired.

In sum, the ordained leadership leads best by serving--serving first the Lord Jesus Christ and his 
Gospel and thus too serving the church in its witness to the Gospel. Ministers are accountable to 
God and to the whole laos of the church for the performance of their obligations. They are not to 
regard themselves as the Head of the church but as servants of Jesus Christ.

Ordained ministers are not the only leaders called out and necessary for the administering of the 
church's life. The Holy Spirit from time to time calls forth others of the laos to whom the church 
entrusts short-term and long-term tasks and functions for the sake of the church's witness. Such 
persons--among them those Disciples at present call elders and deacons--engage in practices of 
providing-servant-leadership which are signs of church's faithfulness to its calling. The 
distinction between the formally ordained leaders and the nonordained but called leaders, should 
remain fluid, open, and nonhierarchical.

The church must remember that its administrative arrangements are not eternal. They are subject 
to continuous review and reform in light of their conformity with the distinctive social character 
and distinctive calling of the church amid "the needs and patterns of a changing world" (Design, 
#2).

In this third part we have pointed to the defining signs of the church's identity, nature, and 
purpose--to the best of our understanding. In doing so, we have been able to do something else as 
well: we have brought to light why, because of our faith in the Gospel the life of the church 
involves such things as worship, preaching and the sacraments, education, evangelism, 
confessing the faith, works of compassion, involvement in social action, and ordination. These
are so commonplace in church life that even Christians—perhaps Christians especially—are liable to forget or mistake their real meaning. We understand them rightly when we understand their proper connection to the church’s God-given identity.

Here, then, we have affirmed that the church is itself a liberative and redemptive communal reality, a gift and calling of God to the world. As the community of the faithful engages in the practices of nurture, outreach, and administration which witness to the living triune God for the sake of the world, it becomes what God has called it to be—truly the church of Jesus Christ.

**PART 4. ISSUES OF RELATIONSHIP AND STRUCTURE**

We have now explained that the church is a community called forth by the Gospel. We have pointed out the defining signs of that community's true identity. One other important topic demands attention—the polity of the church. We are concerned here with issues of relationship and structure. We discuss these issues first in quite general terms. This puts them in proper context, as issues facing the church itself. We then turn to the Disciples specifically, suggesting a number of principles for aligning our relationships and structures in accord with the church's true identity.

**Church Organization and the Practices of the Church's True Identity**

The word "polity" refers to the structuring which makes the community of faith also and at the same time a distinct social grouping that is readily identifiable as a society, an organization, an institution. (Synonyms for polity are similarly shorthand terms such as the structure, the government, and the order or ordering of the church.) This topic is important for many reasons. One is that because the church is not simply a group of people but an organized group—one institution among others—in any given culture, it is a matter of some special concern to the powers and principalities of this world: they are eager to decide for themselves whether to ignore, tolerate, persecute, manipulate, or support it. Another is that these "worldly" attempts to define the church and assign it to a place in the social order of their own choosing often induce Christians to forget the church's true identity.

But the topic is also important because Christians themselves are so divided about church polity, and by their church polities. Is this much ado about nothing? Some say it is. Some say it is not. An adequate answer requires us to examine the question more carefully. From a strictly social-scientific perspective, church polity is simply another example of "the sociology of organizations." Institutional structuring involves the development of various more or less formalized, routine, and persisting patterns of human interrelations and activities within any given community. Once in place, these patterns facilitate, shape, and place certain restraints on relationships and interactions among the community's members. Taken together as a complex whole, the community's structure of governance, maintenance, and operation also "typifies" its shared life in the sense that it becomes a visible symbol or emblem of the community itself. So far as the sociology of organizations is concerned, it is neither surprising nor troubling that different communities of Christians develop different polities and that each of them then advertises itself as a "Christian Church."

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Only rarely do Christians view the issue of church polity with such cool detachment, or feel it right to do so. The sociological viewpoint is certainly true so far as it goes: like clubs and many other forms of human association, communities and community-forming movements of Christians, including the Stone-Campbell movement, are historical examples of what the sociologists call "institutionalization." Yet this account does not by itself provide the answers to the questions of Christian faith with regard to church polity. We must seek to understand how (if at all) church polity has to do with the expression of the church's God-given identity.

The first thing to be said is that we have to deal not only with differing opinions about church polity but with very different experiences of it and very strong feelings about it. There is an inclination, on the one hand, to identify the church itself—the one body which is the body of Christ—with some one specific organizational structure. And there is a tendency, on the other hand, to view what is called the "organized" or "institutional" church with some disdain, as though institutional structure itself were incompatible with the shared life of true Christian community. Both tendencies are found among Disciples, as they are within churches and the public at large. Neither of them, however, reflects a proper understanding of the relationship between the church's true identity and its polity. Nor will it do simply to say that God calls the church to be a half-and-half mixture of community and institution. We must speak instead of a dialectical connection between the two.

In order to grasp this point, it may be helpful to consider the rationale for church polity. Why does the church have to have a "structure" that makes it not only a community with distinctive practices but an organization, an institution?

Because the Gospel calls forth the church, that is, one body whose many members pursue one calling, the shared life of that body finds its living reality in more than heartfelt sentiment alone. Christians are drawn together by faith into a community with historically concrete social form. This is because those faithful to the Gospel cannot be content with occasional, random moments of true community and true ministry; by its very nature faith presses us on to fashion a shared life capable of long term commitments to one another and to service to God and the neighbor. Only by means of structures is it possible for such a community to maintain from one moment to another—that is, over time—the distinctive social character which makes it a fitting sign of the Gospel and to equip its many members for the practices of nurture and outreach which make it an instrument of God's work of reconciliation. Thus the development of institutional structures which typify even as they facilitate, shape, and place certain restraints upon human relationships is not merely sociologically predictable: it is a natural and necessary outgrowth of faith itself.

To point out the necessity of a church polity is not to argue for the necessity, and hence the sole legitimacy, of any one particular form of polity. This disclaimer is basically the same as the one made while discussing the administrative practices of the church. But it deserves repeating, considering how often our love for the church leads Christians to make sincere yet extravagant claims on behalf of our own church's polity. There is a logic to this reasoning: if the church's identity is a gift and calling from God, and if institutional structures are necessary, then there
must be one true structure or polity given by God.

This logic is understandable, but not compelling. Institutional structure is not an end in itself or even one end among other: the necessity of church polity is only that of a means to another end. The end is that of keeping the church faithful to its God-given identity and mission. In Protestant tradition, this point has often been made by stating that the structure of the church—that is, an institutionalized ordering of the community for ministry—is a matter not of the very being (the esse) but the well-being (the bene esse) of the church.

Hence the highest praise that can be given to any specific church polity is that it serves its intended purpose well. This judgment, of course, rests ultimately with God. Yet Christians here and now cannot avoid making proximal appraisals of our own in this regard. The church must devise structures of administrative practices (governance, maintenance, and operation) which will promote its well-being in the sense of enabling it to be faithful to its God-given calling in its particular setting in history.

The result of these human devisings is well-known. Churches have developed many different forms of polity in the course of church history. The New Testament itself shows that basic elements of the most prominent forms of polity—congregational, presbyterial or associational, and episcopal—arose so very early in church life that advocates of each speak of its apostolic origins. Variations on these forms, including the distinctive mixed polity of covenant adopted by Disciples in 1968, have emerged as Christians sought to form or reform existing structures by realigning relations among these primary social units of community life. A brief, if over-simple, sketch of how this works out may be helpful.

The living reality of shared life in Christ emerges and is sustained in concrete social form as a group of believers who, living near one another, gather together regularly and, through their face-to-face relations and their practices, witness to the Gospel in that place. This local assembly (the congregation) is the social unit highlighted in congregational polities. The living reality of the union—the communion—of several such local gatherings as one body spread out among differing locations is highlighted by the regional and general connections of the sort formed by presbyterial (or associational) and episcopal polities. The need and desire to achieve what is regarded as a proper, effective balance among these local, regional, and general units of the church's corporate life have led some churches, including the Disciples, to adopt a form of "mixed" polity. The outcome, to this date in history, is the coexistence of a large number of distinct organized bodies of Christians. The technical term for these is "particular churches"; in everyday discussion they are called simply the churches or denominations.

Insofar as any or every one of the churches exhibits the defining signs of the church's true identity, Christians must say, "here are disciples of Christ, our sisters and brothers in Christ, churches which are truly church." Yet these divided churches cannot be said to be fully the church. The full scope of the community of Christian faith extends to the inclusion of all disciples of Christ, i.e., to a universality (catholicity) that is worldwide (the oikumene, ecumenical). Thus the coexistence of numerous disparate—separated and often competing--
churches is a historical development for which no claim to finality can justly be made. Faith sets
in motion a quest for a structuring of relations which will permit the shared life of the whole
people to manifest its living reality in some concrete social form. This quest is still underway, for
despite many ecumenical advances, Christians have not yet envisioned the polity that can be said
by common consent (as it must) to serve this purpose well.

The fact that a structure for the visible unity of all Christians is such an elusive goal, and indeed
that so many in all of the churches are resistant and many more apathetic to it, is instructive. It
reminds us how much remains to be done before the church fulfills its calling and God's work of
reconciliation is to be fully realized. It also alerts us to two other aspects of church polity that
deserve comment.

First, the polity of each church shapes that church's common life in such a way that its members
are reinforced in their conviction that they thereby belong also to the true church of Jesus Christ.
The community of Christian faith--notwithstanding its flaws, imperfections, and shortcomings--
cannot do otherwise, trusting as it does in the Gospel. The faith that is confessed, the baptism
that is administered, the table that is spread, and the ministries that are undertaken by each of the
churches are not their own but those of the universal church of Jesus Christ.

But this encouragement is not risk-free: it can give rise to the conviction that only by belonging
to this particular, polity-structured church is there assurance of belonging to the universal church
of Jesus Christ. One result is all too familiar: each church operates with an institutionalized
assumption that whereas "our church" is both truly Christian and truly church, the status of "your
church" and "their church" remains for us a more or less open question. Today, this question
rarely hinders different churches from forming friendly, even cooperative associations. But when
ecumenism progresses beyond good will, toleration, consultation, and collaboration, all of the
churches become very uncomfortable. While each of them is firmly convinced that it is truly
church, that conviction is not fully shared by the others. The necessity of agreeing, individually
and collectively, on some set of institutional features by which to reassure one another of their
common identity in Christ causes each and every one to feel somewhat hurt and resentful.

Second, the difficulty of devising a polity adequate to the living reality of the unity of all
Christians alerts us to grave concerns--often outright fear--about institutional structuring present
within each and every church. Church polity is also church government: it involves forming
structures for the community's collective decision-making. The questions of "who gets to decide
and how" generate churchwide high anxiety This is understandable, and not all bad. After all,
every Christian should be anxious to see decision-making lead to the right (the most wise, the
most faithful) conclusion and therefore anxious also to see that the decision-making process itself
is structured and carried out well.

Yet this anxiety exposes a dimension of church life that we dare not ignore. Human relations
within the church are also power-relations. In providing a structure for collective decision-
making, the polity of the church serves either to contest or to perpetuate (as the case may be)
power-relations among the church members which are already set in place both by the impact of
outside socio-cultural forces on the community and by the tenor of informal interpersonal dealings within. In short, church polity is also church politics.

And here again Christians have very different views, experiences, and feelings. For some, church politics itself seems to become a primary outlet for Christian service. Others quite frankly wish it would go away. In fact, shared life in a human community—even that of a community dedicated to Christian faith and love—is always "political." Human relations remain power-relations whether or not they are institutionally structured. These power-relations may embody and produce great good as well as great harm.

The Gospel calls Christians to claim and use their power in relating to others, viewing it as a gift from God by which human relations may be altered for the better, in greater accord with God's will for humanity. The polity and politics of the church are to help maintain and reinforce this alteration for the better by institutionally structuring it. Only by means of polity is the church capable of functioning over time as one body commonly committed to the pursuit of its one calling. Hence the church must make collective decisions about how to carry out the nurturing and outreach practices of witness to the Gospel. It must also make a collective decision about how these and every other collective decision will be made. Thus the point at issue before each and every church is the same: the formation of a structure of governance, maintenance, and operation that befits the true nature and serves the true purpose of the church.

It is not to be thought that any institutional structure for collective decision-making assures the church of faithfulness in ministry or that any of those known to church history is perfect, and so unreformable. Each of the various institutional arrangements set by the polities of the churches displays certain peculiar strengths and peculiar weaknesses. This simply confirms, however, that issues of polity are among the most fateful that churches are called upon to address. Thus in forming or re-forming our church's polity, and in evaluating those of others, conscientious Christians will be mindful that our every decision sends a message about our understanding of—and commitment to—our Christian faith. We will be mindful as well that the power-plays, trade-offs, and quick-fixes, and "politics as usual" are out of keeping with the true identity of the church.

This is to say that issues of church polity are first and finally issues of faith that must be addressed first and finally in light of our understanding of the church's true identity. A facility for practical, expedient problem-solving—a pragmatic temper like that to which Disciples justly lay claim to some fame—is of value to the church. Yet it carries Christians only so far. Its appropriate but quite restricted role to play is that of helping the church pursue its calling effectively while setting aside the distractions of other, and lesser things. And its success or failure is to be judged not by how well it enables the church to survive, get by, or even grow in numbers by market appeal, but by how well it contributes to the fulfillment of the church's God-given calling to witness to God's love for the sake of the world.

Having been joined in one body and entrusted with one ministry by God, the church bears responsibility for collective theological judgments regarding its practices of witness to God's
redemptive love for the world. These are in no sense blind or arbitrary judgments: they are
guided by the light of scripture, informed by the traditions and experiences of the church
universal, and responsive to the needs of a suffering, strife-torn world. In its efforts to understand
and evaluate these resources wisely and well, the church is aided by what Disciples customarily
term "diversity of theological opinion" among its members.

It is through the interdependence, interaction, and complementarily of diverse theological
viewpoints that the community fulfills its calling to "be of one mind." This diversity is also
essential for the goal of growing in our understanding of the faith and that of upbuilding the
whole. Indeed, it is a basic Christian conviction is that no person, group, or church possesses a
full grasp of the will of God. Even as we strive to live according to God's self-revelation in Jesus
Christ, we continue to see "in a mirror, dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12), interpreting the Scriptures,
the heritage of the church, and our own experience of God's presence and promise in remarkably
different ways. This multiplicity of theological view is characteristic of the Scriptures themselves
which, to cite only one example, contain not one gospel account but four. The proper conclusion
to draw from this is that the church needs various viewpoints in order to hear the Gospel more
clearly and to understand its meaning more fully.

It follows that as in its practices of education and its practices of evangelism, so too in the polity
which links together all of its administrative practices, the church has to be a community of
dialogue--sustained, churchwide conversation about God, the Gospel, and our participation in the
work of God. This dialogue is not only an acknowledgment but a sharing together of the rich
meaning of faith, and so an expression of living communion and a witness to the Gospel.
Without such dialogue, the smooth running of the church becomes merely mechanistic, its unity
becomes merely formal, and its diversity becomes self-indulgent and contentious.

When we engage in genuine dialogue, we come willing to both teach and learn. We commit
ourselves to listen carefully to one another, refusing to vaunt ourselves or caricature others. We
commit ourselves as well to enter into conversation as informed as possible of the multifaceted
Christian heritage, and we expect that we and our conversation partners alike will come away
even better informed, having deepened and broadened and perhaps corrected our initial views in
light of the dialogue itself. Dialogue of this sort is by no means, then, a zero-sum game whereby
the affirmation of one participant means the automatic rejection of others. Indeed, the point is not
"winning" at all. It is to discern more clearly and fully what God wills for the life of the church
and each of its members. And on the basis of this process of discernment, the church equips itself
for the ministry to which God has called it.

**Disciples Polity: Always Reforming**

Reflections on the polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are to be guided and ruled
by our best understanding of the church's true identity, nature, and purpose. Our Design reformed
our church's organizational life. It affirms that ours is a community formed by covenant
relationship with God and one another. In keeping with that covenant, God's covenant of love in
Jesus Christ, we restructured our life together in Christ along the lines of a covenantal polity
Hence each of the challenges and questions we face today brings with it another question: is our church structure capable of serving its intended purpose?

This question calls for more than a simple yes or no answer, and more too than ad hoc responses to institutional emergencies. It requires evaluating the total structure of the church in light of the character and obligations of our covenantal calling. This reevaluation, we believe, is to be of paramount concern to Disciples in response to what are perceived as stresses, strains, and shortcomings of our church structure. Neither maintaining nor altering that structure can be finally justified on any other basis. Thus the concern is not only paramount but urgent, and deserves churchwide attention.

Discussions about organizational change are already underway within our church. Others will surely follow, and in due course action will be proposed and taken. From all that has been said of the church's true identity, there emerge a number of points which merit attention during this period of churchwide deliberation.

1. The covenant conception of church set out in the Preamble of the Design is an apt expression for the foundation, nature, and purpose of the church. The particularities of organizational structure set forth in the Design, however, are properly viewed as the timely means by which our life-in-covenant with God and one another was given an institutional embodiment in "earthen vessels." Timely as they were, and surely in many instances still of value, those means are of human design and therefore reformable. The Design is open to amendment, and in any case allows considerable latitude and flexibility for realigning our church's structural units, relations, policies, and projects.

Yet neither the desire nor the pressure to reform the organizational structures of our church should blind us to significant, hard-won gains made by the adoption of the Design. Among the gains that are too precious ever to be "reformed" away, even in the name of dire practical necessity, are these:

- that God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ is the prior and final reality of our lives,

- that this covenant draws us into covenant community one with another;

- that the covenant community into which we are drawn is the church, hence one body which, through sacred vows of union in local (congregational), regional, and general spheres of association, participates in the Church universal;

- that the character and activity of this community are to be fitting witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for the benefit of the world, to the glory of God.
Acknowledgements such as these are standards to be used in evaluating proposals for the maintenance or the alteration of our church structure. In adapting organizational forms and relationships, care must be taken that we reinforce, not weaken, the covenantal ties which bind us to God and one another.

2. In addition to these acknowledgements, other concerns of covenantal faithfulness ought not to be overlooked in dealing with issues of church structure. One is a lesson we learn from scripture, the Disciples heritage of checks-and-balances among power centers, and the experiences of women and minorities. Organizational structures have the power to liberate or to alienate. We should therefore examine church structure in order to determine when, where, and who it liberates and when, where, and who it alienates. And we should seek those structures which empower every member of the body as well as the body as a whole for ministry.

Another, equally important lesson has to with maintaining a finely balanced, creative tension between tradition and innovation. Each has value. A church that hastily jettisons tradition will be easy prey to fads and demagoguery. A church that is too resistant to change risks failing to heed the Holy Spirit which, speaking through the cries of those outside established circles of power and privilege or through the still, small voice of conscience within, directs us beyond the status quo. Therefore, examine church structure in light of its capacity to discern those elements of tradition worth preserving and those innovations worth accepting. And seek structures that conserve the best of the church's heritage while allowing for fresh insights and new initiatives.

Structures of this sort value inclusivity, diversity, tolerance, and flexibility. They aim at maintaining a balanced, creative tension between the power of the individual/congregation and the group/church. Whatever decisions are finally made must be subject to appeal and reconsideration, and conscientious dissent must be allowed. Yet on occasion the church with greater wisdom we are leadership and decision-making must take a clear stand, and once taken, firmly held—until servile submission to others have shown a still more perfect way. All those we entrust with too, no less so than the covenant partners to whom we have entrusted leadership and decision-making authority. Unyielding insistence on having our own way and withdrawing from or inflicting pain on our brothers and sisters when we disagree with them are breaches of our covenantal promises.

3. The evaluation and adaptation of church structures in keeping with our covenantal obligations are matters of judgment which call for wise collective decision-making. Hence it is imperative that we structure and conduct the process of collective decision-making in our church in a manner befitting a covenant community. The voices of all in the church are shaping the life to be heard. Each member and each group needs opportunity to share in and work of the church. Because it is impossible for all Christians to

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gather together to make every decision, even in our congregations, the church is well-advised to rely on methods of representative self-government, and to embrace basic democratic values which honor open, reasoned debate, respect the will of the majority and the integrity of the minority, and invite the common consent of all. This is certainly a part of what it means to live and serve in covenant together.

4. The collegial decisions that Disciples make are decisions about whether and how we will be the church. These are decisions regarding our understanding of the Christian faith we share as a covenant community, and so—as the word theology refers to "faith seeking understanding"—they are theological decisions. Collegial theological decisions are made constantly, and routinely, by the community of faith, among Disciples within and across the local, regional, and general manifestations of our church. Many of these decisions are by now so much part of our own church tradition—for example, "as Disciples, our congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper every Sunday, and this is what we say and do"—that we are hardly aware that they are indeed collective and theological and decisions. The same holds for the many decisions customarily thought of as simply practical, or perhaps even "worldly." It is common, for example, to hear it said that our church assemblies deal, or should deal, only with items of "business" rather than of "theology"—if the teaching of the faith were not the business of the church and the business of the church (including the stewardship of funds) were not bound up with our understanding of the church's faith.

To these examples of the collective theological decisions we make, many others can be added. It is unfortunate when such decisions in the church go unrecognized for what they really are, and even more so when they are made without benefit of the wide-ranging, open, and earnest theological dialogue that they deserve. Disciples are by no means to be singled out in this respect. There is no foolproof system of church self-government, and given the persisting power of sin among Christians, none is to be expected. For its part, the structure of our church provides for collective decision making in the manner of a demographically inclusive representative democracy. There is nothing in or about that structure to prevent us from engaging in theological dialogue and in theologically deliberative decision making. We need only to resolve to do so.

Disciples, like Christians in every church, certainly have good reason to keep close watch over church decision making and its outcomes. We want the process to be fair, and its outcomes, wise. Theological opinion in our church is certainly varied—so much so that the popular image of a single spectrum of positions ranging from conservative to liberal or from traditional to innovative is doomed to misrepresent it. By its heritage and ethos, our church commends freedom, inclusiveness, openness, tolerance, non-judgementalism, and anti-authoritarianism. These qualities of shared life as church are in keeping with the gift and claim of the Gospel, which is a message of reconciliation, liberation, and redemption. They are in fact to be counted among the theological strengths of our church, regardless of their public appeal at any given moment in history. Insistence on uniformity in every detail of church teaching and practice (creedalism, dogmatism, ecclesiasticism, and
parochialism) is always a clear and present danger to the church. Equally dangerous, however, is an attitude of laxity or indifferentism which says that "anything goes" and that diversity of opinion knows no bounds--in short, that faith and faithfulness amount to whatever any individual or group chooses to make of them.

5. It is therefore incumbent upon congregations, regions, and general units of our church to encourage theological dialogue and to exemplify the value of careful theological deliberation by the way decisions are made and their outcomes are reported. Above all, members of our church need to be equipped as well as encouraged to take on the theological responsibility which falls to us because our church seeks a structure along the lines of a representative democracy. It would therefore be well for Disciples to assess whether our organizational structure makes sufficient provision for channeling our diversity of theological viewpoints along paths leading to the upbuilding of the whole body. Over the years efforts have been made, some quite fruitful, to help our church become a community of theological conversation--through, e.g., churchwide conferences, study commissions, and workshops at assemblies. Even so, occasional efforts are no substitute for the formation of organizational structures promoting study, reflection, dialogue, and constructive debate about issues of faith and the meaning of faithfulness throughout the church.

In this regard, there is need for Disciples to clarify when and how our church might best express its corporate judgment on basic issues of faith. People wish and in any case deserve to know the beliefs and practices that are upheld by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Faithfulness to the Gospel and effectiveness in ministry demand clarity on this matter. This need is as critical to congregational life and to regions as it is to the general church. But precisely because it is general, the general church--especially the General Assembly--is the high-profile, churchwide arena in which we demonstrate our unity and our disunity. It is important, then, that Disciples clarify the role of the General Assembly (as well as the general administrative units and their officers) in discerning and expressing the common teachings of our church. It is likewise important to specify the theological bases and implications of what our Design refers to as the nature, purpose, functions, rights, and responsibilities of the general, regional, and congregational manifestations of our church.

6. As these comments indicate, to speak of the collective theological decisions of the church is not to speak of any one individual or group legislating and then trying to enforce a uniform understanding of the meaning of faith throughout the church. It is to say, instead, that the church as a whole is responsible for providing means, through its structure, for making collective theological decisions about the teachings and practices of our church. Our covenant conception of church requires that in devising these means we acknowledge that congregations, regions, and general units function as inseparable, interdependent, and complementary parts of the one body. It also requires that whenever truly "essential" matters which the Gospel obliges (or forbids) us to affirm and those
"non-essentials" on which wide diversity of thought and practice is embraced within the life of our church.

This wording calls to mind a maxim that Disciples long ago incorporated into our heritage: "In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity" Although neither strictly biblical nor especially trendy, it is wise counsel nonetheless. As Disciples, we can learn from the course our journey in faith has taken that it is wise counsel with too little practical effect unless and until it finds its way into our church's decision-making and other organizational structures. The only truly timely, and truly faithful, means by which to give our life-in covenant with God and one another proper institutional embodiment in these times will be those which make this maxim the guideline for every undertaking of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

In concluding we must emphasize a point that has been allowed to remain in the background throughout: namely, the church witnesses to God for the benefit of the world to the glory of God. In a distinctively Christian sense, the world's true benefit, and therefore also its glory, is first and last prefigured and contained in God's glory. The glory of God that the church knows in Jesus Christ is a glory which includes the glory of the world of sinners reconciled, liberated, and redeemed. God's glory is not God's selfish possession; it is a glory shared with the world by the One God-Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things. Hence, it is not necessarily a glory on the world's terms, nor is it always a benefit on the world's terms. But God's glory is the only truly eternal benefit for the world. The church is true to its identity when it witnesses to the glory of God as the reality from which and towards which all things move.

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