

Remarks Presented Concerning the Merger Agreement and the Design at Design at 50

“Kick Like Hell”

I should disclose from the beginning of this time we share together that I am not a generational disciple. My introduction to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was August of 1974 when I met the Rev. Alvin O’Neil Jackson who was pastor of Loudon Avenue Christian Church. I have no personal experience of the National Christian Missionary Convention or the pre-merger African American Disciple Church. I do however have stories told to be by members of Loudon Avenue Christian of their fond memories of “The Convention.” There is a picture in the churches library when they hosted the National Christian Missionary Convention.

The first Convocation I attended was the Third Biennial Session held at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee in July, 1976. The Rev. Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, a noted scholar in the Sociology of Religion and Culture was one of the primary presenters during the Convocation. It was during the question and answer period after one of Dr. Lincoln’s lectures that I was unwittingly introduced to the Merger of the National Christian Missionary Convention (NCMC) and the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ).

The Rev. Dr. T. Garrott Benjamin, Pastor of 2nd Christian Church Indianapolis, Indiana (Light of the World Christian Church) raised an interesting question and in my mind Dr. Lincoln’s response was equally interesting. “What do you do, queried Dr. Benjamin, when you are a minnow swallowed by a whale?” “Kick like hell”, was Dr. Lincoln’s quick, terse response.

I was astute enough to understand the analogy, something small being consumed by something large, but the context was missing in this initial exchange. Who was the minnow and who was the whale?

What precipitated the need of the minnow having to kick the whale like hell? Would constant kicking of the whale by the minnow provide any relief or liberation for the minnow? These were my questions.

I listened more during that session and discovered that for Dr. Benjamin and many others, that the minnow was the National Christian Missionary Convention and the whale was the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ). I also saw why Dr. Lincoln could respond as if he knew the context of Dr. Benjamins question without asking.

Dr. Lincoln went on to say that what Black disciples were experiencing, Black United Methodist were also experiencing. He stated that from 1939 – 1968 there was the Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It comprised 19 Black Annual Conferences in the Methodist Church. The Methodist Conference's traditionally are established geographically. The Central Jurisdiction was established racially.

In 1968 the Methodist Episcopal Church (the whale) and the Central Jurisdiction (the minnow) merged, forming the United Methodist Church. Dr. Lincoln could speak so quickly and concise because his black Methodist context mirrored our black disciple context. He had one year of seniority as a minnow kicking like hell inside a whale.

I was puzzled by the usage of language as I listened and observed throughout the duration of my first Convocation. If merger means that two entities now become one, then this swallow language suggests that something else took place in the minds of a number of National Christian Missionary Convention leaders. Swallow carries with it the notion that something is being consumed. Did we have a merger or was there a swallowing, a consuming of smaller African American Disciples Church by the larger white Disciples church. Merger says that there had to be consent on the part of two parties. Swallowing does not necessary mean consent was given. Resolution #44 (the complete resolution is attached to this

paper), affirms that mutual consent was given for merger. Did the African American Church consent to merger in mind but not in heart?

I propose to show throughout this paper, that strength or weakness of The Design was not the issue for Black Disciples. Our struggle with the Design is that it did not include us at all. The Rev. Dr. Raymond E. Brown, one of the principal leaders at the time of the merger often said, “Before the ink dried on the merger documents they had already written the Design.” There is no mention of the merger in the Design and therefore nothing concerning the covenant between the two conventions.

This glaring omission greatly clarifies why the words spoken by Dr. C. Eric Lincoln resonant with me forty plus years later. The African American Disciples have been “kicking like hell” for fifty years to affirm that there was a merger and we expect the Church to fulfill the covenant. I have been an active participant in the kicking for over forty-two of the fifty years.

The Minnow: The National Christian Missionary Convention

What was this minnow and how did it come into existence? Brenda M. Cardwell and William K Fox in their book *Journey towards Wholeness*, affords us a rationale for why the National Missionary Convention was birthed. In Rev. James Blair’s response to the 1917 International Convention we get an idea as to why the National Christian Convention was started. They wrote, “James Blair, in trying to summarize the reason for the formulation of the National Christian Missionary Convention, made the following observations:

- ❖ The need for a good institution of higher education which would provide quality education for Black people;
- ❖ Treatment of second-class Christian citizenship which seemed to permeate most relationships between Blacks and Whites in the church;

- ❖ Lack of public accommodations being available to Blacks when they attended large gatherings of White members of the Christian Churches and no strong advocacy by the White Convention for the securing of such accommodations for all attendants regardless of race;
- ❖ Lack of communication between the church bureaucracy serving Blacks and an unwritten policy that Blacks “were being told what was best for them, rather than being asked what was best;
- ❖ Need for communication and understanding among Black Disciples themselves;
- ❖ Need for an elimination of stereotype ideas about race through the creative interaction of competent Blacks and Whites.

In his concluding remarks Blair made a statement that was similar to Dr. C Eric Lincoln’s “kick like hell.” Rev. James Blair “concluded that the first gathering of the National Christian Missionary Convention was the means by which the Brotherhood was shocked into the awareness that the Negro had changed. He had changed from Uncle Tom to “Mr. Thomas “and had to be encountered in a different way.”

In a document entitled “Design for Renewal and Growth (Projections on the work of the Disciples of Christ Negroes) presented to the National Christian Missionary Convention in August, 1966 by William K Fox, S. S. Myers and Emmett J Dickson I further discovered why the need to establish a Negro Convention within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and an interesting tidbit on the founders. They wrote, “The establishment of the National Christian Missionary Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1917 was an attempt to overcome the problems of providing adequate church leadership and developing strong congregations. The tidbit is that the founders of the Convention included such widely known Caucasian Disciples as Robert M. Hopkins of the American Missionary Society, Stephen J. Corey of the Foreign Missionary Society, Anna K. Atwater of the Christian Women’s Board of Missions and J. B. Lehman of Southern Christian Institute.”

I find it interesting that the very reason why the National Christian Convention was organized in 1917 is the same reason given for merger of staff in 1955 and the merger of conventions in 1969. African American Disciples wanted to be treated as equals in all aspects of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The 1969 merger was for many the best way for this to happen. We have come full circle.

The Merger Documents and the Design

There is no mentioning of the Merger Agreement in the Design as I previous stated. It was Rev. Dr. Raymond E. Brown who drilled into me the importance that we always have key African American Disciple leaders who knew the documents. He would say often, “son, it is not enough to have the documents, you must know them.” It was under his mentorship that I have procured notebooks of documents and the well of oral history he poured into me concerning the merger that are not reflected in the Design. Honestly, I do not know if there is a place where these important documents are canonized and kept by the General Church.

I do not know in the orientation of Presidents of Disciples Home Mission or General Minister and President if these documents are discussed. I mention the above specifically because of their relationship to merger staff and the Executive Secretary of the Convocation. Merger staff are housed in Disciples Home Mission. They are supervised and evaluated by both the President of Disciples Home Mission and the Executive Secretary.

The Executive Secretary of the National Convocation is housed in the office of General Minister and President. The executive Secretary is supervised and evaluated (with input from the Executive Committee of the Convocation) by the General Minister and President.

If there is no process of orientation that consistently allows changing personnel to know how crucial these connections are will have some kicking. As long as there is one minnow who knows and cares

about the merger agreement, there will be some “kicking like hell.” Sadly, the Design nor the General Rules do not assure us that the merger agreement even exist.

I have discovered that very few Disciples (Black or White) have a working familiarity with the merger agreement. Part of the reasoning for the kicking is to make sure somebody remember promises made. The fact that we have a Design, our governing document that does not have at least a footnote to reference a moment as critical as that signals that there is a flaw.

In our Standing Rules for the Administrative Committee of the General Board we have a Commission on Racial Ethnic Inclusiveness and Empowerment. That Commission is tasked with the following:

- ❖ This Commission will hold in review for accountability the ministries, policies and practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), through audience with the Administrative Committee of the General Board, as related to racial justice.
- ❖ The Commission will continue to call the whole church to faithfulness in its commitment of people of color within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); and to challenge the total church to be proactive in insuring that racial equity and inclusiveness is live out in the church’s various structures.

This Commission on Racial Ethnic Inclusiveness and Empowerment may be the General Churches attempt to honor the Merger Agreement. If that be true then we see that the minnow was swallowed up into the Design, the whale. The African American Disciples have lost their identity and have become one of three ethnic ministries. We are now grouped with the people of color. In 1969 the merger was not about an ethnic ministry nor people of color. It was about the African American Disciples becoming one with the Caucasian Disciples at the risk of losing their citadel of power, the National Christian Missionary Convention.

The omission of any references to the merger makes the Design weak for African American Disciples. In addition to the fact that there is no mention of the merger, African American's see no place of power and authority in the Design to appeal to when we know the merger agreement is not being honored.

Where do we find in the Design is a guardian who would assure us that the merger agreement would be honored? What are the consequences or correctives if either side since a breach of the merger? How will we know that the merger is living into its desired purpose? What are the evaluative tools we will use to determine that we are progressing? Who is ultimately responsible for giving oversight to this epoch moment in the life of our church?

In reading the Design I cannot find definitive answers to my questions. We state in the preamble the following:

2. Within the universal Body of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is identifiable by its testimony, tradition, name, institutions, and relationships. *Across national boundaries, this church expresses itself in covenantal relationships in congregations, regions, and general ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), bound by God's covenant of love. Each expression is characterized by its integrity, self-governance, authority, rights, and responsibilities, yet they relate to each other in a covenantal manner, to the end that all expressions will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. We are committed to mutual accountability. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and constantly seeks in all of its actions to be obedient to his authority.*

3. We commit ourselves to one another and to God in adopting this Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in order that we may faithfully express the ministry of Christ, made known through scripture; provide Christian witness, mission, evangelism, and service from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth; furnish means by which all expressions of the church may fulfill their ministries with faithful

Christian stewardship; assure unity in Christ while respecting diversity; and work as partners in ecumenical and global relationships.

4. In keeping with this Design, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) shall establish, receive, and nurture congregational ministries; provide for regional and general ministries and such other organizations as may be required; have a General Assembly, a General Board, and an Administrative Committee of the General Board; define policies and criteria for its Order of Ministry; develop or recognize new forms of ministries for mission and witness; maintain appropriate relationships with institutions of higher education historically related to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); provide appropriate consultation and procedures whereby existing organizations may make any necessary transition within the provisions of this covenant; and engage in continuing renewal, reformation, and adaptation as necessary to minister in the world.

Bound by God's covenant of love

I have highlighted and italicized what I deem to be the most critical words in our design. The statement on surface sound wonderful but in reality is not functional for the demands of an ecclesial body. We say that we are a covenantal church but we fail to say what that means. In failing to tease out what a covenantal church looks like, we leave it to everyone's interpretation. I believe the church would be stronger, more accountable and responsible if we had taken the time to clarify covenantal church. How much stronger spiritually would we be if the church regularly grappled with what it means to be, "***bound by God's covenant of love.***"

There are two moments in my ministry where I saw how powerful and effective the Design could have been if we had done more with developing what we meant by covenant and being bound by God's covenant of love. In September of 1977 I was called to be pastor of Loudon Avenue Christian Church. I reiterate that I was not a generational disciple. Dr. Raymond E. Brown call me two weeks after I began

my ministry. He informed me that there was another critical step I needed to complete before I was affirmed by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as pastor of Loudon Avenue.

Dr. Brown stated that I had to come to the Missions Building in Indianapolis, Indiana for a week long orientation with other new African American Disciple pastors. He gave me the date, told me they would reimburse me for all expenses and insisted that my wife Dana, accompany me. I readily agreed to be in Indianapolis for a week of orientation. I did not know that Dr. Raymond Brown and the other African American Disciple leaders had no formal power or authority to tell me that my call was not affirmed until I went through orientation.

In reflecting over that moment in my ministry I saw covenantal church in action. I saw what it meant to be bound by God's covenant of love. Dr. Brown and others did not know me but they knew Loudon Avenue and her leadership. They were bound by God's love to protect the church that they held in covenant all those years in the National Christian Missionary Convention. The best way to do this in this instance was to orientate their new pastor. We see here how informal power and authority was exercised in the most positive manner.

The second moment in my ministry where I experienced this covenantal church occurred when I missed the Anaheim, California General Assembly in 1981. I had registered for the assembly but a crisis the night before I was to leave altered my plans. A few weeks later I received a letter from Dr. John Humbert stating that my standing was in jeopardy because I missed the assembly. I immediately called to explain what happened and apologize for not informing his office. I assured him that this would not happen again.

I will never forget Dr. Humbert's laugh when he said Bill, "your standing is not in jeopardy and by the way, I don't have that kind of power." He then said, "Glad I got your attention as to how important it is to us that you be present." That is how I envision a covenantal church operating. It was another moment

when I experienced being bound by God's covenant of love. How much stronger would our clergy and churches be if in being bound by the covenant of God's love means calling us to be accountable.

The lack of power and authority

I have heard us defined as a loose fitting federation. I am not sure that really defines us. A Federation is a group of states with a central government but independence in internal affairs. I cannot say the Design is a central government for us. I can say without hesitation that each part of our church operates independently in internal affairs.

Our Methodist colleagues have central government in their Book of Discipline. The Presbyterian's have the Book of order and Catholics Canon Law as their central governments. Each of these have inherent power and authority.

I sense the issue of power and authority is the primary reason we simply call ourselves covenantal church. If we dared to put some substance to this, power and authority would have to enter the conversation. You cannot participate in covenant talk and not talk about the consequence's when covenant is broken. Here is a weakness in our Design. Disciples historically do not want to give formal power and authority to anyone.

Resolution 47 - Working the system

How does the omission of the merger agreement in the Design impact African American Disciples? Each time African American Disciples felt that the merger agreement was not being honored they had to find an entry point into the system to voice their concern. They began by sending resolutions to the general Assembly. Resolution #47 was a test case for the omission of the merger agreement from the Design and the weakness many African American Disciples perceived.

The National Convocation, two years after merger came kicking to the General Assembly held in Louisville, Kentucky, October 15-20, 1971. Oddly enough, the “kick like hell” language was being formulated before Dr. C Eric Lincoln uttered them in Nashville in 1976. The Convocation declared in Resolution 47, “No, we are not satisfied with the present timetable for achieving racial equality in the nation. And since 1968, there is a real question as to whether we are going forward or backward. Many of us share the mood which James Baldwin first enunciated, “The Negro, if he is conscious, is in a rage most of the time.” It was another way of saying, “kick like hell.”

I want to highlight a few assumptions that the National Convocation had concerning the General Assembly based on their interpretation of the Design. The first assumption was that the General Assembly had authority and power. Assuming it did, it was the appropriate place to lodge their “demands.” They wrote, “Specifically, we ask the general Assembly to adopt the following program. Some may feel the list of suggestions is long. But there has been an even longer period of postponement and neglect.” The convocation assumed that the General Assembly had power and authority, so they ask that the assembly to “adopt the following programs.”

The second assumption was that the General Assembly had power and authority over ministries of the church. In the list of suggestions several ministries would have to be involved to satisfy Resolution 47. The Division of Homeland Ministries, the Board of Higher Education, Church Extension and the Office of Communications. The General Assembly has no institutional power or authority over any General Ministry, Region or local congregation. At best the General Assembly could receive this resolution and having conversations with appropriate persons to see if something could be done.

In their book *Journey Towards Wholeness*, Rev. Brenda M Cardwell and Rev. William K Fox offer this concerning Resolution 47. “The resolution was adopted by the General Assembly. The resolution advised the office of the General Minister and President to forward those aspects of the resolution to the

program units who should logically be responsible for implementing the action. African-American Disciples of Christ were on their way in “working the system” to achieve churchly goals.

“Working the system” is just different language for “kick like hell.” In both cases the Convocation discovered that they had assumed incorrectly. To date I have not found a written response or actions taken to address these concerns. Cardwell and Fox make no reference to any resolve of Resolution 47 other than the adoption by the General Assembly. All too many of you participating in this symposium know how many General Assembly resolutions over time run out of steam and passion. Or get lost in the transitioning of board members or general church personnel. What I have found, heard and seen is the reoccurrence of some iteration of Resolution 47 for over forty two years.

Resolution 47 references a weakness I raised earlier concerning the lack of evaluative tools to measure the progress of the merger. “Be It Further Resolved that the Committee on Black Church Work be called to keep these as well as other concerns under constant review, and to evaluate and report on progress to the 1972 meeting of the General Board and to the 1973 meeting of the general Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The “other concerns under constant review” seems to me to reference the merger agreement. There was no provisions for an evaluation or the setting of bench marks that would signal progress. The African American church constantly ask though many times veiled for some sign that the merger was working.

Resolution 46 – Evaluating and Monitoring Merger Agreement

Resolution 46 was an effort to some degree measure, evaluate and monitor the merger agreement. It was also another instance when the minnow had to kick the whale like hell. The resolution called for the establishment of a Committee on Black Church Work. In the book Journey to Wholeness the committee, “was a vehicle for monitoring program services. It was intended to supplant the “Interim Committee on

Developments in Negro Church Life.” The new committee was designed to give a panoramic view of the entire church life and work as it related to Black people and thus involve interaction with all program units and institutions serving the congregations. Further, the new committee was to “have direct contact with the church cabinet, administrative committee and general Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) through the office of the General Minister and President.”

It was further stated by Cardwell and Fox that the purpose of the new committee was to, “hold in review the whole of the Christian Church as related to the Black Constituency and, review ,correlate and evaluate plans and programs of various units as now envisioned for a more meaningful, significant and effective witness of the church.”

Resolution 46 looks so promising. It gets at the very issues that the merger was lacking. The promising beginning would have a quick ending. The life of the resolution depended on the Office of the General Minister and President. Over these fifty years too many initiatives have been placed in the most under resourced office of the church. I have seen firsthand how well intended initiatives were planted in that office without consideration of financial or human resources to sustain it.

The lack of financing and human resourcing was a part of the demise of a promising initiative. Just as the Design invests no power or authority in the General Assembly, I must point out that Design invests no power or authority in the General Minister and President. A review of the role and responsibilities of the General Minister and President will reveal an office without power or authority. The Design states this concerning the General Minister and President:

50. The General Minister and President shall be recognized as pastor to the Christian Church (Disciple of Christ) and president of the organization.

51. As pastor to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the roles for the General Minister and President are to:

- a. Provide spiritual leadership to the church in all of its diverse manifestations and exercise pastoral authority over concerns of the church in times of crisis.
- b. Embody the spirit of *The Design*.
- c. Articulate and interpret *The Design*.
- d. Serve as the primary ecumenical representative for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
- e. Lead and give oversight to the continual discernment of God's vision for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),
- f. Give oversight to mutual accountability among all expressions of the church.
- g. Represent the whole church in collegial leadership in gatherings of regional, general, and congregational ministries.
- h. Offer advice and counsel to commissions, committees, and task groups of General Board and regional bodies.
- i. Convene various congregational, regional, educational, and general church executives and pastors for dialogue and reflection on the whole life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

52. As chief executive officer of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the presidential roles of the General Minister and President are to:

- a. Have full access to boards of general ministries, racial ethnic ministries, and regions with voice and vote, as appropriate.
- b. Hold fiduciary responsibility for the Office of the General Minister and President's finances.
- c. Give oversight of Office of General Minister and President in all of its functions.

- d. Serve as primary spokesperson for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
- e. Sign official documents of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
- f. Serve as corporate Resident Agent for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
- g. Designate Office of General Minister and President executive staff to serve in representative capacities, as appropriate.

53. Qualifications and accountability for the General Minister and President are:

- a. The General Minister and President shall be an ordained minister with standing in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
- b. The General Minister and President shall be elected and called to this ministry by the General Assembly upon nomination by the Administrative Committee through the General Board, for a term of six years and may be elected to one additional term.
- c. The General Minister and President is accountable to the Administrative Committee, General Board, and General Assembly.
- d. The General Minister and President may be removed from office by a two-thirds majority vote of the General Board upon recommendation of the Administrative Committee.
- e. In the nomination and election of the General Minister and President, a two-thirds vote of those present and voting in each of the Administrative Committee, the General Board, and the General Assembly shall be required. In the event of a vacancy in the position of General Minister and President, the Administrative Committee shall name the person to fill the vacancy until the next General Assembly.

In the case of Resolution 46, the General Minister and President would operate out of her/his role described in 50. f of the design - ***Give oversight to mutual accountability among all expressions of the***

church. The General Minister and President can convene tables where each expression can give voice at how they impact the African American Disciple Church. The OGMP can give advice and counsel. The OGMP can suggest and encourage. At the end of the day it is up to each of those unit leaders, Regional ministers and congregations' boards that give them their marching orders.

Given all that the Church requires of the OGMP with limited resources, the person in that office has to decide what is priority. It would be impossible to make everything priority. I believe that Resolution 46 like so many other resolutions and/or initiatives simply could not get traction in an office with meager financial/human resources with no power or authority.

African American Disciples reach the boiling point

The question that looms is whether all the kicking got the whales attention. Many African American Disciples sigh, no. Frustration with the system that we were trying to work reached its boiling point. The call for a new deal or return to the National Christian Missionary Convention began to be heard.

Brenda Cardwell and William Fox's book captured the frustration. They wrote, "The Convocation was hardly five years old before there were indications of a need for in-depth evaluation and study of priorities. It was clear to many that although the conventions had merged and the Convocation was created (in the minds of some, as an interim arrangement) there were still needs to be dealt with. The Convocation was a new style of churchmanship. Its leadership was biblically based and inclined toward the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. But the path of servanthood was difficult. And the need to function as the drum major for both African – American and Anglo – American Disciples was a demanding one.

Some of the restless ones called for a new deal during the 1976 biennial session in Nashville, Tennessee. But many thought their call for something like an all African – American unit smacked of an old way once tried and found wanting."

The Convocation concluded after the biennial session in Nashville in 1976 that it could not look to the General Church to help the African American Church. The merger was not helping the African American Disciples to become all they thought they could become. Leadership in the Convocation decided to look at themselves as the agent for their survival. In the book *Journey Toward Wholeness* it is reported that the Convocation assembled a task force to study the following: (a) convocation goals; (b) structure and relationship to the church; (c) what clergy and lay wanted; (d) progress in the implementation of official commitments; and (e) the participation of the convocation in the life of the Disciples of Christ. The seriousness of this endeavor should be noted. The trustees of the Convocation employed Speed Leas and Joseph Taylor, process consultants from Bloomfield, Michigan to lead the study. It is reported that the consultants made thirteen recommendations.

Cardwell and Fox offer a summation of the thirteen recommendations from the consultants. They state, "In general, they called for a strengthening of the convocation office and staff, coordination of professional staff services to predominately African American congregations, and general improvement of communication at all levels. It also concluded that the Convocation was the vehicle for getting most of these things done. The recommendations inferred the initiative mainly the office of the general Minister and President."

In 1985, five years after the task force study, Rev. Dr. William Hannah, Administrative Secretary of the National Convocation and the board of trustees introduced a draft called "Proposal for Reorganization for Maximum Effectiveness of Black Disciples as Members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Dr. Hannah resigned his office later that year. The Convocation board tabled the proposal at their next meeting because there was lack of leadership on follow through. I might also add this proposal died for the lack of funding. This initiative like other ill-fated attempts was housed in the Office of General Minister and President. I will not rehash why so many previous initiatives met their demise here.

The frustrations mounted and the African American leadership blew a gasket at General Assembly in Des Moines, Iowa in August 1985. It is important to understand that the anger displayed by African American Disciples was not over this one incident. The anger had been built over years of frustration with the merger agreement. Years of unresolved resolutions. The loss of decision making power was an unintended consequence of the merger. The inability of the African American Black disciples to grow and groom their leadership as well as their churches as they did in the National Missionary Christian Convention. All of this culminated in the explosion that occurred that night in Des Moines, Iowa.

When Dr. John Humbert, the General Minister and President named the Rev. Cynthia L Hale as the Associate General Minister and Administrative Secretary of the National Convocation, the minnow kicked like she had never kicked before. It was kicking like hell with intensity. Enough was enough. The merger was not working as expected. Many did not want to say that out loud. The African American Disciples were step children. And now our perceived highest ranking officer is being chosen without African American leaders being consulted. African American Disciples that night felt disgraced.

I was in that pained filled room that night in Des Moines when the African American leadership would not relent on demanding of the withdrawal of Cynthia's name. It had precious little or anything to do with Cynthia's being a woman. It had everything to do with African American Disciples leaders feeling betrayed, disrespected, ignored and disenfranchised.

Every person in that room had a vested interest in Cynthia and would do nothing to hurt her. In that room was Rev. Dr. Sam Hylton, Cynthia's uncle. Sam (affectionately called Buddy) preached her ordination sermon. She is the daughter of his sister Janice. She is the granddaughter of his parents, Wilbur and Idenia. You had to be there to see the anguish on his face.

The Rev. Dr. Claude Walker, who grew up in Loudon Avenue Christian Church and had known Cynthia from birth. Rev. Dr. Raymond Brown who publicly displayed his pride in Cynthia as part of our new

leadership. I was in that room, Pastor of Cynthia's home church. Pastor to her family. Others were in that room loved and cared for Cynthia. No one wanted to see tears in her eyes or her hurt thinking that African American leadership did not support her nomination. The hurt, the pain, the disappointment of the African American leadership superseded the pain that Cynthia would experience.

It was a no win situation for all of us when it came to what happened to Cynthia. It was a win for the African American disciples' at a great cost to us and her. That moment showed many African American disciples who were skeptics of the merger, that maybe at last we had some power and authority. Maybe we can be a voice in this church. What a price to pay to find our voice!

I think it would be safe to say that after the Des Moines incident, the African American Disciples slowly moved away from depending on the Office of General Minister and President. In fact, African American Disciples looked with a great deal of skepticism at the whole church. The minnow saw very little reason to kick like hell. The results of kicking were meager at best. The output of energy in kicking did not have much of a return. There may have been some resignation or maybe realization that racism ran so deep that trust was impossible. African American Disciples lost all trust in what was covenanted in the 1969 merger.

African American Disciples tried to work the system with a different approach than kicking in the mid 1990's. It was obvious to our leadership that identifying, recruiting and nurturing ministerial leadership was the number one priority of African American Disciples. The African American Disciples were recipients of funds for ministerial recruitment. The Black Disciples Endowment Fund made the decision to use some of its funds along with gift mentioned above to fund an initiative to address ministerial recruitment for African American's. A request was sent to Disciple Home Missions in October of 1998 to develop a comprehensive plan for identifying, recruiting and nurturing African American ministerial leadership. While we wait on DHM, Black Disciples Endowment readied itself to develop such a program.

Twenty years later we have not gotten a response from our request. There is no were in the structure were we can demand a hearing. We have decided to do it ourselves. We established the Office of African American Leadership Development. We have really come full circle. What we thought would happen with merger, we find ourselves attempting to do on our own. No more resolutions. No more demands. African American disciples are no longer trying to work the system.

All of the architects of the merger agreement are now in that great cloud of witnesses. Only a few of us remain who use to kick. My fear is when the kicking stops, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) will have lost it African American constituency. This is the greatest consequence of the weakness of our Design. This would be tragic.

Is there a way to avert this tragedy that I perceive? I believe there is. African American Disciples will have to be the leaders here. The Convocation needs to call for a African American Leadership Symposium. It needs to “commission” at least 7 fresh faces and voices to read the Design, all historical documents pertaining to the merger and all post-merger amendments, agreements that have not been canonized.

It has been 50 years since the merger, it is way past time that we have an honest conversation with ourselves. We need to raise critical questions about health of African American Disciples in this church. African American Disciples need to revisit the merger and develop some evaluative tools to see if we have made substantive progress. We have to see ourselves an agents of our own change. I don't know who to give attribution to for this statement but it is the best that I can offer to African American Disciples. We are the ones that we have been waiting for. The wait is over, now is the time for action.

