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Design Flaw: The Mistake that Gave Us Birth
Reflections on *The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*
On Its Fiftieth Anniversary

Prologue

My intent in writing this paper is not to blame or judge. Everyone involved in the events I describe are or were honorable people who tried by their best lights to do what they believed best for the gospel and the church. I am hopeful, though, that from my perspective of having been a local church pastor (in rural and urban, larger and smaller, Disciples and United Church of Christ congregations), an Associate Regional Minister and then Regional Minister, a member and officer of two different General Ministry boards over twenty years, and in semi-retirement a part-time contract staff for both the Week of Compassion and also a covenanted ministry of the national setting of the United Church of Christ, that it might be recognized that I am speaking from some breadth of experience. I am also hopeful that this paper might spark serious denomination-wide discussion and real work at re-imagining what our structures should look like in order to best serve congregational mission in an era so very different from when our structures were instituted.

I. Introduction and the Fundamental Polity Mistake

The 2018 semicentennial of the adoption of *The Design for the Christian Church*

*(Disciples of Christ)*¹ is an apt time to observe that while it is an admirable document in many ways, it is based on a fundamental mistake that has profoundly helped to create and increasingly exacerbated the numerical, organizational and missional decline of the Disciples in virtually every sector of the movement. The fundamental mistake is found in the second paragraph of *The Design*: “Across national boundaries, this church expresses itself in covenantal relationships in congregations, regions, and general ministries....”² In this paper, I intend to try to argue that the course of the last fifty years of Disciples history might have been significantly different if *The Design* had instead made something like the following fundamental polity assertion: “*The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) movement finds its fundamental normative expression through congregations. Regions, Areas, General Ministries, and Seminaries (along with other organizations that may come into being through congregational or individual initiative) have as their primary reason for being the support of the mission of congregations.*”³

II. *The Design* as Both the Culmination of “The Builder” Era and the Dismissal of Certain Historical Marks of Disciples Identity

¹<http://disciples.org/our-identity/the-design/>

²The current version (as it has been amended) version of *The Design* uses the terms “expressions” to talk about congregation, region, and general ministries. The original language was “manifestations.” Clark Gilpin intriguingly points out that “The shift from manifestation to expression is a fundamental theological change from a theocentric/Christocentric term to one that strikes me as psychologically oriented and anthropocentric.” From email correspondence, May 12, 2016.

³To be fair, *The Design* does say in paragraph 8 that “Congregations constitute the primary expression of the community of faith within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).” However, this is not the fundamental polity assertion, given that in paragraph 2 it is said that the church expresses itself in congregations, regions, and general ministries.

Before going further, though, let us briefly recall the climate of 1968. Those who had a hand in framing *The Design* were devoted, faithful servants of the gospel and the church. They were committed to social justice. They finalized their work amidst the tumult of the 1960s -- but the document itself is a reflection of the presuppositions of “the Builder Generation,” presuppositions which began to be explicitly questioned by the late 1960s and which have not prevailed in either our shared civic or churchly lives.

The Design embodies several crucial Builder Generation notions: 1) that a unified structure is to be preferred over other possibilities; 2) that a unified structure will aid in stewardship and fund-raising; 3) that the economy that enabled philanthropic giving would continue to grow; 4) that “vertically organized” institutions are admired, respected, and trusted. Every generation inescapably brings its own experiences to its thinking and work, and these presuppositions are understandable from the perspective Builder experience. It was, after all, unified and “vertical” structures which won World War II, which so successfully carried out the Marshall Plan, which brought to near-completion the electrification of rural America, which built in record time a substantial portion of the interstate highway system, which moved the American space program from televised ignominy to the moon’s surface in record time, and more. Their experience in the business world was that unified giving in the form of United Way and Community Chest-type approaches to fund-raising was successful and the most rational way to fund-raise. Following the very short-lived recession immediately following World War II, the American economy grew at an astounding pace and church giving for the most part reliably increased every year as well. Institutions were generally admired and respected and government was generally trusted.

The framers also had presuppositions about the church and specifically the Disciples of Christ that were closely related to these more general presuppositions. There was something of a feeling of embarrassment at the Disciples' "loose" structure as compared with the more vertically structured, more hierarchical denominations. That embarrassment often manifested as envy, fueled in part by the belief that a more unified structure for the Disciples would allow us to more effectively cooperate with those other denominations in mission and other work. There was also a very strong belief that organic and structural unity of the various mainline denominations was a worthy and achievable and desirable goal. Given the economic context of the post-war era, allied with the consistent and sometimes remarkable growth of congregations in virtually every part of the country, there was a presupposition that every "State Society" (what would become Regions in *The Design*) had at least two full-time ministerial staff, along with other additional program staff. There was also a strong awareness of the status of clergy in other mainline denominations and a desire that Disciples clergy might be similarly seen (it's no accident that the number of Disciples clergy who adopted robes and stoles increased dramatically during this time). Those who helped bring *The Design* to fruition also shared in the presupposition that church members would give to the "wider church" simply out of a sense of duty and respect for the institution and a belief that unified giving was the best form of giving. Unlike our post-modern era, they also shared a more general cultural assumption that "the truth" about this or that could be found through rational discussion and compromise,⁴ and that one can and should trust

⁴ I am indebted to Barbara Blaisdell for this salient point.

those elected to a representative leadership or governance role⁵ (even when their decisions might not mirror a given individual's tastes and desires).

Given the context of the day, in many ways *The Design* is an ingenious document. And the Preamble is truly beautiful in its power and eloquence, worthy of inclusion with other classic Disciples statements. Its preeminent genius, though, lies in what it **didn't** attempt to deal with, instead relying on William Blakemore's third item in his classic characterization of the Disciples movement: "reasonable, empirical, and pragmatic."⁶ It would prove next-to-impossible (and thus not pragmatic), for example, to fully bring under *The Design's* over-arching structure the way that Texas and Missouri (among others) had "Areas" as their primary judicatory relation to congregations. And in some states, there was a mix of strong Areas, weak Areas, and no areas. The fact that many churches in these State Societies gave a large portion of their monies directly to their Areas was not dealt with in *The Design*, nor was the fact that in some states congregations remitted their Unified Promotion giving to the State Society and that Society's Board chose how much to send on to "Indianapolis." In some states, "women's work" (often funded from the United Christian Missionary Society) was stronger than the State Society itself (an occasion for thanksgiving in those locales that were too parochially focused!) *The Design's* framers realized that these structures and practices could not, in fact, be "homogenized" under one over-arching structure, and so

⁵ Michael Kinnamon's remark, which he often stated in the 1990s, has proven even more prescient for the current post-modern era with its fracturing of norms of civility, compromise, and truth: "Everyone wants to be represented but no one trusts anyone else to represent them."

⁶William B. Blakemore, "Reasonable, Empirical, Pragmatic." In *The Renewal of the Church: The Panel of Scholars Reports*, Volume 1, *The Reformation of Tradition*, edited by Ronald Osborne, St: Louis: 1963, Bethany Press.

in pragmatic fashion they simply ignored them. Put less tendentiously, in acceding to that reality, the framers instead had recourse to a long and venerable Disciples tradition of seeing certain things as “expedients” rather than “essentials.” (And that tradition, as we shall see in the final section, is, I believe, the most important thing that we should recover from their work.)

The Design also ignored, in my view, certain utterly key elements of Disciples history and identity. First, from the “official” founding of the movement in 1832, when the “Disciples” and the “Christians” agreed to join forces, Disciples have never understood their primary identity as being grounded in a **structure**. In fact, there is a profound suspicion of structure that is baked into, to use the current over-worked metaphor, Disciples DNA. While the two formal splits in the Disciples movement (with the “Non-Instrumental Churches of Christ” and the “Independent Christian Churches”)⁷ have complex causes, one of those causes can reasonably be argued as coming from a suspicion that changes in structure would subsume or undercut congregational identity and autonomy.⁸ Second, structure in Disciples history was virtually always an “expedient” in the service of a particular mission endeavor. The structure itself was never seen as a mark of identity, only as a means toward a particular mission. Third,

⁷There are those who would say that there was a much smaller, third split in the 1980s and 1990s when several disaffected Disciples ministers created Disciple Renewal (later, Disciples Heritage Fellowship), an organization which sought to entice more “conservative” congregations and pastors to disaffiliate from the Disciples. They created their own para-denominational organization with a ministerial job bank and offered program and other resources to congregations. Its website currently lists 79 congregations affiliated with them.

⁸Clark Gilpin helpfully and rightly points out that it is hardly the case that Alexander Campbell eschewed any form of trans-congregational identity. Gilpin notes that Campbell talked about a “community of communities” – a sense of “being Disciples together” rooted in those things I have identified along with those “Disciples distinctives” of baptism by immersion and weekly communion (conversation with the author, April 27, 2018). Hence the later Campbell was far more supportive of organizations that advanced initiatives that no congregation could do alone (e.g., the American Christian Missionary Society) than was the early Campbell. But nonetheless he never **identified** such organizations as “church” but only as helpful “expedients” to congregations’ mission hopes.

geographic gatherings and groupings of Disciples were never based on structural obligations, but on contiguous shared ties of history and affection -- often based on working together on a particular mission endeavor (founding new congregations in the area, supporting a missionary to a particular locale, “young people’s” work, etc.)

Fourth, State Societies and national/international ministry entities were never understood to be anything other than helpful means for supporting congregational desires (e.g., “our” missionaries, starting new congregations in nearby areas). They were never understood to be “church” in the same way as congregations are church.⁹ Fifth, the early Alexander Campbell’s low view of clergy (“hireling clergy”) has had multiple and profoundly deleterious effects on church life. Clergy have too often been seen as “hired hands” rather than leaders and teachers. But *The Design’s* privileging of clergy as being automatically entitled to vote at General Assemblies (soon to be followed by many Regional Assemblies) was profoundly at odds with our Campbellite heritage, and while that heritage can and should be decried in many ways, changing it by fiat (as *The Design* does in this regard) only served in the long run to distance the congregation from other extra-congregational entities.¹⁰ (Under the pre-Design International Convention, clergy could be voting delegates to annual conventions, but only if their congregations elected

⁹The late Karl Ivin, former Regional Minister of Northern California-Nevada, once said that “Regional Ministers have unlimited power -- to make suggestions.” This is both true and very much in keeping with traditional Disciples identity.

¹⁰ More than a few folks have noted that General Assemblies have more and more taken on the flavor of clergy reunions as the ratio of clergy to laity has increased over the years. It’s also fair to say, I believe, that if the ONLY attendee from a congregation is its pastor (who has voting privileges not as a congregational representative but in virtue of being clergy-with-standing) the congregation *per se* is not as fully or truly “represented” as it would if the church also sent its allotment of voting representatives. But given the increasing costs of General Assemblies, and the fact that very few congregations pay lay representatives’ expenses, there are fewer and fewer lay persons able to attend – thus further distancing general structure from congregational life.

them as congregational representatives. Under *The Design*, this connection between the congregation served by the pastor and General Church is significantly weakened).

Now, it also must be said that one of the intentions of *The Design* was to help undercut the sometimes baleful effects of the Disciples' long-standing assertion and value of "congregational autonomy." Despite the success of the "functional department model" in the preceding twenty-five years, there were still many congregations where "Ruling Elders" too often stifled creativity and cooperation and were a primary cause of too many short-tenured pastorates. While clearly not understanding the systemic effects of institutional racism, those involved with the work that led towards *The Design* were nonetheless aware of the odious cultural captivity that so many Disciples congregations had fallen into in the 1920s in their relationships with the Ku Klux Klan and its racist, misogynist, homophobic, anti-Jewish, xenophobic claims to white supremacy. They knew that Disciples congregations had sometimes been strongholds of hate, even when they were not explicitly in relationship with the Klan or resurgent nativist-type movements. The commendable hope was that *The Design*, by setting up a strong structure where "the wider church" could speak to congregations, might help bring to congregational consciousness social justice and other issues. That is an important and good value. Congregations can sometimes indeed be self-satisfied bastions of provincialism and prejudice. But the cure slowly incubated a new disease: there were more and more in Regional and General ministries who often seemed to be less and less in touch with the actualities and realities of life in the congregation, with the practical ways in which Christians could be challenged to grow in love rather than feeling ostracized and judged. Moreover, General Assembly resolutions (many from "related

organizations" that had very loose ties to any congregation, let alone many congregations¹¹) came more and more often to have a tone of what many considered "talking down to" or even moral superiority to congregations, deigning to instruct them on the things they were allegedly failing to do or be. The fact that *The Design* maintained that Regional and General ministries were just as fully church as congregations in reality too often came to mean (or at least be perceived as such by many congregations and pastors) that there was a presumption that congregations needed to be schooled by the more well-informed and "authentically" Christian leaders "from above."¹²

III. The Center Does Not Hold

I do not fault the framers of *The Design* nor those who enthusiastically worked so hard for its adoption for not being prescient about where American culture was heading in 1968. After all, the work that culminated in *The Design* actually might be said to have formally begun with the inception of "The Panel of Scholars" work in 1956. *The Design*, therefore, as I have noted, is not a document that reflects the cultural and societal ferment of the late-60s, but rather the consensus of the Builder Generation's experience

¹¹ I am indebted to Ted Waggoner for this reminder about the fact that too many resolutions have only very tangential congregational connections.

¹²I am aware that this is broad brush. Please hear that my point is primarily structural and systemic, not aimed at individuals. There are and have been many truly faithful and effective Regional/Area Ministers and General Ministries staff who have indeed kept in close touch with the realities of congregational and pastoral life. Yet the structural and systemic point remains: the "church-in-three-manifestations/expressions" presumption does not in this instance help unify but actually often foments divisiveness. Moreover, for example, when Regional/General staff routinely post on Facebook and other social media explicitly hyper-partisan political posts, this too exacerbates the sense that there is a certain degree of out-of-touchness with the realities of congregational composition and doesn't necessarily serve as a support to the congregation or its pastor.

of life, church, and society in the postwar years.¹³ Before moving forward, though, I need to also note that I do not mean to trivialize or appear ungrateful for the contributions of Builder Generation Disciples to the church; far from it: they are the folks who gave to their congregations and gave to missions year in and year out -- whether they liked the preacher, the worship service, the staff, etc. Their shared sense of obligation made it possible for congregations to prosper. They devoted countless hours to maintaining church buildings that were, for that era, attractive and welcoming. They wanted their churches and church buildings to be assets to their communities. They gave generously of time, talent, and treasure and weren't concerned about whether (as so many Boomers would be) "it made them feel good." Both the country and the Church owe this generation more than we can say, and the fact that they ended up often creating structures fit for the church of the recent past instead of the church of the future should caution us to humility and against over-confidence in our own powers of prognostication!

In Yeats' poem,¹⁴ the beast "slouches" towards Bethlehem. In the same way, the deleterious effects of *The Design*, exacerbated by the changes in society, culture, and attitudes towards church and institutions in general, did not happen overnight but slowly came to pass over the next twenty years. At first, all seemed well: in the society at large, during the 1970s, schools continued to be built to accommodate the final wave of the Boomer children. Likewise, churches built new education wings to house all

¹³It is crucial, of course, to note at this point that it is in fact much more accurate to say such was the consensus of the **white** church of this era, and particularly the white male leadership of this era. The experience of the African-American church and women in white churches in the 1950s was not the "golden age" so fondly remembered by so many white middle-class male Disciples!

¹⁴W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming." <http://www.potw.org/archive/potw351.html>

those children that those prolific postwar Disciples created.¹⁵ The Builder Generation was in its peak earning and saving years and gave generously (during their lives and through bequests) both to their local congregations and to wider church mission endeavors. Seminaries still thrived and the Disciples were able to support several residential seminaries and divinity houses.

But things began to change in the '80s. The Builder Generation began to retire and mortality began to claim more of them. Many of these had given sacrificially of time and money and talent (many a congregation's boiler was maintained by these folks!) and by the end of the '80s their loss was noticeable in many congregations. The 1 out of 5 women who had worked outside of the home in the 1950s became the 1 in 5 who didn't -- and congregations had relied greatly on this pool of usually unsung and unpaid heroes who were no longer available in the same ways or to the same degree as twenty-five years previously. Concomitantly, by the end of the '80s it was no longer possible for most families who wished to have a middle-class lifestyle to do so with only one wage-earner. The public school systems that had built new buildings in the 1960s and '70s began to close buildings as the tail-end of baby boomers had finished their educations. Churches that had built new education wings now found themselves renting out those spaces and beginning to struggle to have adequate income for the range of ministries they had become accustomed to. Churches began to downsize ministerial and program staffs under the impact of declining attendance and offerings. In 1980, giving to Basic Mission Finance had increased almost 8% over the previous

¹⁵One estimate is that the current Disciples birthrate is about 1/3 of what it was in 1960. Thus, up until about 1970 or so, Disciples could depend on "organic" church growth.

year. This percentage fell steadily through the '80s until in 1989 Basic Mission Finance actually decreased from its total the previous year. During the same period, though, the Consumer Price Index increased 31%.¹⁶

By 1992, the changes could no longer be denied, ignored, or gainsaid. The high point for giving to Basic Mission Finance would prove to be 1991 when \$20,975,000 was given. The slouching beast turned out to be the elephant in the room, and it was finally named one evening in the Spring of 1992 at the Commission on Finance (later to be re-named Commission on Mission Funding) when Ohio Regional Minister Howard Ratcliff announced that the Ohio Regional Board had instructed him that the Region would not abide by the Commission's percentage share of Basic Mission Finance monies allotted to the Region but instead would retain a larger percentage. What made this announcement such a ground-shifting moment for those ministries dependent on Basic Mission Finance was that most of Ohio's congregations already remitted their Basic Mission Finance offerings to the Region and the Region sent them on to the then-Church Finance Council. In short, Ohio could enforce the decision it had made.

Thus began at least a decade's long preoccupation with seeking to adjust the "funding system" in a way that would be acceptable to all the recipients of Basic Mission Finance dollars. Literally thousands of hours were spent by Regional Ministers and General Ministries staff working on allocation proposals. During that decade there were at least three different funding systems tried before the current system of designated Special Day offerings plus percentage allocations was finally settled on. And between

¹⁶Throughout, figures for BMF/DMF giving come from John Goebel in the Office of General Minister and President.

1990 and 2000, giving to Basic Mission Finance remained essentially flat -- which, of course, meant that its actual “buying power” lessened by 30%. As one Regional Minister said at the time, “We keep trying to find new ways to cut up the pie but very little time on baking new pies.”

The plural – “pies” -- in this remark is important. By the end of the ‘90s, it was clear that unified approaches to fund-raising were falling out of favor with donors, there was vastly increased competition for dollars from para-church organizations and secular charities, and church consultants were saying that churches and church organizations needed to increase and diversify their potential “funding streams” dramatically.¹⁷ Moreover, what had worked to motivate giving for the Builder Generation and early Baby Boomers -- obligation, duty, unified approaches -- rapidly gave way to the later Baby Boomer mentality that giving is motivated by tangible needs that were “nearby,” associated with people that were trusted, and which made the givers “feel good about themselves.” Secular charities learned this lesson quickly; the famous Sally Struthers ads to help hungry children had heart-wrenching pictures that were captioned to the effect “You can help this child or you can turn this page.”¹⁸

Yet despite these profound cultural changes and despite the advice from fund

¹⁷Church consultant Tom Bandy addressed a gathering of Regional Ministers and General Ministries staff in Indianapolis during this time and pointed out **thirteen** different ways that churches and church organizations needed to be raising funds.

¹⁸Contrast this approach to the fact that the Disciples in fact severed the connection (the “nearby” factor) between overseas missions and congregational donors when the “Living Link Missionary” program that directly linked missionaries to congregations was dropped in favor of a “Global Missions Partner” emphasis where missionaries were assigned to a Region. Some congregations in a given Region worked hard to create the connections that had existed under the “Living Link” approach, but many did not -- and the result was that there was perceived to be less and less connection between “outreach giving” and those would be helped by such outreach.

raising and church consultants, those who received Basic Mission Finance funding basically doubled-down on the unified approach and eschewed the creation of additional methods of funding and, in fact, in many quarters became overtly hostile to those who wished to experiment with other approaches. The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw an important and disturbing change in this regard: the word “covenant” began to be used by some as a weapon, employing punitive language against those who wished to pursue alternative mission and stewardship strategies.

In its narrowest meaning, “the covenant” was the agreement (dating back to the creation of Unified Promotion in 1934) among General Ministries not to directly solicit congregations for financial support in exchange for being assured a minimum percentage of the offerings received for Unified Promotion/Basic Mission Finance. But during this era, it began to be used differently: “being in covenant” was more and more applied to those who agreed to a particular funding system, and the accusation of being “out of covenant” was lodged against those who wished to supplement such a system with other approaches. Hence, those who wished to experiment with plans like the Ohio Region=s (e.g., Georgia, Kansas, Upper Midwest, Kansas, Northern California/Nevada) for raising and distributing outreach monies were -- it is not too strong to say -- often pilloried for being “out of covenant” with the wider church. This writer was told by one colleague in a meeting of Regional and General Ministries staff that he “should be punished for ‘breaking the covenant.’”

In other words, for too many, the sense of “being Disciples together” changed from a system of mutual trust, shared history, and affection -- with the understanding that various entities within the wider church may well choose differing tactics and means for

expressing support -- to a much narrower assertion that to be Disciples meant assent to a particular funding allocation system.

There were some dissenting voices. The General Minister and President's Commission on Faith and Understanding offered a report to the General Board that argued that having multiple funding systems was fully compatible -- and even desirable -- with classic understandings of Disciples history and ethos. In that report,¹⁹ church historian Jim Duke remarked

... *The Design* discusses only certain of the various forms and terms of our covenantal commitments to God and one another. Individuals, congregations, regions, and general units have considerable latitude for making agreements, arrangements, and provisions that [their] mission may require. Such arrangements are not "the covenant." ... In Stone-Campbell tradition, following Anglican-Reformed custom, they [are best] called "expedients" or "expediencies."

The Commission's report then went on to say (again quoting Jim Duke in part):

On occasion, some of our "arrangements" (for example, financial ones) have been spoken of as "our covenant" or "part of our covenant." The Commission believes that that is not the case. Such arrangements, as worthwhile, as important, as worthy of being done well as they are, are not matters which are "integral to God's covenant of love in Jesus Christ ...or to our church's [foundational] covenantal polity... They are simply ad hoc, negotiated and

¹⁹Presentation to the General Board on Behalf of The Commission on Faith and Understanding On the Notion of "Covenant," July 20, 2002, Indianapolis, Indiana.

renegotiated, and expedient means for facilitating the church's life and work."

Thus

"It is quite possible, and at certain times or under certain circumstances quite honorable, for loyal covenant partners to dicker or disagree over precisely which arrangements will work best to facilitate the church's life and work."

However, it is not too overstated to say that, as with 18th century philosopher David Hume's description of the reception and effects of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, the Commission's report also "fell dead-born from the press." And meanwhile between 2000 and 2012, annual giving to Basic Mission Finance (now renamed Disciples Mission Fund) fell precipitously, from \$20,558,000 to \$12,666,000 -- a drop of 38%!

Before moving on – and lest this sound simply like one more ecclesially Luddite screed by an old white man – it's also important to note some of the gains for the Disciples of Christ in the last fifty years (only the first of which is directly related to the funding system). First, under the pressure of declining revenue, Regions were given the opportunity to truly assess what about their ministries is essential to maintain and enhance and what, while salutary, is not.²⁰ (Some Regions took advantage of this opportunity better than others). Second, it is a gladsome and much-too-long overdue thing that those serving in extra-congregational leadership are no longer almost exclusively white and male.²¹ Third, mirroring (although also lagging behind) society's

20 In the mid-1990s, then Illinois-Wisconsin Regional Minister Pete Smith advocated using a ministry assessment tool that sought to classify particular Regional programs under the rubric of "essential, important, and good." This schema sought to avoid labeling some programs as less than worthy, while saying that some of the good and even important things could no longer be done by the Region if those things that were essential were to be maintained and enhanced.

21 When this writer joined the Indiana Regional staff in 1991, there were no persons of color serving as

change in attitudes towards LGBT persons, the General Assembly (and followed by a slowly increasing number of Regions and congregations) put itself on record as saying that sexual orientation in and of itself was no bar to church participation and leadership, seeking to fully welcome the gifts of LGBT church members.²² Fourth, a younger generation of talented pastors who have no memories or experience of the full-coffer fleshpots of the '70s have creatively gone about the work of the gospel and the church unencumbered by "the way it used to be," starting new congregations and embracing (rather than just tolerating) bi-vocational opportunities. Fifth, there has been an increasing realization of the pernicious effects of institutional racism in every quarter of the church and efforts to confront and redeem that reality have been ongoing and improving. Sixth, although coming to the change somewhat reluctantly, alternative tracks to ordination have been developed to recognize the burgeoning number of pastors who are indeed called and gifted but who, due to family and economic circumstances, could never undertake the "professional model" of seven years of college and seminary education.

IV. Conclusion

It is time to return to the original thesis of this paper: that *The Design's* assertion that congregation, Region, and General Ministries are equal manifestations/expressions of church is a fundamental flaw that has helped lead us to our present situation. So let us try to pull all these strands together in service of that proposition:

Regional Ministers, and only one woman so serving.

²² It was embarrassing that in the 1990s there was a churchwide "discernment process" on the role of LGBT persons in the church. As Michael Kinnamon noted, "You don't get to 'discern' who is a part of the Body of Christ"!

The late Bill Nichols, General Minister and President of the Disciples in the early '90s, often and famously remarked that for the individual in the pew, there are exactly two "manifestations" of church: "my" congregation and everything else. While such an attitude can indeed sometimes lead to extreme provincialism, it is also reality. Those in the pew care little about funding system fights and, more importantly, believe by and large that those Disciples entities beyond the church ought to serve the aim of helping the congregation do things it cannot do by itself and which are worthy of being done. It can be argued, in fact, that every General Ministry had its origin in church members wanting to achieve something that a congregation could not achieve by itself. Hence, the assumption is that those ministries -- and Regions, for that matter -- exist in order to support congregational ministries.

But that is not the impression that too often was given. Rather, too often it seemed to be the case that the job of congregations was to support wider Disciples ministries rather than vice versa.²³ And, even more crucially, it seems to me that what was conveyed to congregations was that support for a certain **structure** was in fact equivalent to supporting mission. But congregations tended to know better. And, as argued earlier, Disciples have never been a people who have understood their corporate identity based on a structure.

In 1993, newly elected General Minister and President Dick Hamm convened a Vision Panel to offer thoughts on what the vision for the Disciples should be at the rapidly

²³I will never forget, when I was first on the Indiana Regional staff as Associate Regional Minister, taking a pastor to coffee and at the end she said "OK, what do you want? No one from the Region ever shows up here unless they want something from us."

approaching turn of the millennium. Part of the report of that Panel to the 1995 General Assembly included a statement called "Character Traits of the Disciples." Its primary author was the late Tony Dunnavant, then church historian at Lexington Theological Seminary. It is a brief statement that should have received far more attention than it did. Its thoughts on what binds Disciples together as Disciples are both instructive and eloquent:

We are a congregational people. We have prized the way that congregational life has formed us, shaped us, and embodied our identity and vocation. It is neither code nor creed, but rather the common confession that we share. The ties that bind us to each other are primarily ties of common care and concern, of affection and respect. Thus, our common life at its best is marked by the joy of association and establishes a covenant built on mutual respect.... We center our discipleship in the broad, common affirmations of Christian faith. In other words, our life together is not defined by doctrinal, ethical, or ecclesiastical boundaries so much as by central affirmations of faith.... We insist on being left free to experiment and to shape our own patterns of participation in, and support of, God's mission. At its best, our engagement in mission, including its leaders and structures, remains "light on its feet" -- ever responsive to God's gracious invitation, our call to discipleship, and a changing world. Such opportunities and structures for mission elicit and evoke, rather than demand, our participation and loyalty.²⁴

²⁴From a Report by the "Vision Panel" to the 1995 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of

“We are a congregational people.” That is what defines, shapes, and gives us the first mark of our distinctive shared corporate identity as people of God. And to recur to the earlier discussion, extra-congregational initiatives are always understood as expedients to further a shared hope or goal, not as essentials that must be assented to by all. The confusion of those has led to a stifling of creativity at times when creativity was most needed, an exacerbation of competition, an increasing distrust of wider church structures in many quarters, and the sense at times that congregations existed to support the other manifestations rather than vice versa.

The Disciples partner denomination, The United Church of Christ, says this about congregational primacy:

The basic unit of the United Church of Christ is the congregation. Members of each congregation covenant with one another and with God as revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. These congregations, in turn, exist in covenantal relationships with one another to form larger structures for more effective work. Our covenanting emphasizes trustful relationships rather than legal agreements.²⁵

And the American Baptist Church (arguably the denomination most like the Disciples in its culture and ethos) says this even more explicitly:

As American Baptists we affirm that the mission of Christ is given visible expression in and through the local churches. The American Baptist Churches

Christ). Emphasis in the original.

²⁵http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-is-the-united-church-of

USA is the creation of local churches of like faith and order. It exists to be a resource to the churches in their implementation of Christ's mission locally and to be a major organizational vehicle through which the churches engage in His mission beyond their communities.²⁶

Now, all has not been rosy with either of these denominations; far from it. Yet whatever ills and challenges may have befallen them, those cannot be laid at the feet of a structure that inevitably sets up competition between three “equal manifestations/expressions” of Church, and their statements can serve as magnets to pull folks back whenever an extra-congregational entity begins (intentionally or inadvertently) to act as if the job of the congregation was to support them rather than the other way around.

What might Disciples' recent history have looked like if we had had a similar fundamental polity assertion, an assertion which as I have tried to argue is far more in keeping with Disciples identity, values, history, and ethos? It is, of course, impossible to prove such a counterfactual, and yet I believe that the effects might have been salutary. Thus my modest proposal is this: just as in 1968, when *The Design* was actually approved by the International Convention as the **Provisional** Design, perhaps the 2019 General Assembly might make such history into prologue by amending *The Design* to once again be the *Provisional* Design and with paragraph 2 amended to something like as indicated on page 1:

“The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) movement finds its fundamental normative expression through congregations. Regions, Areas, General

²⁶<http://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/PRIMACY-OF-THE-LOCAL-CHURCH.pdf>

Ministries, and Seminaries (along with other organizations that may come into being through congregational or individual initiative) have as their primary reason for being the support of the mission of congregations."

I believe such a change could have some important benefits:

- It explicitly re-asserts that we understand ourselves to be a "movement" -- and in this post-Christendom (and rapidly oncoming post-denominational!) era it is nimble movements that are needed rather than simply structures and institutions.
- It acknowledges that extra-congregational entities have as their *primary* reason for being the support of congregational mission. (There may be other reasons but they will always be secondary to the primary reason.)
- It could pave the way for a second "restructure" by inviting all extra-congregational entities to seriously consider how different structures, different expedients, could better serve congregational mission. (*The Design* has the effect of "hard-coding" into our structure the existence of Regions and General Ministries. Many of these entities are in significant financial straits and the freedom to re-imagine how to best serve congregational mission could be unleashed by removing the requirement that such entities "have to" exist in their present form. As blogger, pastor, and writer Carey Nieuwhof says, we are called to love and serve our mission, not our models.)
- Relatedly, if such a change were allied with a funding system which placed

decisions about the funding of extra-congregational denominational entities in the hands of the donor (i.e., congregations) rather than the recipients, it may well be likely that financial support would increase (as congregations which have experimented with “donor choice” regarding missions have learned). It is hard to see how the results from such a switch could be worse than the situation now.²⁷

- It could revitalize trust in and support of extra-congregational structures as those structures and entities worked much more closely with congregations.

Dick Hamm offers words that are fitting to close this paper:

...the human condition is such that structures have a tendency to demand service rather than remaining servants. Thus, we must always remember that the primary purpose of the Regional and General manifestations is not to be ends in themselves, but to enhance the faithfulness and effectiveness of congregations, providing ways and means for congregations to address the world faithfully and effectively.²⁸

²⁷ It is often claimed, based on the creation of Unified Promotion in the early 1930s, that congregations do not want multiple appeals from extra-congregational entities. However, to treat an almost 90-year-old decision as some sort of a priori for today’s context seems short-sighted and certainly less than empirical. Moreover, congregations these days **are** in fact very much accustomed to multiple extra-congregational fund-raising appeals from para-church and non-denominational ministries. It is partly due to the effectiveness of those appeals that congregational giving over time has been diverted from Disciples Mission Fund.

²⁸“The Disciples of Christ Structure,” Presented to the Stone Campbell Dialogue, Cincinnati Bible College, November 27-28, 2000. <http://councilonchristianunity.org/the-disciples-of-christ-church-structure/>

Indeed. May it be so.²⁹

²⁹ I am greatly indebted for conversations that have led up to this paper and for the careful reading and suggestions from so many. I am grateful for the improvements they helped make (whether they agree with my point of view or not); any mistakes are mine alone. Thank you, then, to: Barbara Blaisdell, Jeff Gill, Ted Waggoner, Dick Hamm, Dean Phelps, Katherine Blaisdell, Dennis Landon, José Morales.