

An empirical, experimental ecclesiology
Remarks for Design at 50 Symposium

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I've been asked to focus on the strengths of The Design.¹ I am going to tack theologically, and read The Design for its ecclesiology, its mostly implicit theology of the church. I will focus on two strengths: One is the idea of a church with multiple “manifestations,” and the concomitant implication that the reality of church is made known in multiple ways in multiple loci. The second is the notion of “a design,” which, whether it still says “provisional” or not, nevertheless suggests a schematic of relations or a plan of interaction more than, say, a constitution.² Insofar as that provisional sense—that always reforming and being reformed sense—is retained, it reminds the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to be light on its feet and adaptable, imaginative, and forward-looking. As I'll later discuss, these strengths don't always find consistent or optimal expression in the document or in its implementation.

The first strength, an acknowledgment and even celebration of multiple manifestations, is grounded in the empirical reality—the lived confession and experience—of being Disciples, which is the starting point of The Design. The second strength points to a kind of experimental

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Newell Williams, Eilene Theilig, who organized and hosted this conference and Brite Divinity School; to Chuck Blaisdell, who insisted this symposium into reality; to Lori Tapia, who responded to an initial version of this paper; and to the other symposium speakers and participants. I dedicate these reflections to Dolores Highbaugh, one of the relatively unsung leaders who helped usher the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) into reality in the turbulent sixties. She was one of the earliest vice moderators under the new structure. Her husband, the late Richard Highbaugh, was a Tuskegee Airman; Dolores Highbaugh has been an equally fierce pioneer in the church. For many years, Mrs. Highbaugh has attended Monday dinners and programs at the Disciples Divinity House, as did other “saints,” Sybel and Harvey Thomas, Eddie Evans Griffin, and Jean and Don Ervin. We knew the church was there when they were present.

² At its adoption, the document was entitled, “The Provisional Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).” “Provisional” was removed from its title by action of the 1977 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The version cited in this paper as The Design is the revision approved by the 2017 General Assembly and as accessed online at <https://disciples.org/our-identity/the-design/>.

pragmatism in which expedient structures and modes of relating diverse manifestations of church are embodied, elaborated, and tested.³ The two together imply that, theologically speaking, the church is not so much an ideality but rather a reality that is lived, enacted, shared, and always changing, even prone to renewal. This reality is almost always also ambiguous, often confounding, and liable to disorder—as implied by the drumbeat of concern about keeping covenant that is sounded throughout *The Design*. Whether motivated by the hope of renewed structures or by strains of mistrust and betrayal, this document elaborates a plan and procedures for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) without claiming that they are changeless expressions of true Christianity. The Design’s empirical, experimental approach replaces both Restorationism and liberal theologies’ reliance on an essence of the church. The Design places the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in a profound continuity of life, work, and mission with the universal church through the ages, on the one hand, while, on the other, chronicles its reality in multiple manifestations and in relation to the ongoing need for renewing change.

1. Multiplicity and depth of field

The Design doesn’t merely acknowledge that diverse expressions of church can have validity; it pictures a church that is made manifest in diverse ways, or at least in three. I was baptized and formed as a Christian and given remarkable opportunities as a youth in my home congregation in Des Moines, Iowa, but it was the in-care process of the Upper Midwest region

³ See W.B. Blakemore, “Reasonable, Empirical, Pragmatic: The Mind of Disciples of Christ,” in Ronald E. Osborne, ed., *The Reformation of Tradition*, Vol. 1, *The Renewal of Church: The Panel of Scholars Reports*, W.B. Blakemore, ed. (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), 161-83. Blakemore observes, “Pragmatism adds the dimension of the future and asserts that emergent facts have their place in the validation of religious faith and conduct. This Disciples recognition of the validity of the pragmatic gave our people an eschatological character” (176).

The connection between a pragmatic bent and an eschatological, future-oriented character deserves further attention. For instance, how do authority and legitimation shift when they become accountable not only to what has been but to what might emerge, to what yet-to-be-manifest ministry and response to God, others, and world may be made possible by certain structures and relations.

that made me a lifelong Disciple. John Hardy, a twinkling marvel of an associate regional minister, and the in-care committee made church manifest to me in new ways and invited my participation in manifestations in addition to my local congregation. They rejoiced in and supported my path to PhD studies in theology when they had never known such a thing as a Disciples feminist theologian—in fact, we were only beginning to exist. When I postponed ordination, the typical endpoint of the process, while I pursued the PhD (and ultimately discerned not to be ordained), they continued to support me, even changing the committee’s policies in order to provide scholarship support. On this very personal level, I experienced something of what the second paragraph of *The Design* explains as the integrity, authority, and responsibility of congregational and regional manifestations.

The Design pictures members who recognize, experience, and participate in the church through multiple manifestations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This is neither a congregational nor a hierarchical polity, but a mixed polity. That means that worship at general assembly is not necessarily “more” church or “less” church than worship in my local congregation. Or, for that matter, a regional in-care committee, a Monday forum at the Disciples Divinity House, the local food pantry, summer camp, anti-racist/pro-reconciling efforts, Ecumenical Advocacy Days, or the NAPAD Convocation, are not somehow more church or less church than a worship service. This is an ecclesiological version of “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20). It might also be understood as a post-enlightenment version of Martin Luther’s radical re-construal of the church as an assembly that is called together by the gospel in the midst of mundane life. As Christ becomes manifest among

neighbors and strangers, so church can appear in many places and take many expressions. No person or place is closer to or farther from the justice and grace of God.⁴

This picture of a church made manifest in multiple ways is surely also rooted in how the Stone-Campbell movement was built through diverse streams that came to recognize each other as kindred, and whose architects include, then and now, people who cannot take “home” for granted but who build a table of welcome between and among themselves. They were “aliens” and “strangers” who, in taking up each others’ sorrows and joys, make manifest a shared citizenship, home, and hope in God, as Alexander Campbell phrased what was probably also his own experience as an immigrant to the US.⁵ Those parentheses in our name can remind us to complicate how we understand and express ourselves—to make manifest and recognize more encompassing realities of God’s saving and renewing grace without also forgetting the particular mercies and joys that called us forth. Similarly, *The Design* invites us to recognize and to be one church in manifold ways. To be sure, *The Design* primarily envisions multiplicity in terms of congregations, regions, and general ministries, but at its best, it may attune us to other multiplicities and manifestations.⁶ Living with parentheses and in multiple manifestations, in turn, can lend a greater depth of field to the lived understanding of church.⁷

I don’t want to romanticize the movement or to downplay exclusions, xenophobia, bad faith, and lack of imagination that have also shaped the Disciples movement. Rather, I’m endeavoring to read historical realities and *The Design* towards possibilities that are sometimes latent and submerged. I’m informed especially by experiences of Disciples’ inclination and even

⁴ See my discussion of Martin Luther in *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), chapter 2.

⁵ As adapted and set to music in David L. Edwards’s hymn, “When You Do This, Remember Me.” *Chalice Hymnal*, 400. See also Campbell’s words, presented as a “Communion Affirmation,” 401.

⁶ For a different but related angle on productive multiplicity, see *Cynthia Lindner’s work, Varieties of Gifts: Multiplicity and the Well-Lived Pastoral Life* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁷ I’m borrowing “depth of field” from photography.

expertise at calling forth and encouraging ecumenical and interfaith work, and also by the experience of serving in NAPAD (North American Pacific/Asian Disciples) task forces and participating in NAPAD Convocations over twenty-five years, where historically unrelated and even antagonistic national and cultural groups have created a dynamic reality among and between themselves. There's a passage from the poet and critic Audre Lorde's work that buzzes in my mind as I write: "Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters." Lorde focuses on the space generated among and between difference. Admittedly, I am writing towards what I have learned from her work.⁸

2. Manifestations we can rely on

Let me turn more directly to the language of "manifestation." The first numbered paragraph of *The Design* begins:

Within the whole family of God on earth, the church appears wherever believers in Jesus the Christ are gathered in his name.... [T]he one church manifests itself in ordered communities bound together for worship, fellowship, and service; in varied structures for mission, witness, and mutual accountability

This language—"the church appears wherever"; "the one church manifests itself"—has a Christological connotation. One recalls stories of Jesus' appearance to his disciples on the road to Emmaus or along the shore in an intimate breakfast, and experiences of Christ made present in the breaking of the bread. In those instances of appearance and manifestation, something more comes to be known about the abiding presence of Christ, though there is still mystery and

⁸ She continues, "Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) difference lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being." Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 111-12.

hiddenness. Similarly, The Design affirms that something more comes to be known about the abiding reality of church when believers gather and the church appears in “ordered communities” and “varied structures.”⁹

If you’ve read The Design but didn’t really notice the language of manifestation, there’s a reason why. When The Design was revised by action of the 2005 General Assembly, the language of “expression” was substituted for that of “manifestation” in most of the sections following the first paragraph—and also as the document turns more specifically to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In older versions of The Design, “manifestation” was also used to depict congregations, regions, and general ministries. In fact, General Assembly business items often referred to “general manifestations” rather than “general ministries” (or “general units”). So, paragraph 2 says “this church expresses itself” and subsequent paragraphs refer to the three “expressions” of congregations, regions, and general ministries of the Christian Church.¹⁰ The Design identifies congregations as the “primary expression” (8).

What seem to be additional expressions or manifestations are glimpsed in The Design: other communions; ecumenical organizations; Disciples theological and higher education; the historic ministries of the National Convocation, the National Hispanic and Bilingual Fellowship, and NAPAD (69); “recognized ministry partners” (74-78); and the order of ministry (85-88).¹¹

⁹ Due to time and space constraints, I cannot do justice to the ecclesiological affirmations that are packed into the first paragraph of The Design, and especially its second sentence: “Transcending all barriers within the human family, the one church manifests itself in ordered communities bound together for worship, fellowship, and service; in varied structures for mission, witness, and mutual accountability; and for the nurture and renewal of its members.” Note how carefully each characterization is made and grouped.

¹⁰ E.g., 3, 8, 10, 18, 25, 27, 51f. However, section 37 has “the General Assembly shall seek to manifest the wholeness and unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) within the one Body of Christ” and, in 51a, the General Minister and President is to “provide spiritual leadership to the church in all of its diverse manifestations.”

¹¹ I am noting only how The Design refers to or implies these possible manifestations, without giving additional commentary on the historical or theological adequacy of how The Design explicitly or implicitly construes them. See William Lee’s paper and presentation for an account of how The Design minimizes and misrepresents the historical reality of the National Convocation in its brief mention and placement of the Convocation. William Lee, “Kick Like Hell,” for “Design at 50: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Recommendations,” a symposium at Brite Divinity School, January 14, 2019.

We can think of other possible manifestations that receive no mention at all, say, the church as manifest and convened historically through its journals and magazines. In addition, there are crucial differences between The Design’s envisioning of “general ministries” that are “created to strengthen congregational life for the church’s mission” (68) and which are often what come to mind when we use the term “general ministries,” and of “general” as in the General Assembly that “establishes and recognizes” these general ministries. The Design envisions the General Assembly and its Board, Officers including the General Minister and President, and Administrative Committee as seeking “to manifest the wholeness and unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) within the one Body of Christ.”

Insofar as the 2005 and subsequent versions of The Design reserve the language of manifestation for the whole church, the Body of Christ, and use the language of expression only for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), these later versions imply an altered Disciples ecclesiology. However, I’m going to assume that the revisers took expression and manifestation to be rough synonyms, and that the *de facto* theological change that comes with the shift in terms was primarily an unintended one.

“Expression” may connote a whole comprised of the sum of three parts. To my ear at least, an expression is less dynamic than a manifestation: expressions are conveyed, received, appreciated. By contrast, a manifestation is participated in; it can be recognized from previous encounters; it causes reorientation and renewal.¹² The idea of one church manifesting itself in multiple ways reminds me of H. Richard Niebuhr’s 1945 essay, “The Hidden Church and the

¹² Chuck Blaisdell footnotes a comment from Disciples historian and theologian W. Clark Gilpin about the shift from manifestation to expression—which also captures the gist of conversations that I have with Prof. Gilpin. Gilpin observes that this shift represents “a fundamental theological change from a theocentric/Christocentric term to one that strikes me as psychologically oriented and anthropocentric.” See Chuck Blaisdell’s paper for the Design at 50 symposium, “Design Flaw: The Mistake that Gave Us Birth. Reflections on *The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* on its Fiftieth Anniversary.”

Churches in Sight,” in which he argued that the church is “an emergent reality, hidden yet real.” It is a reality, not an ideality, that emerges through ongoing processes of forgiveness, conversion, and shared work and life.¹³ We rely on its reality as we depend on a friend, he wrote. “For the church in which we believe, on which we count as the supporting, interpreting community of faith,” Niebuhr wrote elsewhere, “is actual interpersonal reality, not form, but an action, trust and loyalty experienced over and over again.”¹⁴ Niebuhr helps us to grasp how actual historical-social entities and interpersonal relations can allow recognition of and reliance upon more encompassing theological realities.¹⁵

In Joe Jones’s extraordinarily thorough theological analysis of *The Design*, prepared for the Commission on Theology in 1978 and later published in *Mid-Stream*, he writes, “*The most inventive and felicitous concept used in The Design is that of manifestations. It retains a sense for ordered community at various levels of the church’s life and avoids the temptation to reduce the church to the congregational level.*” His summary of the concept remains instructive:

First, the manifestations are not hierarchically ordered. Second, they do not have a sacerdotal—priestly mediating—ordering principle. Third, each manifestation has its own legitimate sphere of influence in work, though there is interaction among them. Fourth, each manifestation in its work is an expression of the “whole church.” Hence, wholeness and unity are norms for the action of each manifestation, and we can infer that wholeness and unity are dependent upon a strong sense for the covenantal character of the relationships within and between the manifestations.¹⁶

¹³ Finite communities and mundane structures do not have to be sublated or transubstantiated to bear the reality of the church and serve as means of God’s grace. In Niebuhr’s words, “The gospel restores and converts and turns again; it does not destroy and rebuild by substituting one finite structure of life or thought for another.” See Kristine A. Culp, ed., “*The Responsibility of the Church for Society*” and *Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 59-60.

¹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed., Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989), 117.

¹⁵ Note how the formal and often bureaucratic language of recognition of ministries can take on a different connotation in relation to the theological concept of manifestation. Recognition can take on a sense of discernment of emerging manifestations.

¹⁶ Joe Jones, “A Theological Analysis of the Design for The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” originally published in *Mid-Stream*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (July 1980), 309-21, but also available on Jones’s website, grammaroffaith.com/2010/08/a-theological-analysis-of-the-design. Emphasis is in the original.

3. So, what about covenant?

The Commission on Theology’s 1979 report to the General Assembly about its ongoing work on ecclesiology largely follows Jones’s work. The Commission agrees that the theological concept of manifestation is “unique and one of the strengths” of The Design. In addition, both Jones and the full Commission draw attention to the concept of covenant as a promising theme that was in need of further development. The concept was sounded explicitly in the Preamble, “God’s covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another.” The Commission finds the concept of covenant to be implied throughout The Design, if underdeveloped, and notes that “there has increasingly been acceptance and use of the concept of covenant.”¹⁷ Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the Commission’s final report on ecclesiology, received by the General Assembly nearly twenty years later in 1997, develops covenant as a major theme. Similarly, in Duane Cummins’s widely circulated and regularly updated booklet, *Handbook for Today’s Disciples*, Cummins writes, “The genius of The Design was lodged in the concept of covenant.... Through covenant, the church was able to occasion a more equitable balance between some of its ageless polarities—‘freedom and community,’ ‘unity and diversity,’ ‘congregationalism and catholicity.’ ... The mutual affinity and pervasive bond among these tens of thousands [of members] is expressed through covenant, entered voluntarily and in love.”¹⁸

The importance of ties that bind in affection, loyalty, worship, and responsibility is undeniable in the life of the Disciples of Christ. The language of covenant can convey that, and it and related constructs (e.g., enumeration of “rights and responsibilities”) come into greater

¹⁷ See Appendix A, “A Word to the Church on Ecclesiology (1979),” in Paul A. Crow, Jr., and James O. Duke, eds., *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today*, “A Report and Resource by The Commission on Theology, Council on Christian Unity,” (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1998), 89-92.

¹⁸ D. Duane Cummins, *Handbook for Today's Disciples in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 15.

prominence as The Design is revised. That said, my suspicion, which needs closer examination than I can devote here, is that the post-2005 Design bears some of the impress of the tendency to wield covenant like a weapon that Chuck Blaisdell chronicles in relation to debates about the funding system. Covenant then becomes contract, and a provisional, always being reformed, design becomes a constitution. This tendency, combined with the flattened language of “expression” and the laser-focus on (only) three “expressions,” causes me to ask whether aspects of The Design as we currently have it, tacitly function to hinder positive multiplicity, to limit manifestations of church, and perhaps thereby possibilities of renewal. And, for a church grounded in the reality of a received and lived faith, that may also mean inadvertently limiting a sense of the presence of a living God among us and hindering attunement to the surprising appearance of Christ among us.

4. To conclude with the beginning

The opening confession-like paragraphs of The Design already suggest something about how the church appears among members of the Christian Church. There are no prefatory or explanatory sentences, The Design simply begins with “we Disciples” making the good confession: “As members of the Christian Church, We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God....” But then come several more stanzas. The Preamble continues, “In Christ’s name and by his grace we accept our mission of witness and service to all people. We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth,”—a lovely snatch of attribution from the Nicene Creed—“and in God’s covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another.” *The Chalice Hymnal* reprints this beautiful, majestic statement, titling it, as have many other Disciples, “A Disciples

Affirmation.”¹⁹ But if this is a Disciples affirmation or even confession, what is being affirmed or confessed here isn’t really that God as the maker of heaven and earth, Jesus as the Christ, or the Holy Spirit as the tie that binds. Rather, “we” are the reflexive subjects of this lyrical affirmation, and through it, “we” are observing, affirming, even confessing our way of being Disciples more than we are confessing the nature of the God in whom we have faith.

We as members of the Christian Church, of course, begin our life together with the good confession, and then so much follows: we accept our mission of service, we rejoice in God, we enter into newness of life, we are made one, we are joined in communion, we celebrate, we receive, “...we yield ourselves to God / that we may serve the One / whose kingdom has no end.”

We yield ourselves in service to the One who can’t be contained in any creed, but who appears in Christ, the universal church, and scripture—and who, we affirm, is manifest in our life as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The surpassing grace of a creating God, living Christ, and renewing Spirit takes many manifestations. Likewise it takes many manifestations to show the fullness of church, and we are still being surprised by what can emerge. Yet we have come to recognize and rely upon each other as church and as Disciples of Christ. This reality of church, created among strangers and familiars, we can affirm. We affirm that it is manifest in our life together as Disciples of Christ. Indeed, we rely upon its reality the way one relies upon a friend.

¹⁹ The Chalice Hymnal follows it on pages 358-61 with the “Nicene Affirmation of Faith,” and the “Apostolic Affirmation of Faith,” (viz., the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed) and “Statements of Faith” from the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ.