

Response to Rev. Dr. Kristine Culp and the Design
Brite Divinity School
By Rev. Lori Tapia
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Not a generational Disciple myself, I represent a growing demographic of the denomination- the non-lifetime, non-generational, unchurched, converted, or coming back to church person who doesn't necessarily know they attend a Disciples church, much less, that a design exists. Large numbers of this demographic are minorities with Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, just like myself. While you may be thinking, "but this isn't Disciples," my ministry among Disciples suggests otherwise.

It is precisely this that lends me to have something to say about the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at this 50th anniversary, because God's ministry that I have been called to has privileged me to deeper knowledge of this than I would have ever had as a local church planter who joined the disciples because of the freedom it offered my husband and I to follow the vision we believed God had placed in our hearts, yet gave us accountability through what we understood as voluntary covenant. The deciding point for joining the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was this very idea of intentional and accountable relationship through covenant that meant we were responsible and accountable to others, and they in turn, were responsible and accountable to us. Not in the generic form of accountability, but rather one founded on love, mutual trust and respect, and a general desire that we each have well-being and fortitude because of the other so that we could collaboratively fulfill our call and witness the Good News of Jesus Christ in and for the world from our respective rolls and ministerial responsibilities as different expressions of the church.

Research of the history of the restructure and the implementation of the design and it's affects over the decades from diverse perspectives and different angles left me initially with more questions than answers. Questioning how this Design informed me to serve in leadership in a denomination that embraced me, challenged me and trusted me, led me to focus this research on understanding where we stand today because of it. To be transparent, I have evaluated the Design first from an outsider's perspective to help understand how to live into it as an insider.

The restructure and the implementation of the Design have served to build our internal understanding of what it means to be Church; that part of something bigger than ourselves, greater than any one congregation, more expansive than the four walls of a building Church. The "manifestations" of the Church, or "expressions" as later revised by the 2005 General Assembly, have provided imagery that expands the reach of the imagination to that which is possible when we chose to walk in and out of the different manifestations of the Church with each other, for each other and for the world in the name of the one who we proclaim to follow as this Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It has been successful in helping us see ourselves as Church in manifold ways, an idea supported by Dr. Kris Culp in her "Design at 50" Symposium report reflecting that the Design helped us to envision Church through worship happening in many different contexts, with one not being greater, or more church, than another.¹

¹ Culp, K, January 2019, Brite Divinity School, Design at 50 Symposium Report.

Dr. Fiers in his 1992 interview sheds light on this arrival to a greater understanding of who we are as “the Church” as a successfully attained goal of the initial “founders”. While the clear definition of the manifestations of the church as local, regional and general has increased our understanding as church, my observation maintains a conviction that it is the local congregation that must remain the central focus, the foundation of our “movement to wholeness for a fragmented world.” Strong and vital congregations that are equipped, empowered and encouraged to be the church, the visible and tangible gospel of the living Christ in the world, then strengthen and inform other manifestations of the church, mission is expanded and enhanced, and God is glorified and manifested to the world through the church.

At this fiftieth anniversary of the Design, I argue that we are experiencing an identity crisis as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which has developed a sub-related relationship crisis. While we continue to be at the forefront as a denomination for ecumenical engagement, we are not as relationally connected internally to support this similar engagement and our present structure in the Design does not include adequate conduits for this, rather simply suggests we are connected. There may be three different departments in an organization, under the same organizational umbrella, but if there is never an intentional effort to bring them together, they belong to the same organization, but remain functionally three departments, not one organization. This presently describes our relationship crisis, with many local congregations, and therefore church members, having no knowledge of the regional or general church. One cannot be involved with that with which one does not know. In Spanish there are two words to express the one word “know” used in English. The first is “saber” which implies to have information and facts about something or someone. The second is “conocer” which implies knowledge on a deeper level because on interaction and experience with someone or something. Could it be that we are working from “saber” and have not gone deep enough to “conocer”? As followers of Jesus, it is not enough to know about him, we are called to go deeper in our knowledge of Christ.²

The complexities within the context of our society today include much that would have impossible for the founders to envision, just as there are others they simply may not have addressed for one reason or another.

1. A lack of consultation with the women throughout the restructure is clearly an issue that Disciples Women are still struggling through today, with granted, yet unofficial voice in decision making, and granted, yet unofficial and limited ministry autonomy and authority.

2. A named desire to fully live as a diverse church was not intentional in bringing the diversity of the church into the process, which opened the door for tokenism to fill the diversity standards over the years. The needle towards equality has begun moving with more consistency towards a pro-reconciling/anti-racist church over this last decade when analyzed from the lens of Hispanic ministry, but there is great work still to be done. It is not the same to “saber” that there is diversity in the church, as it is to “conocer” the diversity and experience full integration of all diversity in and through every manifestation as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), including leadership and decision making positions.

² I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. Ephesians 1:17 (New International Version)

3. The pedagogy for intentional relationship building across the expressions to support t faithfully and organically living together into the design seems rather absent. A restructure to enable us to be the church that could live out its mission for and through Christ in the world, has not enabled us to have relationships that nurture, equip and empower the church at the local congregation, region and general church. Education and relationship across these ministries increases understanding of identity, and strengthened identity increases trusted relationships, and in turn enhanced, authentic ministry.

4. The expansive growth of the racial ethnic ministries and their need to develop structures and mechanism to support, foster and equip members of these group of the church internally, to then strengthen integration and participation across and for the whole church. Could the founders have imagined the formal development of Hispanic Ministries and NAPAD or were they the mission field of the time and the structures created were those designed to meet their needs? The development of conventions in the Hispanic community was to support fellowship and capacity building among the Hispanic community, but also to create stronger relationship with the regions enabling stronger and more formalized participation. Even so, difficulties are still encountered today for individuals seeking ordination, commissioning, and church affiliations for the Hispanic and NAPAD communities.

As I have spent time reviewing interviews done in the 90's with individuals involved in the restructure and creation of the design and there is much elusion to the design created as a living and breathing informative document that leaves room for the ever changing, ever moving life of the Church in response to the transforming context of society. It was not meant to be entrapping, rather, that there be room to transform, adapt and renew with the needs and context of the world around us.

This has fallen short of the inclusive, integrated diverse perspective longed for in the design from within the context of the Obra Hispana. In the early 90's the establishment of the Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries was met with oppression, an uphill battle on many levels, an oppression maintained through 2017, when the disparity of DMF funding was finally brought up to par with NAPAD after a 25-year struggle. This victory is celebrated, but what perpetuated this? Could it be fear of scarcity, fear of the unknown, white privilege that continues to permeate through our DNA? Once again, I offer a lack of identity and limited relationship, authentic relationship.

The development of the society concept in 1849 which determined the nature of the organization for a century or more, while mostly replaced in the restructure, seems to have remained at the heart of the founders. The problem with societies is the implied membership, which also implies certain exclusion. This exclusion was manifested in the decision making around who were the missionaries and who were the mission, or relatively in the new language of the design, who is the church and who is the mission. There is still some residue of this in the organization today as we think of the racial ethnic divide and how we value diversity beyond some beautifully articulated words, to the way we distribute our resources.

Fiers responded when asked what the politics of the restructure were, "I would say your political issues centered around power, around organization and program and around theological issues."³

³ Fier's 1992 Interview with J. Seale.

This continues to be the struggle of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) still today regarding the wholeness or unity of the Church. The power struggles are manifested in disproportionate distribution of DMF dollars, the imposition of “greater than” theologies that seek to be inclusive on the outside while creating exclusivity on the inside, culturally irrelevant (or at least only relevant to the dominant culture) programming, and limited, tokened board representation at the different levels of the expressions of the church.

The gospel is relational. If we aren’t in relationship first with God, then with each other, we will continue to be a church of issues, and not the church that impacts the world for and in the God who calls us through Jesus, and empowers us through the Holy Spirit.

We must be honest in our evaluation of the design, not only in the evaluation of the written document, but in our own lived experience with, within and through it. I offer these questions to ponder:

Has the design informed our continued transformation?

Has the existence of the design helped us to continue moving the needle to meet the needs of the complex world we now live in?

Has the design become an excuse for not engaging in certain ways, in particular circumstances or with some ministries when it does not fit the greater context of the white dominant church?

Does the design give us the freedom to be who we are called to be by God in every manifestation of the church, or are we confined to the structures and words written within?

Do we control the Design as a living, flexible and every changing, renewing informative theological statement of who we are continuously called to be as this organized portion of the greater church universal as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)?

Or, do I dare ask? Has the design enslaved us to where we are working harder to stay within the confines of the Design to do church, than we are doing the work of spreading the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because we are the Church?

Are we doing church or are we being the church? If we are to be the Church, we must inform the design who is in charge and make way for the renewing and renovation that must come.

Let us we dare to live from a shared theological foundation, “*love one another as I have loved you*” (John 13:34), and build from there.

