

Rev. Dr. Dawn Darwin Weaks
Design at 50 Symposium
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Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University

Response to Rev. Dr. Chuck Blaisdell's paper, "Design Flaw":

I am a transplant into the Disciples of Christ, having come from a church that was completely locally autonomous. I was ordained because 12 deacons said I should be. We did mission work with whomever we wanted, and sent money wherever we wanted. It was completely free, and it was flawed. All human structures are. Yet for my 20 years as a Disciples pastor I have held deep appreciation for the way our Design seeks to give freedom *with* connection and accountability. The Design's timeless preamble and first articles give us eternal purpose and passion. Its efforts at reasonably screened and prepared clergy and well-organized funding and decision-making are definitely better than nothing, I can say from experience. But it is time, as Dr. Blaisdell convincingly argues, to revisit the rules we live by, much like we do every few years in our family as our children grow.

I appreciate Blaisdell's honoring of our foreparents who only had human eyesight, and most especially could not see the coming decline of Christendom in the United States. I think that decline has happened regardless of church structure. It is about far more than how a church is organized. Yet in my experience, our design has been more likely to drain rather than fill the local church, and that devitalizing of the local church could not have helped to stem decline. Blaisdell's assessment that the local church should be supported by our structure, and not vice versa, is spot on. The "design flaw," as he calls it, is that we have tried to maintain three manifestations of church rather than letting the local church be *the* manifestation, with all else supporting it. I have seen this misplacement of emphasis in my own ministry.

In my tenure, I have experienced the toll of supporting denominational structures. I likely have forgotten some interactions, but I cannot recall ever being asked, "How can our area/region/general church support your ministry?" Instead I have been contacted to serve with numerous task forces and boards, events and committees. Please understand I am not

complaining; these calls were intended to be affirming and I received them as such. In turn, this model became for a time the one I followed. I would call congregants and invite them to serve on this committee or that board, to support the church with their gifts, rarely asking except in times of crisis what the church could do to support *their* ministry. Such a model of ministry became unsustainable for me. Thankfully a new freedom came for my ministry as God helped me to quit trying to hold up a structure and let the pieces fall. Then I could give thanks for what was left, and see who I could disciple into ministries of their own which I would support.

I have also experienced the effects of having local congregations support larger church structures at the expense of what best serves the local church mission. The Odessa church and the Midland church were strong churches, and for that reason, when area lines were drawn, we placed Odessa with Tres Rios Area and Midland with the Central Area, to spread the financial and human wealth. This despite the fact that some of these folks even worked together, their youth doing school activities together. Only in the last four years have we thrown that ridiculous situation out and started connecting our youth, women's, and missions groups together.

Of course there are practical reasons for our current structure and reasonable fears about what we would lose without it, primarily related to funding. Yet it seems to me the primary theological reason historically for our current structure, which we must consider, is the pursuit of Christian unity. The ecumenical movement was at its height as the Design's framers worked. I can imagine their eager anticipation that unity was within their grasp if only we Disciples had a way of gathering ourselves up into one to connect to others. But perhaps they lost sight of the practical application of unity.

In the prized Johannine verse, "I pray they will be one so the world will know" (John 17:20), Jesus was not speaking of denominational cooperation or ecumenical dialogue. The best way Christian witness reaches people who are outside of the church is if they are cared for by local churches working together in love to be the church for them. So a tornado-ravaged neighborhood in Rowlett, Texas, knows love because a DOC congregation which has built relationships over 100 years with its neighboring churches reaches out with those partnerships in love. An injustice-struck North

Carolinian sees the Moral Mondays march in their streets made up of Christians from various churches throughout their state. An LGBT teen sees a band of churches in rainbow-attire holding “God loves you” signs at the local pride parade. Then, they know who God is in Jesus Christ, at least a little more than they did before this expression of Christian unity. To me, this voluntary, organic structure compels connection, accountability, and witness. I wonder what more of this kind of coming together could bring for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

I can imagine our denomination doing what two churches I have served have done. Start with trusting God like we really believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and lay everything aside other than a sketched out experimental structure like the one Blaisdell suggests. Then, live into it for about 18 months, and after that time design new words to fit the vibrant life we’re living. Such a thing is terrifying, of course, and unlikely to happen. But it is possible.

Our current church had been holding up its physical and organizational structure under the weight of crippling decline for about 20 years. It took courage from beyond ourselves, and an unflinching look at the reality that to not change was to die, before we could put our trust fully in God anew. A new name, new location, new building, new ministry, dozens of new people, and lots of new grey hairs later, we are off on a new adventure. As the Design instructs us, “the nature of the church, given by Christ, remains constant through the generations, yet in faithfulness to its nature, it continues to discern God’s vision and to adapt its mission and structures to the needs of a changing world” (from Article 1 of the Design). May new wine go in new wineskins for all of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).