

**Celebrating Our History as a Movement for Unity**  
**Council on Christian Unity/Disciples Historical Society Dinner**  
**August 1, 2009**  
**Michael Kinnamon**  
**General Secretary, National Council of Churches of Christ USA**

I love the National Council of Churches, but it is always great to be at home! My thanks to Robert and the Council on Christian Unity and Glenn and the Historical Society for inviting me, and to all of you for supporting these defining ministries of the church. May God use our time together to build up the body in love.

This is a year for anniversaries. In April, the same week I turned 60, Katherine and I celebrated our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We did so by going to see my beloved Cubs in spring training – but I won't tell you what year this is for them! I am also pleased to note that 2009 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> year since I first beat Robert Welsh in squash, but who's counting.

Perhaps more significantly (at least to some people), this is, as you know, the bicentenary of the "Declaration and Address," Thomas Campbell's great call to the church to recognize that it is (say it with me) "essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one;" and, before we meet again in assembly, we will celebrate 100 years of the Council on Christian Unity, started by Peter Ainslie. Ainslie proposed the idea of a "council on Christian union," as he then called it, in his presidential address to the American Christian Missionary Society in January of 1910 – because, as he put it, the church in its essence is not only apostolic (i.e., missionary), it also is one body and, therefore, should not only have a mission society but a unity council.

Listen to his language from the presidential address: "I beg that you will pardon me if I speak too frankly, but these are serious times and soft words will not suffice. If I mistake not, the Disciples of Christ are facing the most critical period in their history...[because] they drift from their original principles into wreckage and crystallization." Any of this sound familiar? "These conditions," Ainslie continued, "must not be smoothed over with self-laudatory sentences and self-congratulatory reports" – for they have to do with our fundamental identity.

I have traveled, he told the Society, throughout the church on your behalf and have discovered that few in our membership (“at most 25%”) “know anything at all about what the [special] mission of the disciples is.” (Any of this sound familiar?) They know, he says, that in the New Testament baptism is by immersion; but if that’s all they know, they may as well be Baptists! They know that the Bible speaks of elders and deacons; but if that’s all they know, they may as well be Presbyterians! They know that in the New Testament church government is congregational; but if that’s all they know, they may as well be Congregationalists!

An ecumenical dinner is probably not the appropriate time to speak ill of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists (let alone the UCC!), but you get his point: We are Disciples of Christ, a people, a movement, a brother/sisterhood whose larger loyalty, to paraphrase Ainslie, is so fully given to the personality of Jesus Christ that we seek to remove all barriers to communion with all persons who also bear his name. Ainslie’s basic message is simple: We are doing lots of good things, but we are in grave danger of forgetting who we are, grave danger of losing track of the being that gives focus and coherence to all of our varied activity. Any of this sound familiar?!

If you hear urgency in Ainslie’s words, and in mine, then we are in good company. How about Barton Stone: “If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world” – because, you see, the gospel of God’s amazing grace must be embodied, not just proclaimed. We usually remember the first proposition from Campbell’s “Declaration and Address” (at least you remembered it), but how about the tenth: Division among Christ’s followers is “antichristian,” “antisciptural,” and “antinatural” – because it sets people in opposition when our deepest obligation is to love one another as Christ has loved us. Such division, writes Campbell, has “rent and ruined the church of God.”

One hundred years later, Ainslie drew the logical conclusion: “Take Christian unity out of the message of the Disciples,” he once wrote,” and [our] existence only adds to the enormity of the sin of division by making another division.” As I see it, it is this passion for unity, this sense of distinctive mandate, this readiness to die for the sake of our calling, that has given vigor to our evangelism, an edge to our social witness, and particular content to our worship and preaching.

And, as in Ainslie's day, we are in grave danger of losing it. These are serious times and soft words will not suffice.

Last week, I was working on a revision of my anthology of the ecumenical movement, reading so many speeches and essays that they began to blur – except one from Archbishop Tutu. Listen to his language, forged in the crucible of apartheid: “A united church is not an optional extra. A united church is indispensable for the salvation of God's world.” (Heard that before?) “[For] we can be safe only together. We can be prosperous only together. We can survive only together. We can be human only together.” Church unity, he notes, has often been dismissed as ecclesiological tinkering. Critics say that it is time to stop wasting energy on internal matters and get on with the business of making the world more hospitable for human beings. But our experience, he reports, is that the “pursuit [of justice] is made infinitely more hazardous and difficult, perhaps even impossible, when the church is divided.... Apartheid is too strong for a divided church.”

Stone and Campbell and Ainslie would have understood his urgency. These are serious times and soft words will not suffice!

Let me relate all of this for a moment to my own work at the NCC. The greatest challenge, as I see it, is to help the churches recognize that they are a council of the churches. I keep insisting, until my friends here are sick of me saying it, that the NCC is not an organization they have joined; it is a covenant they have made before God with 34 other communions to manifest the oneness that is our gift – not our achievement, but our gift – in Christ.

To put it in terms we were just using, the essence of the Council is not what the churches do together but what they are together. To be in covenant relationship with Orthodox churches and Historic Peace churches and African American churches and recent-immigrant churches as well as mainline churches is now part of their identity, not an optional organizational membership that can be demoted on the list of priorities in lean times.

At our best, Disciples have understood – in our bones, at our core – that church unity is not just another programmatic emphasis but the key to all our programming. At our best, we have claimed as our distinctive purpose to make this known in the wider church. But in recent years, if I'm not mistaken, we have begun to think of ourselves more and more as simply another denomination. And without this particular sense of calling to promote the visible unity of Christ's body, it is no wonder that we find ourselves searching for direction and purpose – brand Z on a shelf that already has A through Y, but without the historical depth of Presbyterians or the missional focus of Mennonites or the ethnic identity of Lutherans or the liturgical cohesion of Episcopalians. These are serious times and soft words will not suffice!

Speaking now for myself, and from my heart, I am not much interested in our being a better little church than other little churches. That, after all, only contributes to the sin of division. I am passionately committed, however, to our being a community of distinctive purpose within the church catholic.

There is, of course, an obvious irony in stressing that we are Disciples while also emphasizing our ecumenical mandate. But I hope you agree that this irony is the key to who we are. At our best, we have been a very rare thing: a community with a passionate sense of particular identity that isn't sectarian because its particular identity is to be a healer of the universal church! And if we have lost this, then not only we but the wider church are impoverished.

Now let me name some good news. I find it very encouraging that Sharon Watkins is making such prominent use of the Vision Team's Identity Statement. Let me read both of its sentences, not just the one we have been hearing in this assembly: "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." Such welcome is not just a practice, it is an identity. Instead of defining ourselves over against others, drawing lines to keep our identity secure by keeping others out, we define ourselves as a community of those who have received God's holy hospitality and, therefore, offer it to others, especially those whom the world excludes. My God, what a thing to be!

Why speak of “wholeness” rather than “unity”? Well, unfortunately, despite its different use in scripture, unity has come to be associated, for many people, with institutional merger, with a suppression of diversity, even with force or coercion. Tyrants can create monolithic “unities” which we want no part of. So perhaps a new generation will hear in the word wholeness what Campbell and Ainslie heard in the word unity – a sense of diverse community of which one part cannot say to another “I have no need of you” because each is enriched by the other.

Beyond that, the language of wholeness may signal the intimate connection between our reconciliation as Christians and the promise of shalom for the entire human family. This is a key to the entire ecumenical movement: the conviction that point through the way we live with one another to God’s will for the whole creation.

Our Disciples tradition has borne witness to this in the number of prominent unity advocates who were also ardent peacemakers, even pacifists - including Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, Raccoon John Smith, Robert Richardson, Moses Lard, Alexander Proctor, David Lipscomb, J.W. McGarvey, Charles Clayton Morrison, Harold Fey, Kirby Page, William Robinson, T.J. Liggett ... . And the one who linked unity and peace most directly, Peter Ainslie. War, as Ainslie saw it, is the ultimate church division, and church unity is the ultimate witness to peace. Both the church’s endorsement of state-sponsored violence and its acquiescence to fractures caused by culture, race, or ideology show just how far Christians have strayed from the mind-set of the New Testament. “As wearers of the name ‘Christians only,’” thundered Ainslie in his presidential address, “hostility to war should be as deeply rooted in our conscience as it is in the conscience of our Quaker brethren!”

Or, to put it another way, a church that claims an ecumenical identity – a church that claims to be a movement for wholeness - should have no problem affirming a resolution that names “opposition to war as an expression of Christian unity.” I voted in favor of referral this year and will contribute, if asked, to the study process. But in two years we had better be able to say to the world that for us unity and peace go hand in hand. We are Disciples of Christ, which means not only claiming those who bear his name as sisters and brothers, it means making secondary all

allegiances other than our allegiance to him. The flag is not more important to us than the cross! These are serious times and soft words will not suffice.

What must we do to be a viable movement for wholeness? For one thing, model such wholeness in our own life – which is why the anti-racism emphasis is so important. Second, welcome those excluded by society – which is why our growing openness to persons who are gay and lesbian is so important. Third, teach this vision to the next generation – which is why Robert’s concern for young adult ecumenism is so important. And fourth, support those parts of the church that lift up this identity – which is why your presence here tonight is so important. In these lean times, the Quakers in the NCC have cut back on lots of things, but not on their peace ministries, because that would be to cut out their heart. So why would we whittle away at the Council on Christian Unity as if it were an optional program to be treated like all the rest? What is our heart, if not this?! Say it with me: These are serious times and soft words will not suffice.

I will end with a nod toward our vigil later this evening. Health care reform was never going to be easy. And now that critics are coming out of the woodwork is precisely the time to stand up and be counted. In the same way, church unity was never going to be easy. And now that the ecumenical movement is experiencing tough sledding is precisely the time for Disciples to stand up and be counted, to reaffirm to ourselves and the world that the reconciliation of those who were estranged is not only our calling and identity, it is the gospel. Thanks be to God!