

## Disciples claim new vision for Christian Unity in 21st century

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ST. LOUIS, June 30 – A clarion call for a renewed commitment to Christian unity went out from St. Louis two weeks ago, charging the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to remember its distinctive identity as herald of unity and reconciliation, and urging the church to claim a more holistic, radical and dynamic understanding of its ecumenical vocation.



The call emerged from the *Second Joe A. and Nancy V. Stalcup Visioning Conference* sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity (CCU) which took place June 14-17 at the Mercy Center in St. Louis. Forty-one Disciples — lay and ordained, women and men, younger and older — met for four days of presentations, discussion, worship and prayer as they sought to develop a statement of the church's ecumenical vision for the future. Participants and presenters included persons from local, regional and

general expressions of the church, seminaries, ecumenical organizations, with broad representation of African American, Anglo, Haitian, Hispanic, and Pacific Asian Disciples.

Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Christ in the USA, delivered the keynote address. In that presentation he declared, "I hope that we have not come here to rearrange ecumenical furniture, to discuss structural changes (though they may be needed) as if that were inherently renewing, but to hear God's Word and be renewed by God's Spirit. Antoine de San Exupery may have said it best: 'If you want people to build a boat, don't just give them a blueprint, but let them be filled with a yearning for the vastness of the sea.'"

In a Bible study on I Corinthians 12:4-27, April Johnson, executive director of the Disciples Reconciliation Mission, began with her personal convictions that "Our shared values are greater than our divergences . . . the ways we differ are far less than the ways we are alike. While we may not all share Christ, we all share Christ's message."

At the heart of the conference was a deep desire for a church that could model the very unity it seeks. Many participants advocated for a more multicultural and inclusive church, a higher degree of mutuality between local, regional, and national church bodies, and a greater awareness of who is often being left behind when Disciples celebrate the Lord's Supper. Time and time again the participants pointed to baptism and the communion table as touchstones in the quest for Christian unity, both for the Disciples and for the wider ecumenical church.

“We have to apply our Eucharistic vision to our pursuit of unity in Christ,” said Robert Welsh, president of the CCU. “Our celebration at an ‘open table’ must heighten our commitment to feeding the poor, to building an anti-racist church and society, to all elements of creating a more just and united world.”

Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President of the Disciples of Christ, preached the sermon during the closing worship service of the event in which she expressed her conviction that, “To receive the gift of unity, and open it, means to stand up when that fundamental gift of unity already given by God is not yet experienced in this world. It means to speak out when God’s unity is covered up by the world’s injustice. It means to move on to something else when our ways are not God’s ways.”

The conference will be issuing a report in the coming weeks which will identify several areas of growth and challenge to our pursuit of full visible unity as Disciples. Once completed, this document will be presented to board of the CCU with specific recommendations for our future ecumenical witness as a church. The final report and all presentations during the Conference will be published later this year in the CCU’s journal, *Call to Unity*.

***The Council on Christian Unity serves as the ecumenical office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In its mission of witnessing to God's gift of unity in Christ, the CCU oversees our church's efforts in Christian unity nationally and internationally, provides dialogues seeking understanding and reconciliation, resourcing congregations for local ecumenism, and offers resources to Disciples for interfaith engagement and dialogue.***