

Letter to Oklahoma congregations from Moderator Sharon Watkins & Regional Minister Tom Jewell

August 31, 2001

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the *Oklahoma Christian* which you will soon receive, the moderator's article ends with the prayer "that our various strategies for revealing our God-given Christian unity will not tragically divide us." That continues to be our fervent and daily prayer. When Thomas Campbell wrote, "The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one," he meant that, in Christ, we are one family. God has made it that way. Our human divisions are simply that — human. They mar the face of Christ for the world.

Now, families do have disagreements — sometimes loud disagreements. In the Oklahoma region right now, we are experiencing a bit of a family brawl over the recent General Assembly vote on Churches Uniting in Christ (CUiC). In the course of recent "discussions" several questions have emerged. We'd like to take a stab at answering them.

Question: What really happened at General Assembly?

For forty years Disciples have consulted about church union with eight other denominations. The General Assembly voted to move into a deeper relationship with these denominations in order to live our God-given unity more clearly. This "living toward unity" (called Churches Uniting in Christ) involves recognizing the other churches as truly Christian because they love God, confess Jesus as Lord and find their inspiration in scripture.

This deeper relationship asks three things of us specifically: to worship together more often (especially sharing the Lord's Supper), to join in mission in local communities (especially in efforts to overcome the sin of racism), and to continue studying the disagreements that these churches have regarding ordained ministry.

For Disciples, in some ways, this is not such a big deal. We have always recognized that we are not the only Christians (though we try to be Christians, only). For us, profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior has always been the one and only bottom line. We have gladly acknowledged that ministers of other denominations are "real" ministers. We have enthusiastically invited Christians of other denominations to Christ's table. But some of the other denominations have kept the barriers that we Disciples rejected a century ago. CUiC is necessary for them to catch up with where we have been for generations. Now they can say with us, "Yes, we see in each other, a brother or sister in Christ."

Question: What does this mean for local congregations?

What the vote does **not** mean is that anyone is forced to do anything. Every document regarding CUiC (including the General Assembly docket sent to all congregations) states clearly: **there will be no structural change in any denomination.** Each of us will continue to do things our way. For Disciples that means that every congregation will either pay attention to this General Assembly resolution or ignore it — just like we do with all the others. If our local congregation is interested in CUiC, our pastor may call up a pastor of one of the other denominations and see about planning a special worship service together. If our congregation is not interested in CUiC, we'll do nothing.

Some people have wondered, where do we sign up? Well, it's not that kind of thing. There is no list. The General Assembly recommends that congregations get involved. Some congregations

will. Some won't. No judgment is cast. It's that simple.

Doug Harvey of Disciple Renewal suggests that congregations who are uncomfortable with CUiC take a wait and see attitude. (*Disciple Renewal*, Summer 2001, p.3). He says, ". . . stand back from CUiC and see what happens. There is no need to make panicky decisions." He continues by saying that it will be years before we really know how CUiC is going to pan out. He is right.

For those congregations who are interested in CUiC, the brochure enclosed with this mailing lists several ways in which congregations can start deepening the relationship with other CUiC denominations nearby. These are just suggestions. Be creative.

What is next?

So if there's no sign up sheet, what happens next? Well, on a national level (we Disciples would say "general manifestation", because we like to avoid hierarchical language) there will be an inaugural worship service in Memphis on January 20, 2001. Representatives of the nine denominations (and anyone else who wants to be there) will gather to worship God and share communion. That worship will be an opportunity to say that we intend to do better at showing the world the oneness of the Body of Christ.

After that, congregations and regions will be encouraged to do the same thing — to have worship services involving persons from all the nine denominations. In Oklahoma, we might try to have something in the late spring, for example. These services grow out of our desire to be faithful to Christ's prayer:

20 "I ask . . . 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

What about homosexuality?

Some have suggested that our continued involvement (after forty years) with these same denominations is going to force us to move faster in our discernment on issues around homosexuality. The suggestion is that some of the CUiC denominations are too open to homosexuals, and we will therefore suffer guilt by association.

It must be said, however, that other denominations (the United Methodist Church) for example, are much stricter in their formal pronouncements than we are. They have taken a more restrictive and even punitive stance toward ministers and others who sanction homosexual practice. Through CUiC, we will also be associating with these brothers and sisters of a stricter view.

We, in Disciples and in the larger Christian family, will continue to disagree on many things: how to end racism, what exactly it means to be true to the Apostles teaching, sexual ethics, etc. But in the end, it is God in Jesus Christ who gives us our unity. In spite of our disagreements, God adopts us as children into one family.

Whether we are enthusiastic or fearful about the relationship called Churches Uniting in Christ, we will continue to be in God's care as we struggle to be faithful. God bless each of you as you find ways to demonstrate our oneness, in the places where you live and witness.

Yours in Christ,

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