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Council on Christian Unity, Inc.

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Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry

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Paul S. Tch , President

General Board Report on 2020

The Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry (CUIM) has been accompanying a faith community called the Disciples of Christ for over 110 years now on the journey toward unity among Christians. Since the inception of this church as a movement, the Disciples of Christ have envisioned Christian unity beyond the struggles and divisions within the Church. While the word “unity” is commonly understood to mean uniformity in a monotonous orthodox faith and practice, the Disciples boldly proclaim that unity is not merely a matter of theological agreements between institutions: rather, it is relational, and it is all about our life and reality. For the Disciples, the question of unity has always been about whether we can embrace one another as we are; whether we can worship together, serve together, and engage in mission together; and whether we speak to the world as one body of Christ for justice and peace. Our quest for unity has never been about putting a clear boundary around the Christian faith, but rather about our willingness to dissolve the existing artificial boundaries that we, not God, have set between ourselves. We therefore believe that unity will be lived out with a great deal of diversity so that we can have a broader, richer, and older church, one that Thomas Campbell envisioned as “essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one” (Campbell, Declaration and Address, 1809).

To the Disciples of Christ, pursuing unity has never meant that we should let the past, often speaking in the name of tradition, anchor us at a certain point of our journey; it means that the present is defined by the road ahead of us, not behind us. It has been risky, and sometimes perilous, for such a small group of Christians to avow this revolutionized understanding of the Church and Christian unity, but nothing has deterred the courageous journey of the Disciples of Christ.

In the course of denominational history, however, some started to suspect that the Disciples of Christ have developed a tendency to stay close to the shore. The fact is that we are now too large a denomination to function as a “movement” in terms of our structure, which means that we cannot be as responsive as we have been previously. Someone would say that we should not be “reckless,” as if we were on the US frontier in

the 1800s. Someone might say that staying closer to the shore has allowed us to see that we are still sailing, while dramatically reducing the risk of shipwreck. Close to the shore, the wind is not strongest in the middle of the ocean, and keeping the land in our sight has given us a sense of security and comfort.

In 2020, the 110-year-old Council on Christian Unity adopted its new name, the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry. Many Disciples were encouraged by and have welcomed this change. Some believe that it is an example of what we are: a body that evolves and moves forward with a great deal of courage. However, other Disciples have expressed disappointment, feeling that we will eventually lose our focus on healing the divisions of Christ's church and bringing the visible unity of God's one church to the world. To this small number of Disciples, the change in name is irresponsible to the tradition of the church.

It took the board members five years of discussions and conversations to conclude that now was the time to change our ministry's name and renew our commitment to God's calling. This was not an easy process by any means. The board members thoughtfully considered our tradition as a denomination and carefully studied the ministry's original purpose. We prayed, reflected, consulted, and studied this issue, and we have communicated to the broader church how prayerfully we engaged in this process.

After we made our official announcement to the church and legally adopted the new name, the reaction and response to this decision from the wider church made the board of the CUIM suspicious that we, the Disciples of Christ, had gotten stuck on the sandbank called the tradition and the structure when we were instead merely staying closer to the shore. Have we completely stalled, and yet, have we perceived it as the weight of tradition and history as a denomination?

Facing the criticism, concerns, and indifference of the church as well as welcoming this change, Ms. Teresa Crist, board chair, class of 2020, responded to the church in a recent communiqué:

As jarring as it might be for a denomination that loves tradition, changing the name from Council on Christian Unity to Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry has been the result of prayerful reflection and discernment. The new name represents not a change, but an acknowledgement of what the ministry has been doing if not since its inception, at least for the past few decades. It was important to the Board to have a name that reflected the work engaged by our President, and which affirmed the important theology of unity that is at the heart of Disciples identity. The new name is an important step toward aligning our purpose on paper as well as in practice and reminding the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of the continued and renewed vitality of this general ministry.

As the COVID-19 pandemic caused the replacement of most physical ecumenical and interfaith activities with screen-based gatherings, the CUIM Board spent quite some time re-elaborating the purpose of this ministry. Thanks to the lengthy process of

consideration and discussion that preceded the name change, the conversation about how to redefine the language in our mission statement was able to be concluded quickly. This efficiency was also due to the fact that the Board of the CUIM is deeply rooted in a fundamental principle, which is our calling from God toward this ministry: manifesting God-given unity.

Our new mission statement, derived from this very calling to manifest God-given unity, reads as follows:

The mission of the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry (CUIM) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada is to embody the Disciples' vision of unity and collaborate with ecumenical and interfaith partners to create a more just and peaceful world.

One mandate that derives from this new mission statement is to ceaselessly articulate what the Disciples' vision of unity is for the Church, for humanity, and for all creation. The CUIM will continue to reflect on this topic and be engaged in theological conversation, as it has always done over its 110 years of existence.

With this new mission statement, the Board approved the three missional mandates as those foci of the ministry that the President should give his greatest attention to. The three mandates are as follows:

(1) Being committed to the Sacramental Vision of Unity

We are called to pursue full eucharistic participation with all Christians. The Disciples of Christ believe that Christian unity begins at the Lord's Table, where we are nourished by the love of God in Jesus Christ and through that love are made one with one another and with the Church Universal. All sincere Christians are invited to the Table by Christ himself and are formed and transformed by participating in the sacrament. There should be no barrier for all Christians to gather at the Table.

(2) Becoming a Just, Peacemaking Church

We are called to be a just, peacemaking church, with the understanding that this commitment represents an essential mark of our life and mission as a church, as the Disciples of Christ seek to live out our witness to God's gift of peace and reconciliation in Jesus Christ and God's call to justice in a broken world.

We are . . .

Seeking Peace in the Community
Seeking Peace with the Earth
Seeking Peace in the Marketplace
Seeking Peace among Peoples

(3) Building a Community in a Multireligious World

We are called to build a community with one another regardless of faiths and religious traditions by inviting everyone to certain places of life. As we come together, we bring our gifts, as other people of faith bring their gifts, and by sharing these gifts we build a better community and a better world.

Finally, the Board assures the church that the CUIM is a Disciples' ministry for Christian unity and unity for all humanity and creation and is endeavoring to bring full visible unity of God's one church to the world, not for our own sake but for the sake of the world.

ELCA-Disciples of Christ Bilateral Dialogue

While many ecumenical engagements were struggling to move forward during this global health crisis, the determination of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Disciples of Christ to develop a dynamic and fully collaborative relationship inspired the leadership of the two churches to have a pre-dialogue meeting in Chicago in September 2020. Participants included the following:

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AMERICA

- Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop
- Rev. Don Kress, Bishop, Southeast Michigan Synod; Chair, Ecumenical & Inter-Religious Relations Committee, ELCA Conference of Bishops (via Zoom)
- Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Assistant to the Presiding Bishop, Executive, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations & Theological Discernment

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

- Rev. Terresa Hord Owens, General Minister and President
- Rev. Dr. Mark Toulouse, Emeritus Professor of American Religious History, Brite Divinity School (via Zoom)
- Rev. Paul S. Tch , President, Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry

The purpose of this preliminary meeting was twofold: (1) to deepen relationships and mutual understanding, and (2) to make decisions about the topic under discussion and determine next steps for a continuing dialogue.

The agenda included "state of the church" updates from both heads of communion. The Rev. Dr. Toulouse and Bishop Kress offered presentations on the "history, polity, practice, and ecumenical self-understanding" of each church. Ms. Lohre and Rev. Tch  gave an overview of the previous dialogue between the churches and introduced case studies written by mid-judicatory leaders and/or pastors from each church intended to inform our joint exploration of current collaborations and areas where deeper relations are desired.

The discussion that followed was framed by the goal of the resumed bilateral dialogue: to define a new ecumenical relationship between the churches. The case studies helped clarify that the challenge that needs to be addressed to move forward is the space between mutual recognition and mutual reconciliation of the ministries. Thus, the discussion centered on theological differences, including each tradition's relationship to the ancient historical creeds and the respective understandings of each ministry. The decision was made to resume the dialogue in January 2021 on a virtual platform and to pick up the original topic from the initial dialogue meeting in 2004, which was "the role, place, and power of the sacraments and the Confessions in shaping our identities as church." Four delegates will be named from each church, including teaching theologians, and Rev. Tch  and Ms. Lohre will head the planning and staffing for the dialogue.

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- April Johnson, Executive Director, Reconciliation Ministry
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- Rev. Richie Sanchez, Regional Minister and President, Pacific Southwest Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Rev. Dr. Mark G. Toulouse, Brite Divinity School
- Rev. Dr. Robert Cornwall, Senior Pastor, Central Woodward Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Ms. Allison Bright, Seminarian, Brite Divinity School
- Rev. Paul Tch , President, Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry
- Rev. Terri Hord Owens, General Minister and President

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- Peter Makari
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- Sheila P. Spencer

CONVENING TABLE ON JOINT ACTION AND ADVOCACY ON ISSUES OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

- April Johnson
- Ken Brooker Langston

CANADIAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

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- April Johnson, Reconciliation Ministry
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Paul S. Tch , General Secretary

MEMBER CHURCHES

- Argentina: Iglesia Evangelica "Discipulos de Cristo"
- Australia: Churches of Christ in Australia
- Canada: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Canada
- Congo: Eglise du Christ au Congo–Communaut  des Disciples du Christ
- England: Fellowship of Churches of Christ in England
- Ghana: Ghana United Churches of Christ
- Great Britain: United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom
- India: Church of North India
- Jamaica: United Church in Jamaica and Cayman Islands
- Malawi: Church of Christ in Malawi
- Mexico: Confraternidad de Iglesias Cristianas Evangelicas (Discipulos de Cristo)
- New Zealand: Associated Churches of Christ in New Zealand
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- Puerto Rico: Iglesia Cristianas (Discipulos de Cristo) en Puerto Rico
- South Africa: United Congregational Church in Southern Africa
- United States: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States
- Vanuatu: Churches of Christ—Vanuatu
- Zimbabwe: Associated Churches of Christ in Zimbabwe

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DCWC (DECC) holds associate membership as a world communion.

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