Celebrating Our History as a Movement for Unity

25th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity

Michael Kinnamon

Dr. Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, presented this address at the Council on Christian Unity/Disciples Historical Society Dinner in Indianapolis, August 1, 2009.

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, 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.”

“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?!
The pursuit of justice is made infinitely more hazardous and difficult, perhaps even impossible, when the church is divided...
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.

The NCC is not an organization they have joined; it is a covenant they have made before God.

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 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!

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!