

# How It All Began: The First Seven Years of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue

D. Newell Williams

The idea for the Stone-Campbell Dialogue grew out of a comment made by the General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Richard Hamm, at the 1998 Board meeting of the World Convention of Churches of Christ. Hamm raised the question of how Disciples could legitimately claim to be ecumenical if they consistently avoided relations with those with whom they shared the same history. The comment elicited a favorable response from several others on the WCCC Board.

Hamm and the president of the Disciples Council on Christian Unity Robert Welsh, working with Henry Webb and John Mills from Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, made initial inquiries and pulled together a group of three leaders from each of the three major North American streams to meet in Cincinnati, Ohio on June 25, 1999. As the conversation progressed, each participant committed to pursuing together the unity of the fractured Stone-Campbell Movement. Those present composed a purpose statement that explained the Dialogue's goal as nothing more—or less—than developing “relationships and trust within the three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement through worship

and through charitable and frank dialogue.” The statement explicitly denied that the Dialogue was seeking any kind of organizational or structural merger.

The initial group agreed to expand the number to include twenty people, six from each of the streams, and two observers who transcended the divisions because of their work or nationality. And, that’s where I came into the story, as one of the six Disciples of this expanded group.

The first meeting of the Dialogue was hosted by the Disciples of Christ in Indianapolis. Initial papers examined what might have been done differently by each of the paper writer’s own side to avoid the two major divisions of the Movement.

To the surprise of participants, who had stated in their first meeting of the Dialogue that they would not seek to produce written agreements or common statements, at their June 2000 meeting hosted by the Madison Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, Dialogue members decided to write a “Confession of Sin and Affirmation of Faith.” The writing of this document was both one of the most moving experiences of my life and, to my mind, somewhat comical.

We divided into smaller groups to draft this document. The Confession of Sin acknowledges the “special trust” to promote unity among Christians that had been given to the Stone-Campbell Movement, and confesses that we have betrayed

that trust.<sup>1</sup> I was in the small group that worked on a statement of fundamental convictions we hold in common. Not wanting to reinvent the wheel, I recommended that for the affirmation of faith we use the Preamble to the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which is, sometimes, referred to by Disciples as an Affirmation of Faith. In fact, this statement is not what most Christians have historically understood to be an affirmation of faith, but rather a very distinctive Stone-Campbell document. Composed in the 1960s, it was identified by its authors not as an affirmation of faith, and certainly not as a creed that might be used as a test of fellowship, but rather as a “covenantal declaration.” It declares what we do and what we receive by God’s gracious covenant in Jesus Christ.

Returning to the larger group, we read our “draft” of an affirmation of faith, noting that it could be found in the Chalice Hymnbook where it is identified as an Affirmation of Faith. And, to my amazement members from Churches of Christ and from the Christian Churches /Churches of Christ exclaimed: “That’s us—that’s the Churches of Christ!” “Yes, that’s us, the Christian Churches/ Churches of Christ. That’s who we are.” Someone asked if we could say a little more about the origin of this affirmation. I responded that this affirmation was the Preamble to the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the adoption of which in

---

<sup>1</sup> “Confession of Sin and Affirmation of Faith: An Invitation from the Stone-Campbell Dialogue.” Available online at <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/programs/documents/2000ConfessionStatement.html>

1968 had sealed the separation of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)! The initial euphoria quickly subsided. One member, noting that the affirmation spoke of receiving “the light of Scripture,” asked if that phrase was a Disciples’ way of denying the authority of Scripture. The Disciples in the room answered that it was not, and proposed that we use the term “authority” rather than “light” in our affirmation. Another member noted that this statement speaks of what we receive at the table of the Lord, but does not specify that we observe communion every Lord’s Day. Did that mean that Disciples had given up the practice of weekly communion? The Disciples answered, “No,” and that clause was also amended. Finally, it was noted that though this affirmation begins with, “As members of the Christian Church,” which the authors of the statement had understood to refer to all Christians, it might be understood in our context as privileging the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In its place was proposed an alternative term, “As disciples of Christ.” With these adjustments in place, the document otherwise unchanged, was affirmed. The Dialogue concluded that despite our differences, we obviously share a common DNA.

In June 2002, the Dialogue began taking the conversation into local churches wherever the group was meeting, beginning with Southeast Christian Church of Louisville, Kentucky. Later gatherings of this sort were held in Atlanta,

Indianapolis, and Dallas. The Dialogue began the project of producing materials for congregations to use in creating dialogues in their own locations, and proposed the October 2009 “Great Communion” to celebrate the bicentennial of Thomas Campbell’s call for unity in the *Declaration and Address*.<sup>2</sup>

All of that in just the first seven years!

---

<sup>2</sup> See workbook and other materials at <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/programs/stonecampbell/>