

## Looking to the Future

### Doug Foster

- a) Some of the Things We Have Done in the Last 8 years
- b) What We Dream for the Future: The Vision—Commitment to Unity

The tenth session of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue met in June 2006 in Nashville, TN and continued the focus on scripture from the previous year. Several things became increasingly clear in this discussion:

1. We all hold Scripture as central and indispensable to our faith.
2. We all believe in the inspiration and authority of the whole Bible.
3. We all seek to be shaped by the Scriptures in matters of faith, doctrine, and practice.
4. Yet we also share common difficulties. Though we have a common commitment to the inspiration, authority, and priority of Scripture, we have often seen these in different ways and come to different conclusions about some teachings of Scripture. This is true **within** each stream as well as **between** the streams.
5. Yet we affirmed through the grace of God that we would seek to understand one another.

It was the next year, in June 2007, that we finalized the manual that would provide a step-by-step model for local churches to begin their own Stone-Campbell Dialogues. One of the most important tasks the national team had set for itself early on was to foster a vision for and encouragement of the creation of dialogues entirely carried out by local leaders in cities and towns around the world. We met that year in Austin, TX, where leaders in the churches had already done just that. If you want to see the wonderful work they are doing, go to their website, [unity-christian.com](http://unity-christian.com). The Austin Stone-Campbell Dialogue serves as a model for how such efforts can make a difference in their community.

The Dialogue in June 2008 in St Louis, MO addressed how the three streams have taken the gospel to the whole world, and how we might work **together** to continue doing that vital work of mission.

Several things converged in 2009. As Newell mentioned, the Dialogue had set in motion several years earlier plans for a commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of Thomas Campbell's 1809 *Declaration and Address*, the call to visible Christian unity that was at the heart of our origins. A task force supported by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society produced materials available free online to assist churches around the globe in planning celebrations in their own localities. The national team met in Cincinnati in March to reflect on the ten years

of the Dialogue and to consider the significance of the *Declaration and Address* for the church today.

In October, 2009, in hundreds of places around the globe, Christians from the Stone-Campbell Movement and beyond gathered to worship, renew the biblical and historical call for the unity of all Christians, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper together in what was called "The Great Communion." Over a thousand gathered here in ACU's Moody Coliseum. Again, this was largely spontaneous—the national team didn't manage it. But we heard reports afterwards of Great Communion services all across the United States, as well as in Africa, India, and South America.

This represented the heart of the purpose of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue—to bring people together across barriers to worship together, to come to know and love one another and to find ways to serve the world together in the name of Christ.

The next month, November 2009, we met in Lexington, Kentucky to discern whether our work as a national team was done or if we should continue. We committed to five more years of work, but with a new emphasis: cultivating unity through mission and service—in other words, encouraging working together to serve the "least of these"—those most in need of Christ's healing—and spending time in spiritual formation together as a basis for discovering our oneness in Christ.

Over the last five years we have spent time in working with local Christians in Albuquerque, NM to help inner city ministries, and examining issues of moral injury and how we can minister together to people traumatized by war and domestic abuse. Two years ago young church leaders from the three streams of the movement in the DFW metroplex spent several days together with the national team in prayer, silence and solitude, seeking God's guidance and forming lasting bonds. And this year we are centered tomorrow on how we can support the spread of God's kingdom led by leaders with roots in the SCM who are working in ways that go beyond the traditional and comfortable.

In my opinion, the two most visible things that the Stone-Campbell Dialogue has done over the past eight years are the producing the Manual for Local Dialogues, called on the website "Stone-Campbell Study Guide" (<http://ccu.disciples.org/StoneCampbellDialogue/tabid/1295/Default.aspx>) and the work to promote the Great Communion of 2009. But perhaps the most important **fruit** of the efforts made has been the rise of commitment in towns and cities around the country to refuse to perpetuate the separation and division that has characterized us for many years, and to find ways of serving and being formed into the image of Christ together.

This takes commitment. It takes effort. Many don't see a need for it, and some think it is against God's will. Yet we see the work of God's Holy Spirit in so many places—not just among those of us who share the Stone-Campbell heritage, but among all that love the name of Christ.

The dream for the future held by the national team of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue is that this work of the Spirit will continue to break down the barriers of mistrust, ignorance of or indifference toward one another, to bring us to understand that we need each other. Christ did not pray for the unity of his followers for unity's sake. It was to him, apparently, the single most powerful evidence to the world of Christ's identity. Whether we as a national Dialogue group continue or not, we are committed to that vision and to submitting to God's will for us in being an answer to Christ's prayer. We pray that you will make that commitment as well.