

Singing with the windows open

Distinguished Alumnus Address by William E. Crowl

July 15, 2013

William E. Crowl is the seventeenth recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award, which was presented by the Alumni/ae Council at the DDH Luncheon during the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The award commended him “for outstanding service to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in many manifestations and in many places—mentoring youth, founding one vibrant congregation and enabling others to grow and thrive, nurturing and nudging the Central Rocky Mountain region, providing and exemplifying leadership within the general church, supporting higher education, including especially the Disciples Divinity House; for gifts of compassionate attention, laughter and song, good will and good faith; for life and ministry shared generously with and for others.”

Trustee Marshall Dunn introduced him: “It is my great honor to introduce Bill Crowl as the 2013 Disciples Divinity House Distinguished Alumnus.

Most of you know that Bill is a lifelong Ohio Disciple who stayed in his home state and went to what is clearly our denomination’s finest church-related college, Hiram (please hold your applause to the end).

The truth is I have followed in Bill’s footsteps much of my life. First I went to Hiram College, where he had been my wife’s Chi Rho sponsor in the Stow Christian Church; then to DDH and the Divinity School. Sadly I missed him both times because he was so much older! Finally I followed him to the Capital Area Region, but I will say more about that in a moment.

Bill’s first claim to fame in ministry was planting an exciting new congregation in Downers Grove, Illinois. He then went to be the minister at First Christian Church in Baltimore, Maryland, where he clearly began preparing for his eventual role as a regional minister.

I got a phone call one night and it was Bill saying he had put my name in to be the Senior Minister at University Christian Church by the University of Maryland. I incredulously asked, “Bill, don’t you think you should have asked ME first?” His wise, and quite compelling answer? “No.”

Well, they DID ultimately call me and I stayed there thirty one happy years, so Bill must have been a better matchmaker of ministers and congregations than any of us had known--a skill that would be invaluable when he later became the regional minister in the Central Rocky Mountain Region!

But in between Baltimore and Denver, Bill became the Senior Minister at Northwest Christian Church in Columbus, Ohio, where he served a wonderfully vibrant congregation for almost twelve years before his eleven years as a regional minister. Bill loved working with youth, and was famous for his big, beautiful bass voice leading silly camp songs. I am actually hoping he will sing “Elderly Man River” as part of his acceptance speech today.

In 1987 Bill became a trustee of Disciples Divinity House and then its president for five years before moving into his next major career shift as our Associate Dean. During many of those years he was also serving the wider church as a member of the General Board and the Administrative Committee. He then became the Director of the National Campaign for Churchwide Healthcare, working for our church’s Pension Fund.

Bill has served with distinction on many other boards and committees throughout his ministry, most notably on the boards of the Council on Christian Unity and Phillips Theological Seminary, reflecting his passions for ecumenism and theological education.

Many years ago, the date now lost in memory, Bill retired for the first time. But every time you turned around he was accepting a new full time ministry position, and he is serving as the Interim Minister at Arlington Heights Christian Church as we speak!

I once introduced the very relaxed Chris Hobgood as “the Perry Como of ministry.” Well, Bill Crowl is “the Energizer Bunny of ministry” --he just keeps going and going and going I warn you, do not EVER send him another retirement card!

But I know Bill well enough to know the truth. All that energy is born of extraordinary devotion to the church he loves and to the God who keeps calling him to use his extensive gifts to help congregations and other ministries in pivotal moments in their lives.

One of Bill’s long interims was at Cherry Log Christian Church where one of his heroes, Fred Craddock, was in the pew nearly every Sunday listening to Bill preach. I don’t know about you but preaching weekly to Fred Craddock is MY definition of outrageous courage!

Dr. Craddock, who would have loved to be here today, Bill, said that “ministry is the art of the appropriate.” Knowing when to speak and when to be silent, when to encourage and when to challenge, when to demand serious theological reflection and when to enliven a room with laughter--these are all among Bill Crowl’s many gifts.

It is no wonder he has been deeply respected and deeply loved in every setting in which he has ministered--including, of course, his years relating to the students of the House as their Associate Dean, role model and friend.

Bill has demonstrated again and again what the Divinity School and Disciples House hoped they might produce in our ministry program graduates: ordained scholars with huge hearts and ministers committed to excellence coupled with the willingness to work very hard in its pursuit!

Bill has been an exceptional theologian, teacher, preacher, church camp counselor, administrator, prophet and pastor. His has been a clear voice for justice and compassion, and he has made everyone around him better.

I do not know anyone who has had such a major impact on all three manifestations of our denomination. Bill has served congregations, a region, and has been an invaluable leader in general ministries. Add to that his contributions to higher education as President of the DDH Trustees and Associate Dean, and you see ripples of his immense influence moving steadily across the globe.

In closing I would not be true to helping you know Bill Crowl if I did not mention something he knows so well: the best thing Bill ever did was persuade Patty Hammell to be his wife and life partner. SHE has made him far better than he could have been without her love, guidance and support. And of all his accomplishments I ALSO know he is proudest of their three amazing girls who have become even more amazing women!

Thank you, Bill, for all you have meant to me and to so many. And thank you, Alumni/ae Council for the honor of introducing him.

I am honored and humbled to stand here today before this beloved community.

Now don’t blame Marshall for all of this. In fact, don’t blame the Alumni/ae Council either. If you want to blame someone, start with all those who have blessed my life’s journey with their discerning questions. My home minister, Ben Hagelbarger, asked when I was a sophomore in high school, “Have you thought about going into the ministry?” Mrs. Ackerman, my high school

English and French teacher, asked her question by assigning the topic of Philosophy for my final in her English composition class. How did she know I would major in Philosophy in college?

While those and many other questions were life-changing in my formative years, none were more important than those asked in the 1960s. Allow me to single out four that represent the many I experienced in that decade.

The first question brought me to Chicago. Following graduation, I worked in the Admissions office at my alma mater, Hiram College, and, among many other duties, I staffed the Hiram booth at the 1961 International Convention in Kansas City. While there, Hunter Beckelhymer, a House alumnus, wanted to know more about my plans for graduate studies. When I told him I had visited several campuses but none had clicked with me, he quietly asked, “Have you thought about DDH at the University of Chicago?”

The question struck me as rather humorous—me go to Chicago? DDH never entered my mind because I never thought I would be accepted. However, his question gave me the nerve to apply in spite of my doubts and, surprisingly, Dean Blakemore accepted me.

Coming to Chicago was truly a life changing experience for me. Among the many courses I could name, my favorites were in biblical studies. The Old Testament came alive through the lectures of Professor Rylaarsdam and of then-PhD-candidate Jay Wilcoxon. To this day, those ancient stories shape my work and help me understand how a faith community thrives in the midst of wrenching social change.

Who could forget the quiet whispers of Robert Grant as he challenged us to read biblical scholars, and to always question their conclusions. He demanded that we read the scripture references cited in their writings and question the authors’ interpretation of the text. And I will never forget the day when a couple of Meadville students asked if he believed in the resurrection. The rest of the class held its breath as we waited to hear his response. We had been discussing whether the texts were historical and thus “factual,” or whether they were an attempt of a faith community to reconstruct and edit the story of Jesus. Slowly drawing a couple of times on his cigarette (yes, faculty smoked in class in those days), he stated that he believed the New Testament was a historical document which describes the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Back at the House, the rich theological discussions helped me formulate my own theological context which to this day informs my work. The House was an interesting mix of personalities and theologies that churned those discussions. Clark Williamson was a graduate assistant working with Paul Tillich and was also translating some writings of Ernst Troeltsch. Don Browning was writing his dissertation proposal in Religion and Psychology, which several faculty members thought equal to a dissertation. Ray Williams was deep into his New Testament studies and serving a small Indiana congregation. Then there was Don Anderson, kicked out of David Lipscomb College after a heresy trial. (He dared to read some of the writings of Harry Emerson Fosdick, that liberal New York preacher.) At DDH he was reading the entire 13 volumes of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. And who could forget Bill Carpe, our in-House curmudgeon, and his take on current events. It seemed as if all of our work was a community effort.

That sense of community permeated the House and contributed to my spiritual and intellectual growth. Working in close quarters and worshiping weekly in the Chapel of the Holy Grail nurtured a bond that has enriched the church and the academy to this day.

Moving to Chicago gave me the opportunity to become reacquainted with a family friend, Patty Hammell. Our relationship flourished which led to a second pivotal question: “Will you

marry me?" Fortunately for me, the answer was, "Yes," and we have been working together for these last forty-eight years.

In 1963 the third question came in the form of a telephone call from Bob Bond, Executive Secretary of the Chicago Disciples Union. He asked if I would consider using my intern year to start a new church in Downers Grove. I had worked that summer at Jackson Boulevard Christian Church and preached each weekend in a Disciples congregation around the CDU. I had talked about the challenge of ministry in urban America. Bob thought I might be of help in Downers Grove.

I agreed to go to Downers for a year; at the end of that time either party could say "no" to continuing the relationship. The work began in the winter of 1964. It was exciting, challenging and gave me peace of mind that, in fact, I was called to work in the church. At that time, I was in the midst of trying to sort out a career in music or teaching or church. I worked at Downers for eight years.

During those eight years, the last question arose. It is one that I revisit regularly since I first heard it in 1967. It was a theological question that came unexpectedly...and still rings in my ears to this day.

The church in Downers was growing; the Region had purchased a site, and we were about to build. However, we first had to ask for a zoning change so that we could build on the property on 63rd Street. Our attorney and numerous other folks helped gather information for our meeting with the Planning Commission. We needed to be prepared to answer any questions regarding the building and its surroundings: what is the set-back of the building; the size of the sidewalks; how big is the parking lot to be; what about the south end of the plot, how is it to be used; and how many street entrances are there to be? After many hours of work, we were ready.

This meeting was open; homeowners within a block of the site were invited to attend and voice their concerns and questions. We were prepared to answer any possible question that might arise. I say "we" since our attorney and I had been selected to attend the meeting. The day of the meeting arrived and I learned that our attorney would be unable to attend. I was all alone.

When I arrived that evening at the Commission meeting, only one resident was present. When asked if he had any questions, he said that he did. His question was, "Do you sing with your windows open?" Now that is one question we had not thought about. As I recall that evening, my answer was in the affirmative. I declared that we are not only a people who sing their faith in the building, we are also a people who live our faith outside the building. I have spent my entire working career attempting to live out that response.

From the cold December Sunday in 1956, when I stood in the pulpit of my home church and declared that I had been called into the ministry, I have worked by the call system. My years have been rewarding, exciting, sometimes frustrating, but, hopefully, always faithful. People ask why I am working today. I am supposed to be retired. My own children jokingly note that I have failed retirement numerous times. I remind them that I am not in charge, God is. Just as discerning teachers, preachers, the House community, a loving wife, and a nameless neighbor voiced God's call in my formative years, I have tried to live that spirit of discernment in all that I do.

In 1957 the International Convention of Christian Churches was held in Cleveland, Ohio. The conductor, son of a Disciples minister, was none other than Robert Shaw. We sang three numbers which I remember even today: *He Watching Over Israel*, *How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place*, and the *Hallelujah Chorus*. Working with the dean of choral conductors was one of the highlights of my years in music.

Years ago, Shaw was asked what worship was about. His response went something like this: “Worship is the time when the community of faith comes together to plumb the depths of the mystery of God and to feed the longing of the soul.” That is the spirit of Disciples Divinity House. I pray that you who are Scholars today and those who are yet to come will continue to sing with the windows open.