

Academic Theology and Disciples Dissent
Distinguished Alumna Address
by Bonnie Miller-McLemore
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The Alumni/ae Council honored Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Pastoral Theology at Vanderbilt University, as the 2011 recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus/a Award at their luncheon during the General Assembly of the Christian Church in Nashville. She is the author, co-author, and editor of twelve books. She is a past president of the International Academy of Practical Theology and of the Association of Practical Theology. In selecting her, the Alumni/ae Council cited her distinguished contributions to the field of practical theology and to feminist moral reflection, her contributions to the wider academy and to the profession—especially to women in the profession. They also noted her long record of service to and support of this Disciples Divinity House—and indeed of both DDHs.

The award commended her “for advancing the field of practical theology with exemplary scholarship and leadership; for distinguished service to the wider academy; for ground-breaking work that focuses on the messy glory of daily existence—on living and dying, on being a scholar and a mother, on parenting and children; for enriching feminist moral reflection; for generous and wise mentoring; and for outstanding support of Disciples theological education through the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago—and at Vanderbilt.”

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore is the sixteenth recipient of the award, and the first alumna to receive it. Her remarks follow.

I am honored and immensely grateful to receive the Distinguished Alumna Award. I know many worthy friends and colleagues more deserving (which says a lot about the Disciples Divinity House and its contributions). So, my remarks center around *gratitude*—for the House, those affiliated with it, and the Disciples tradition more broadly.

The House made all the difference in my life. If I have made a contribution to theological study, women in ministry, care of children, Christian life, or any other area, it reflects the gifts of the House and the University of Chicago. Without these two institutions, I would not be doing what I’m doing.

I am especially honored to be the first alumna to receive this award. From the beginning I have had interest in women’s lives. Women’s advancement depends on women forging ahead. But twenty-five years ago, role models were scarce. My academic and ministerial mentors were almost all men, and opportunities for women scholars seemed especially vague.

Sometimes it pays to be oblivious of one’s circumstances. When I arrived as a student in 1978, I did not realize that the House had neither permitted women to live in its rooms nor supported them financially at the university until 1975. It didn’t occur to me that my women housemates and I were doing something new.

When I struggled over the years with whether to stay in the doctoral program, pursue teaching, have children, or write books, I sometimes had the fleeting hope that I might make a difference if I persisted, that a girl or mother, a son or male colleague might change their minds in response to a glimmer of possibility refracted through my life.

Without the House's support, incentive, community, and friendships I doubt I would have had the confidence to persist. I would have found the competitive Divinity School atmosphere disturbing enough to leave. I was literally granted permission to stay and earn a PhD in a time when few Disciples women had done so. I am thankful.

Then there's Don Browning, a stellar mentor and generous colleague. I had the good fortune to come to the House under his tenure as dean thirty-three years ago, to work with him as my primary advisor at the school, to join him in chairing the DDH Centennial Campaign in 1994-95, and to participate with him on several projects. I am glad he was honored as the Distinguished Alumnus during the last General Assembly in 2009. This award is more poignant to me because I am gratefully aware of following his footsteps.

On this occasion, I want to express deep appreciation not only for the gift of these years and for the House, but also for the House's important work in sustaining the wider Disciples theological tradition that formed me and continues to shape my work. This is where I want to focus my remarks.

Historically, Disciples criticized creeds and formal theology as insufficient, even sometimes destructive, for the life of faith. This Disciples dissent influenced my choice of a doctoral area years ago, it has shaped my scholarship in the time since, and it continues to inform my driving conviction about the need for a richer lived theology that reaches beyond the walls of the academy.

When I was in the House, Clark Williamson was invited to deliver a paper on Disciples theology. This was a pivotal moment for me. I still have my tattered copy of the manuscript he presented with my initial reactions scrawled in the margins ("good" and "yes...my own experience"). Williamson tried to unearth our Disciples "ethos" or what he also called the "forgotten" tradition—those deep commitments that activate us but of which we may have little conscious recognition.

What most interested me then and still does now is Williamson's portrait of our suspicion about formal theology and our reclamation of theology as practice. As a rule, Disciples react negatively to the mere hearing of the word *theology*. Alexander Campbell forbade the teaching of theology at one of the movement's colleges. Like creeds, systems of theology often encumber, truncate, or distort the truth of Jesus as the Christ as much as they confirm or embellish it.

Disciples want to avoid abstracting faith "from the whole of life," Williamson noted, "rendering it into a property to be owned, dividing believers from one another, and substituting propositions about God for communion with God." Faith is a "way of life," oriented to practice and confessed primarily through deeds as much as creeds.

He likened our pragmatic orientation, as cast by Dean W. B. Blakemore, to a behavioral system, more like Judaism. "How things are done, what one does, is a primary form of confession and a witness of faith."¹ Disciples do not (or should not) measure a church member or minister's faith based on their stance on eternal life, gun control, homosexuality, or any other issue. Our theologies on these matters are diverse; confession of Christ binds us together in love.

Over the years, I have referred back to Williamson's paper many times. It captures an important trajectory in Disciples history and theology that I now realize influenced my choice of a doctoral area—Religion and Psychological Studies—an area interested in formal doctrine *only* as it affects the hard day-to-day questions of religious experience and faith (and an area not coincidentally shaped by influential Disciples like Browning and E. S. Ames).

In the years since doctoral study, Disciples convictions have shaped the books I've written, the research I've pursued, and the courses I've taught—on topics like death, illness, women, children,

families, and spirituality. A distinctive Disciples temperament supported my protest about conventional ideals of spirituality that exclude children and those caught up in their care. And Disciples dissent on doctrine and creeds fuels my current interest in understanding *theology as practiced* rather than as thought, systematized, and theorized.

In fact, there is an important parallel between my earlier work on spirituality and my current work in practical theology. Just as I sought to redefine spirituality to include children and adults in the midst of complicated mundane lives, so also am I working now to broaden definitions of theology to make theology more inclusive of what happens beyond elite academic institutions.

Recent scholarship suggests that early Disciples might have been ahead of their time in their frustration with theology as a nicely worked out system of cognitive belief. Let me offer a few examples. When Susan Ridgely Bales studied children's understanding of First Communion in three Roman Catholic congregations in North Carolina, she discovered that what seven- to ten-year-old children believe and experience is not quite what adults or the wider church have in mind.

One of her more striking findings is the centrality of sensory experience. To her surprise, her conversations with children do not center on white dresses and parties, much less transubstantiation or the church universal. She discovers instead what she calls a "theology of taste." Ryan, a communicant in an African American congregation, "explains that First Communion is 'about tasting and learning about Jesus.'" ² Another child explains her understanding of transubstantiation through taste, saying that the real bread tastes better than the practice bread.

Bales also uncovers what I would call a theology of sensory movement. Children yearn for inclusion in the community but they feel separate "because they cannot perform the necessary movement." That is, they understand their disaffection as centering "on *action* as much as on *belief*." Their interests are practical. They want to teach "their bodies to move as the adults moved during the liturgy." ³ While teachers hoped to convey the sacred meanings of communion, the children's attention was focused on their physical bodies.

Are these findings unique to children? Adults like to think we are different but this hides important connections. Most of us do not remember clearly our early sensory experiences, which are reshaped through memory, later experience, and learning, but our theology partly resides there nonetheless.

When I was in fifth grade, I was baptized by immersion. I don't remember going under or coming up. Try as I might, I can't picture the minister in the baptistery or recall water temperature, much less the baptism classes. But I do remember anticipating what new life would feel like, the weight of the white robe clinging to my body and dragging me back down as I stepped out, wet hair, a group picture, and pondering whether I felt different. I remain convicted that Christian baptism requires visceral experience that sprinkling can hardly achieve.

We are naïve when we assume adults leave sensate knowing behind, even though much Western doctrinal and intellectual history implies that such detachment is possible and even admirable, a sign of intellectual and spiritual maturity. There is something to be learned from children. Adult belief is grounded in our bodies even though this escapes our notice. Sensory understandings linger longer than most people realize, and the bodily knowledge that forms us as children continues to play a role in adulthood. Our bodies mark our theology and knowledge of God.

Consider a second example from recent scholarship in learning theory: To move from a rule-based beginner to virtuoso expert requires more than analytical rationality, general theories, and the reduced formulas that comprise them. According to Danish sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg, rule-based knowledge is

important for novices, but expert knowledge is context-dependent. It requires a dexterity of thought that builds on intimate familiarity with “several thousand concrete cases.” This undercuts the general assumption that “general, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than practical (context-dependent) knowledge.”⁴

Flyvbjerg reminds us about an insight from Thomas Kuhn, which in my reading is quite damning of formal theology as it has developed in the last two centuries and supportive of the direction practical theology has gone: “A discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and...a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one.”⁵

We know this colloquially when we say “a picture paints a thousand words.” When I lecture and write, people consistently remember my personal stories more than my theoretical points.

Of course, researchers create theories and believers seek dogmas. That is what we are trained and driven to do. But it is important to remember “something essential may be lost by this summarizing” (Flyvbjerg). Theological doctrines are only maps or “models of reality” (Bourdieu). We should not mistake them for the “reality of the model” or the richer, fuller concreteness of Christian life.

In fact, *what people say they believe* in confession, creeds, and doctrines and *what they actually do* rarely cohere—a reality that religion scholars and the general public often refuse to admit. According to one study, “intrinsically religious people do not act in more prosocial ways than anyone else, but they think they do, or should, or would.” Religious confession and action are highly situational and instrumental. Professional athletes perform rituals to enhance performance but do not skip rigorous workouts, divine healers supplement prayer with medical intervention, and Native Americans pray for rain only in the rainy season. “If we want to predict someone’s behavior,” another study suggests, “we are better off knowing where they are rather than who they are.”⁶

Tonight I head overseas to attend the International Academy of Practical Theology, an organization Don Browning helped found twenty years ago. I will conclude my presidential address by observing that in the last quarter century practical theology has been disruptive to the space occupied by academic theology. Like the liberation theologies that have had a steady influence since the 1960s, practical theology has been all about taking theology to the streets and using what it has learned from going out to assess the adequacy of biblical, historical, and doctrinal claims. This work has disturbed conventional boundaries and redefined what theology is, how it is done, and who does it.

The aim of good practical theology is to foster richer material understandings of embodied theology so that those who practice ministry and pursue lives of Christian faith will have a greater sense of their theological and religious vocation. Although restoring practical theology as an academic discipline has merit, practical theology has always been and remains far more than an academic endeavor. It has been about returning theology to the people.

Little will my colleagues in the International Academy know: *This is just good Disciples theology*. I am thankful once again for the Disciples Houses *plural*, north and south, Chicago and Nashville, and all they do to sustain this tradition. They are often its strongest and most vital backbone. I thank you for the gift of this award; it will be a wonderful reminder to me of these many good things.

¹ The paper was published as “Theology and the Forms of Confession in the Disciples of Christ,” *Encounter* 41 (Winter 1980). See pp. 56, 57, 69.

² Susan Ridgely Bales, *When I Was a Child: Children’s Interpretations of First Communion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 99.

³ Bales, 91-92, 96, 103.

⁴ Bent Flyvbjerg, “Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (April 2006): 222, 223.

⁵ Flyvbjerg, 242.

⁶ Both studies cited in Mark Chaves, “Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy,” *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010): 5, 4.