

**Crisis in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
Distinguished Alumnus Address by Marvin E. Smith  
October 19, 1987

*In the award's citation, the Alumni Council commended Marvin E. Smith for his "outstanding contributions to the ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as pastor, educator, and administrator" and for his "devoted service to the Disciples Divinity House as Trustee, President, and Acting Director."*

Dean Gilpin, comrades and friends of the Disciples Divinity House, this Alumni Council award is one of many great gifts I have received as a result of my relationship with the House and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. To receive at this time in my life this expression from such appreciated friends and peers in Christian ministry is indeed a very special gift and one I deeply appreciate. Thank you, very much!

Although I had an earned B.D. degree in hand when I arrived at DDH in the fall of 1939, I was not yet mature intellectually and I lacked full ability to minister to a congregation. No one ever confronted me with those shortcomings but somehow I seemed to sense them. I think now that I was moved by a strong desire to be a minister and therefore Chicago opened up for me many windows.

You who matriculated in more recent years can hardly imagine the awe generated in a "would-be-minister" from walking into Disciples Divinity House and meeting Dr. E. S. Ames face-to-face, or in attending the Tuesday luncheon and listening to Dr. Ames and Dr. W. E. Garrison exchange views on almost any subject as they were always quick to do, or from attending the Thursday night dinner and seeing and hearing Dr. William Clayton Bower, Dr. Perry Rice, Dr. Charles Clayton Morrison, and on rare occasions to meet and hear aged Dr. Herbert Willett. I thought I had some understanding of what we called "the Brotherhood." I at least had read *Religion Follows the Frontier*. But not until I enrolled in Dr. Garrison's course in the Divinity School for House Scholars did I sense deeply the masterful analysis of Dr. Garrison's views on the factors and religious perspectives that had made us a significant conscious religious group.

In this House environment, I formed the impression that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) had emerged through considerable debates, periods of tension, and intense discussion among ministers and leaders. The respect for intelligence and scholarship so exemplified by such persons as I just mentioned, stimulated and influenced many of those times of crises and reform, and mightily helped a majority set of concepts about our church become ground for pride. With this expanded sense of pride and a second B.D., I left Chicago for a ministry with a West Coast congregation. I left feeling I did not need to apologize about my church. As the predominate posture of the secular educators of my country was openness to new discoveries and scientific findings, so my church's posture was one of openness to the many questions responsible scholars might be led to in their research. As the predominate posture of my country's political arena was to seek the will of the people in a democratic manner, so I knew that our church members were

encouraged to engage in discussions about primary theological concepts, as they oftentimes did in dramatic manner in their local settings and in their national and state conventions.

During these past forty-six years I have continued to observe this shaping and reshaping of our church. Ours has been and is a living church. Of course, the volatile status of the secular social and political civic culture in which our church has existed has had a decisive influence on the ways members feel about belonging to a church, undertake their programming, and structure themselves for their self-governance. You, too, have sensed these changes, and some of you have played key roles in the alterations that have taken place, especially in our recent restructure process.

Now as a retiree of ten happy and meaningful years, I view our Disciple of Christ family to be in deep trouble, even appropriately described as “in crisis.” I believe we are currently under a grave threat of not moving in some reforming ways to counteract a malaise that is handicapping our members, making us confused about our purpose and uncertain about possessing beliefs unique and imperative for the Christian future. With rather broad strokes I am so bold as to share with you three reforming next steps that I feel should characterize major thrusts of our church’s future. There are of course more than three, but these I feel rank high on any such listing.

1. First, reforming steps should be taken to clarify and justify our reason for being. Numerous factors have weakened our sense of self identity. I don’t think it is unfair to point to the interdenominational development at the seminary level as one contributing factor. In such a mix it has been understandably difficult to send the denominational graduate out to serve with a high awareness of the unique factors in his or her heritage.

Another contributing factor has been our recent and rather intense ecumenical quest for common ground. Although the principle guiding such a quest has been described by Dr. Ronald Osborn as one of “mutuality” and “reciprocity,” or more colloquially as one of “give” and “take,” it would appear that the quest for self-identity has not been given equal time and effort. Without a lively functional sense of identity, without a reasonable energizing sense of purpose, no group, no nation, no church can long endure.

This point was vividly underscored for me recently as I viewed a Public Television program featuring Dr. Mortimer Adler with some of his students discuss the Preamble to our nation’s Constitution. One quickly got the impression that Dr. Adler is very concerned over the fact that very few Americans are functionally literate about the content of our Constitution and it especially worries him that so few Americans seem to pay any attention to the Preamble. He is right! The Preamble in just fifty-two words succinctly sets forth a sound reason for government. Its aim is to establish a sound purpose for existing.

Perhaps this reference to the Preamble raises the question: “Isn’t the need for stating marks of identity and purpose adequately met by the excellent phrasing of the Preamble to the Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)?” I think this carefully crafted statement deserves our deepest approval and ought to be used by all of us to serve the purpose I am addressing. In its confessional nature, it indicates our purpose to be respondents to the call of Christ and to take up our mission with all his followers within the universal church.

In paragraph three, the Preamble speaks of our identifying marks: "Within the universal body of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada is identifiable by its tradition, name, institutions, and relationships." In my opinion, that points in a direction, but it is not very precise. Following that we need to discuss, editorialize, form resolutions, and debate our understandings of what is embraced in that word "tradition." Our aim should be one of preciseness in answering the question, "Why should a person identify with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)?" In the presence of the rampant present day rush toward religious fundamentalism can we state our appealing viewpoint of approaching religious faith with common sense? Can we state our tradition of a scholarly application of learning about Scripture in ways that make sense to the hearer who is being told something radically different about the Bible by the TV evangelist?

Academically, some significant examination of our theological heritage is being done. The report of the Commission on Theology to this Assembly, "A Word to the Church on Baptism," Resolution 8713, is illustrative. The study booklet in the series "The Nature of the Church" entitled *Baptism: Embodiment of the Gospel*, by alumnus Dr. Clark Williamson, puts excellent study material in published form and provides a most comprehensive bibliography of the subject. My anxiety arises from the ineptness in moving such resolutions and scholarly arguments to places where church members live and worship.

The commendable participation of both ministers and lay persons in the conference last March at Christian Theological Seminary, which had been initiated, planned, and administered in a major way by alumnus Dr. Michael Kinnamon on the theme, "Reappraising the Disciples for the 21st Century," convinced me that there is a deep need to help our total membership to get readings on the theological consensus of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). That conference forced one conclusion: many members of our church family want to engage in reappraisal, examination of issues influencing the units of our church, and in expressing a consensus as a unique people. So there is a major need for us to be much more determined than we are in getting academic agreements about ourselves shared with and discussed by our total membership.

Dr. Gabriel Fackre, professor of theology at Andover Newton Theological Seminary, seemed to me to be endorsing such self-identity efforts among liberal Protestant groups in his recent *Christian Century* article, dated September 23, 1987. He began his article by quoting from a statement of Roger Shinn of Union, made twenty-five years ago, in which Dr. Shinn said students were putting aside introspection in favor of marching in "the coming theologies of renewal, humanization, secularity, and hope." "Protestant theology in the United States," Dr. Fackre said, "has continued in the direction that Shinn . . . identified: historical suffering is its focus and hope in action its response." Dr. Fackre then reports on what he sees as a change taking place. He illustrates his point by describing a church of his personal acquaintance where the pastor and some of the members were very active in a theological renewal movement of their denomination. "They want," he said, "to clarify the church's doctrinal identity, recover its theological heritage, and ground its actions in biblical faith."

William Willimon of Duke University, also in a *Christian Century* article last January 28, stirred considerable debate in his plea for a postliberal theology. In that article he said: "In our desire as a

religious people to be significant partners in national discourse, we have lost a distinctive voice . . . ; my goal is not to make the church a sect but simply to make it faithful.”

Professors Fackre and Willimon are, of course, commenting on the condition the whole liberal Christian enterprise finds itself in today. Evidently they would tell us to leave off trying as Disciples of Christ to describe ourselves only as a part of the universally available Christian experience and to direct our attention faithfully toward describing our faith as a particular religious community.

2. The second major reforming step we need to be undertaking is to devise some radical new ways of nurturing our local congregations. During my experience, the programming assistance for the local church has swung the extremes of the pendulum. When I went to the congregational ministry, I inherited years of arduous work that had been cooperatively developed to guide local congregations in the “functional committee” structure. National structures had been created to permit a considerable representative membership to serve in the Home and State Missions Planning Council, the Curriculum and Program Council, and the National Church Coordinating Council. Specifically these groups were to engage in planning and developing what was referred to as “church-wide” programs and educational resources for local churches. Regions were assisting local churches in conducting schools and training events for church educational workers and functional committee leaders. In these events, the resources of the cooperatively developed process were used.

In 1968 at the Kansas City Assembly, the Provisional Design was adopted. A great deal of energy and thought had been expended in this goal of “Restructure.” A serious attempt had been made to enunciate the relationship of the parts of that restructured church: namely general organizational, regional, and local. It affirmed that “each manifestation has functions for which it is uniquely responsible and is characterized by its integrity, self-government, authority, rights, and responsibilities.”

This three-level image of the church seems to be borrowed from national, state, and local government. If being the church could be conceived fully as actions, perhaps the actions appropriate to each level could be effectively agreed upon. Somehow we seem to have forsaken the imagery for church the Apostle Paul used. He didn’t call it a triad, he called it a body! I think we made a serious mistake in the Design in trying to define the structure of our church as three separate manifestations, each responsible for its own self-government and responsibilities. In 1 Cor. 12:26, we hear Paul instructing the Corinthian members: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

The adoption of the Provisional Design implied that a new way should be created to allow local churches to freely and voluntarily plan and resource programs appropriate for a local church form of mission. So the General Minister and President sent a letter to officers of the planning bodies suggesting that they not call a meeting until new structures could be studied and financed. The new design for local church planning never got started. Local congregations, from my level of observation, continue to reflect debilitating uncertainty about programming.

To pass such harsh judgment is not to imply that if those former planning bodies had been financed and continued, our church would have been served wonderfully. Instead, we should admit to having made a mistake. We should, then, begin an urgent reforming effort to nurture and assist all of us where we live and worship—in the local church. Somehow, two decades ago, we were over-persuaded that a sound philosophy of church nurture was to insist that each congregation meet in conference, assess its needs, plan its program to meet those needs, and then get help in the way of resources and leadership wherever they could be found. Advocates of this style of programming insisted that it was restrictive to creativity and manipulative of persons to recommend a church-wide program or curriculum. Whatever truth there is in this claim, its effect is less fatal than the affliction resulting from the unplanned, unrelated, unresourced program of the present.

I sense some stirring in regard to restoring cooperatively studied and planned programs and resources for the local church. General Minister John O. Humbert has announced in the September issue of *The Disciple* and in his report to this Assembly, a commitment to convene a “church-wide planning conference” next summer involving volunteer participants of all three manifestations of the church. In this conference, participants will work in one of nine areas of our church’s life and mission. They will be challenged to assess the future of our church and to fashion resources and programs which will better the possibility of our church being Christ’s church.

Such a conference may be the beginning of a new cooperative effort. Perhaps we are ready to admit that we were faulty in our radical withdrawal from cooperative planning. Sensing such, reform can be attempted and, I feel, supported. We must learn to effectively plan and work together!

3. A third reform our church must attempt is this: We must take major steps to restore and vitalize teaching and learning at the local church level. It is amazing that the vast and long established structure of our church’s religious education could have been so radically dismantled in two decades! As I currently observe our church life, attention to religious education is very weak. Workers who are involved seem to be maintaining a tradition. One wonders, where are the planners who should be trying to revitalize our educational structure and resources? Where are the educational workers struggling with such questions as: “What constitutes a life-wide, life-long curriculum plan? How do persons effectively learn the Christian faith? How can the school of the church fulfil the aim of being a reputable school?” Was Jesus wrong in trying to be a teacher?

Professor Allan Bloom, of the University of Chicago, caustically affirmed in his recently published book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, “the eclipse of liberal education began in the sixties and has persisted to the present.” His thesis that there is a serious crisis in liberal education is graphically discussed in terms of the philosophies affecting present life-views and cultural expression. He is convinced that the “nothingness of eternal value,” which Nietzsche described, has seeped into America and is now predominately accepted. He is frustrated deeply with the college student’s assumption that truth is relative and that it is the epitome of intelligence to remain “open” to any sort of ideas. He affirms that the social contract of democracy cannot long endure in the prevailing culture of “anything goes—one opinion is as good as another.”

Although Bloom decries the severely weakened role of religion and family in the instruction of values for American life, he does not try to suggest corrective steps for the churches. Of course, this is our job. In light of this shaking of the foundations of liberal and secular education, in the face of the unhooking of trust in reason and the rejection of the long-standing concept that education should acquaint students with lasting life values, we of the church have urgent work that needs to be done. If we delay longer, we will soon be saying: “Why did we let this religious education tradition get away from us?”

Most of us in our academic training accepted the concept of a balanced education relying on carefully chosen parts from various fields. Such an education contributed to the goal of a liberal arts degree, and in our case, a ministerial degree. In like manner, for decades resource planners of learners in our local churches pursued efforts to make a curriculum as inclusive as possible of issues where the faith would be lived and tested. They tried to imagine a student beginning in the Nursery department and then following his church’s recommended curriculum to his adulthood. Where, they asked, will the student have courses on the Bible, where courses on other religions, or courses on morality, or courses on Christian history and denominational heritage?

Then two decades ago these guidelines for curriculum building became anathema! Young seminarians demanded the right to choose courses of his or her liking and to receive degrees when enough hours were attained. Some church educators grabbed the new idea and insisted that the learner in the local church should be encouraged to create his own curriculum plan. Decide, it was said, what one’s personal needs are and then get whatever resources one can find related to the need. The result was that a sixty-year-old structure of curriculum resourcing and teacher training was made almost useless. There was no way to be very precise in teacher helps because no one could be sure what teachers were trying to use as a resource. A curriculum plan with some balance in areas studied, some closely examined consistency in theological views, and consistency in moral advocacy was discredited in favor of the right to choose whatever one judged was his interest at the moment. To turn away from this confusion may be too taxing on us now in terms of scholarly work and resource and teacher training dollars. But without reform we face alarming illiteracy! Surely if we will only admit our predicament, we could institute some reforming changes. It is our only hope!

Whereas my intention at the outset was to share with you some of my somber worries about our church’s present day slumping condition, I will not predict a complete downfall. I have not spent all of my funds of hope. You know our history well enough to know that there have been other periods in our past when we were in almost a hand-wringing state about our sense of identity, our mutual support of one another at the local level, and in a state of great confusion about our educational methods and structures. Diagnosing an illness is imperative before treatment is administered. Thus, it is time for some key decisions to be made. It is time to recognize where we are in this crisis and to discuss the issues. Disciples House alumni have been wonderfully advantaged in developing selves capable of responsible thinking and decision-making. Some of us, by reason of our age, will have to ease into less aggressive roles, but others among this alumni should rise to the challenge!