A Spirit-Led Movement for Justice and Reconciliation

Reflections on the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Columbus, Ohio, July 18-22, 2015

Rev. Peter Goodwin Heltzel, Ph.D.
Associate Pastor of Evangelism
Park Avenue Christian Church

“If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada is at a crossroad:

*Will we be a mainline institution or a movement for justice?*

Four thousand Disciples gathered at the recent General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Columbus, Ohio, on July 18-22 to worship, debate and discern a collective path ahead. A new initiative, *Mission First!*, was boldly announced. *Mission First!* is a process of reflection that seeks to help Disciples identify the next mission priorities God has for us as we move toward the year 2020 and beyond.

*Mission First! seeks to give courage and support to Disciples as we seek to be a movement for healing and hope,* said Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President. In order for Disciples to discern our mission priorities, congregations will gather in regional areas to give input into the national process, helping to establish mission directions. A Mission Council will be established to focus the emerging priorities, implement them and keep local congregations accountable. While our denomination’s new missional focus is a positive development, whether or not we will live into our vocation as pro-reconciliation/anti-racism denomination remains an open question.

On the first day of business Monday July 20th, the General Assembly passed GA-1518 “Black Lives Matter: A Movement for All” calling us to “support” the Black Lives Matter movement “by joining the cause; sharing awareness; supporting and encouraging our congregations to be safe spaces and sanctuary for peaceful protesters, participate in and host sacred conversations and dialogue on race relations and inclusion, and be spiritual allies in prayer, for God to enable the pursuit of justice through those who take a stand and lift their voices for justice.” A second “emergency” resolution GA-1539, “Charleston and Beyond: Terror, Intimidation and the Burning of Black Churches,” proved more continuous. With a
divided house, it was sent back to the resolution committee to be revised. The revised resolution passed and calls “on the General Minister and President’s Pastoral Table to work with Reconciliation, the Council on Christian Unity and the College of Regional Ministers to establish appropriate means to commemorate the Charleston Nine and their families and to encourage predominantly white Disciples congregations in the United States and Canada to worship and serve with predominantly African American congregations to work to eliminate the sin of systemic racism.” In this revised version of the resolution “systemic racism” was named and “predominately white congregations” are invited to join African American congregations in the struggle to dismantle systemic racism. While these two resolutions call Disciples to exercise national leadership in the Black Lives Matter movement, many Disciples of color and their white allies are concerned that Mission First! may sideline the denomination’s historic pro-reconciliation/anti-racism commitment.

The call to be a mission-driven denomination has long and deep roots in the ecumenical movement. Mission First! at its best will embody the Mission Dei, the Latin term for “mission of God,” a concept that changed the way the mainline church thought about mission in the mid-twentieth century. At the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany in 1952, Missio Dei theology entered the ecumenical movement. Instead of thinking that the church has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world, Willingen argued that God is fulfilling a mission in the world. From a missional theology perspective, Christians are called to discern the movement of the Spirit and join it through Spirit-led, Christ-centered prophetic ministries. This shift from a “church-centric” missiology to a “God-centered” missiology was a “game-changer” in mission in the mind of Disciples minister and Christian Century editor Rev. Harold E Fey (1898-1990) who said after the conference, “After Willingen, Disciples mission will never be the same.” Through a Missio Dei theology, Christian leaders began to discern parables of the kingdom in revolutionary movements of freedom and justice throughout the world.

In the 1950s and 1960s in America the Civil Rights Movement erupted on the scene. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in Dallas, Texas on Sunday, September 25, 1966. In a sermon “Beyond Discovery, Love,” Dr. King called on Disciples to become prophetic leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, proclaiming:

In our nation today a mighty struggle is taking place. It is a struggle to conquer the reign of an evil monster called segregation and its inseparable twin called discrimination—a monster that has wondered through this land for well-nigh one hundred years, stripping millions of Negro people of their sense of dignity and robbing them of their birthright of freedom....We must make a choice. Will we continue to bless a status quo that needs to be blasted and reassure a social order that needs to be reformed, or will we give ourselves unreservedly to God and His Kingdom? Will we
continue to march to the drum beat of conformity and respectability, or will we listen to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march only to the soul-saving music of eternity? More than ever before we are today challenged by the words of yesterday, "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds."

As an unarmed African American is killed by a police officer every twenty-six hours in America today, we must make a choice. Will we surrender ourselves unreservedly to God and His Kingdom? Will we courageously join the faith-rooted struggle for racial and economic justice?

A year a half later, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was brutally murdered at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. A few months later during the summer of 1968 Disciples would institutionalize our movement into a mainline denomination, changing our name from the International Convention of the Christian Churches (Disciple of Christ) to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For all intents and purposes, our network of congregations and agencies became a church in 1968, a year of revolution. We became an institution when anti-institutional sentiment was at an all time high. While Disciples had had a rhetorical commitment to racial reconciliation and justice, it was unclear what form it would take in the life of our new denomination.

In response to the "Black Manifesto" (1969) that demanded $500 million in reparations for African Americans, Disciples established the Urban Emergency Response Fund to raise money to eradicate poverty which was seen as the root cause of racism. From 1969-1972, $1.5 million a year was raised for poverty alleviation.

In 1973 the Urban Emergency Fund was renamed Reconciliation Mission, seeking a more wholistic focus. Funds would be used to support programs that sought to reduce extreme domestic poverty, including faith-rooted organizing and advocacy initiatives that sought to end racial discrimination and economic injustice. In 1996, our denomination began a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop strategies for congregational engagement to dismantle it.

At a contentious General Assembly in Kansas City in 2001, Disciples formalized our identity as a pro-reconciliation/anti-racist denomination, alongside developing new leadership, establishing 1000 new churches and transforming 1000 churches. These four mission imperatives grew out of the “2020 Vision” initiative of General Minster and President Dick Hamm that called us to be a “faithful growing church of true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice." We partnered with Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training to equip leaders in the anti-
racist movement through regional trainings, several of which I was able to attend with Rev. Mary Anne Glover.

In 2007, Regions were encouraged to inspire and equip congregations for the ministry of reconciliation. The Northeastern Region established a Northeastern Anti-Racism team that currently has four members serving from Park Avenue Christian Church (Rev. Louis Alfredo-Cartegena, Rev. Mary Anne Glover, Rev. Peter Heltzel, and Chantilly Mers). Our Anti-Racism team has sought to strengthen our Region’s anti-racism ministry through congregational and regional trainings.

While our denomination continues to support an Office of Reconciliation as part of the Office of General Minister and President, since Mission First! intimates a denominational downsizing, it’s unclear what the future of the Office of Reconciliation and our Disciples anti-racist witness will be. Since the Reconciliation Ministry is supported by the annual Reconciliation special offering, the future of this initiative really lays in the hands of all of us Disciples.

As our General Church discerns, “Where is God calling us next?” The Park is also in a spirit of discernment about our future, given the recent announcement of the retirement of Pastor Alvin O’Neal Jackson. The Park is unique in our denomination because it is at once the oldest continuously worshipping congregation and one of the most innovative, progressive congregations in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), always on the forefront of the faith-rooted struggle for racial, social, gender and economic justice.

Pastor Jackson has embodied the spirit of justice and reconciliation during his nine years as Senior Pastor at The Park. Bringing together the best insights and virtues of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Thurman, Pastor Jackson’s mystical-prophetic theology has lead The Park to be a “big, bold, bodacious and beautiful” congregation, accepting the “divinity of difference” within all people.

Like Howard Thurman, Pastor Jackson sees reconciliation as a spiritual discipline that should be embodied in our life together. In his Disciplines of the Spirit, Thurman talks about reconciliation as a discipline. As we seek to dismantle institutional racism, we need to do the internal work of dismantling it in our hearts. Like the discipline of prayer, the discipline of reconciliation is ongoing existential work that needs to be practiced daily in the rhythms and rituals of community. Thurman wrote,

The quality of reconciliation is that of wholeness; it seeks to effect and further harmonious relations in a totally comprehensive climate. … The concern for reconciliation finds expression in the simple human desire to understand others and to be understood by others. These are the building blocks of the society of man, the precious ingredients without which man’s life is a nightmare and the future of his life on the planet doomed.
As Thurman pastored a prophetic interracial Church of the Fellowship of all People in San Francisco, Pastor Jackson has guided The Park to deeper diversity and communal wholeness in our beloved New York City.

As we seek to dismantle systemic racism, our work should be shaped by the deepest wells of spirituality. Since the soul and the psyche are related, the work of reconciliation, while a political struggle, is also a spiritual struggle, with personal and interpersonal dimensions. As humans we all long to be re-joined to our whole self, but this journey of the heart is always in the context of community. Given the “internalized superiority” of whites and the “internalized inferiority” of people of color (concepts used in Crossroads training), it is vital to establish open tables where we can all honestly share where we are on the journey. Through open and vulnerable conversations about racism, we will be able to transform our prophetic grief into prophetic action for justice in New York City, New York State and the nation, encouraging each other toward full maturation in Christ Jesus.

The Christian call is to be a unified self as well as a unified whole as the body of Christ. The discipline of reconciliation is seeking to understand what Christ is calling us to do and to live it out in our communities, seeking wholeness for the sake of a fragmented world. Because we are frail, fragile and wounded, this is difficult work, but work well worth it, as we unify in common mission.

How can The Park carry on the Spirit of the General Assembly?

One way The Park can carry on the Spirit of the General Assembly would be to hold four Open Table conversations specifically focused on our ministry of reconciliation and racial justice, over the course of a month or two.

In the first conversation, we can share “Who are we?” as individuals, as The Park, as Disciples, expressing our own experiences of racism and passion for justice. In the second conversation we can discuss “What is the purpose of our ministry of reconciliation?” discussing systemic racism, power, trauma and the phenomena of “racial othering,” by watching a video and having an open discussion. In the third conversation, we can discuss how The Park can recognize racism and promote the needs of the multi-cultural community (e.g., Does a particular structure inhibit a person of color leading in our church? While we are a multi-cultural congregation, how does the white liberal narrative affect our community focus? When we seek to change things, how can we overcome the perspective of “We’ve always done it that way”?) In our fourth conversation, we can discern a collective strategy and congregational call to action, seeking to answer the question: “What are concrete strategies for dismantling institutional racism at The Park, in the region, the Disciples and in New York?” Possible congregational actions could include a book group (e.g., Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow or Toni Morrison’s Beloved), a collective organizing experience (joining a local campaign for justice), establish a
consistent pulpit exchange with an African American Disciples Church, or something new that is birthed through the Spirit.

Rev. Dr. William Barber II, Senior Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) spoke the last night of the General Assembly, calling Disciples to join the Moral Movement. An old friend of Pastor Jackson, Rev. Dr. Barber preached a sermon at The Park, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:19-26), on Pentecost Sunday May 24th. Since Dr. Barber will be teaching at Union Theological Seminary this Fall we should engage him in structured conversations to help guide us in establishing a vibrant social witness that is intentionally connected to the growing national faith-rooted struggle for justice.

Dr. Barber is calling on faith-rooted activists to join him in mobilizing faith-rooted moral movements for racial and economic justice in state capitols around the country. On Monday July 13th, Rev. Dr. Barber led a Moral Movement Mass March in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the first day of a U.S. District Court trial about the constitutionality of the state’s voting laws, including issues of a voter ID law, limiting early voting, and limiting same-day registration, and many other practices that are intentionally trying to take away access to voting typically utilized by African-Americans.

North Carolina is our Selma. Fifty years after Dr. King led the Selma to Montgomery March during the Civil Rights Movement, Rev. Dr. Barber led the Moral Movement Mass March in Winston-Salem. Voting Rights are under attack and churches are being burned; it’s time for a national mobilization. The growing Moral Movement is a concrete opportunity for faith leaders to join the struggle to dismantle structural racism and build an inclusive economy for all.

Our own New York City is a “Tale of Two Cities.” In order to engage our economic inequity and racial injustice in our city, we need a bold prophetic vision of public engagement and a congregational organizing and advocacy strategy. The Moral Monday movement in New York offers another concrete opportunity for the members of The Park to put our faith into action in the faith-rooted struggle for racial and economic justice through keeping Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo accountable to pass policies that help New Yorkers who suffer the most.

Throughout our denomination’s history, The Park has set an example of innovative, prophetic urban ministry for the General Church. Through our own prophetic pro-reconciliation/anti-racist witness I hope and pray The Park will inspire our General Church to redouble our pro-reconciliation/anti-racist efforts as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada seeks to put Mission First!