

# **Stone-Campbell Dialogue (1999-2016):**

## **A Dialogue of Hope**

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### *How it all began*

It was at the 1998 board meeting of the World Convention of Churches of Christ (WCCC) that Richard Hamm, General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), raised the question of how Disciples could legitimately claim to be committed to Christian unity if they consistently avoided pursuing any relationship with other Stone-Campbell churches with whom Disciples share a common history and common roots. His comment immediately elicited a positive response from several other members of the WCCC board asking how this important question might be taken up in a positive and constructive way.

In April of the next year, Robert Welsh, the newly elected president of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), working with Henry Webb and John Mills from the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and Doug Foster from the Churches of Christ, made initial inquiries about pulling together a group of leaders from each of the three major North American “streams” of the Stone-Campbell Movement (Churches of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ) to pursue an “informal, exploratory conversation to heal the divisions and to encourage reconciliation among these three churches.” That initial gathering took place on June 25, 1999, in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the Westwood Church of Christ that included the following participants: Doug Foster, Gary Holloway, and Michael Armour from the Churches of Christ; Richard Hamm, Robert Welsh and Raymond Brown from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); and, Henry Webb, John Mills and James North from the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

This exploratory conversation proved to be open, honest, sometimes difficult – and yet surprisingly hopeful and concluded with a proposal to launch a “national dialogue” between these three churches focused on the goal of “developing relationships and trust within the three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement through worship and through charitable and frank dialogue “that the world may believe.”

This exploratory meeting in Cincinnati also agreed to expand the number of participants in future dialogue sessions to include 20 people: six from each of the “streams,” and two observers whose ministries served all three churches: the World Convention of Churches of Christ (General Secretary Lyndsay Jacobs) and Peace on Earth Ministries (Victor Knowles, editor of *One Body* magazine)

The national dialogue was thus launched with the mandate of seeking reconciliation within the fractured Stone-Campbell Movement. The proposal also explicitly stated that the dialogue would *not* seek any kind of organizational or structural merger; but rather, it would seek to build understanding and trust among the three “streams” of the movement as a witness to the world of God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

#### *Early Dialogue Sessions*

The first meeting of the national dialogue was hosted at the Disciples Center in Indianapolis, IN, focusing on the topic, “What

might have been done differently to avoid the two major divisions that had taken place within our stone-Campbell tradition?" It was a fresh and creative way to look at our histories – beginning with a self-critical examination of what “we” (each of our churches) might have done differently in our life and relationships with these other churches to prevent the separation of our movement. The papers were written by Doug Foster from Churches of Christ [CoC]; D. Newell Williams on behalf of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) [CC(DC)]; and Henry Webb from the perspective of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ [CC/CC].

At that initial meeting the potential of this dialogue was strongly affirmed as a conversation that was long-overdue for churches that see themselves as part of the common heritage of Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and who claim a shared commitment to Christian unity as “our polar star.” (Note: copies of the three initial papers are included in this issue of the *LTS Quarterly*.)

The second session of the dialogue was hosted by the Madison Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, in June 2000. The major paper at that meeting had been written by Peter Morgan, president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, on the topic, “Celebrating Areas of Consensus.” Perhaps the most surprising development in this second meeting was the writing of a common “*Confession of Sin and Affirmation of Faith*,” especially because the first meeting of the dialogue had agreed that we would not be producing any written agreements or common statements on behalf of our churches. This “confession and affirmation” was therefore claimed only as a statement representing the thinking and commitment of the 18 dialogue participants for themselves. In its third meeting in November 2000, the dialogue teams met at Cincinnati Christian University to explore several key issues where we knew that we had both theological disagreements and differences in practice; for example, on the topics of church structure; women and leadership in the church; and, baptism and “open membership.” (*Reports and papers from this meeting and all dialogue sessions are available at [www.councilonchristianunity.org/stone-campbell-dialogue/](http://www.councilonchristianunity.org/stone-campbell-dialogue/)*).

In its fourth session in August 2001, the dialogue met in Lexington, KY, to facilitate its participation and sharing in the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Cane Ridge Revival -- the “birth-place of our movement.” Given that context, it seemed appropriate that the focus of discussion would center upon how the Stone-Campbell Movement has understood and pursued its historic calling to Christian

unity from the perspectives of our different traditions. Papers were prepared James North [CC/CC], D. Newell Williams [CC(DC)], and Michael Armour [CoC] (these essays also appear in this issue)).

### *An Ever Expanding Agenda*

#### A. Reaching Out to the “Grassroots”

In 2002 the national dialogue team began to include as part of the meeting’s agenda an opportunity to engage local congregational leaders in conversation and to hear their experiences, issues and concerns in relation to seeking healing and reconciliation among congregations who share a common Stone-Campbell tradition. In June, the dialogue session was held at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, KY; over 100 local leaders (elders and pastors) from a diversity of congregations in the Louisville area came together – many meeting for the first time! – to share a meal together, to share stories of their ministries, and to join in worship and prayer. This gathering with local congregations proved to be very successful – especially in helping to identify the realities of local church life related to the dialogue, and in hearing the fears, concerns and stereotypes of each other from the perspective of the “grass roots.” This practice of engaging a local community as part of our dialogue sessions continued in the meetings of the national dialogue team for several years (Atlanta, 2003; Indianapolis, 2004; Dallas, 2005; Nashville, 2006; Austin, 2007; St. Louis, 2008; Cincinnati and Lexington, 2009; Johnson City, TN, 2010; Albuquerque, 2011; and, Grand Prairie, TX in 2012).

Building on its session in Louisville, the national dialogue identified the need to develop study materials for congregational and local use that would offer (a) concrete steps on how to begin a local dialogue; (b) specific resources about the history and development of the Stone-Campbell movement, including information to help in getting to know one another as churches today; and, (c) guidance for local communities to engage in conversation that would build on the experience and resources produced by the national dialogue team. This “*Manual for Local Sessions*” was jointly written by members of the national team over the next several years; and, after being tested locally, it was made available on-line in 2007 (see [http://councilonchristianunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Stone-Campbell\\_Study-guide.pdf](http://councilonchristianunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Stone-Campbell_Study-guide.pdf)).

## B. Addressing the Authority of Scripture and Biblical Interpretation

Perhaps the most significant issue at the heart of the division between these churches is that of the authority of Scripture and biblical interpretation. Throughout discussion of specific topics in dialogue meetings -- whether the role of women in the life and leadership of the church; how each stream carries out global mission; how our churches celebrate the Lord's Supper; or the nature of the unity we are seeking -- *the* key issue that continued to surface was how our different traditions understand the "authority of scripture" and how we interpret biblical texts in light of the changing context and challenges of today's world.

This topic served as the primary focus of several meetings of the national dialogue. In 2003, the meeting explored the understandings of "the authority of scripture and how we use scripture" in the life of our churches today. In 2005, Eugene Boring, professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School in Ft. Worth, TX [CC(DOC)], presented a paper on "How Disciples Interpret the Bible" (see below) -- and, to the surprise of the dialogue members, there was general affirmation and support of his outline of basic principles that should be used when interpreting scripture. The news release on that meeting noted that the dialogue had discovered "common ground" around the issue of scriptural interpretation which offered hope for the future of the dialogue.

The next meeting of the dialogue (in 2006) continued to explore the theme of scripture interpretation as we focused on "The current state of hermeneutics in our three churches." Growing out of that discussion and building on the previous work of the dialogue around the issues of the authority of scripture, the dialogue teams produced a common statement titled "Stone-Campbell Affirmations on Scripture" that affirmed:

- (a) We all hold Scripture as central and indispensable to our faith.
- (b) We all believe in the inspiration and authority of the Holy Bible.
- (c) We all seek to be shaped by the Scriptures in matters of faith, doctrine, and practice.
- (d) 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.

(e) Yet we all affirm through the grace of God that we will seek to understand one another.

(This statement is included as *Appendix 1* in the study materials [*Manual for Local Sessions*] that were released the following year.)

### C. Great Communion Celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Declaration and Address*

In 2009 the dialogue endorsed a new direction for its life and work in preparing for a commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Campbell's 1809 *Declaration and Address*. Working with the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, a joint task force was named to produce materials to assist Stone-Campbell churches around the globe in planning celebrations of this "Great Communion Celebration" in their local settings. The focus of the celebration was to help Stone-Campbell churches and members to learn about, and consider the significance of the *Declaration and Address* for the church today.

In October 2009, in hundreds of places in North America and beyond -- Africa, India, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South America -- thousands of Christians from the Stone-Campbell Movement gathered to worship, to renew the biblical and historical calling for the unity of all Christians, and to celebrate the Lord Supper together. This event, the "Great Communion Celebration," represented the heart of the purpose of the Stone-Campbell dialogue in bringing people together across previous barriers and divisions to worship together, to learn about our common tradition, to come to love one another, and to find ways to serve the world together in the name of Jesus Christ.

The meeting of the national dialogue returned to Lexington, KY, on May 15, 2016, to share in another 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration that lifted up the founding of the first Stone-Campbell congregation in Lexington. This event, "*Restoration 200*" (like the "Great Communion Celebration"), brought together several hundred members of congregations from the three "streams" as a public witness to our calling as a people of seeking the revival of unity, liberty and love, both within the church and in our society.

#### D. Common Mission and Service

In November 2009 at our dialogue meeting in Lexington Kentucky, the national team sought to discern whether our work was done or should continue. At the conclusion of a lively two-day discussion, the dialogue 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 as a basis for discovering our oneness in Christ.

Over the last seven years we have worked with local Christians in addressing issues ranging from how to engage in inner city ministries (Albuquerque, 2011); examining issues of "moral injury" and how to minister together to people traumatized by war and domestic abuse (Indianapolis, 2013); exploring new approaches to establishing churches that go beyond the traditional and comfortable models of the past (Abilene, 2014); and, addressing racism both within the church and in our society (Baltimore, 2015). [Papers and reports from these meetings will be shared in the next issue of the *Quarterly*.]

#### *A Journey of Hope*

In looking back over the 17 years of dialogue (1999-2016), the national dialogue team believes that this has been a journey of hope—grounded in an approach that has truly sought mutual understanding and love, and has always been nurtured by the grace of God. The dialogue has served as an important meeting place to reclaim our fundamental identity as churches that share a powerful heritage in the Stone-Campbell movement and in affirming our churches to be a people of unity: a unity that celebrates both the congregation as the essential locus of church life and the value of diversity in belief and practice. Perhaps the most important fruit of these efforts has been contributing to the rise of commitment in towns and cities all across the United States—and even around the world—to refuse to perpetuate the separation and division that has characterized our life for many years, and to find ways of serving and being formed into the image of Christ together.

The dream for the future of the dialogue is that the work of the Spirit will continue to break down the barriers of mistrust, ignorance of

or indifference toward one another, and to bring us to understand that we need each other. Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers (John 17:20-21) was not a prayer for unity for unity's sake. Rather, Christ apparently saw our unity and oneness as the single most powerful evidence to the world of Christ's divine love and reconciliation to a hurting society and a broken world.

The national dialogue team has seen and learned about the work of the Holy Spirit in so many places— not just among those of us who share the Stone-Campbell heritage, but among all who love and claim Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. It has been and will continue to be a dialogue grounded in faith and lived in the hope of God's promise!