

Towards closer fellowship

Report of the international Disciples of Christ-Reformed dialogue, Birmingham, United Kingdom, March 4-11 1987

[Introduction](#)

[Our common faith](#)

[Issues we face together](#)

[Recommendations](#)

Introduction

1. The Church of Jesus Christ is one, but the different Christian communions are separated from one another. The Reformed churches and the Disciples of Christ have entered into a dialogue in the hope of healing their own divisions and so more nearly manifest the unity in which both so firmly believe. This is a report of that dialogue.
2. The Reformed Christians were represented by a delegation from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a family of some 160 Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational and united churches from throughout the world. Their origins, in some cases, even precede the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, and all recognize some form of historical relationship to the Swiss Reformation. Their global expansion has taken place largely as a result of the missionary efforts of the 19th century.
3. The Disciples delegation represented the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council. The Disciples of Christ are a family of churches with origins in the 19th century in the United States, Great Britain, and Australasia. They quickly spread to various parts of the world, also largely through missionary efforts. From the beginning they emphasized Christian unity as one of their fundamental concerns. Today there are about 3 million Disciples in some 35 different countries.
4. The dialogue began to take serious form with a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in the summer of 1984, when representatives of the Reformed and Disciples met to explore the possibility of a consultation between these two families of Christians. The results of that meeting were presented in *Reformed and Disciples of Christ in Dialogue*, published by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1985. Included in this booklet is a survey of the history of relations between the Disciples and Reformed, and lists of places where the two have cooperated and currently work together. Also there is a response by a Reformed theologian to this history of relationships.
5. Both sides discussed with their appropriate governing bodies the possibility of a dialogue, and received approval to proceed. Plans were then

made for a formal gathering in Birmingham, England, 4-11 March, 1987. During this meeting the two delegations, involving over twenty participants, engaged in wide-ranging, searching conversations, listened to and discussed papers, learned about cooperative activities and actual unions of churches. Each day included worship, and there was an opportunity to worship in churches in the region around Birmingham.

6. The dialogue is seen by the Disciples as an opportunity to make clear the international character of their own commitment to unity, particularly as they learn about the uniting and united ventures of Reformed and Disciples in many parts of the world. Also, by engaging the Reformed churches in conversation the Disciples might be able to re-appropriate their own historic emphasis on the grace of God experienced and made known especially in baptism and the Lord's Supper. For the Reformed, dialogue with the Disciples represents an opportunity to explore some issues of concern in their heritage. The Disciples separated from the Reformed precisely over some of the issues that have continued to be divisive in the Reformed churches, including the authority of creeds, the nature of the church, and ministry. By talking with the Disciples, the Reformed will be able to reconsider these issues. Also, conversations with the Disciples reinforces an increasing awareness among the Reformed of the significance of the unity of the church and the centrality of the sacraments in the life of the church. For both groups, the dialogue has provided an occasion to examine critically a wide range of issues over against and in tandem with another community of God's people. It is an encouragement to participate in what is fittingly called "a reconciliation of memories" over past divisions.

7. One of the results of this dialogue has been the discovery that there is great diversity within each church family, so much so that serious questions must be raised about the validity of any purported church-dividing issues. At each place where there seems to have been a grave impasse, it is found that there are some groups within both the Disciples and Reformed that stand on either side of the issue. Even on such a question as baptism, where the practices and theology appear to be so different, we learn that the sides are already living together in united churches where such issues have been overcome. The dialogue has led to better understanding and provides the basis for further cooperative efforts in mission and witness. This report thus reflects differences and diversity along with delight at the level of unity thus far achieved, and great hope for the future relations of the Reformed and Disciples as they seek to be faithful people in God's world.

Our common faith

8. On both sides Disciples and Reformed share certain fundamental commitments which deserve to be reaffirmed as guidelines for the future. These commitments have to do with the calling and mission of the church itself. Among other things the church is called to be:

A community living by God's word in holy scripture

9. The church lives by faithful hearing of the Word of God, as the testimony of the Bible is witnessed to afresh in its bearing upon today and tomorrow. This also involves listening receptively and critically to the witness of past generations to that testimony; but it requires more than merely traditional reliance on past interpretations. The range and power of

God's Word is not confined to the understanding unfolded in any one age or time - whether the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation or the 19th century. We are certainly called to hear and respect the witness of our ancestors in the faith, and to learn from it. But to do this in order to engage in faithful hearing of God's Word *today*. The reason is not simply that times change; it is that the gospel is always calling us forward toward the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church should always be:

A community in reformation

10. Our communions owe a particular debt to the movement of Reformation that began in Western Europe in the 16th century. Much of our institutions, order and practice derive from that beginning which retains special significance for us, whether we trace our historical origins to it more or less directly as some Reformed churches do, or only indirectly as the Disciples and newer Reformed churches do. These churches share a complex, diverse common heritage. But they also share the awareness that the church is continually called to reappraisal and renewed reformation. Complex social, political, cultural and intellectual developments since the 16th century have affected us all. Particularly important have been the Enlightenment, the Evangelical Awakening, and the global expansion of Christianity. The enslavement and oppression of racial groups during the period of colonization has also had far-reaching consequences. All these challenge us to look self-critically on the ways in which our churches have developed and identified themselves throughout the centuries, and in particular on the long history of Christian separation, sub-division and denomination-building. Disciples and Reformed alike are increasingly aware today that the church is called to be:

A community visibly united in the faith and service of Jesus Christ

11. This certainly involves the quest for unity among *all* Christians and churches, for ways of discovering and expressing that unity even now, albeit this is often only possible in fragmentary and provisional forms. But it is also a challenge to those churches which, like ours, are especially closely related to each other to engage seriously in the search for visible unity between themselves. Current ecumenical encounters, local, regional and international, have already increased our appreciation of each other's tradition and testimony and invite us both to critical appraisal of our own heritage and to a renewed search for a greater unity.

Lord's Supper

12. Disciples and Reformed are in basic agreement about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. We celebrate it in obedience to the command of Christ as a "sacrament" or "ordinance" instituted by him. By partaking of it we remember him and his sacrificial death, but the significance of the Lord's Supper, for us, is by no means restricted to its commemorative aspect. The dominant theological position in both traditions has always stressed that the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, is a means of grace, a sign and seal which makes Christ's presence known to us through the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*). Whilst the Lord's Supper is a memorial (*anamnesis*) in that it brings to redemptive memory the earthly life and death of Christ, it goes far beyond memorial, bringing the participant into communion with the one who not only died but rose again from the dead and with whom we can have a living relationship. The experience of communion with Christ, who is present in the Lord's Supper, therefore evokes praise and thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). It also reaffirms for us that the church is a "Covenant community" as we respond in a covenant meal to God's

initiative. Such a response entails a commitment on the part of the eucharistic community to be a prophetic sign of God's presence with, and loving care for, humankind. Moreover, the Supper, for both traditions, is a sign of the unity of believers and a means of proclaiming the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ "until he comes". This eschatological dimension not only points to future aspects of the Lord's Supper as the "meal of the Kingdom" but emphasizes that, through Christ, we already participate in the present reality of the Kingdom of God.

13. The issue of "closed communion" which in the 19th century was instrumental in causing the Disciples to disassociate themselves from current Presbyterian practices, is no longer an issue dividing Disciples and Reformed. For the most part, Reformed churches welcome to the Table members of other Christian communities, as do the Disciples. Both traditions recognize that the Table is the Lord's, not ours, and that all Christians may approach that Table on Christ's own invitation.

14. Both traditions affirm the importance of the Lord's Supper for the life and witness of the Community of Faith. Reformed ministers are ordained as ministers of "Word and Sacrament" and Disciples ministers are ordained to these same functions. Both traditions, therefore, affirm the centrality of the Lord's Supper for their understanding of the nature of church.

15. Another way of affirming the centrality of the Lord's Supper for Disciples is weekly communion. Frequency of the Lord's Supper has never been a divisive issue between Disciples and Reformed, although Disciples would encourage all Reformed churches to celebrate the Supper more frequently than quarterly or monthly. Weekly celebration is already the practice in a number of Reformed churches. Such weekly communion, of course, has always been part of the Reformed ethos, if not of Reformed practice, as Calvin strongly (though unsuccessfully) argued for weekly communion in Geneva. The Reformed tradition, for its part, would encourage the Disciples to take even more seriously the link between the preaching of the Word and the Lord's Supper.

Issues we face together

The nature of the church

16. Disciples and Reformed both affirm that God's free act of grace brings the church into being. God has remained faithful to the covenant established for God's people, even when they have rebelled against it. In the fullness of time God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to unite all in heaven and on earth in one body, giving access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 1.3-10, 2.11-22).

17. Thus there is only one Church of God. The church is holy because God has redeemed and consecrated it through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church is catholic because Christ calls it to express the fullness of his own life and ministry, drawing all peoples into one fellowship in all places and times. The church is apostolic because Christ commissions it to proclaim to all peoples the gospel first entrusted to the apostles.

18. The church is called to a continual offering of itself and the world to God in a life of worship prayer and praise; it receives and expresses the renewing life of the Holy Spirit in word and Sacrament; it declares the reconciling and saving power of Christ in preaching and service; it bears witness to Christ's sovereignty over all the nations.

19. Hence the church, called into being by God's Word, becomes visible as the local community of faith gathers around the Lord's Table, receives those newly baptized into his name, studies the Word of God, hears the gospel proclaimed, helps the poor and needy, and is sustained by the ministry of those called and set apart for that service. Christ has promised to be in the midst where two or three are gathered in his name, and where two or three are so gathered they are necessarily united with all others so gathered through space and time (cf. Disciples-Roman Catholic International Dialogue: Agreed Account of Nashville Meeting, 1984, *Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal*, Vol. XXV, No. 4 (1986, p.417)).

20. Disciples and Reformed have generally found no difficulty in relating their understanding of the church either to the local congregation or to the church universal. But it has sometimes been difficult to express the reality of the church in a way which does full justice to its nature beyond the local congregation. Moreover, particular emphases or concerns can distort the understanding of the whole. For example, the notion of a covenant people causes problems if that people is identified with a particular nation, race, or state. Again the voluntary principle, classically expressed by John Locke, that a church is a voluntary society of those who join together of their own accord to worship God, can obscure God's initiative in calling the church and blind local congregations to their involvement with other congregations in mutual support and service. Finally, the identification of a church with a particular culture, way of life, race, or social grouping, obscures God's intention that all shall be one in Christ. We recognize and confess that such partial understandings have existed in both our traditions, and that we can only realize and embody the unity God intends as we progress beyond them. Thus, although the church already is the Body of Christ, in its existing forms it is a provisional embodiment of the Kingdom (cf. Anglican-Reformed International Dialogue, *God's Reign and our Unity*, paras. 30, 35).

21. Historically the church has made affirmations of its faith in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds as a way of manifesting its unity. From the 16th century onwards the Reformed churches believed it important to express their witness to the gospel and its implications for their day in particular confessions of faith. The way such confessions of faith were sometimes used as exclusive tests of fellowship led Disciples in the 19th century to reject them and to prefer only the simplest confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the son of God, found in the gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament.

22. Changes in biblical and theological hermeneutics have led increasing numbers in both traditions to recognize the difficulty of claiming that one particular credal formulation is an adequate statement of the truth for all peoples and times. Changes in Western culture and an increasing awareness of the challenge of other faiths and cultures have enabled us to recognize that the church needs to confess its faith today in a way which relates it both to scripture and to the contemporary world. Disciples have been reconsidering their attitude to creeds and confessions of faith. Several Reformed churches have found it necessary to confess their faith in the midst of political crisis. Several united churches have found the occasion of union to be a valuable opportunity to confess their faith. Such confessions always need to have as their purpose the building up on the Body of Christ, and their authority lies in their faithfulness to the gospel rather than in the human wisdom involved in their compilation. God's grace remains primary.

Baptism

23. From the responses of Disciples and Reformed to the World Council of Churches' text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, as well as from various teaching documents or common statements of churches in various national settings, it becomes clear that agreement exists on central theological convictions concerning baptism, namely that

- a. baptism is the unique initiatory act which makes explicit for the recipient God's gracious act of redemption in Christ. It signifies dying with Christ to sin and being raised with Christ to new life; it marks a union with Christ, and in it is promised the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit;
- b. baptism also requires the response of faith to God's gracious action. It is administered by and within the church as the Community of Faith. At every baptism, the faith is confessed;
- c. the difference between infant and believers' baptism becomes less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a personal response of faith made within a believing community. Personal confession of faith normally takes place in the presence of the congregation, either at the time of baptism in the case of the believer, or at a later time by those who are baptized as infants;
- d. baptism is the entrance to a life of discipleship within the shared ministry of the whole people of God. It bears witness to the church as a confessing community in which members are led by the Holy Spirit toward lifelong growth in faith.

24. In most places, Disciples and Reformed recognize each other as baptized members of the body of Christ and admit one another freely to their respective eucharistic celebrations.

25. They agree that teaching concerning baptism is never to be developed in a way which undercuts the centrality of justification by grace through faith.

26. Thus also neither tradition can be content with a baptismal theology which excludes children from the Christian community. Reformed affirm that children belong to the covenant people of God and signify their belonging through infant baptism. Disciples affirm that they have a place within the kingdom, which is confirmed in the face of human sin and rebellion, by baptism as a believer for the remission of sins. For a united church to have a double practice is to assert the legitimacy of both these theological views. There is need for fuller discussion in this setting of traditional teaching on original sin.

27. It is consistent with the agreed theology of baptism to perceive baptism as a once-for-all event in the life of the Christian, leading into a continued reception of grace focused by the repeated sacrament of the Lord's Supper. To uphold this theology of grace, Disciples and Reformed should refuse to practise rebaptism. Recognizing that such refusal creates pastoral problems of great difficulty for some individuals and churches, they should support one another in theological and pastoral consistency.

Ministry

28. Our dialogue has confirmed and strengthened the sense, already developed through ecumenical discussion, cooperation, and participation in

uniting churches, that Disciples and Reformed are in fundamental agreement on the theology of ministry. We share the conviction that the ministry of the church has as its basis the ministry and "self-emptying" of Jesus Christ which the proclamation, witness and conduct of the life of the community is to reflect. Into this ministry, Christians are incorporated in baptism. The calling of ministry is thus given to the whole people of God, and constitutes a "priesthood of all believers" in which each Christian ministers to the other and pursues his or her vocation in the world. We believe and experience the empowering of the Holy Spirit in enabling the fulfilment of the various vocations of Christians who together comprise the ministry of the whole church.

29. Within this mutual ministry of the people of God, our traditions have reaffirmed the necessity of a ministry of Word and Sacrament, through which the community is challenged to be faithful, is nurtured, and proclaims the grace and presence of God. Both traditions have always affirmed that such a ministry is to be exercised collegially. They have also seen the need, through various patterns, for an expression of the church's *diaconia*. They have also been concerned with provisions for helping the community and communities to be built-up so that they might participate more effectively in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

30. Historical experience, theological principle, and the needs of ministry have led us to establish and make subject to reform, the patterns of our ministry. Despite claims in the past, Disciples and Reformed have come to acknowledge that there is no single pattern of ministry set down in the New Testament and that no exclusive claims on behalf of any of the historic patterns developed by our churches, or others, are warranted by biblical scholarship, ecumenical consensus, or the challenge of ministry. There are no differences between us to keep us apart, as is illustrated by the instances in which we are already in union.

31. Since the forms of ministry which exist at present are different at various points, despite remarkable similarities, certain issues deserve continued mutual reflection and clarification. Our efforts to deal with these issues must be set within the larger context of theological reflection on the nature of ministry carried out in ecumenical discussion today. Among the matters to be clarified are the following:

32. *The theological meaning of ordination.* Disciples and Reformed share the conviction that the ordering of the ministry of the church justifies certain ministries "set apart" within the ministry of all by the act of ordination, which must be understood in the context of the one ministry of the people of God. Our churches, like all others, are challenged to rediscover the theological meaning of ordination so that it will not be confused either with induction to a pastoral charge or with matters of practice, however significant, such as terms of employment, salary, part-time and full-time service, and standards of accreditation.

33. *Presbyteral Ministry.* In our traditions ministry within the local congregation has been shared among a group of people who have overall responsibility for ensuring that the Word is preached, the sacraments are administered, and discipline, governance and oversight are exercised. To care for this cluster of services our churches have developed certain "offices", e.g. , the minister or pastor, the Reformed "elder" and the Disciples "elder" - which in various ways require clarification through further ecumenical dialogue.

34. *Diaconal Ministry.* The Reformed in the 16th century and the Disciples in the 19th century retained, in a revised form, the office of deacon as an

integral part of the ministry of the whole people of God. Both of our traditions have valued a diaconate as a means of linking the worshipping community with care for the poor and needy of the world and as a means of ordering the life of the local congregation in a way which links the ordained to the whole people of God. Since within and between our two traditions there are and have been different understandings and practices of the role and function of the diaconate, revitalization of this ministry warrants our further mutual attention.

35. *Oversight Ministry*. Disciples and Reformed acknowledge, implicitly and explicitly, the need for oversight (*episkope*) within the church. Within the local congregation this has been focused in the pastors and shared with elders. Beyond the local congregation oversight has been exercised in a variety of ways with different combinations of individual and collegial ministry. In the light of ecumenical dialogue (e.g., *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*), and practical experience of cooperation with other church traditions (e.g., local ecumenical projects in England), both Disciples and Reformed are called upon to consider anew the provisions for *episkope* present within their bodies.

36. Both the Disciples and many of the Reformed ordain women, in keeping with their understanding of oneness in Christ, the inclusiveness of the ministry to the gospel, and the gifts of ministry given to Christians regardless of their sex, race, and other natural and social distinctions. Although we have not considered *the ordination of women* to be an obstacle to mutual recognition between our churches and those which cannot yet in conscience affirm the ordination of women, we cannot consider the issue to be in any way secondary or expendable in the effort for unity in the church, and we therefore press in ecumenical dialogue to keep this concern before all churches of Jesus Christ. We also press to keep before our own churches the concern that all prejudices be eliminated and full equality of opportunity be obtained in our responses to God's call to women in ministry.

Recommendations

37. On the basis of these discussions we believe there are no theological or ecclesiological issues which need to divide us as churches. Consequently we request the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches call upon their member churches to say whether or not they can accept the following declaration:

"The Disciples of Christ and the Reformed churches recognize and accept each other as visible expressions of the one Church of Christ."

Acceptance of this declaration presses us beyond our divided histories toward a common ecumenical future. We believe that this declaration has several specific implications. It implies sufficient consensus between our two traditions on the meaning of the gospel, on baptism, the Lord's Supper, and ministry to enable our churches to recognize and accept each other's members and ministries, to share reciprocally the Lord's Supper, and to engage in common mission, evangelism, and service in the world. The acceptance of each other as churches also implies our commitment to remove other obstacles which keep us from sharing full fellowship and mission in the name of Christ.

38. This unity will clearly need to be expressed in each local and national

context where Disciples and Reformed exist. Its form will vary in different situations. Faithfulness to God's call to visible unity may encourage some of our churches to achieve *some form of visible unity* in their national or regional situation. Our member churches may also be drawn into *closer cooperation* (e.g., local covenants, shared buildings, shared ministries, united congregations, joint mission beyond congregations, and joint theological education) and into *costly solidarity* with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Our churches may further be drawn into dialogue on specific theological and missional issues, e.g., the presidency of the Lord's Supper, the crisis of the environment, peace and justice, the witness of the disabled, the use of inclusive language in theology and liturgy.

39. We trust our common declaration will lead the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to work more deliberately to express their unity in Christ. In anticipation of a growing relationship of unity, we propose several new links, namely that the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches:

- i. (i) Establish regular communication between each other, especially about the major activities, programme strategies, and ecclesiological developments in each tradition, and involving reports to their plenary meetings.
- ii. Send special delegations to each meeting of the DECC's Assembly (every 5-7 years) and Warc's General Council (every 5-7 years). These delegations should include persons from diverse constituencies, such as women and men, those from the "Third World", as well as Europe and North America, and those of different races and ethnic groups.
- iii. Encourage awareness and learning experience from those united churches in which Disciples and Reformed have lived together in faith and witness (viz., United Kingdom, North India, Zaire, Jamaica, Japan, Southern Africa).
- iv. Pursue common theological work, focusing upon common concerns which emerge from our participation in the wider ecumenical movement.
- v. Give attention to the widespread distribution of this report of the Birmingham international consultation, calling upon the churches to study its issues and proposals and to offer their counsel about the future between these two families of churches.