

*We struggle and thrash, and drown; we succumb, even
in despair, and float, and are saved. (John Updike)*

Reflections on the State of the United Church of Christ
for the Council of Conference Ministers

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“State of the church” speeches, particularly by leaders whose terms are coming toward a close, run the risk of becoming overly self-referential and are, therefore, subject to two seductions that can distort perceptions in opposing ways. Ego needs, and pride, can tempt one to review the state of affairs in such a way as to “pad the legacy,” making things brighter and better than the evidence would actually suggest. On the other hand, the inevitable personal and institutional disappointments accumulated over the years can lead to an overly morose assessment of where things are. So I begin this reflection with the reminder first, that it’s not all about me and second, that regardless of whether I’m in a “half-empty” or “half-full” mood, the important thing to remember is that while the glass is not full it does have water in it!

I.

Dan Aleshire of the Association of Theological Schools was quote recently by Alice Hunt of Chicago Theological Seminary: “The Mainline,” he said, “has lost out because it keeps trying to be what it remembers it was.” You would think we might have gotten past this by now. A string of books beginning with theologian Douglas John Hall through Dick Hamm’s more recent *Recreating the Church* has hammered home the lesson that whatever form of Christendom we may have once inhabited, it is now gone, gone, gone! Aleshire’s charge is neatly double-barreled, reminding us not only of the danger of seeking to recover the past, but also of trying to recover a past that never really existed, or if it existed at all, did so for only a very few short post-war years. Poet Donald Hall puts it well: “Nostalgia without history is a decorative fraud.” We know this, but like snakes needing to molt, we hang on to dead skin for fear there will be nothing to replace it.

I believe that the United Church of Christ is in various stages of “getting it” about the radical changes in our cultural location, the related weakening of our ecclesial structures, and the attending missional imperatives this implies. To some degree the differing capacity to “get it” may be generational. Many of us in this room prepared for ministry at precisely the moment the old foundations began to crumble. But we entered a church that still looked sturdy and healthy above grade. Consider – or perhaps better, remember – our surprise, then, when eroding foundations began to give evidence of their weakness in tottering steeples. We’ve spent more than three decades struggling with denial, bewilderment, grief, and anger over this. The past is seductive, even if it is Egypt, and it’s not surprising that folk experiencing the uncertain journey through the wilderness should become an unruly people! If this is true for leaders, it is certainly true for our members who have struggled mightily and we must say faithfully to keep old institutions going. Some places it works longer than others, which only adds to the confusion and the conflict. I’m certain that this reality is, in large measure, what underlies the passion over our disagreements in the national setting governance debates.

The good news is that I believe a critical mass of leaders and followers in the United Church of Christ is now reaching the point of no longer trying to be what they remember we were. New leaders are emerging here in the Council and throughout the church who never knew “the good old days.” The crisis of viability and sustainability which grips many of our conferences (as well as Lutheran synods, Presbyterian presbyteries, and Disciples regions, to name just a few) is grim for leaders to deal with, but strips away any remaining illusions about the “decorative fraud.” This is both spiritually and structurally instructive. On the one hand, it presses us to contemplate once again the truth of what our Reformed ancestors told us about the source of “our only comfort in life and in death.” On the other hand, it makes letting go of cherished structures, if not easy, at least imaginable. I once said to a group of pastors of small rural churches something that I believe is true, even though I recognize it is terribly hard to hear: “Our responsibility is not to keep the old institutions going the way they’ve always gone; our task is to determine what God wants to have happen in this place and then go about figuring out what resources we have to help make that happen.” That is not to suggest that we pretend institutions don’t matter. They do. But if they are to live, they

must grow and be reformed, and occasionally give themselves up and not merely strive to be artifacts of a glorious past or, more likely, a flawed memory.

Easier said than done, of course. Because whether we're local church pastors, or conference ministers, or seminary presidents, or national leaders, we've been called not simply to be spiritual guides and leaders in mission, we've also been called to lead institutions with precious histories and sometimes unrealistic, even pretentious aspirations. "Keeping this place going" may be precisely what the constituency that called us has in mind! Which again presses us to remember the essentially spiritual and theological and pastoral dimension of our institutional responsibilities. Again, not easy. John Updike, whose "silencing" I have mourned deeply of late, once wrote about this deeply spiritual challenge through the imagery of a trip to the beach along the cold Atlantic coast.

Consider. We enter the sea with a shock; our skin and blood shout in protest.

But, that instant, that leap, what do we find? Ecstasy and buoyance. Swimming offers a parable. We struggle and thrash, and drown; we succumb, even in despair, and float, and we are saved, ("Lifeguard," 1961).

Ministry has been described by a more conventional theologian as "helping people relax into the buoyancy of grace." I think we're starting to get that, if for no other reason than we've been shocked awake by the cold waters into which we've been tossed. And, at the end of the day, this will be, and already is, a good thing.

II.

A second challenge continues to be our struggle to throw off – to use an admittedly sloppy piece of shorthand – the hegemony of the Enlightenment with its heavy emphasis on the human intellect and ethical behavior. This is certainly not to dismiss reason or to debase the moral element of our witness. But the dominant streams of the United Church of Christ continue to believe that if only we can be intellectually credible and morally courageous, we will ultimately win the day. I would not want to abandon either of these. But what are too often missing are the equally necessary elements of evangelical passion, spiritual desire, and sacramental mystery. The twin orthodoxies of right thought and right action cannot be sustained without deep practice. I'm not sure we really get that yet.

Many of the institutions we lead in the United Church of Christ had their origins in the Second Great Awakening. Ironically, we have tended to claim only half of the legacy of this formative history. We remember and live out the great moral revival of that era, but often ignore the evangelical revival that was at its heart. Or, we assume that today's form of evangelical revival somehow precludes or is antithetical to the kind of moral revival that is so crucial to our time. The Stillspeaking Initiative awakened us to "the spiritually homeless" in our midst, as Ron Buford liked to put it. Some of us rediscovered an evangelical mandate to reach out to those who inhabit our communities yearning for a relationship with Christ and with the community of Christ's people and who have yet to be startled by the stillspeaking accent of the Gospel. But turning these tentative embers of evangelical zeal into the fire of revival remains a future calling rather than a present condition for us.

Many in our congregations are beginning to engage spiritual practices such as testimony, prayer, Sabbath keeping, labyrinth walking, journaling, devotional reading of scripture and the spiritual classics, retreat, the discipline of silence. But we have a long way to go. Far too much of our liturgical life feels like the promotion of an agenda rather than the encounter with a Presence or the experience of awe. The Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church begins with "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen." How distant that splendid horizon is from the far too typical "Good morning" that greets us in worship, sometimes repeated when the "right back atcha" is not shouted out loud enough. OK, we're now getting to pet peeves! But when free worship becomes chaotic or inept worship, when informality renders liturgy banal, and when imagination is squelched by prayers and liturgies laden with pedestrian language that not only tells us what to think but also presumes to educate or domesticate God as well, it's no wonder that our rituals fail to nurture the deep yearning for a God we know to be found more in the drama of mystery and the poetry of awe.

The state of the United Church of Christ will largely depend on how we can stimulate and then feed a ravenous hunger for God in a people who all too often act as if the goal in communion is taking the tiniest piece of bread possible, or who worry that we might splash too much water on the baptized. It seems to me that Mercersburg's Henry

Harbaugh got it right when he composed this communion prayer for his little volume, *The Golden Censer*: “O God, who is eternal salvation and inestimable blessedness: grant to all your servants, we pray you, that we who have received things holy and blessed may be enabled to be holy and blessed evermore.” Here is poetic and pastoral imagination linking sacraments and ethics in a way rarely seen, I fear, in our churches. In a recent review of two books on the sacraments, Walter Brueggemann lifts up and affirms their sense of the “urgency of the question of Eucharistic presence in a flattened, technological world that has almost nothing left of the art of the sacramental,” (*Christian Century*, February 24, 2009, p. 55). But contrary to Thomas Friedman, the world is not flat even when we make it seem so with thin liturgies and weak practices leaving us little solace and making it difficult for our flock to see through the veil or beyond the Jordan to any place we might call home.

III.

The founders of the United Church of Christ believed firmly that one measure of the state of the church was its capacity to bear witness to the unity of the one church of Jesus Christ. Our vocation as a “united and uniting” church was foundational and they envisioned fundamental reformation among the churches to deal with the scandal of division. There was a moment when the leaders of the church understood that there was something quite wrong in the divisions that fragmented the church and its witness. In many ways it seems that moment has passed. It’s not merely due to the ecumenical disappointments of these five decades, the weakness of many ecumenical institutions and instruments, or the shifting landscape of church life, though it is all of that to be sure. And it’s not merely that success has bred a certain contentment with the way things are, though that’s part of it, too.

Horace Bushnell, in another century and context, once spoke of “sin that needs salvation,” but that has “grown so thoroughly respectable that we have lost any just impression of its deformity,” (quoted in Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 1, pg. 130). The state of ecumenism, in the United Church of Christ, and beyond, has been so often reduced to the organizational disarray of councils and the disappointments of dialogues that we have forgotten it is, at its heart, a theological problem. In 1937 as part of the preparation for the Second World Conference on Faith

and Order to be held in Edinburgh, Scotland, Karl Barth wrote about “The Church and the Churches.” In his typically aggressive style, Barth starkly brought the sinfulness of division into sharp relief:

We have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all. We have to deal with it as we deal with sin, our own and others’, to recognize it as a fact, to understand it as the impossible thing which has intruded itself, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality; rather we must pray that it be foreign and removed, and be ready to do whatever God’s will and command may enjoin in respect of it. A great part, the decisive part perhaps of all that we can do for the unity of the Church would be already done if on all sides we were able and willing to handle the multiplicity of the churches in this way; no longer as a speculative problem or a matter of the philosophy of history, but, to put it in the simplest terms, with a sober mind as women and men profoundly shocked but yet believing, and therefore hopeful, and, by reason of hope, ready to obey, (Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, pp. 22-23).

You may be preparing to accuse me of the very nostalgia I have critiqued. Far from it. Many of the ecumenical institutions and instruments and strategies are in need of profound reformation and many ecumenical leaders in the United Church of Christ have been lonely prophets in the wilderness. But the current reduction of the ecumenical vocation to a mere cost-benefit analysis in which ecumenical cooperation is judged solely on pragmatic outcomes like efficiency, economy, and effectiveness, rather than seen as the matter of obedience to the Gospel Barth describes, that reductionism does not reflect well on our fidelity either to God or to the vision that animated those whose legacy we bear.

This is not just a UCC problem. We have all allowed this sin to grow respectable again. We have all lost a just impression of its deformity. Lament is not called for. Repentance is. Barth said in those lectures long ago, “Homesickness for the *una sancta* is genuine and legitimate only insofar as it is a disquietude at the fact that we have lost and forgotten Christ, and with Him have lost the unity of the Church,” (Barth, p. 15). For leaders run ragged dealing with institutional crises, and lured by lesser institutional

loyalties, it is understandable that this disquietude often hardly registers. But it is this very disquietude that reminds us how often we have made comforting idols of our sin, including our division, and thus have lost sight not only of the unity of the church, but of the “one Word of God we are to hear, trust, and obey in life and in death.”

IV.

But God is not left without witnesses, either at Barmen where those words were confessed, or in our own urgent times. And so a final word about the state of the United Church of Christ is that we continue to be a people who privilege courage over caution. Caution can be a good thing, of course. Sometimes it can be a legitimate plea to be more strategic. Sometimes it is a faithful pastoral word for those not really capable – emotionally or spiritually – of risk. Sometimes it is a call for deeper, more faithful discernment by those who know that there are times when the testing of the community may reveal that the bold step proposed ultimately does not appear to be “good to us or to the Holy Spirit.” Some things we have done over the years under the banner of prophetic courage have, I fear, been silly or immature.

And yet, it has been a legacy of our forebears, and I would even suggest a charisma of our tradition, like our ecumenical vision and vocation, that we have been courageous for the sake of the Gospel when others have held back under the weight of caution. Ben Herbstler, the first president of the United Church of Christ is remembered to have called our church “a risk taking fellowship.” The past ten years have involved a number of risks and we have paid a price for that. (Some of you might even suggest that you have paid the price for my risks!) The list of “UCC firsts” always runs the risk of arrogance, but it also reveals a kind of genetic trait that we can’t quite ignore. In this 500th year anniversary of John Calvin’s birth we are reminded that we share with a global family of churches the identity of “reformed, always reforming.” Brian Gerrish puts it well: “What we find in Calvin, at the very source of the Reformed tradition, is a powerful sense of the duty to reform every department of public life, not just to preach – much less. . . just to manicure our own souls,” (Brian Gerrish in David Willis and Michael Welker, eds., *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*, p. 18). We are rarely at ease in Zion, an exhausting, exasperating, yet exhilarating spiritual uprootedness that has been and continues to be a witness the world finds as admirable as it is sometimes bewildering.

Privileging courage over caution. The hymn that seems to have become the unofficial anthem of the United Church of Christ, “*In the Midst of New Dimensions*,” puts it well: “Should the threats of dire predictions cause us to withdraw in pain, may your blazing phoenix spirit resurrect the church again.” Are we continuing to be good stewards of this particular charism? Yes and no. As a church we are largely throwing caution to the wind in our embrace of the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. In these last years of deception, idolatry, and greed in a nation bent on its demonically imperial project, we have sounded at times a certain, at times an uncertain note on behalf of the Empire of God. In the face of the global environmental crisis, and in the journey toward being a multi-racial, multi-cultural church, and in the face of desperately needed sacred conversations on race, we have been far too timid. Yet even here we are self-consciously uncomfortable, and so refuse to fully withdraw.

In his own charming, understated way, Updike again sets forth the spiritual impulse that lies behind our moral courage. In one of his later novels this odd theologian, nurtured by Pennsylvania Lutheran and New England Congregational communities, has his central character describe two evidential arguments for the truths of the Christian religion. The first, he says, is “our wish to live forever, however tedious the actual experience of eternal consciousness might be.” The second is “our sensation that something is amiss – that there has been a lapse or slippage in the world and things are not quite as they should be. We feel made for a better world, and the fault is ours that this is not Eden,” (*Villages*, p. 312). Like other more sectarian traditions, we know we are made for a better world. But unlike those traditions we have sensed deeply that the fault is ours that this is not Eden, and so have sensed a complementary responsibility to help approximate it in this world, and not just the next.

V.

Yes, I think we are finally stopping trying to be what we remember we were. Yes, I think we still need to work hard at overcoming the hegemony of the Enlightenment, adding heart to head and hands. Yes, I believe there is a call to repentance – and obedience – in a lost sense of the fundamental deformity that is a divided church and its disobedience to the one Word to be heard and trusted. Yes, I think we have been faithful stewards of our gift of privileging courage over caution in a world

of profound lapse and slippage. As I write this I know that I have been as much a part of the problem side of these equations as the solution. So they are shared not with aloof arrogance, but with deeply complicit confession.

There is much more to be said about the state of the United Church of Christ. But soon it will be time for a new General Minister and President to articulate it in a new accent and style. I approach that transition with some regret knowing what a gift this role has been for me, and how much communities like you have offered me. But I also know, to paraphrase Updike, how tedious the actual experience of eternal leadership certainly would be, both for me and for the church! I don't hand over the state of the UCC to a new GMP, any more than I leave it with you. It was never mine to hold, or yours to carry, but belongs to God. Therein lies our deepest comfort, our greatest joy, and our most profound gratitude.