



Richard L. Hamm

On Being a Church of the Welcome Table

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Since becoming general minister and president eight years ago, I have spent a great deal of time seeking to understand who we Disciples really are and what future God may have in store for us. I have now published a book, *2020 Vision for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* in which I share some of what I have learned and discerned.

As I have read, thought, prayed, dialogued and experienced this church from one end to the other, I am continually impressed with the fact that we really are a *people of the Table*, and it is our common experience of the Lord's Supper that is the center of our life and who we are.

The Table is at the heart of our earliest beginnings as a movement. The Cane Ridge Meeting, held in 1801 on the grounds of the church served by Barton W. Stone, was one of several *communion festivals* that were celebrated around the country.

It was also at a communion service that Alexander Campbell came to a moment of clarity about what was for him the true nature of the church. The practice was for the presbyters of that Scottish Presbyterian congregation to examine those who wished to take communion. If found worthy, one was given a *token* which could be exchanged for admission to the Table on the Sunday when communion was offered. This practice

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was called *fencing the Table* because a *fence* was thus effectively placed around the Table and communion was closed to all but those whom the presbyters deemed worthy. Campbell found this practice unacceptable as he believed only God could judge the heart of people and that no one comes to the Table but by grace.

Thus, we Disciples have always practiced *open communion*, in which all who count themselves as Christians are welcome at the communion table. Week after week we celebrate the grace of God and recognize the utter dependence upon grace which characterizes the whole human family. I believe that even those Disciples who do not have a very full intellectual understanding of the meaning of communion nevertheless internalize the meaning by repeating it week after week. It *get's inside of us* and impacts the way we view the church and the world. Our Disciples commitment to Christian unity is enhanced because we recognize again every week that all Christians are dependent upon God's grace and we experience that grace weekly in the Lord's Supper.

We chose the name *Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* long ago as a way of affirming Christian unity and avoiding a denominational name that would denote yet another division in the body of Christ. Such a *generic* name was and is a great theological statement. However, in this 21st century world of *media presence*, our name doesn't exactly *stand out* in the marketplace. As I thought about a slogan by which we Disciples might characterize ourselves as a church and thus gain some *name recognition* in this secular culture in which we live, several phrases came to mind. *A Church For Today* is a slogan we used to entitle our new member video, but it doesn't really say very much about us. Another possibility is *The Church of the Open Table*, however this seems too passive to me: it suggests we are *open* to others participating at communion with us, but we aren't going out of our way to invite or encourage them.

Then the theme of this July's General Assembly in Kansas City came to mind: *Gather at the Welcome Table*. What better phrase to characterize who we are as a church when we are at our best! When we are most faithful as Disciples, we do not merely practice *open communion*, rather we assertively invite others to the table and seek to make them feel welcome as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Church of the Welcome Table, this is who we are. This is who we *must* be if we are going to fulfill what has been identified as 2020 Vision of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): *to be a faithful, growing church that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality, and a passion for justice*. It is not enough for us merely to keep the doors open, hoping that people will want to meet us in worship and at the table. We must seek people out, inviting and *welcoming* them to the Feast. The

more secular the culture around us becomes, the more we need to be a *Church of the Welcome Table*. And the more we become this kind of church, the truer we are to our own heritage and calling as Disciples. May God help us truly be a *Church of the Welcome Table!*



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