

2023

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Recommended Citation

Blaisdell, Chuck (2023) "A Review of John O. Humbert, "Claiming A Legacy"," *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 76: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol76/iss1/1>

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A Review of *Claiming A Legacy* by John O. Humbert

By Chuck Blaisdell, Paxton, Massachusetts (chuck@blaisdells.net)

John Humbert's massive *Claiming a Legacy* is really four books in one:

- A charming and nostalgia-laden chronicle of a middle-class childhood in the last era in which the United States was still significantly rural.
- The remembrances of a young man from his college years to marriage, parenthood, and becoming firmly established in his ministerial calling.
- An overview of his work in the Office of General Minister and President, first as Deputy and then as General Minister, in the last era in which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was growing either in giving or membership.
- A joy- and sorrow-filled recounting of retired life, of travels, and elegiac affection for his beloved wife Joanne, whose death came after a long and painful struggle.

The late Larry McMurtry often talked about the absolutely huge changes that came to American life during the 1900s, in a little less than a century—from torturous travel by horseback to railroads connecting virtually every town, from it taking weeks for news to get from the east coast to California to it being instantaneous, and so much more. We could say the same of John Humbert's almost century of life. In his childhood, almost all farms were family farms; now a majority are corporate farms. When he was growing up it was not unusual for formal education to stop with the eighth grade; now completing high school is widely expected. The rural and small-town Ohio of Humbert's childhood was far, far less ethnically, racially, and demographically diverse than today. Humbert's memoir of his early life brings all of these realities into clear and fascinating relief to a culture now wedded inextricably to technology and a society fracturing along ideological lines. There was little ethnic or racial diversity in Humbert's childhood milieu, and this reader would have found it instructive for Humbert to reflect on how that milieu continues to affect—for good or ill—our current cultural situation in the United States.

Humbert's account of his college years, his marriage to his beloved Joanne, and then years of congregational ministry shows a not-untypical career path for a talented, white, male minister in the Baby Boomer era of the 1950s and '60s. His description of the urban and suburban churches of this era show just how very different white church life in that era was compared to the current and much-diminished situation, not just of the Disciples but of mainline Protestant Christianity as a whole. The massive membership and worship attendance figures that he cites for many of those churches is utterly different from our own post-Christendom era. Reflection on the differences between churchly and ministerial life then and now would have been helpful and challenging to hear.

The third section of Humbert's memoir details his work as Deputy and then General Minister and President. And "details" is the right verb! A huge part of this section of the book is a sequential timeline of Humbert's day-to-day work, meeting after meeting interspersed with guest preaching and congregational and Regional visits. However, one does wish for more analysis of this whirlwind of work, for the era of the 1980s in the life of the Disciples is so very different from now. Reflection on the differences between that multi-staffed office of General Minister with few budgetary constraints on travel, etc., and the current circumstances would be enlightening.

There are, in fact, several points where Humbert speaks of important conversations related to church mission but in the end leaves the reader wishing for more context, insight, and analysis. For example, of his first General Cabinet meeting, he writes "The dynamics between Bob Thomas, President of the Division of Overseas Ministries, and Ken Kuntz, the president of the Division of Homeland Ministries (DHM), was especially noteworthy" (183). The reader is left wondering what was "noteworthy" and what the issues were that called for that characterization. In 1979, Humbert attended the Black Ministers Retreat and preached at a church that was "having difficulty with the study document [on homosexuality] issued by the Assembly. It was an interesting discussion" (199). Again, the reader is left wanting to know more about this discussion—the first of several churchwide discussions of the topic over the years—which was no doubt mirrored in other congregations. In 1986 Humbert preached to an Ohio gathering that had been studying Disciples history and polity but remarks that "if there was one sermon preached that I wish that I could have back that was the one" (290). What about that sermon was, in hindsight, not the sermon for that gathering? In the fall of 1989 Humbert met with the General Cabinet where there was a "good spirit" and "with the two who were sometimes hard to bring along even complimenting me..." (345). One yet again wishes that what is elided here was fleshed out as to the context. One final example: in 1990 there was an attempt to do a "new more inclusive language hymnal" with the United Church of Christ. But, Humbert writes, "personalities had 'gotten in the way of the kingdom,' and that possibility had been scrapped" (352). As discussions currently percolate about a potential new Disciples hymnal, it would have been instructive to discuss how such past pitfalls might be avoided.

Of course, the saddest and most poignant event during this era of Humbert's life—every parent's worst nightmare and fear—was having to say goodbye to his and Joanne's son John, who died of AIDS at the age of 35. Some of the book's most eloquent and powerful words are the ones Humbert said to his son when the latter asked "Dad, how do you get ready to die?" Humbert's testimony to his and Joanne's faith are beautiful and reassuring: "I can only tell you what I believe. Your life will not end. Your body won't be able to sustain your life as we experience it. But the mystery we believe from God is that you will pass over into a continuing life.... Jesus said he was preparing a way for us. I believe it. We will all go through this, my beloved son" (357).

The final section of the book describes Humbert's retirement life. He and Joanne traveled extensively, visited friends, and enjoyed their time in what had become their vacation locale in Sarasota, Florida. These fulfilling years, though, were prematurely marred by Joanne's discovery in 2002 of cancer in her mouth and the thirty-eight serious surgeries that followed. This extraordinarily difficult time was made easier by the many, many friends that surrounded the Humberts during this time and later, after moving from Indianapolis to Cleveland to be near their daughter, as well as connecting with old friends from their Ohio days. Joanne died on May 4, 2019, seventeen years after her initial diagnosis. For her memorial service, Humbert wrote: "You've seen how wondrous Joanne has faced adversity and made the best of it with amazing grace and presence. Through it all she has loved us with her amazing resilience and courage, carrying us all along through the turbulence of surgery after surgery, ravaging her face and body, but never her spirit" (419-20).

John Humbert's tenure as General Minister and President stood on the cusp of a sea change in Disciples history. The 1980s proved to be the high-water mark in giving to denominational funding. The huge numbers in baptisms, worship attendance, transfers, and new members in this era began to decline precipitously.

But many of the issues that confronted the Church during Humbert's era remain with us, if in new ways. In that regard, he unfailingly stood for the way of justice and inclusion. His witness to being a church truly welcoming of LGBTQ persons made the way easier for those who followed, heartened by his example. His steadfast and moral leadership around the appropriate responses to South African apartheid was unflinching. He patiently and persistently stood against those who would hijack the Disciples movement into a sectarian and judgmental organization. His sermon in response to the cowardly and vile Birmingham church bombing was principled and worthy and an eloquent refutation of the idol of racism (153-58).

In all these ways, and more, his is a pastoral heart combined with true and worthy Gospel convictions. But perhaps an anecdote he relates says it better: During a visit to one Ohio congregation, he says,

[I] suffered through a solo by a beautifully dressed lady, a halftone off-key through all four verses. She turned to me after the service, obviously expecting a compliment. I said, "You obviously enjoy singing." She seemed pleased. (196)

John's life and ministry is indeed a testimony to his strong and worthy convictions but manifested always with a pastoral heart. He is and has been a gift to me, our church, and the world!