Atlanta Declaration Committee, A Reaffirmation of Convictions and Concerns

Robert W. Burns
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of
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AN INVITATION TO CONSIDER THE ISSUES

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FIVE POSITIVE PROPOSALS OF THE ATLANTA DECLARATION COMMITTEE

1. Unite on the authority of Christ revealed in the Scriptures, witnessing to our love for Him in every area of our lives, instead of losing our relevance by institutionalizing the brotherhood.

2. Strengthen our loyalty to Christ by emphasizing our free fellowship of persons and congregations, instead of tighter controls by overhead authority and continue as a brotherhood.

3. Express the WHOLENESS of the brotherhood in Christ consistently with our history, instead of losing our continuity as a people.

4. Attempt to solve our spiritual problems by RENEWAL instead of by organizational conformity.

5. Restructure the agencies only, and omit entirely congregations, ministers and other individuals.

THE ATLANTA DECLARATION COMMITTEE

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A Reaffirmation of Convictions and Concerns
Approved by the Atlanta Declaration Committee
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We, of the Atlanta Declaration Committee, hereby reaffirm the Atlanta Declaration of May 4, 1967. We continue in the belief that these are times of extraordinary opportunity for spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are firmly persuaded that the Provisional Design proposed for adoption by the International Convention at Kansas City falls far short of measuring up to this opportunity. We hope to continue our relations with all disciples, including those in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), those who cooperate outside the present International Convention, and all others who belong to the Campbell-Stone movement. Where we use the word “brotherhood” we mean all of these disciples.

Section I. Objections to the Recommended Provisional Design

1. The Provisional Design establishes the Administrative Committee which is in fact an ECCLESIASTICAL COURT. The Design also connects all parts of the restructured church with these words:

“matters of grievance or appeal may be referred by individual members, ministers, congregations, regions or boards to the Administrative Committee which shall handle such matters under policies to be established by the General Assembly” (Paragraphs 33, 84 and 92 of the Provisional Design)

This court may soon establish precedents which may include the disposition of grievances brought by individual members and congregations. Every meaningful court develops methods of enforcing its decisions. Any region which objects to the conduct of a congregation or individual may appeal for a public rebuke of the offender. This could be a dangerous step toward CONTROL by the Administrative Committee of the individual members, ministers, congregations, regions and boards. No system of “checks and balances” is provided on the exercise of authority by this court.

2. The following facts seem inconsistent with the ideal of “free and voluntary” relationships:

a) The General Assembly cannot elect its own committees (Paragraph 21)

b) The Administrative Committee must recommend the budgets of all regions (now states and areas) and general units (Paragraph 30)

c) The regions will be required to conform to the Provisional Design (Paragraphs 75 and 76)

d) Regional ministers (previously often called state secretaries) must be chosen in counsel with the general minister and president (Paragraph 79)
e) The agenda for the General Assembly must be prepared by the General Board (Paragraph 17)

f) The agenda for the General Board must be prepared by the Administrative Committee (Paragraph 33)

g) In the election of the general minister and president, after two-thirds approval by the Administrative Committee no new nominations may be made in the General Board or General Assembly (Paragraph 41)

The Provisional Design establishes a cycle of nominations and elections that could render powerless any representation of congregations. After the Provisional Design has been adopted those who now are employees of the agencies could well become masters of the congregations. The consequence of the Provisional Design, in our opinion, will inevitably be to give some agencies extensive additional influence over the congregations. Our historic viewpoint has always been that the agencies are to serve the congregations.

3. The Provisional Design provides for later mergers:

"The General Assembly shall determine the basis of cooperative relationships of the Christian Church with other religious bodies, organizations and agencies, and shall be responsible for authorizing unity and union conversations, consultations and negotiations with other Christian communions." (Paragraph 14)

Merger with a form of church government having bishops has already been unanimously approved by the nine members of the Disciple's delegation to the Committee to Prepare a Plan of Union for the Consultation on Church Union (COCU). Furthermore, Paragraph 41 of the Provisional Design places unlimited authority in the general minister and president in ecumenical matters:

"In ways appropriate to the office, the general minister and president shall represent the Christian Church in interchurch relations and in ecumenical circles or appoint a representative."

4. The Provisional Design establishes a professional Order of the Ministry with hierachical overtones that point toward ultimate ecclesiastic regimentation, controlled by the power of the regions to certify ministers.

"Within policies developed by the General Assembly, regions certify the standing of ministers and provide help, counsel and pastoral care to ministers and congregations in such matters as: ordination, licensing, placement of ministers, establishment and dissolution of pastoral relationships, and installation of ministers." (Paragraphs 11C, 71, 89)

The authority to grant or deny certification could be used as a control over the ministry and the congregations. Certification
will not be automatic. Conformity to structures of authority could be mandatory.

5. The Provisional Design establishes the “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)” as a sect (Paragraphs 6 and 9) thus making an unscriptured use of the “church” contrary to the revealed purposes of Christ. This does not conform to the disciple’s concept of the church.

“The General Assembly shall authorize a commission under the General Board to prepare a constitution for the Christian Church based upon the principles set forth in this design. When a proposed constitution has been prepared and recommended by the General Assembly, it shall be sent to the congregations, regional bodies and general organizations for study. The General Assembly shall declare the constitution for the Christian Church adopted and in force when it has been approved by two-thirds of the regional bodies, two-thirds of the general organizations and by two-thirds of the voting members of the General Assembly present and voting.” (Paragraph 19)

This constitution is not yet written, but it is evident that congregations acting in their own assemblies are not to be given the right to participate in its adoption or rejection as finally formulated, and that they may find they have become part of the constituted church in spite of the opposition of many of their members to the adoption of the constitution, as the constitution will become effective upon approval of two-thirds of the regional bodies, two-thirds of the general organizations and two-thirds of the voting members of the General Assembly without approval by the congregations as such.

6. The Provisional Design provides that all in the restructured church shall support “present and emerging ecumenical structures.” (Paragraphs 70 and 89) What are “present ecumenical structures”? These include the National Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the World Council of Churches and a multitude of other inter-denominational agencies, whose names are not mentioned. What are “emerging” ecumenical structures? These include the Consultation on Church Union and possibly eventual compromise of some sort with the political power of the Roman Catholic Church, including even a recognition of the authority of the pope.

Instead of being a force to unite us, the practical effect of the Provisional Design has been to divide our own movement, causing dissension within hundreds of congregations and separating congregations from other congregations. We recognize the need for greater efficiency in our brotherhood life, but this greater efficiency must be consistent with the right of free persons and free congregations to constitute the life and work of the brotherhood and to
provide leadership and money for an ever-widening of fellowship of Christian faith. In recent years our brotherhood's decrease in membership and missionaries reveals a fundamental lack of Christian motivation, inspiring leadership and responsive constituency. We are tragically failing to meet our evangelistic responsibility, having dropped from 2,242,469 members on June 30, 1958, to 2,115,542 members on June 30, 1967, while the population of the United States increased during this period by approximately 25 million persons and some other religious organizations were growing by leaps and bounds.

We can only conclude that the general philosophy of restructure is unacceptable to us as it applies to congregations and individuals.

Section II. Questions Being Asked and Appeals for Help

People and congregations are pleading for help. We are being deluged with questions from cooperatively-oriented persons and congregations opposed to the Provisional Design, wanting to know:

1. Shall we send voting delegates (representatives) to Kansas City instructed to vote in opposition to adoption of the Design?

2. Shall we withdraw from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) prior to Kansas City by voting to remove the congregation from Year Book listing?

3. Can a congregation continue to participate in Brotherhood affairs and continue to contribute to brotherhood agencies without becoming exclusively a constituent congregation of the new sect?

4. Is there a rallying point for cooperatively-oriented congregations that object to the Design?

5. Are there forms of resolutions available that might be useful to accomplish these and related purposes?

We are deeply troubled by the knowledge that there is no cooperatively-oriented agency capable of presenting effectively objections to the Provisional Design. The Christian, The World Call, many state publications, and other literature emanating from the Christian Board are highly effective in promoting the Design. There is a need for study of the Provisional Design, but a lack of evaluation materials. We urge the churches to analyze the Provisional Design under competent leadership, fortified by the advice of competent legal counsel, and some congregations have undertaken such an analysis, but usually only one side of the question has been adequately equipped to present its point of view.

The Atlanta Declaration Committee has no publishing house; we have no professional writers or journalists; and we have little effective means of circulating ideas. We have no "resource persons" and few "source materials" as such, and we cannot hope to fur-
nish leadership in the many situations which are coming to our attention. All of us are volunteers. The widespread effect of the Atlanta Declaration itself, however, leads us to believe that there is an urgent need for publication of our points of view on these and other questions so that the leaders of local congregations will have at least some material for their own local situations. We see no alternative to local leadership. We can be of only limited help to such local leadership, but this we hope to provide.

Section III. Our Suggestions to Appeals for Help

Each congregation's historical background may have a vital bearing on positions that it should take. Furthermore, the legal rights of each congregation will be determined by the state and other laws specifically applicable to it. This makes it imperative and vital that each congregation obtain and rely upon the advice of competent legal counsel.

We recommend, subject to such legal advice in each situation, that until after Kansas City, relationships be continued with all brotherhood causes and endeavors. Consistent with this recommendation we do not favor congregational action to remove Year Book listing. We strongly recommend, however, that congregational action be taken by adoption of appropriate resolutions to insure that participation in the activities of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) be on the express condition that the congregation retains its full historic freedom and autonomy.

We also strongly recommend that in continuing to support brotherhood agencies, such gifts as are made be specifically designated "over and above all other contributions and in addition to percentages allocated in Unified Promotion" as provided in present Unified Promotion agreements.

In accordance with the above we suggest the following answers to the questions and appeals for help listed in Section II above:

1. Each congregation will have to determine for itself whether to send voting representatives in the light of its acceptance or rejection of various parts of the Provisional Design, but if so, definitely on condition that the congregation retains its full historic freedom and autonomy as above stated.

2. As stated above, we favor present continuation of all of our relationships with appropriate safeguards.

3. We hope that such participation can continue and, subject to each church's historic background and their legal counsel's opinion, we only recommend that such participation continue dependent upon how the situation becomes clarified at Kansas City.
4. We consider ourselves to be a fellowship of persons who see faults in the Design and are thus obligated to point them out. We welcome additional members in this fellowship. We want to be helpful to persons and congregations.

5. We suggest that each congregation prepare its own resolutions, but we strongly recommend that they be designed with retention of its full historic freedom and autonomy. Upon request we can furnish copies of resolutions passed by some congregations.

IN CONCLUSION

No spiritual problem which we now face can be solved by present restructure plans. Historically our dynamic has come from our distinctive loyalty to the Word of God. We have grown when we have had biblical preaching and teaching.

We are not interested simply in picking flaws in the Provisional Design. We seek a genuinely authentic and apostolic experience of the Living Christ. Our church structures should develop our Christian witness and not limit our freedom in proclamation of the gospel. We do not resist all change, but changes must be made in continuity with the historic plea of the Disciples of Christ. The tragedy of this whole affair lies in the fact that just when many sectarian churches are moving in the direction of the free traditions of the Disciples, the Disciples are moving toward sectarianism.

We are ready to help, to the best of our ability, those who are not willing to be bound by the narrow confines of the Provisional Design, extending this brotherly assistance to individuals as well as to congregations. Our ability to do this will depend on the manpower and the money which those who share our convictions are willing to provide. Some will say that to do this creates division. We can only reply that our understanding of the Savior of whom the scripture tells makes it impossible for us to abandon any single shepherd or flock, including the individual lost sheep. None should feel lonely or deserted.

We are not ashamed of our movement's origin or of the plea for an interpretation of Christianity which bases all authority in Christ.

We send this message to the brotherhood in humble dependence on God whose servants we are and to whom we pledge anew our obedience and faith. We are brothers in Christ and are eager to work with all who are also brothers in Christ. We pray for the peace, unity and holiness of all congregations and of the brotherhood as a whole. May the joy of the Lord refresh all who read these words.
I endorse the Reaffirmation of Convictions and Concerns.

☐ You may publish my name.  ☐ My name may not be published.

Name.........................................................

Address.......................................................