

IN OR OUT?

**ADVICE FOR
CHURCHES
CONSIDERING
WITHDRAWAL FROM
THE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF
CHRIST)
DENOMINATION**

By Doug Harvey

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is written to help congregations struggling with decisions about their relationship with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. It is written in response to many requests for help with the decision-making process. DHF does not press churches to either leave the denomination or to stay in the denomination. We simply try to provide information that helps churches make an informed decision.

Since 1985 I have been part of the Disciple Renewal movement. Through the years since then, I have watched a number of churches in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) evaluate their relationship with the denomination. There have been many different results from those deliberations. Some churches have torn themselves apart in the process of decision. Others came to conclusions with a unanimous vote. Some have opted to stay in the denomination; some chose to leave. There have been churches who just took a vote and moved on with little effect on the local church, and churches who have made major shifts in direction as a result of their decision.

Out of years of observation and participation, I have seen healthy and unhealthy patterns for making such decisions. In this booklet I offer some of what I've learned with the hope that it can guide congregations toward healthy decision-making. Regardless of your position on denominational issues, there are some right and wrong approaches to the question. I hope you can learn from the

experiences of others and make sound, church-strengthening decisions.

WHY DO CHURCHES THINK ABOUT LEAVING?

For some, loyalty to the denomination is not open to question. They assume that since their church is currently part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, the decision is made. That's who they are and there is nothing to think about.

For many others, however, the issue is not so simple. Denominational loyalty does not run deep in our culture. For several decades now, church growth researchers have been telling us that the majority of people who move to a new area do not automatically seek out a church of their previous denominational affiliation. They may give such churches first opportunity, but they look far more deeply at specific characteristics of the local church than they do at its denominational connections. They pay attention to such things as worship style, quality of preaching, ministry to children and youth, underlying theological beliefs, sense of community and the quality of nursery care. They will commit to the congregation which seems to best meet their needs in these (and other) areas regardless of denominational family.

Some of our older members can remember a time when a move to a new community automatically entailed a search

for a church in the same denominational family as the church of their childhood. It wasn't unusual to find people who had lived in four or five different communities and been Lutherans in each one.

Today, many of our geographically mobile church members have crossed between a number of denominational families with ease. It is not unusual to learn that the newest family in my local DHF member church grew up in the Catholic church, spent some time as a Baptist, then got involved with a charismatic mega-church, attended an independent Bible church, then found their way to First Christian Church.

It doesn't even seem odd to them that their journey has crossed so many denominational lines. It feels quite natural to them to find a local church that meet their needs without much thought about the congregation's denominational roots. As a long-time pastor, I've found that many new members don't even know which specific denomination their previous church was associated with. They may know it was called "First Baptist," but not have a clue which of the many Baptist denominations it was associated with.

The breakdown of denominational loyalties hasn't just affected the relationship of members to denominational families. It has also brought many congregations to reexamine their own denominational commitments.

The past generation has been one of rapid social change in our culture and rapid internal change in most

denominations. The depth of change and the pace of change have created a situation in which many congregations are coming to realize they no longer fit comfortably in the denominational family to which they have historically belonged. More conservative congregations in the old “mainline” (or, more accurately, “oldline”) churches are particularly prone to be in significant disagreement with the beliefs, practices and policies of their denominational family.

A number of churches in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination have come to realize that their denominational leaders are moving in directions that are at odds with the local church’s beliefs and mission. Most of these are churches that have remained committed to an evangelical belief system while the denomination has moved decisively away from such beliefs.

When the extent of difference between the local congregation and the denominational leadership becomes clear, it is common for people to question the appropriateness of their denominational ties.

For instance, one of the “hot-button” issues of the church today is belief about homosexual practice. Many evangelicals in the oldline denominations simply assume that their denominational leaders generally agree with them that homosexual practice is sinful according to Scripture, and therefore not to be encouraged or blessed. These folks assume that any serious Christian would read the Bible and come to the same conclusions they do. When these

conservative folks learn that most of the denomination's leaders openly encourage and bless homosexual practice, they are stunned. When they start doing their homework, they find the denomination's leaders have moved away from a commitment to the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. They find that the denomination's leaders have been moving toward the idea of universal salvation and are unable to affirm the unique saving power of Jesus Christ. They learn the denomination's overseas ministry division has declared the age of missions to be over. They learn that the homeland ministries division of the denomination has been actively promoting a far-left political agenda with no attempt to represent their more conservative congregation's views. And they begin to wonder why they are still a part of such a denomination.

WHAT PROCESS SHOULD WE GO THROUGH?

When these issues begin to arise in a church, it is very important for those raising the issue and the congregational leadership to create a healthy process for considering them.

I find it unfortunate that in many churches, when someone begins to raise these issues, serious internal dissension results. What usually happens is that a handful of concerned members begin to press the church to leave the denomination. They have done some homework and found serious problems, and demand that the church immediately remove itself from the denomination. Members with

stronger denominational loyalties begin to resist. Some are afraid of change and resist out of that fear, while others have positive memories of the denomination and believe the concerns exaggerated. The church begins to polarize. If the folks who are calling for withdrawal keep up the pressure, the polarization grows deeper as people stake out their positions and begin building defenses. Before it's over, one side or the other has "won," the other has left and the church is far weaker than when the process started. The bottom line is that the mission of Christ through that church suffers unnecessarily.

Churches that make decisions about denominational affiliation in a healthy way usually follow a different path.

When the issue of denominational affiliation begins to become a serious question in a church, the people who are raising the issue need to realize that the burden of proof and the burden of right attitude is on them. There are times and circumstances in which it is appropriate for a church to leave its denomination. However, given the strong emphasis the New Testament puts on church unity, any person or group calling for separation from a denominational body needs to be sure of their facts and the motives they have in calling for this change.

The first step for anyone who wants to call a church to consider denominational affiliation is to research the issues thoroughly. Don't just read some piece that raises concerns and jump to the conclusion that you understand the issue.

I have written extensively on concerns I have about the DoC denomination, its leadership and its direction. I get very frustrated when someone reads an article DHF published and, with only partial understanding of the issues, begins to agitate for change. These folks often do more harm than good for the cause of evangelical truth in the church.

Constructive change comes when someone discovers significant issues, then makes a thorough study of them before seeking congregational action. If the issue relates to General Assembly decisions, find out exactly what was passed. Seek out and read the materials for yourself. If the issues are related to our seminaries, or decisions of the region or whatever, do the homework and be sure you understand the issues. This doesn't mean you should allow yourself to be thrown off the track by some of the rhetorical dodges and ridiculous explanations you'll get from denominational leaders, but it does mean you should thoroughly check out the facts before you raise concerns in your local church. Raising an issue, then discovering that you only had a partial understanding of what was actually said or done, will not help your cause even if you are right.

Be sure to examine the claims of both sides of any issue. Don't take either side at face value, examine the facts, examine the claims on both sides and move toward a fully informed decision. Be sure your information is up-to-date. Sometimes further actions have been taken on issues, and those actions have shifted the terms of the debate.

When you have done your homework and evaluated what you have found, it is time to take the next step: look at the area of concern and ask if the issues are serious enough to justify bringing them to the attention of your local church. Are the issues significant enough to be worth calling attention away from the church's regular business? Are the issues significant enough to justify risking the unity of the local church?

Sometimes the issues are worth the risks, sometimes they aren't. Don't be intimidated away from action by asking these questions, but don't raise a ruckus over minor issues either.

If your decision is that the issues are worth pursuing, the next step is to raise the issues in a way that invites the rest of the congregation into investigation and dialogue. There are several keys to getting the discussion on the right footing.

First, raise the issues as concerns you have that you'd like the church to investigate with you. Don't just show up at a meeting one day and announce that you have checked things out and now you've come to tell everybody exactly what's going on. Tell people you have been doing some research and have found some disturbing facts. Ask for others to look at the materials you have accumulated or ask for the church leadership to appoint a task force to examine the issues.

Second, work with the leadership structure of your church. If you are a layperson, first talk to your pastor about your concerns. Don't assume he or she is on one side or the other unless they tell you so. Don't blindsides your pastor or other church leaders.

If you are a pastor, talk to your elders and to the chairman of your board. Privately, let them know your concerns and what you intend to do.

If possible, raise your concerns in a way that invites the church's leadership to join you in examining the issues. Don't create an "us vs. them" atmosphere. If divisive attitudes arise, be sure they come from others, not from you.

If you're going to raise an issue in a particular meeting, tell the person chairing the meeting well ahead of time. Respect those who are in leadership in the church or you will create hostility that will only make your job harder. I know this sounds like obvious advice, but I have seen a lot of unnecessary division created by people who thought they'd get the advantage by surprise attacks at meetings.

Remember, you can't do the right thing in the wrong way. You can't do the right thing with a bad attitude, because part of doing the right thing is having the right attitude.

If you believe you are representing genuine concerns of God, you must raise them with the right attitude. If you

have any other motive for raising the issues, hold your peace. You have no right to speak up.

That may sound harsh, but it is an important reality. The church is not a political playground or a place for people to exercise power or work their personal agendas. It is the local setting of the Kingdom of God on earth. The only legitimate business of the church is the business of the King.

This means that no matter the attitude of those you deal with, your obligation is to raise your concerns with genuine concern for the good of the church, with loving patience and with a humble spirit.

You may have to persist longer and endure more setbacks if you have the right attitude, but the fruit of your efforts will be more lasting and will build a stronger church.

In most churches, once the issues are raised, a helpful strategy is to appoint a task force of trusted leaders to do a thorough investigation of the issues and report back to the governing board or the congregation. After they have done the primary research, they should talk with someone from both sides of the issues to be sure they are getting a balanced picture. In most cases someone from Disciple Heritage Fellowship and someone from the regional or general offices can provide representative perspectives. It is usually best to schedule visits at different times rather than bring them in together for a debate. My experience is that the format with representatives of both sides present at

the same time usually turns into a debate over secondary issues.

When the task force reports, their report may include conclusions and recommendations for action. These should be presented to the board or congregation without asking for immediate action. Rather, encourage everyone to check out the issues for themselves. Only when there has been time for the board or congregation to digest the information and check out the issues should decisions be called for.

WHAT ISSUES SHOULD WE CONSIDER?

Why would a church consider ending its denominational affiliation? What on earth could make this something worth considering?

Let's start by naming some of the things that shouldn't motivate such a discussion. A bad experience with a denominational official is not a reason to consider separation. A single decision by a denominational assembly or a denominational unit should not be a reason to separate. Failure of a single effort to change the denomination should not be a reason to separate.

These types of experiences can be frustrating, but in a fallen world, there will always be isolated experiences of hurt and disappointment. You will never find a denomination, a local church or a para-church group that will not hurt or disappoint you somewhere along the line. These hurts and disappointments need to be dealt with

honestly and forthrightly, but they are not grounds for separation unless the issues are very extreme.

Separation becomes a legitimate consideration when a church finds its core beliefs and mission to be at odds with the primary direction of the denomination. Only core issues of the faith should motivate discussion of leaving.

For churches in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), several issues have arisen in denominational life that are important enough to justify exploration of possible separation. As we will see later, even disagreement on core issues doesn't guarantee that God's call is separation, but I believe several issues at stake in the church today can justify opening up the question.

The DoC leadership's understanding of the nature of salvation in Christ is a core issue that has become difficult for evangelicals in the DoC. This is not an issue that a Bible-believing church can pass off as one where Christians can "agree to disagree." This is at the very core of our faith, and cannot be negotiable.

Unfortunately, some actions of the DoC in recent years raise genuine questions about their commitment to the biblical understanding of salvation and the saving power of Christ. After hearing a DoC overseas missionary state "we've got to get away from the idea that Jesus Christ is the only way to God," in 1987 over twenty churches brought a resolution that asked the General Assembly to affirm that Jesus is the only way of salvation. To avoid a

vote on the issue, the resolution was referred to the Commission on Theology for two years of study. The commission came back with a lengthy theological statement that affirmed hope in universal salvation and said it is inappropriate to suggest that Jesus Christ is the only possible way of salvation. Since then, a number of denominational leaders have refused to affirm a personal commitment to the unique saving power of Jesus Christ.

In the last several years I have heard or heard of several denominational leaders openly denying the blood atonement. They have taken the position that Christ's death on the cross was not a sacrifice that paid for our sins, but simply a statement of the self-giving love of God. Of course Christ's death was a statement of His love, but unless the New Testament is simply a pack of lies, it was also the atoning sacrifice that paid the price of our sins and opened the way for our forgiveness by a just and loving God.

This raises the question of whether or not the denomination's leaders are preaching the same gospel as evangelical Disciple churches. The Bible teaches clearly that Christ's death on the cross paid the price of our sins and brings the forgiveness of God to all who receive Christ. If there are other legitimate ways to God, the sacrifice of Christ was unnecessary and the claims He made for Himself are not true. If His death on the cross was not an atoning sacrifice, Jesus' prayer that "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me," was ignored by a cruel God, as it was possible to save the world without the cross.

I believe that most churches with conservative or evangelical leanings will find the gospel preached by the leaders of the DoC and the gospel preached at their local church to be stunningly different.

Another core issue is that of authority, specifically biblical authority. Christianity is a revealed faith. That is, we don't think we've brilliantly figured out the things of God, we believe because God has revealed Himself to us. His greatest self-revelation was in the person of Christ Himself. The only record we have of that self-revelation is contained in the books of the Bible. Evangelicals believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

If the materials in the Bible are not reliable, there is no core Christian faith. Christianity is whatever anybody says it is, and there is no basis for believing anything is true or false, right or wrong.

If you can get most denominational leaders to be honest about their understanding of the Bible, you will not find commitment to an entirely trustworthy, inspired text. If you get an honest answer about the beliefs of those who teach in our seminaries, you will find the same thing. You will find a hash of various approaches to Scripture, all of which assume it is not the inspired and utterly reliable Word of God.

Another issue is that of sexual ethics, specifically homosexual practice. Nearly every denomination is struggling with the issue of the homosexual lifestyle, and the Disciples are no exception.

Evangelicals believe the biblical teaching on homosexual practice still holds true. Homosexual activity is sinful. It isn't a worse sin than others, but it is sin. As such, living without repentance in the homosexual lifestyle is wrong and should be a bar to leadership and ministry roles in the church.

The DoC leadership clearly takes another view. In 2001, the DoC General Assembly approved the decision of the DoC Pension Fund to offer "family" health-care coverage to same-gender domestic partners, thus equating homosexual unions with marriage. When they are honest, nearly all the Disciple leaders believe homosexual practice is not wrong in and of itself. Dick Hamm, former Disciple General Minister and President, claimed in many settings that he felt the biblical materials on homosexuality were about heterosexuals who engaged in homosexual acts, not homosexuals who were in committed relationships with same-gender partners. He felt that a homosexual lifestyle itself should not be a bar to ordination or ministry. His views are reflective of many (if not most) Disciple leaders.

Several Disciple regions have been ordaining and granting standing to open homosexuals for twenty or more years. The California-Northern Nevada Region has openly declared itself "Open and Affirming" of the gay, lesbian,

bi-sexual and transgendered lifestyles. It is safe to say that in many regions there are openly homosexual pastors who have been granted ordination or ministerial standing under a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, even though their sexual practices were widely known.

After the issue was brought up several times at General Assemblies, the issue of homosexuality and ministry was placed in a process called “Discernment.” The primary result of this decision has been to hold off honest discussion of the issue, while the gay movement grows in strength in the denomination. Interestingly, at the 2001 General Assembly Dick Hamm announced that the discernment process was open-ended and the denomination had no intention of bringing the process to closure. This policy is in defiance of the resolution that created the discernment process, which clearly anticipates a termination of discernment processes. Meanwhile, the Gay, Lesbian, Affirming Disciple (GLAD) organization has a booth and a strong presence at General Assemblies and advertises openly in the *Disciples World* magazine. The denomination’s webpage contains links to the GLAD website.

In addition, in 1995 the DoC entered a special bi-lateral relationship with the United Church of Christ (UCC) denomination. The UCC openly claims that the special gift it brings to the ecumenical church is its openness to gays, lesbian, bisexuals and transgendered people. They even created a denomination-funded scholarship to encourage gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people to attend

seminary with the intent of becoming pastors in the UCC. The choice of the UCC for this special relationship is disturbing and pretty well demonstrates where the DoC is headed on the issue of sexual ethics.

IF WE ARE INCLINED TO LEAVE, WHAT FURTHER ISSUES NEED TO BE CONSIDERED?

After researching the issues thoroughly and carefully informing the congregation, there may be a sense that a decision is called for. If so, do not jump into a decision. Several other considerations need to be addressed, especially the property issue.

PROPERTY

Before making any steps toward a decision about withdrawing from the Disciples, a church must look at several key documents to be sure their property will not be compromised or lost in the event of withdrawal.

For decades, denominational leaders have been encouraging local churches to “protect” their property by putting reversion clauses in key congregational documents. These clauses say the church’s real estate (and sometimes also its permanent funds) will be given to the Region or some other Disciple institution if the church ever ceases to be a Disciple of Christ church.

Churches have been persuaded to include these clauses in their constitutions, articles of incorporation or property deeds in order to protect themselves from having their property taken over by “Independents.” Apparently in the 1930’s there was a case or two in which a group of outsiders showed up one Sunday, moved their membership to a congregation, then voted to leave the Disciples and join the Independent Christian Church movement. After hearing these stories, a number of churches added reversion clauses to congregational documents. In other cases, such clauses were added to church constitutions during constitution revisions. Sometimes they were knowingly added, sometimes they were quietly slipped in without the church ever discussing the issue. Other churches added reversion clauses as part of receiving funds or loans from denominational groups. Though the clauses are no longer required if you have paid off the debt, they are often retained by default, and often forgotten.

It is critical that you not assume anything about your property. Plan to research thoroughly even if you believe there is no problem.

Three documents need to be searched. One is the church’s constitution and by-laws. A second is the church’s articles of incorporation, if the church is incorporated. The third search is of the church’s property deeds themselves.

If there are reversion clauses in the constitution or articles of incorporation, these can be changed by the process

outlined in those documents. Do not make any decisions about withdrawal until these changes are made.

The property deeds are more complicated. If someone in your church is familiar with the county's property records, they can probably do the search at no cost. But it is usually worth the price to hire a professional to do a title abstract and be absolutely certain there are no reversion clauses in the property records in the courthouse.

If there are reversion clauses in the property deeds themselves, you need to seek legal counsel. The processes for change vary from state to state, and it is very difficult to change property deeds without the consent of the institution that will receive the property in case of withdrawal from the DoC.

If there are reversion clauses in any of these documents, do not proceed until they are taken care of. You can't withdraw, then change the documents. This will likely cost you the church's property. Don't proceed in the hope that the DoC institutions don't know of the reversion clauses. It is almost certain that they have record of them. Don't assume that the denominational folks will just let you leave with your property if the decision is made in good faith. Most DoC institutional leaders have a belief that since the property was purchased by people in the DoC tradition, the denomination has a right to it if the congregation takes a different course. The idea that the denomination has departed from its roots, and thereby has left evangelical churches, does not occur to them.

If you withdraw with reversion clauses intact, the most likely scenario is that the denominational folks will find some people on the church membership rolls who will affirm their desire to remain in a DoC church, and the Region will try to claim the building for these folks.

OUTSIDE RELATIONSHIPS

It is not healthy for a local church to float alone in complete independence from other churches. If you examine the New Testament, you will find apostolic-age churches maintained relationships with other churches. Some of those relationships were direct, others were mediated through trusted trans-local leaders such as Paul and Apollos.

Most churches choose to take the decision to leave the denomination first, then start thinking about where to turn for resources and relationships with other churches. This is a normal progression, but don't forget the importance of finding a place to belong, a source of future pastors and a source of outside leadership to help keep your vision fresh.

Of course, DHF would like to become your church's trans-local relationship center. We are non-denominational. That is, we don't ask churches to relate to us structurally. We ask churches to enter into a relationship with DHF, its churches and its leadership. There is a huge difference between being in a voluntary relationship with a group and being structurally tied to it.

Some churches will find other groups to be more appropriate for their needs. That is fine. Our greatest concern is that you don't slip into the trap of being an isolated local church. This is never healthy in the long run.

MISSION SUPPORT

When churches move away from the denomination, they have to make a decision about where they will send the mission support that they have been sending to the denomination's agencies.

I think it is important for a congregation to give some serious thought to where their outreach giving will go as soon as possible after a decision is made. It is not right to drop outreach giving. The mission of Christ's church is just as important after your decision as it was before. In fact, it may be more important, since you will be supporting causes that are more in line with your church's priorities than the denominational causes were.

DHF maintains a list of missionaries with DHF backgrounds who are working through responsible mission agencies, and would be glad to share that list with you for consideration.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Your church has a style of church government that reflects your denominational heritage. When a church leaves the

DoC denominational structure, it is important to take a look at your structure to decide if it is still appropriate.

Some churches see no need for a change, but many discover the structures they build while in a denomination are no longer helpful in a non-denominational setting.

DHF tries to help churches move toward a more biblical model of church structure. We believe that the best and most biblical model is one in which the church is lead by a team that consists of the pastor and elders, who create ministry teams lead by deacons. We don't push this model on any church that is not interested, but we will gladly provided printed resources and consultation to churches that would like help in looking at moving this direction.

PROCESSES FOR CHOOSING PASTORS

Your church probably hopes it doesn't have to search for a pastor soon. I hope that is the case, anyway. But sooner or later you will have to find new pastoral leadership. It is very important to know where you will turn for help in the pastoral search process before the need arises. Otherwise, at a moment when the church finds itself without pastoral leadership, it has to make a huge decision that will permanently affect the church's future.

Our observation is that most congregations that don't build healthy relationships with some group of churches after leaving a denomination do fine until they come the their first pastoral change. At that time they try to decide who

they will be in the future. They often devolve into chaos as various groups in the church try to get things going their way while the church doesn't have a top leader to hold things together. The results are often harmful.

Whether you become part of DHF or some other group, be sure you know where you will start looking when you need a new pastor.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

I can't emphasize the importance of this section enough. When evangelicals raise concerns that lead toward a vote to withdraw from the denomination, they assume that everyone in the process shares their values. They assume that the process will not be a political war, but a reasonable search for truth followed by a decision by the people who will be most impacted by that decision.

I don't know how to say this nicely, but my observation is that denominational loyalists often don't share those assumptions. They tend to believe they have a right to "win" the vote, and with that right, should use whatever tactics are needed to secure the "win."

I have observed several recent situations in which the denominational loyalists insisted that the church constitution calls for a vote of the membership, and since not all members can be present at a meeting, the vote should allow for mail-in ballots. Then they search out every person on the church rolls, knowing that many folks

who are no longer involved in the church can be scared into voting against change in “their” church. A recent vote included people who had not been active in the congregation for decades, but who still had their names on the membership rolls.

If a policy is not clearly stated in the church’s constitution, it would be helpful for the church board to create a policy that congregational decisions will be made by those present and voting at a called congregational meeting. While it is true that this might disenfranchise some active members who cannot attend on the particular day of the vote, it avoids the practice of seeking out absentee votes from long-departed members.

Decisions for a congregation’s future should be made by those who will be living out the implications of that decision, not by people who happen to still be on the rolls, but who have already decided not to participate in the life of the church.

MOVING TOWARD A DECISION

Once this groundwork is laid, it is time to move toward a decision.

Several steps need to be taken.

The investigating committee or some other group should prepare a motion to send to the congregation.

There are two ways to approach this. One is to call for a vote that simply affirms the congregation's desire to withdraw from the denomination and instructs the church's governing board to then prepare the appropriate changes to the church's constitution and articles of incorporation for later confirmation. The disadvantage of this approach is that it requires two votes. The advantage is that it allows the church to express its general decision without the danger of getting bogged down in the issues of the particular language of the changes needed in the church's foundational documents. Once the general decision is made, then the focus can switch to exactly how to enable the change legally. Of course, if the church's constitution and articles of incorporation do not make any statement about the church's denominational affiliation, only the first vote is needed.

The other approach is to bring a proposed set of changes to the church's constitution and articles of incorporation. A brief statement can make clear the reason for the vote, but the decision is actually one of changing the constitution and articles of incorporation. The advantage of this approach is that only one vote is required. The disadvantage is that the decision can get bogged down in the details of how the changes are worded and the larger decision can be obscured by quibbling about the wording of the changes.

Once a specific proposal is created, the church's governing board should issue a call for a congregational vote on a particular date. I would recommend that the date be eight to ten weeks in the future. This may seem too long, but

time is needed for educating the congregation. By now, most of the church's leaders will be informed, but it is important to educate the entire church on the issues around the decision.

I suggest several steps be taken next. A written document with the proposed decision and statements for and against the change should be prepared and distributed to the church's active members, either by mail or by distribution at the close of worship services. Then a series of small group meetings should be held for discussion and information. Each of these meetings should be led and moderated by ministry staff and elders with both sides of the issues represented. Open informational meetings with outside leaders on both sides of the issue should also be offered.

All this generally seems unnecessary to the church's leaders at this point. They have gone through the process of learning and deciding, and it usually seems to them that anybody who is paying attention should not need all this effort at education. But remember that it took a while for you to do your homework and get the issues straight, and realize that people who aren't in the congregational leadership loop haven't had the information you've had and they often didn't begin paying attention to the issue until a congregational meeting was called. If you short-circuit the education of the congregation at this point, there will be a price to pay. This is a big decision. Take your time and let everybody feel they were brought fully into the process before they were asked to decide.

By the time you meet to vote, there should not be much to discuss. People may want to express their thoughts, but there should not be a lot of unanswered questions or ambiguities.

It helps to have one or two people who can make brief positive presentations to start the meeting. Try to set an upbeat tone. Be sure the church's leaders display the best of attitudes even if others try to move the discussion to an argument. Then get the vote done. I think it is best to vote by written ballot. This way no one can say they were afraid to vote their conscience because of intimidation. Having a paper ballot also removes any question about the accuracy of the count. It helps to have the actual proposal printed on the ballot so no one can say they didn't understand the vote.

WHEN THE VOTING IS DONE

When the voting is finished and ballots are being counted, it is very helpful for the pastor or a respected leader to talk to the congregation about keeping the right attitude regardless of the outcome of the vote. Announce the results of the vote in a prayerful attitude and dismiss the meeting.

However the vote came out, the church's leaders need to pay attention to the response of individuals. Often someone will be hurt, angry or upset. Note who those people are and arrange for a mature leader to contact them in a day or two. These contacts should not be to persuade

people of who was right or wrong, but to listen and let them know you have heard and understood their hurt. It is possible that your church will lose some people regardless of the outcome, but be sure someone reaches out in love and empathy to people who express hurt or anger. Don't withdraw from them, reach out.

If the vote is to remain in the denomination, not a lot changes. Be prepared to get back to the business of being the church in your community. Be sure to let your Regional minister know of the decision.

If the decision is to withdraw from the denomination, several steps need to be taken.

If the vote was to authorize the board to pursue the appropriate constitutional changes to allow withdrawal, a group needs to be assigned to get on with that business as quickly as possible.

If the vote is such that the decision is made at that time, or when the appropriate constitutional changes are made, the next step is to inform the denomination of your decision.

The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the DoC constitution, says this about withdrawing:

“Once a congregation has been listed, it can be omitted from the **Year Book and Directory** if the congregation has taken action to withdraw as a recognized congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Office of

the General Minister and President has received a notarized statement from the congregation of its action which the regional minister has certified...”

The best approach to fulfilling these requirements is to call your Regional office and ask if they have a specific form they would like the congregation to fill out, or if they just want a notarized letter. Policies vary from Region to Region, and what satisfies one won't satisfy another. If they have a form, ask for a copy, fill it out, get it notarized and return it. If there isn't a form, send a notarized letter to the Regional office and the General Minister and President's office informing them of the church's decision, the date of that decision and a formal request to have the church's name removed from the DoC Yearbook and Directory.

It often takes quite a while for a response to come, but at this point you have done your part and the ball is in their court.

Now it's time to get on with being the church in your community. Don't bog down by focusing on the denomination you have left, get moving in the positive direction of God for your church.

APPENDIX: DISPELLING SOME MYTHS

There are some myths about leaving the denomination that often arise in the process of choosing whether or not to remain in the DoC. Be sure to have answers ready for the following questions.

Will we lose our tax-exempt status if we leave the DoC?

No. As a DoC church, you have 501(c)3 status under the denomination's covering, but if you leave the denomination you continue to have 501(c)3 status with the IRS. This means you are still a tax-exempt organization and donations continue to be tax-deductible as allowed by the IRS. The church may file for its own 501(c)3 status, but it is not required as long as the church is functioning as a normal church and is not engaging in political actions in violation of the IRS statutes.

Will our pastors lose their pensions or health care coverage?

No. If your pastors are in the DoC Pension Fund, they cannot have their retirement money taken away. They will lose a considerable amount if they try to take it out of the Fund prematurely, but that is the case whether they are in the denomination or out of it. The Pension Fund is set up on a fully-paid annuity basis and cannot legally take pension rights away.

If the church stops contributing to the Pension Fund, the pastor loses certain disability benefits, but not his or her

pension. Again, this is the case whether the pastor is in or out of the denomination.

If your pastors are in the DoC Pension Fund health care plan, this will also continue to be available as long as they are pastoring in a Campbell/Stone heritage church.