

Rev. Dr. Chris Davies 5/29/2021

Beloveds of God-- It is my call to help midwife the reformation. From the work with the United Church of Christ in visioning our own denominational future, starting five years ago, to wider work of Christian witness and ministry in the call beyond the institutions which have held us together in shared faith and hope, my work is dedicated to ensuring that the message of the Gospel is one that my great-great-great-great-granddaughters will have access to.

My name is Rev. Dr. Chris Davies, and I am the Minister and Team Leader for Faith Education, Innovation, and Formation at the National Level of United Church of Christ in the United States. I bring the North American Perspective to this conversation, drawing from my ecumenical and interfaith ministry here, and personal call and attentiveness to how this crucial liberation message will carry forward in faith and hope for a world God imagines alongside us all.

I appreciate the framework you have offered through MISSION TODAY THESES and will add some particular components in regard to my own experience, as follows:

I witness to our collective Christian work to align with the Gospel, as supported by our institutions. When we led a research study for the United Church of Christ's 10 year vision, in 2016, focusing on the responses and input of people under the age of 40, it was abundantly clear that young people will dissociate from anything that is experienced like Institutionalism for the Sake of Institutionalism. The clarity of specific CALL AND PURPOSE is critical. The research clearly pointed from our UCC constituents and friends towards a focus on Racial Justice and Equity, as well as Environmental Justice, *because* of faith. I believe the events of this past year and global uprisings after the state murder of George Floyd have only amplified that need.

Furthermore, I am witnessing exceedingly creative ways for the message of Gospel to be shared. I think of the movement of #progressivechristianity on TikTok, as led by UCC pastors, wherein the engagements outnumber our total membership. This aligns with your assertion of One Voice Among Many, as well as a critical owning of Christian Witness while affirming a pluralistic approach to faith.

However, the challenges to Christian Witness and Evangelism are many. You may notice my shying away from the use of even the word "mission." In the North American Context, our colonialism and the violence of Christianity is still a critically brutal force in our collective society. From the settler colonialism and residential schools for the purpose of Christian Mission at the expense of Native people (for example, 215 bodies of children were just confirmed buried at a former Kamloops Indian Residential school site on Thursday in British Columbia, unacknowledged until now,) ... to the way that today, White Christian Evangelical Nationalism has helped tip the United States into a

dangerous political environment leaning towards facism, exported all over the world. One of the most volatile conversations- even in our generally progressive churches- is still whether to take the flag out of the pulpit.

Echoing your assertions in Thesis 4, the cognitive dissonance of Christinaity's history in power in North America does NOT align with the liberative message of the Gospel as I understand it. Even in our call to partner alongside people as experts in their own contexts, even the language of Christianity carries the baggage of our history. I have noticed that many people are also shying away from "Christian" as an identity, and are "followers of Christ." The institutions, the langage, and the faith itself is continuing to evolve, as it has for millenia. So, too, does our collective work of liberative faith.

However, I do affirm the opportunities present. Let me tell you a story. In November of 2017, I haphazardly posted on my facebook wall an invitation into ritual. I *love* writing ritual and liturgy and the flow of words to make meaning and how spirit shows up. I invited my extended community-- "queer witchy God-leaning non-church folk" to give me just a little detail about what they needed and I'd make it happen. A clear kind of colorful diversity emerged. This opportunity of the witness of liberative love, using language that is, as feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp argued over 30 years ago in *The Power to Speak*, the Word beyond words, the Perfectly Open Sign. I posit: Proclamation, through ritual, holds the Spirit present even where the trauma of words on those who are the most and multiply oppressed. Creative ritual points clearly to some of the liminal or "in-between" spaces.

So: I wrote rituals about gender transition. Rituals about name changing. Rituals about beginning again after bodily trauma, rituals about beginning to write dissertation in academic grind. I learned: people crave the space of ritual that leans on Spirit, partners alongside them in meaning making, and invites possibility of community engagement. I believe rituals are a gift that faith traditions hold, and even as Christianity continues to evolve in more specific understanding of our liberative faith, the proclamation of the Gospel is paramount, even in awareness and sometimes avoidance of the words that carry such trauma. And through these rituals, people became closer to the witness of spirit in their own lives and communities.

Finally, I point to the Christian leadership of those who seek liberation as an opportunity for our collective witness. As a young, queer, ordained Minister, I both know what it is to be excluded in conversations, and to focus to recognize clearly where it is currently happening. I believe my work is to learn where people are the most hurt, and show up beside them. Whether in racial justice work, or conversations of class access, or disability, or alongside our queer and/or gender nonconforming and trans siblings, immigrants and refugees, or

people for whom the dominant language is not their first tongue, it is my work to learn, listen, witness and support-- BECAUSE I am a Christian.

I believe WE are those who will carry the faith towards the generations to follow alongside and with the leadership of people who are leading in Christian faith with the balance of awareness of our collective history and where we have caused harm, and yet still hold a hope for the future, and the world we co-create alongside God. Where dominant culture, in whatever context, seeks to define experience exclusively, we collectively fall short. For this reason, I deeply appreciate the approach you describe regarding equal footing. The kaleidoscope of experience and people, each with access to a version of the Divine, is necessary to gain understanding of God made incarnate through Christ in the world. The Christian leaders among us rising are those who have been historically excluded, cast aside, harmed, and/or ignored.

And yet. These leaders call us to the message of the Gospel which paints a picture of a world where the people who are the most oppressed lead the way in liberation. When the "least of these" are centered, all benefit. I join in this hope for God's witness in the world, and imagine a world where prisons are obsolete, health care is available to all, and the ways in which our gentleness with each other manifests reflects the inherent dignity and worth of every human beloved of God. I dream of a world where the systems that we ascribe to are not defined by capitalism, domination, and greed, but the amount of Divine worth of the people within them. This is a world we can feel in our own bodies and we can create these spaces in the here and now as we relate to one another in the world.

Thank you so much for the time to speak with a North American Perspective on your Theses. I am one of many, and it is an honor to contribute into this ongoing imagination of Christinaity, as held by church, for the sake of our great, great, great, great granddaughters, that they, too, may know the love of God made incarnant in their own bodies. Let us lead-and follow- in deep humility and care, and listen deeply across places of difference to learn more of who God is, through each person. I am honored to be beside you in Christian Witness... and mission.