

Elders at the Communion Table

by

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I lovingly dedicate this to my grandfather, Rev. Eugene T. Curtis, posthumously.

Who always asked me, "Where is the logos?" in everything I did.

One God, one system of nature, one universe. That universe is composed of innumerable systems, which, in perfect concert, move forward in subordination to one supreme end. That one end of all things is the sovereign and infinite pleasure of the creator who inhabits eternity and animates the universe with his presence. So, worship and adore the heavenly hierarchies, saying: -"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure, they are and were created."¹

Alexander Campbell 1834

¹. Alexander Campbell, "Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs," *Millennial Harbinger* 5 (1834): 239.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DOC	Disciples of Christ
CBP	Christian Board of Publication

ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis explores the theological, historical, and practical dimensions surrounding the involvement of elders in communion practices within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma. These churches, characterized by a lack of strict doctrines, prioritize the spiritual significance of communion in fostering community, unity, and remembrance. By examining the theological landscape of rural churches in Oklahoma, the research investigates the rationale behind inviting elders to fully participate in and reclaim their leadership role in communion. Additionally, the thesis examines the historical trajectory of communion practices within these churches, identifying instances where elders may have been marginalized or excluded from active involvement. By contextualizing these historical developments within the specific context of rural Oklahoma churches, the study provides insights into the evolving dynamics of communion practice, free from rigid doctrines. The practical aspect of the research involves engaging with rural congregations and elders to understand current perspectives and challenges related to elders' inclusion in communion. Through methods such as census data analysis, in-depth interviews, and nuanced case studies within rural Oklahoma communities, the study explores attitudes, challenges, and opportunities associated with elders' full participation in communion. Ultimately, the thesis advocates for a more inclusive approach to communion within rural churches in Oklahoma, affirming the diversity of the community and recognizing the integral role of elders in spiritual participation. By integrating theological insights, historical analysis, and practical considerations, the research aims to foster greater unity, hospitality, and spiritual

enrichment within rural congregations while contributing to broader discussions within the Christian community regarding communion inclusion in diverse and doctrine-free contexts.

INTRODUCTION

I want you to imagine being a kid and attending church for the first time. Do you remember your first time to have communion? Did you even know what communion was? What about the first time you were asked to pray, let alone in public? In your memory, was it a man or a woman you remember at the communion table giving the prayer over the elements? Did you go to a church that sang? If you went to a church that sang, did they have someone playing an organ or a piano, or did they sing without accompaniment altogether? What did they call the person who gave the "message" on Sunday was it a preacher, minister, brother, or sister? Was the carpet red or orange? Did the place everyone came together have benches (pews) or chairs? There is a lot that a person coming to a church for the very first time has to assimilate to the first time they come to our places of worship. In the academic and theological world, we assume that everyone will assimilate into a lulled sense of comfort if we say the "churchy" words and get everyone through the hymns in one piece in a rural setting. However, I have found that in a rural setting, the only thing lacking in congregations is resources for our laity.

I have always been fascinated with how the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) comes together in worship. I am a fifth generation (Disciples of Christ) minister. In my life, I have watched the denomination undergo many changes in how we each interpret what we do in our respective liturgies. We believe every church is independently autonomous, and the connecting piece is how we practice communion. I use the word liturgy because it's essential to make the distinction that historically, liturgy means the practice of the people.

Historically, the congregationally elected elders in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have always been an integral part of the community, and the phrase "priesthood of all believers," emphasized by Alexander Campbell, underscores their significance.² In the past, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination helped collaboratively provide resources from elders from all over the country. They would provide prayers at the table, communion meditations, offering prayers and meditations, and submit them to the Christian Board of Publication to be distributed. That practice ended in the 1990's. Disciple congregations still depend heavily on elders to offer weekly communion prayers. Rural congregations in Oklahoma need examples of elders' prayers and liturgical resources as they lead their congregations and a way for people to share them collaboratively. This stems partly from the institutionalization of the Christian Church in 1971 when the order and call of ministry replaced the elders' roles with clergy.³ The subsequent lack of clarity regarding their roles led to an ongoing balancing act between clergy and elders, especially prevalent in rural congregations. My thesis in this project undertakes an analysis of elder communion prayers in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma, focusing on their theology and inclusivity, and aims to provide worship resources that foster inclusive, theological, and community-based discussions within the denomination, particularly in rural congregations.

Questions to be considered in this project focus on the need for these types of worship resources and the theological differences in rural Disciples congregations that come through in prayers at the table. The hope will be to come up with future material to

². G. Edwin Osborn, "The Disciples of Christ and Worship" (speech presented at the Oklahoma Christian Ministers Institute, Enid, Oklahoma: Phillips Theological Seminary, 1952), 15.

³. Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity*, rev.ed. (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 1997), 181.

be published but, more importantly, to get an indicator of how rural congregations function in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma. Ethnography ensures that diverse voices and perspectives within the denomination considerations, promoting inclusivity, and honoring the uniqueness of each congregation's worship practices, leading to more representative and inclusive final resources.⁴

The three main components of this project are theology, inclusivity, and patriarchal language:

Theology: This aspect of the inquiry seeks to uncover the implicit and explicit theological themes embedded within the elder communion prayers. It probes the extent to which these prayers align with the core theological foundations and beliefs of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Additionally, it explores how these prayers may reflect unique theological nuances or interpretations that could influence the spiritual experiences of those who engage with them.

Inclusivity: The assessment of inclusivity involves carefully examining whether these prayers are designed to be inclusive and accommodating to a broad spectrum of worshipers. This examination considers the accessibility of prayers to individuals from diverse age groups, backgrounds, and physical abilities. It also evaluates whether these prayers acknowledge and celebrate the diversity present within the congregation.

Furthermore, it scrutinizes elements that may inadvertently marginalize or exclude certain community segments.

Patriarchal Language: The scrutiny of patriarchal language within the elder communion prayers focuses on identifying gender-specific or biased language. It examines how these

⁴. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 10.

prayers address concepts of divinity and humanity concerning gender. The analysis aims to uncover phrases or linguistic constructs that might perpetuate traditional gender roles or stereotypes. The ultimate objective is to explore possibilities for revisions that could render the language more inclusive and gender equitable.

Project Purpose: Beyond a mere academic exploration, the overarching purpose of this undertaking is to foster a more informed and constructive discourse within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma and rural Christian congregations more broadly. The project aspires to:

- **Enhance Worship Resources:** By identifying strengths and weaknesses in the elder communion prayers, this study contributes to the refinement of worship materials, benefiting the specific geographic focus and potentially inspiring improvements in worship practices elsewhere.
- **Promote Inclusivity and Diversity:** The project promotes inclusivity and diversity within religious practices. It aims to create worship spaces that are welcoming and equitable, fostering a sense of belonging for all congregants.
- **Facilitate Community Engagement:** Hosting a focus group encourages community engagement and participation. It provides a platform for the congregation to actively shape and influence their worship experiences.
- **Encourage Theological Reflection:** The project encourages a deeper theological reflection within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It prompts members to consider their worship practices theological underpinnings and how they align with their faith and values such as lay-led prayers at the Lord's Supper.

At its core, this plan aspires to catalyze meaningful change within worship practices. Singling out and analyzing elder communion prayers within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma seeks to illuminate the inner workings of a crucial aspect of religious life. These prayers are not just words spoken during rituals; they embody the essence of faith, serving as a bridge between the divine and the congregants. Consequently, by examining their theology, inclusivity, and language, this project engages with the heart of spirituality, challenging established norms and encouraging introspection.

This endeavor is not content to remain confined within religious institutions. It radiates outward, touching upon broader societal concerns. The emphasis on inclusivity is particularly noteworthy, as it underscores the project's commitment to nurturing an environment where everyone, regardless of their background or identity, can find a sense of belonging. In a world marked by diversity and evolving societal norms, the project's exploration of inclusive language and practices resonates far beyond the walls of any church. It aligns with broader societal discussions on equity, diversity, and inclusion, positioning itself as a relevant and progressive force for positive change.

In focusing on rural churches, it recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities that exist within these settings. These churches often serve as bedrocks of their communities, shaping and reflecting their congregants' values, hopes, and concerns. Thus, by initiating a conversation within this context, the project becomes a conduit for exploring the intersections of faith, tradition, and contemporary life. It challenges, questions, and inspires, seeking to understand and actively shape the future of spirituality within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma and beyond. By

embracing inclusivity, reevaluating theology, and acknowledging the dynamism of spiritual engagement, this initiative stands as a testament to the enduring capacity of faith to evolve, adapt, and continue to enrich the lives of those it touches.

CHAPTER ONE: PROJECT SETTING

Ministry Setting

I reside in rural Oklahoma, near the college town of Stillwater. While the proximity to a "big city" offers an escape from rural monotony, I grapple with prevailing societal norms related to race, theology, and the treatment of individuals who deviate from white, hetero-normative lives. Rural communities are designated by three components according to the census bureau: location, population, income.⁵

In Perry, OK, the historical significance of the land run in 1893, which opened the Cherokee land for non-Indigenous settlement, continues to influence the community. Perry's economy is anchored by companies like Ditch Witch, which provides manufacturing jobs. The town's predominantly conservative and religious character is reflected in its adherence to traditional beliefs and values. Religiously, Perry emphasizes faith, moral values, and spiritual traditions, with religious institutions playing central roles. The community highly values religious education and passing down faith traditions. However, Perry also grapples with social conservatism on abortion and same-sex marriage. Politically, Perry is conservative, with deeply ingrained values prioritizing conservative social beliefs, faith, and patriotism. Political participation is significant, with conservative values influencing local governance. Economically, Perry relies on manufacturing jobs and low living costs. It exhibits resilience despite economic challenges, and blue-collar occupations characterize the community.

⁵. U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey and Geography Brief, Michael Ratcliffe et al., *Defining Rural at the U.S. Census Bureau*, December 2016, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajglcefindmkaj/https://www2census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/ua/Defining_Rural.pdf.

The theological landscape within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma exhibits significant diversity across geographic areas. This theological diversity is notably influenced by the prevailing dominance of evangelical Protestantism throughout the state. This religious landscape presents distinctive theological challenges for mainline denominations, including the Disciples of Christ, as they grapple with various factors contributing to shifts in membership and beliefs.

One of the primary challenges faced by mainline denominations in Oklahoma is the decline in membership. This decline can be attributed, in part, to theological differences that exist between mainline and evangelical Protestantism.⁶ While evangelicalism tends to emphasize conservative interpretations of religious doctrines and biblical teachings, mainline denominations often adopt more progressive and inclusive theological perspectives. These divergent theological positions can create tensions and make it challenging for mainline denominations to attract and retain members in a predominantly conservative religious landscape. When 79 percent of Oklahoma identifies as evangelical Protestant, it adds an extreme dynamic to understanding an "open communion table."⁷

Cultural shifts also play a significant role in shaping the theological context in Oklahoma. Evangelicalism's alignment with conservative cultural values, such as traditional family structures and moral conservatism, resonates strongly with many Oklahomans. This alignment with prevailing cultural norms has contributed to the

⁶. Michael Lipka, "Mainline Protestants Make up Shrinking Number of U.S. Adults," *Pew Research Center*, May 18, 2015, accessed August 23, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>.

⁷. "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>.

ascendancy of Evangelical Protestantism within the state. In contrast, mainline denominations, with their more liberal positions on social issues like LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality, may find it more challenging to align with these cultural values. Interestingly, in its most recent poll, Pew Research found that 53 percent of those surveyed believe homosexuality "should be accepted," while 40 percent said it "should be discouraged."⁸ The rise of evangelical Protestantism in Oklahoma can be attributed to a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors. Historical roots of evangelicalism in the state date back to its formative settlement period, and its emphasis on personal transformation and active faith participation has resonated with the local population. In acts like handing out Bible tracts to strangers, or going door to door, or beaming mega-churches to dozens of campuses and how they demonstrate their commitment in a pluralist world.⁹ Robust community engagement, including outreach and charitable endeavors, has helped evangelical churches establish a strong presence and influence within communities.

Political influences further complicate the theological landscape. Evangelicalism's robust political involvement and alignment with conservative causes have a considerable impact on public sentiment and policy decisions in Oklahoma. This prevailing environment can present a challenging landscape where the more centrist or progressive positions of mainline Protestantism may struggle to gain a foothold.¹⁰ This political

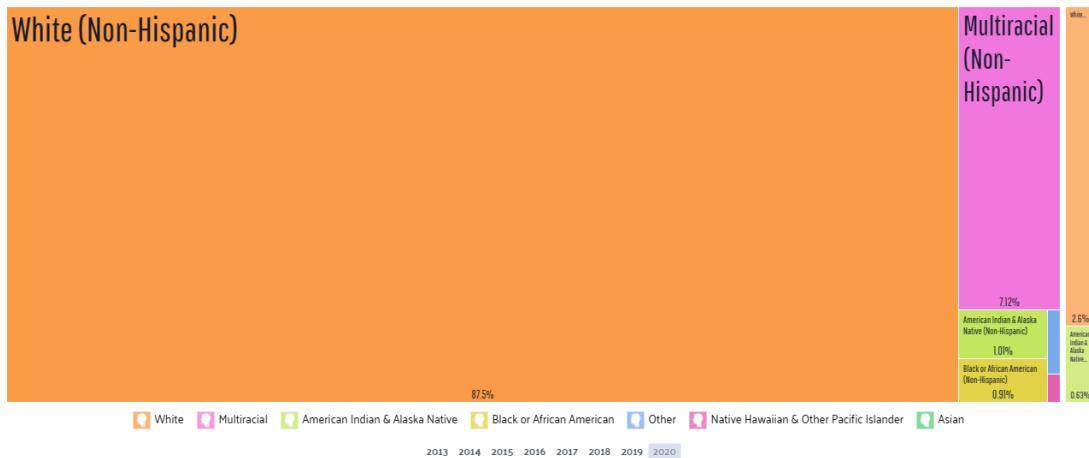
⁸. "Religious Landscape Study."

⁹. John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), accessed August 24, 2023, introduction page 1, JSTOR.

¹⁰. Rebecca Leppert and Dalia Fahmy, "10 Facts about Religion and Government in the United States," *Pew Research Center*, July 5, 2022., accessed August 23, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/07/05/10-facts-about-religion-and-government-in-the-united-states/>.

involvement can create an environment where the more centrist or progressive theological positions of mainline denominations face challenges in gaining acceptance and influence.

Understanding these theological challenges is essential for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma as it seeks to navigate the complex theological landscape while upholding its commitment to an open communion table. This commitment to inclusivity and a welcoming approach to worship remains central to its identity, even in a predominantly evangelical environment. Finding ways to engage with theological diversity, foster dialogue, and promote understanding within the broader Christian community is a crucial endeavor for the Disciples of Christ in Oklahoma. Perry, OK, is very indicative of many small, rural communities in Oklahoma. Our social data graph, as far as the diversity, looks something like this:



11

In Perry, OK, 15 percent of the population (721 out of 4.79k people) live below the poverty line, surpassing the national average of 12.8 percent. The highest poverty rate is among females aged 25-34, followed by males aged 6-11 and females aged 75+. The

¹¹. “Perry, OK.” Data USA, accessed May 17, 2023, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/perry-ok?fbclid=IwAR3Sg9UN_jRqtuT_mGFqievnuqna5oc9OSIPCLngs1OjvjqtMme18aCAaM.

most prevalent racial or ethnic group facing poverty in Perry, OK is White, followed by Black and Native American.¹²

Religious/Theological

Perry is a theologically conservative rural community and characterizes itself by adhering to traditional religious beliefs and practices within a predominantly rural setting. This community strongly emphasizes religious faith, moral values, and spiritual traditions. Residents revere their religious institutions, which are central in shaping their daily lives and social interactions.

In Perry, religious doctrines and teachings guide its members' moral compass and ethical decision-making. They prioritize strict adherence to religious scriptures, traditional rituals, and conservative interpretations of theological doctrines. They uphold doctrinal traditional family structures and gender roles, emphasizing the sanctity of marriage and the importance of raising children per religious principles.

Worship and religious gatherings are significant in the community, fostering a sense of unity and shared faith. Religious leaders, such as pastors or ministers, often play influential roles as spiritual guides and community leaders. The community places a great value on religious education and passing down their faith traditions to the younger generations, with religious schools or homeschooling being common educational choices. The townspeople have some of the highest homeschooling rates in the area.

Unfortunately, Perry also exhibits a strong sense of moral responsibility and social conservatism. Issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and gender roles are commonly viewed through a lens that aligns with traditional and very hurtful religious

¹². "Perry, OK."

teachings. Community members actively engage in efforts to promote their values within the public sphere, advocating for policies and practices that align with their theological beliefs. This is where one sees the flags in the yards. The bumper sticker politics as they drive down the road with the mufflers as loud as possible, thundering in and around those who want to show love to others. I have to remind myself it is important to approach discussions with a theologically conservative rural community with sensitivity, respect, and a commitment to understanding. Recognizing and appreciating the diversity of perspectives within the community and fostering a dialogue that promotes empathy and mutual respect can lead to meaningful conversations and a greater appreciation for the complexities of theological conservatism in rural settings, but it is hard.

Political

Perry is a conservative rural community characterized by values, beliefs, and social norms that reflect a traditional and often politically conservative outlook. Perry tends to prioritize and uphold traditional family structures, religious institutions, and a sense of community cohesion. In this conservative rural area, there is often a deep-rooted respect for conservative social values, including a focus on "Bible-based" conservative faith, over-inflated patriotism, and the preservation imaginary, that somehow everyone knows about traditional customs and practices. Perry tends to place a high value on personal responsibility, self-sufficiency, and a strong work ethic. It also has close-knit social networks and relies on mutual support and cooperation within their neighborhoods. While Perry may experience challenges related to limited resources, economic opportunities, and access to services, it often exhibits resilience and a strong sense of community pride. Political participation and engagement hold significance in these

communities, with conservative values frequently influencing local governance and policy decisions. According to the Noble County Election Board, Perry has 6206 registered voters and 4134 of those are Republicans, 1,270 Democrats, 748 Independents, and 54 Libertarians. In the last gubernatorial race, 64.53 percent of the vote went to the Republican candidate.¹³ Overall, conservative rural communities play a vital role in preserving traditional values, cultural heritage, and a sense of shared identity in the rural landscape, and yet it is hard when we "know" everyone.

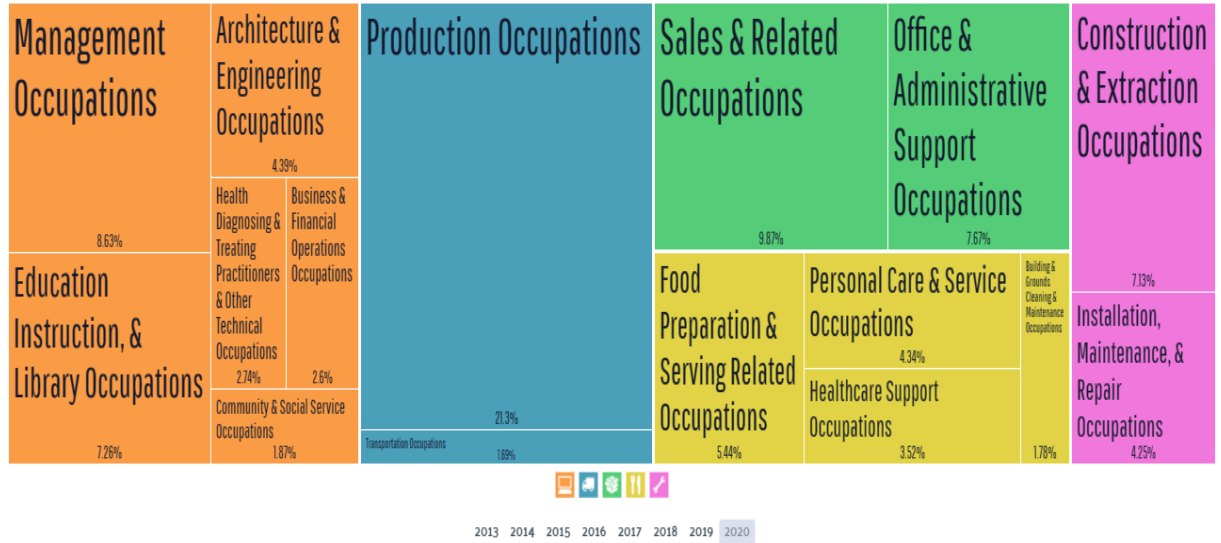
Economic

The largest employer of Perry is the industrial giant known as Ditch Witch. Most employers are manufacturing and require specific training offered here in Perry, and if not here, it is readily available in Stillwater. Ditch Witch employs 1,635 in the city of Perry. Many people live in Perry for the low cost of living but work in other communities, especially in Stillwater, which is a twenty-five-minute drive.

The economy of Perry, OK, employs 2.19k people. The largest industries in Perry, are manufacturing (665 people), health care and social assistance (255 people), and educational services (180 people), and the highest-paying industries are agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining (\$115,375).¹⁴ The graph below shows breakdown of the operations of Perry. Pay close attention to the fact that 21.3 percent is production occupations. This is a "blue-collar" community and most of the upper management do not live in the city of Perry, so there tends to be a lot of animosity towards those in leadership roles telling people what to do in the city that the citizens live in.

¹³. Mary Deken, "County Clerk Election Data" (Noble County Election Board, May 17, 2023), 11.

¹⁴. "Perry, OK."



The community in Perry is a rural community but is not defined by an agrarian culture like a predominant number of rural communities are. Alan Stanton writes "When people talk about agrarian communities, they are assuming more than just economics. More often, and particularly within theological circles, they are presuming cultural markers that might or might not exist."¹⁵ I think sometimes outside voices tend to believe that rural communities are only a group of country-bumpkins. While some of those may exist, that is definitely not the case in Perry, where Ditch Witch is a multi-billion-dollar industry.

¹⁵. Allen T. Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural: Building Thriving Rural Congregations* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020) 2.

CHAPTER TWO THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) places tremendous emphasis on the significance of Lord's Supper. In our pursuit of ecumenism, however, we may have inadvertently lost some of the theological depth and meaning behind this sacred practice. It is not uncommon to hear some Disciples clergy refer to our communion as Eucharist, but the definitions often seem to stray from the original intent.

Understanding the true origins of the word Eucharist and its profound theological implications becomes paramount for Disciples as a denomination. To gain insights, engaging in ecumenical discussions with other Christian traditions can be enlightening. For instance, a Roman Catholic priest, Father Shockey, in discussing this project, once explained that "Eucharist is a transformative moment where God's presence is experienced through the act of partaking in the body and blood of Jesus Christ."¹⁶ While this depiction is eloquent and engaging, it might not completely capture the essence of communion within the Disciples of Christ and its unique theological significance from various perspectives.

¹⁶. Father Benjamin Shockey, interviewed by the author, Kingman, Kansas, April 25, 2016.

Communion

By actively exploring and affirming the distinctive theological aspects of communion in the (Disciples of Christ), Disciples can reinforce the profoundness of this sacred practice within our faith tradition. This journey of understanding and appreciation will help Disciples reaffirm their identity and enrich their spiritual experiences as a collective community, fostering a deeper connection with the divine during our worship gatherings.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a twentieth century theologian, stated:

I really cannot tell you what happiness such things give one. However certain I am of the spiritual bond between all of you and myself, the spirit always seems to want some visible token of this union of love and remembrance, and then material things become the vehicles of spiritual realities. I think this is analogous to the need felt in religions for the visible appearance of the Spirit in the sacrament.¹⁷

In the twentieth century, Bonhoeffer, expressed the profound joy and significance he found in tangible expressions of spiritual unity and love. He believed that material things can serve as vehicles for spiritual realities, similar to the need for visible representations of the Spirit in religious sacraments. In this manner, most Disciples clergy view communion as a memorial celebration. It is an opportunity to find a moment with Jesus and his disciples. It is, if you will, a thin space in the midst of the worship experience. Dr. G. Edwin Osborn would write: “That communion is not Calvary reenacted indefinitely, always with Christ’s sacrifice offered anew, but is rather a fellowship with Christ, a reminder of not being alone and focused on death but rather his life.”¹⁸ It is not something

¹⁷. Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity*, rev. ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1997), 149.

¹⁸. Osborn, “The Disciples of Christ and Worship,” 7.

where the bread and wine become something else (transubstantiated). It is a moment for us to glimpse the life and the ultimate loss of Jesus on behalf of humankind surrounded by his closest friends and people of his community.

Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Stone-Campbell movement, focused on words rather than sacramental language of the Lord's Supper and called it an ordinance. His focus on scripture in his claims advocated that if we are to be different than other Christian denominations, we must focus on scripture only and not the given doctrinal understanding that we have inherited with our relationship of the European churches. To Alexander Campbell, ordinance was something biblical, and so communion for him and I would say also for me is in memory of the last supper.¹⁹ If we are to take communion, we must acknowledge that we are a part of humankind and in like manner are sinners. All people are welcome at the table because not one of us can judge one another. (See Matthew 7:11)

For me, communion is where all can put aside differences and come to the table striving for a sense of unity. There are no limitations except the ones individuals bring to the table. It is in the act of communion that the glimpses of God become real and tangible in the act of serving one another as we recognize our commonness to one another.

¹⁹. Alexander Campbell, "Remission of Sins," *The Millennial Harbinger* 1, extra 1," accessed August 23, 2023, https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tmh/MH0113.HTM#MH011301.

We start with who leads.

History of Elders in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Comparing Campbell and Stone

Alexander Campbell, a leading figure in the early North American restoration Movement, had specific views on the role and function of elders within the Christian Church. Campbell believed in a congregational form of church government, where local churches were autonomous and self-governing.²⁰ In his writings and teachings, Campbell emphasized the importance of elders as overseers and shepherds of the church. According to Campbell, elders were responsible for the spiritual well-being and guidance of the congregation. Campbell emphasized the importance of elders being qualified individuals who demonstrated exemplary character, knowledge of scripture, and a commitment to the teachings of Christ.²¹ Campbell also emphasized the need for elders to be appointed by the congregation through a democratic process. He advocated for the involvement of the entire church community in the selection and appointment of elders, as he believed this ensured accountability and prevented the concentration of power in the hands of a few. He further wrote there is to be a difference between teaching elders and ruling elders. The teaching elder would be labeled a “Bishop” “ whose office was to preside over, to instruct, and to edify the community.”²² Still, Campbell emphasized that elders should not exercise authority over the faith and conscience of individual believers. He believed each

²⁰. Alexander Campbell, “The Christian Ministry,” in *The Christian System*, 82-90 (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Company, 1890).

²¹. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati, Bosworth, Chase & Hall, 1871), 111, accessed September 7, 2022, <http://archive.org/details/christiansystem00camp>.

²². Alexander Campbell, “The Christian Ministry,” in *The Christian System*, 82-90 (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Company, 1890).

Christian had a direct relationship with God and was responsible for their spiritual journey. While elders provided guidance and support, they were not to exercise authoritarian control over the beliefs and practices of the congregation.²³ Overall, Alexander Campbell saw elders as essential leaders within the local church, responsible for providing pastoral care and spiritual guidance and promoting the unity and well-being of the Christian community. His views on elders reflected his broader vision of restoring primitive Christianity and emphasizing the autonomy of local churches.

Barton W. Stone, another prominent leader in the early restoration movement, also had views on the role of elders within the Christian Churches. Stone shared similar ideas with Alexander Campbell regarding congregational autonomy and the importance of elders in the local church. In Stone's discourse on the roles of governance of congregations he clearly designated elders when he stated, "It is abundantly plain that the office of an elder, bishop, and overseer is the same that they were teachers, or preacher of the Word; for a bishop to teach."²⁴ Stone believed that elders were responsible for overseeing the spiritual welfare of the congregation and providing pastoral care. He emphasized their role as shepherds who were to guide, teach, and nurture the church members. Like Campbell, Stone emphasized the importance of elders being individuals of good character, knowledgeable in scripture, and dedicated to the teachings of Christ.

Additionally, Stone emphasized the need for elders to lead by example and exhibit a servant-like attitude in his address: "Be an example in charity, love, or not in word in

²³. Campbell, *The Christian System*, 1871, 112.

²⁴. James Mathes, *Works of Elder B W. Stone*, 2nd ed. vol. 1 (Cincinnati, Ohio: Moore, Wiltstach, Keys & Co., 1859), 826.

tongue, but in deed and in truth, by administering of your goods to the poor and needy."²⁵ He believed that elders should not lord over or dominate the congregation but rather serve as humble and compassionate leaders. Stone emphasized the idea of a plurality of elders, where a group of qualified individuals collectively shared the responsibility of leadership and decision-making within the church.

Like Campbell, Stone advocated for congregational involvement in the selection and appointment of elders. He believed the congregation should have a voice in the appointment process, ensuring accountability and preventing the concentration of power. Stone valued the democratic participation of the church community in matters concerning leadership and governance.²⁶

In the not-too-distant past, the roles of elder/steward, clergy, and diaconate were clearly defined in the Stone-Campbell movement. Clergy were, and continue to be, the individual congregations called to lead them through the ordinance of scripture reading and the church's administration.²⁷ It was a distinct honor of serving a congregation to which they felt "called." The elders/stewards were the overseers, shepherds, celebrants of the Lord's Supper and teachers for all our congregations in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).²⁸ Deacons have been and will continue to be the servants of the local congregations "It is clear that deacons are to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (Jas 1:22) Deacons must be the embodiment word of God for others, the 'good

²⁵. Mathes, *Works of Elder B W. Stone*, 1:167.

²⁶. Mathes, *Works of Elder B W. Stone*, 1:166.

²⁷. Campbell, *The Christian System*, 1871, 117.

²⁸. Peter Morgan, *Disciples Elder/Steward/Stewardship: A Quest for Identity and Ministry*, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2003), 78.

book' others can read and pattern their life after."²⁹ The roles of elder, deacon, minister in the local church are not the only roles of leadership in a congregation; however, they are the ones most often needed for logistical and functional duties.

Having grown up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I have witnessed numerous transitions of these roles over the past thirty-five years. I can remember when an elder/steward had to be ordained into the congregations just like the clergy. Alexander Campbell's statement in the *Christian Messenger* in April 1827 reflects a perspective within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that questions the necessity of an ordained elder in the process of ordination. Campbell's reasoning is grounded in a careful examination of the New Testament, which, according to him, lacks instances where ordination to the ministry is exclusively performed by the church or in collaboration with the elder/stewardship. Instead, the New Testament portrays the elder/stewardship or presbyter as the agent responsible for ordination. Campbell's position suggests a decentralized approach by emphasizing that the elder/stewardship, with the endorsement of the church, holds the authority to ordain. It implies that the settled pastor, supported by the church, possesses the authority to carry out ordinations without strict reliance on a separate class of ordained elders.³⁰ This perspective challenges the traditional role of an ordained elder in the ordination process, pointing towards a more congregational and collaborative approach within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Disciples slowly shifted the authority from ordination from the congregational to the regional level in recognition that ministry has responsibilities beyond those associated

²⁹. Gary Straub and James Trader, *Your Calling as a Deacon* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2005), 29.

³⁰. Thomas Smith and Thomas M. Allen, *Christian Messenger*, vol. book 6, 1827.

with any one congregation.³¹ One can see this in 1946 with O. L. Shelton's book, the *Church Functioning Effectively*: elders began to assume identity as lay elders and began to recognize ministers as a new office in disciples ministry, one distinct from that of an elder.³² “ The significance of the called minister was initially limited to their specific congregations, but as people began feeling a "calling" to other congregations, often in different states, the situation changed. As the denomination continued to have debates about the roles of clergy/elders one could see the inevitable splits emerge from differences of theological and biblical perspectives. The Stone-Campbell Movement split with the independent Christian Churches with the vote to make the Movement into a denomination in 1968. These splits were not solely about the calls of clergy/elders, but the discourse definitely did not help. In 1971, the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) issued a document that focused on establishing policies and criteria for the order of ministry.³³ Interestingly, this document required seminary education for clergy seeking ordination but did not mention elders or stewards. This document elevated clergy to a position of ecclesiastical authority. It aimed to support clergy in their work within the global ecumenical world. While this section of this research primarily discusses elders and stewards, the historical understanding of these roles has shifted mainly due to the document, resulting in a partial return to our Stone roots.³⁴

³¹. Dr. Lisa Barnett, “History and Polity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) ‘More Internal Tensions,’” (lecture, Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK, August 2023).

³². William Edward Tucker and Lester G. McAllister, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Saint Louis: Bethany Press, 1975), 417.

³³. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, 182.

³⁴. Joshua Bell, “Bell Final for MTS2018” (Phillips Theological Seminary, Spring 2018).

The concept of ordination then came under scrutiny by the denomination especially people like Jim Jones were ordained by a local congregation. The roles and the understanding of the roles became the topic of discernment towards individuals as well as the regions or congregations they were serving. Elder/steward at one time were the ones who oversaw all the business of the local church and served at the table. In the evolving landscape of the early Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a fascinating transformation was underway. As the church community progressed and matured, individuals who had long served as elders and stewards began to adopt a distinctive self-identity-that of a "lay elder/steward." This shift was not merely semantic; it signified a growing recognition of a new ministerial office within the Disciples' ministry. Alongside this acknowledgment, the role of "minister" emerged as a separate office from the traditional "elder/steward." This development marked a significant turning point in the structure and dynamics of Disciples of Christ ministry and in the way leadership and pastoral responsibilities were understood within the faith community. The historical context and implications of this transition, shed light on how this reshaped the ecclesiastical landscape of the early Disciples of Christ movement. Elders/stewards began to assume a self-conscious identity as a "lay elder/steward," they also began to recognize "ministers" as a new office in Disciples ministry, one distinct from that of 'elder/steward.'³⁵ Campbell would not have seen the distinction, however, Stone would have wanted the distinction leaning towards clergy being called an elder adhering to his Presbyterian background.

As the twentieth century ended, the denomination grappled with changes introduced as early as the 1920s with open membership question and entrance in to the

³⁵. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, 175.

Federal Council of Churches—an evolution that caught many Disciples unprepared. The reality of being progressive and articulating what the denomination meant by the phrase “All are welcome to the table.” The focus and responsibility to be good neighbors to global justice and being vessels of peace sounds good on paper. Still, no resources were available for local congregations to deal with or provide ministry in social justice situations. The responsibility of composing this section is not taken lightly; rather, it is an earnest attempt to initiate a denomination-wide discourse reflecting our inherent strength in collaborative endeavors. An identity crisis has been apparent within the denomination, warranting deep consideration. Through my comprehensive research, a notable pattern emerged: over the past thirty-five years, many local congregational leaders have been drawn to the denomination due to the inclusivity and diversity that define Disciples. It becomes evident that the compassion and acceptance they experience here may not have been as prevalent in the congregations of their upbringing, making them discover a sense of "sanctuary" within our community. This embrace of newcomers, while incredibly promising for the future, prompts a fervent desire that both new arrivals and those of us who can be characterized as "cradle-disciples" will utilize the material presented here to stimulate a more expansive discourse concerning leadership roles within the contemporary church landscape.

The task of providing and revamping training materials for our denomination and congregational resources emerges as a crucial endeavor. This initiative will pave the way for a more informed, comprehensive, and transformative approach to leadership roles. I sincerely hope this call to action resonates throughout our denomination, ushering in an

era of progressive growth, open dialogue, and a shared commitment to the values that define Disciples.

Disciples' understanding of "educated laity."

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), originally part of the Stone-Campbell Movement, emerged as a denomination, though its founders initially envisioned it differently. Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, and Walter Scott, all educated men, played crucial roles in its early development. Alexander Campbell, considered a minister even as the denomination formalized, aligned with the Apostle Paul's concept of a *didaskalos* or teacher. His commitment to learning led to the founding of Bethany College in 1840, emphasizing education for all within the denomination. The struggle over the hierarchy with roles existed from the start but intensified in the nineteenth century with a focus on "ordained clergy." While the founders valued educating the laity, Alexander Campbell opposed a standing clergy, advocating for leadership to arise from within congregations. Dr. Lisa Davison notes Campbell's resistance to established clergy, influenced by concerns over authority abuse in other denominations. Barton Stone, however, held a different view, emphasizing an educated clergy to align with the educated laity.³⁶

The early founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement were concerned about educating the laity but not about establishing a standing clergy. Alexander Campbell opposed a standing clergy due to concerns about its potential for abuse of authority. He believed leadership should come from ordained elder/stewards and deacons within congregations. In contrast, Barton Stone did not share this view, given his value for

³⁶. Lisa Davison, "Disciples and Education," lecture (Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK, April 17, 2018).

education and belief in an educated laity, suggesting that clergy should be equally educated as the congregation members. Disciples still struggle with who and what we are and how we do it. Alexander Campbell's understanding of an "educated laity" can still be seen with our Churches of Christ/acappella brothers and sisters, in the ways their leadership is established. The elders/stewards and deacons have been lifted into their prospective churches and have continued to be ordained. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we have followed more of Barton W. Stone's understanding. He also believed these individuals must be educated and informed by biblical studies, science, languages, and church history. In 1841 Stone wrote, "ignorant, enthusiastic preachers disgrace the word, and ordinances of God."³⁷ The early founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement were concerned about educating the laity but not establishing a standing clergy. Alexander Campbell opposed a standing clergy due to concerns about potential abuse of authority and believed leadership should come from ordained elder/stewards and deacons within congregations. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has followed a more Stone-inspired path, emphasizing education for its clergy.

Campbell and Stone may have disagreed on a lot of things however, they did not disagree that there are different leadership roles in the church. I believe the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) started with Alexander Campbell's understanding that we must educate as many of those with ears to listen and then that changed somewhere in the 1950's. This is evident in the language of the *Christian Worship: A Service Book's* language regarding how one might view worship when it states, "The act of worship is the speech of the soul Christian public worship tries by certain acts to express experience

³⁷. *Christian Messenger*, volume 11, issue 8 (April 1841): 283.

with God . . . Such an expression is made by a group of people as a common corporate act.”³⁸ Historically, the Disciples have emphasized educated clergy and, at the same time, the need to be a church of laity-led worship. This is evident in all the publications from Christian Board of Publication, Bethany Press, Standard Publication and even Chalice Press. Starting from Osborn's book and leading up to *Chalice Worship*, written by Dr. Colbert Cartwright, which was created in 1999 as a resource for clergy and laity, serving as a tool for worship materials. Today's issue is claiming Disciples heritage, defining the roles of clergy and elders in rural and urban areas and how to get resources to both simultaneously. Disciples can accomplish this using historical biblical language and changing our vernacular to fit the needs and roles of stewards, servants and clergy today.

Who is in charge?

If elder/steward are not the only ones making the decisions anymore, who is? There are a lot of my ministerial colleagues who believe that it is strictly the clergy, while some congregations would say that it is strictly the board of elder/steward in the local congregation. No matter what Disciples do as a local church, they still need some clearly delineated and accepted organization. The job and mission of the church is to continue to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The church (universal) still teaches and preaches. With the growing number of commissioned ministers in rural and urban areas, it is very important to have resources that help in the corporate act of worship for the laity and clergy.

The question Disciples are faced with today as the church (universal) is who leads, who presides, who visits, and who decides. In the early church, the elders and

³⁸. G. Edwin Osburn, *Christian Worship: A Service Book*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1952) vi.

stewards would have been the decision-makers and the delegators of duties. The deacons would have been the ones who carried out the necessary tasks on behalf of the congregations or the "house churches" of the first and second centuries. Early on the first believers in Jesus recognized a need for organization. The synoptic gospels, the book of Acts, as well as the pastoral letters, all call for some organization. The elder/steward helped the community survive. While the dominant metaphor for working in a faith community might have been "servant," it helped reinforce the idea that Christianity did not belong to just one person or community. The early Christians recognized that by proclaiming they were "followers of Jesus they were under the authority to serve whenever the *Master* spoke and to whomever the *Master* wished."³⁹ In the ongoing journey of the Disciples of Christ, questions about leadership, decision-making, and organization remain at the forefront. As the landscape of the church continues to evolve, there are diverse perspectives on who holds these roles. Some argue that it is primarily the domain of the clergy, while others assert the authority of local congregational boards of elders and stewards. Regardless of these varying viewpoints, one constant remains: the church must maintain a clearly delineated and accepted structure to fulfill its mission, which is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, teach, and preach.

With the expanding presence of commissioned ministers in both rural and urban settings, there is an increasing need for resources that support the collective act of worship for both clergy and laity. The pressing question facing the Disciples today, as part of the universal church, revolves around who leads, presides, visits, and ultimately makes decisions.

³⁹. David W Bennett, *Metaphors of Ministry: Biblical Images for Leaders and Followers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 122.

Reflecting on the early church, we find a blueprint for the organization. In those formative years, elders and stewards assumed the roles of decision-makers and delegators of duties, while deacons carried out essential tasks for the congregations, often within the context of "house churches." This early recognition of the need for organization is evident in the synoptic gospels, the book of Acts, and the pastoral letters. The role of the elder/steward was pivotal, serving as a cornerstone for community survival. As the Disciples of Christ navigate the complexities of contemporary church life, these historical insights provide a foundation for discussions about leadership, organization, and service, ensuring that the essence of Christianity's collective mission remains ever-present.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT TIMELINE AND FOCAL POINT

The project commenced on September 28 with the submission of the project proposal for approval. Moving into October, the focus shifted to engaging with various Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) communities in Oklahoma. Between October 2 and November 1, a focus group was established, representing the five areas of the Christian Church in Oklahoma. The introductory meeting, set for October 15, allowed participants to gather in person at the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Perry, Oklahoma, or virtually through Zoom, depending on their convenience and location. The focus group included area elders from the southeast, southwest, northeast, northwest, and central regions, with a follow-up meeting on October 30 involving three invited clergy from rural areas.

The primary goal of these sessions was to explore the project's material, aiming to answer how elders engage in prayer within rural congregations in Oklahoma by October 30. (Refer to the Attachment in the Appendix section for details.) The subsequent steps, from November 2 to December 1, involved synthesizing and analyzing the focus group material. The process included transcribing recordings from November 2 to November 15 and then editing the content into a publishable format using Panopto, with particular attention to omitting participant names. By November 16, a summarized analysis section was prepared for the final project, coupled with an update to the bibliography. The concluding statement was written by December 1.

Ultimately, the project will be presented for publication, providing valuable insights into the communion prayer practices of elders in rural congregations within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma.

The prayer used for the elder discussion.

I chose the following prayer because my focal point has been to try to understand the prayers chosen at the communion table. This prayer was submitted to www.chaliceresources.com from Randy Holt. A presiding elder at the First Christian Church of Norman, Oklahoma. This congregation is open-affirming, and their elders still preside over all elements of the communion section of the worship service on Sunday. I chose this prayer intentionally. Using the prayers that have been submitted on the website for discussion, this one in particular was the only one that was not patriarchal in nature and interestingly using blood-atonement vernacular. In the Disciples of Christ denomination there are many different viewpoints and embedded theologies that come through elders prayers at the communion table and this one stood out to me the most because of the deliberate delivery and imagery of it. It was both a visual and auditory challenge to the embedded theologies of most submitted prayers.

The goals for the discussion/interviews were to ascertain their viewpoints and, in turn, their theological insights into this challenging prayer. The purpose of this would be two-fold. One was for the elders who participated in the discussion to think theologically about the prayer and how it would or would not work in their particular setting. Two, for them to think deeply about why or why not. The interviews were designed with the questions that can be found in Appendix 1.

Blood
 Bleeding
 Pain
 Violence
 Murder
 Killing
 War
 Death
Blood
 Transfusion
 Hospital
 Healing
 Hope
 Faith
 Salvation
 Resurrection
Life

O God of Life, whose power extends even over death, we remember at the table that the blood of the new covenant is [bring our brokenness to you in the broken bread and spilled blood remembering that Your bread is the Bread of Life and Your blood is] the blood of the new covenant, the blood of healing, the blood of salvation and resurrection. We are amazed by the gracious gift of that covenant through Your Son, Jesus the Christ. Amen

40

⁴⁰. Randy Holt. "Communion Meditation," October 1, 2023, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.chaliceresources.com/_files/ugd/868726_bd857359c44340a9befb52889af4354.pdf](https://www.chaliceresources.com/_files/ugd/868726_bd857359c44340a9befb52889af4354.pdf).

The recorded conversation between Joshua Bell and two elders from the Southwest area offers valuable insights into their perspectives on communion prayer and related theological aspects. One of the individuals was a white male in his sixties who had been an elder in his church for a long time. The other was a female, Native American, in her sixties who served in her respective church for the past ten years. The analysis delves into several key themes evident in the discussion. The interview used the questions found in Appendix 1.

1. Nature of God and Theological Understanding: The participants explored the prayer's portrayal of the nature of God. While the prayer itself was considered neutral on the gender of the divine until the closing reference to "your son Jesus the Christ," the conversation touched on the participants' inclination to interpret the divine gender based on personal beliefs and denominational background. Theological understanding emerged as a dynamic and diverse aspect, influenced by individual experiences and denominational teachings from their perspective congregation. It is important to note that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) does not have just one viewpoint for all churches to follow. The common thread used to discuss communion is a table for all. "We have given consistent testimony to the fact that the Table belongs to the Lord rather than to his disciples and ministers. Consequently, there have been no major disputes about who has the right to administer the sacrament(sic) /ordinance. Laymen usually offer the

⁴¹. Southwest Area Elders, Interviewed by author, Perry, Oklahoma, November 7, 2023.

prayers of blessing and dedication for the elements.”⁴² With this very early understanding of our denomination, one can make the inference that it is hard to say that the (Disciples of Christ) have just one way of thinking theologically.

A dynamic and diverse aspect emerged in delving deeper into the participants' theological understanding. Notably, individual experiences played a pivotal role in shaping their beliefs about the nature of God. Some participants expressed a patriarchal understanding of God, influenced by societal norms, cultural influences, or personal encounters with the divine. This patriarchal lens, ingrained in their embedded theology, provided a framework through which they interpreted the divine, often diverging from the more gender-neutral depiction presented in the prayer.

Consequently, juxtaposing participants' embedded theology, characterized by a patriarchal understanding of God, and the gender-neutral portrayal in the prayer, led to nuanced discussions. The closing reference to "your son Jesus the Christ" became a focal point, prompting participants to navigate the tension between their pre-existing theological frameworks and the prayer's attempt at a more inclusive representation.

Furthermore, the participant's background added another layer of complexity to the theological landscape. The participants' beliefs were influenced by their individual experiences and the teachings of their respective congregations. Divergent theological teachings within the group contributed to a rich tapestry of interpretations, reflecting the broader diversity in theological discourse. It is important to note that the reflections of the broader diversity in theological discourse are something the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is very much focused on as a discourse in today's church.

⁴². James M. Flanagan, ed., *What We Believe*, 6th ed. (St. Louis, Missouri: Bethany Press, 1963), 66.

2. Aspects of Jesus's Life and Teachings: The discussion surveyed the participants' interpretations of the prayer's emphasis on the graphic elements of Jesus's suffering and sacrifice. There was an exploration of the balance between acknowledging the event's solemnity and expressing gratitude for the salvific act. Different perspectives emerged, with one participant expressing a desire for more emphasis on gratitude in communion prayers.

SW Elder 1 Perspective: SW Elder 1 emphasized the significance of the prayer's focus on the nature of communion and the symbolism of the body and blood of God's son, Jesus Christ. They acknowledged Jesus's grasp on the purpose of gathering for worship and the salvific implications of communion. However, SW Elder 1 expressed concern about what they perceive as a lack of emphasis on thanksgiving in the prayer. They compare the prayer to the words of the institution used by many pastors during communion and suggest that a central focus should be gratitude for the sacrifice made for salvation.

SW Elder 2 Perspective: SW Elder 2 offered perspective, by recognizing the graphic nature of the events surrounding Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection. They highlighted the importance of occasional reminders, acknowledging the dark and challenging aspects of the disciples' experience. SW Elder 2 suggested that while not every communion prayer needs to be dark, periodic reminders are essential to prevent complacency and maintain a connection to the profound sacrifice of Jesus. They emphasized the need for balance in approaching the communion table with both somber reflection and joyous thanksgiving.

DMin candidate and SW Elder 1: During the discussion, the Dmin Candidate talked with SW Elder 1 about the perceived stoicism and lack of thanksgiving in the prayer. SW

Elder 1's earlier critique about the absence of a celebratory tone is echoed in this conversation. Both speakers express a desire for a balanced approach that incorporates both the somber acknowledgment of Jesus's suffering and the joyous gratitude for the salvation it brings. While this is not a universal understanding in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), it is a prominent one in Oklahoma, especially in rural areas with the strong influence of evangelical Protestantism.

3. Inclusivity in Communal Worship: The participants reflected on the inclusivity or exclusivity conveyed in the communion prayer and its impact on communal worship. While the prayer was perceived as inclusive, the conversation expanded to real-world scenarios, such as welcoming homeless individuals to the communion table. The importance of explicitly communicating inclusivity in prayers and invitations to the table was highlighted, emphasizing the need to ensure everyone feels welcome and worthy.

4. Significance of Communion: The essence and significance of communion in the person's faith and practice was explored. The participants recognized the central role of the communion table in Christian worship, emphasizing the representation of sacrifices made through the bread and wine. The significance of communion as a means of communing with God and expressing hope for eternal salvation was underscored.

SW Elder 1 Perspective: SW Elder 1 emphasized the significance of the prayer's focus on the nature of communion and the symbolism of the body and blood of God's son, Jesus Christ. They expressed in their own words the need to pray with Jesus's grasp on the purpose of gathering for worship and the salvific implications of communion. There was a clear understanding amongst the two of them that if Jesus did not die for their sins then there was no need for Jesus to die. While this this is not the only way to view the Lord's

supper in the denomination, in my research of rural congregation in Oklahoma it is definitely a prevalent one. However, SW Elder 1 expressed concern about what they perceived as a lack of emphasis on thanksgiving in the prayer. They compared the prayer to the words of institution used by many pastors during communion and suggested that a central focus should be gratitude for the sacrifice made for salvation.

They emphasized the need for balance in approaching the communion table with both somber reflection and joyous thanksgiving.

SW Elder 1 and Dmin Candidate: The Dmin candidate discussed with SW Elder 2 the perceived stoicism and lack of thanksgiving in the prayer. SW Elder 1's earlier critique about the absence of a celebratory tone is echoed in this conversation. Both speakers expressed a desire for a balanced approach that incorporated both the somber acknowledgment of Jesus's suffering and the joyous gratitude for the salvation it brings.

5. Congregational and denominational Influences: Throughout the conversation, denominational perspectives subtly influenced the participants' interpretations.

References to traditional practices, such as weekly communion and historical perspectives on communion exclusivity, highlighted the impact of denominational backgrounds on individual beliefs and practices. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) argue about a lot of things but there are three practices that are usually non-negotiable. One, whenever we gather, we must partake of the Lord's Supper. Two, anyone can participate and receive or administer those elements. Thirdly, we are the priesthood of all believers and elders play a vital role in the leadership of worship experience.

6. Challenges and Opportunities in Communal Practices: The conversations briefly touched on challenges faced in communal practices, such as the perception of exclusivity among guests or newcomers. It opened the door to a broader discussion on the evolving nature of communion practices and the ongoing need for intentional inclusivity.

In conclusion, the conversation analysis revealed a rich tapestry of theological perspectives, individual beliefs, and denominational influences and more importantly congregational practices that most of the time did not reflect the rich tapestry of what the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) strives for with the understanding of the Lord's supper. The participants engaged thoughtfully with the communion prayer, offering diverse insights that contributed to a deeper understanding of the dynamics surrounding communal worship practices within the context of the study. It would have been nice to have more elders willing to participate from the other areas of Oklahoma, but in the effort of finding some more there were very few that felt comfortable sharing their voices. I found, asking the very same people that are terrified of saying the wrong thing at the table were even more terrified of speaking about or even discussing another elder's prayer for fear of critique on their own unique prayer life. The clergy, on the other hand, were more than willing to share their voice and their optimistic points of view on the roles of elders at the communion table and the leadership of their congregations.

Exploring the intricate relationships between geography, theology, and congregational practices within Disciples of Christ congregations in Oklahoma has revealed compelling insights. Through insightful interviews with clergy members representing diverse geographic locations, the study has illuminated the interplay shaping the communal experiences of these faith communities. The DMin Candidate interviewed five ordained seminary-trained ministers.⁴⁴ In the context of this doctoral thesis, the clergy interviewees from distinct geographical regions are presented as follows:

Representing Northeast Oklahoma is a clergy individual, identified as a white male in his mid-forties, serving within an urban locale amidst an open and affirming congregation. Transitioning to Northwest Oklahoma, another clergy participant is characterized as being of white and partial Native American descent, aged in his mid-fifties, and ministering within a rural setting characterized by conservative theological orientations.

⁴³. The author used Appendix 2 for the interviews.

⁴⁴. In the Oklahoma region, there are three types of ministers. First, there are the ordained clergy. They may have received this title after completing 16 ministerial proficiencies designated by the denomination as a commissioned minister, or they could be ordained because they are seminary trained with an MDIV or its equivalent. Both are not allowed to be ordained without having a sponsor congregation and constant communication and relationship with the Commission on Clergy in the Oklahoma region. Then there are the Commissioned ministers, who are lay leaders (non-seminary trained) of the church or the region of Oklahoma who have a relationship with the Commission on Clergy to receive standing. They have all the rights and privileges of ordained clergy, but they serve the congregation that has called them because the Oklahoma region has recognized them as having the gifts and graces to serve a church. Most of the time, they are not seeking ordination. So, the three types are Commissioned seeking ordination by alternative track, Commissioned minister non-ordination seeking, and Seminary trained Ordained. This matters because, in Oklahoma, more than half of our congregations have a Commissioned non-ordination-seeking minister. In the history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), elders led the churches, and clergy came and went, unlike in other Euro-centric North American Protestant Reformation movements where the elders were the clergy. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) patterned itself on “restoration” ideology, where the early movement believed, supported, and created a different movement that focused on the priesthood of all believers.

Central Oklahoma contributes to this study with a white male clergy member, also in his mid-forties, engaged in urban ministry within an environment supportive of open and affirming theological stances. Lastly, Southwest Oklahoma introduces a white female clergy respondent in her mid-thirties, operating within a rural framework under the auspices of a federated church accommodating worship services for the United Churches of Christ, the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

I also included a minister from what I call the Northwest/Central Oklahoma. This clergy person is white, male, working in a rural congregation, and is surrounded by the conservatives, and yet he is not. I chose him because he has successfully navigated his theological understanding in this small community for over two decades.

The rural-urban dynamic, magnified by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been a central focus. Adaptations observed in the roles of elders in prayers and leadership, particularly within urban churches, underscore the pragmatic responses prompted by external circumstances. The resilience displayed by these congregations in navigating shifts in communal practices reflects an inherent commitment to adaptability and unity, demonstrating their ability to evolve in response to changing circumstances.

The NW/C clergy person states in the following about the congregation they serve:

We were constantly trying to figure out a schedule that then didn't work. At one point, we probably would average 50 or so in worship, I moved today. It's 2025. And who's serving as Elder and Deacon today? We did a schedule, but people don't show up, and somebody's got to fill in, or hey, then we just take it to where somebody's doing it for a month. But all the months are too long. So then we'll swap, and then it turns into, well, whoever, you know, and this was actually the tradition when I came, whoever got tapped on the shoulder at the beginning of worship. You're it today. And so it just, and we actually changed the nature, I mean, I still say the words of institution or some form of them, but we pray the Lord's

prayer. All of the spray. Which is maybe, you know, in a way, I can work that around and say, well, that's really we're talking about the priesthood of all believers here. And we recite John 3:16 and 17 prior to the cup, and so, you know, it's just that all was born out of COVID. And when we came back, it's like, well, it kind of stuck.⁴⁵

While geographic factors undeniably influence congregational dynamics, a key finding is the apparent minimal impact on specific theological differences in communion meditations. Instead, the roles of elders in communion appear to be influenced by their beliefs towards logistical and practical considerations rather than deep-seated theological disparities. This observation suggests that, despite geographic diversity, the unity of celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly within the Disciples of Christ tradition remains a prevailing force guiding congregational practices. This is not always the case I have found in my research that while we mostly can agree on the three practices of having the Lord's supper, the priesthood of all believers, and finally elders play vital roles in our congregations, in rural settings and across the denomination each church will function just a little bit different from one another.

The SWO Clergy person asserted that their church viewed the roles of elders in their church as distinct from traditional expectations tied to denominational titles.⁴⁶ In their church, there are no designated elders or deacons, and the board, comprising nine individuals plus the pastor, assumes leadership responsibilities. The interviewee expressed an inquiry about appointing lay leaders for spiritual care roles, similar to what elders might typically handle. However, the response indicated that the church members are uncomfortable with the terms "elder" and "deacon," possibly due to variations in roles

⁴⁵. Anonymous NW/C clergy, interviewed by the author in Perry, November 21, 2023.

⁴⁶. It is important to note that this ordained clergy person is serving a federated church where the term elder has multiple meanings and none, all in the same breath.

across denominations or a denominational ecumenical challenge. Despite the absence of these specific titles, the board functions effectively as spiritual and logistic caregivers for the church, emphasizing a pragmatic and inclusive approach to leadership.⁴⁷

The challenge of maintaining an "open communion table" in a state dominated by evangelical Protestantism has been a focal point of inquiry. The commitment of Disciples of Christ congregations in Oklahoma to inclusivity, transcending denominational boundaries, underscores the significance placed on communion as a symbol of unity, love, and shared faith. This commitment serves as a testament to the enduring values that anchor these congregations amidst the prevailing religious landscape.

The NE ordained clergy person expressed a desire for greater inclusivity within their congregation and the Disciples community, particularly in comparison to other churches with more conservative ideologies. They highlighted the welcoming stance on LGBTQI+ issues at their church and advocated for a theologically broad and inclusive congregation that embraces diversity. The speaker acknowledged geographical divisions and perceived Tulsa and Oklahoma City as more progressive than other parts of the state.

The perspectives that I hear from youth, people or ministers that do camp is that I wish we were a little more inclusive. Like you guys are when they hear our stances at *&(@#, when they hear how inclusive we are on LGBTQ stuff, and we, you know, and. And well, really, it's not just gay, lesbian stuff. It's truly just an all-inclusive, theologically broad, you know, base, like a congregation that accepts diversity and embraces it, for goodness sake. And so, as far, as I know, I'm not answering your question. The geographical divisions that I have that I've seen again have been at camp. And we don't get into a lot of depth when we're all trying to run around, like chase kids and whatnot. I know that I know that Tulsa and Oklahoma City are a little more, you know, progressive than the rest of the state.⁴⁸

⁴⁷. Southwest Oklahoma Clergy, interviewed by author in Perry, Oklahoma, November 22, 2023.

⁴⁸. Northeast Oklahoma Clergy, interviewed by author in Perry, Oklahoma, November 20, 2023.

Regarding the view on conservative ideologies, NE Clergy noted a common sentiment at camps where individuals often express a longing for more openness and inclusivity within their own congregations. The speaker rarely encounters those who proudly defend conservative ideologies at these gatherings. There is an emphasis on encouraging open dialogue and embracing a diverse range of perspectives within the Disciples community.⁴⁹I would be remiss to not point out that the in the Stone-Campbell movement the terms conservative and/or progressive in the early stages of the denomination were focused on a hermeneutical understanding. It was not brought into discourse until fairly recently especially in rural Oklahoman churches where these terms have become synonymous with political and/or theological ones. There is a danger here to not comment or acknowledge these differences and to help further the dialogue in the future.

This perspective aligns with a commitment to inclusivity and a willingness to question and challenge closed-mindedness, creating space for diverse beliefs and opinions within the community. In essence, this research asserts that while geography has some challenges to congregational practices, the resilience of Disciples of Christ congregations in Oklahoma persists. Theological differences, while acknowledged, take a backseat to practical considerations, illustrating a shared commitment to the core principles that define the Disciples of Christ tradition across the diverse landscapes of Oklahoma. As these faith communities continue to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of communal worship, what needs to be tightened will lay the groundwork for further

⁴⁹. Northeast Oklahoma Clergy, interviewed by author in Perry, Oklahoma, November 20, 2023.

scholarly exploration and a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships that define faith communities in varied geographical contexts. The impact of geography on certain congregational dynamics is evident, but the unity and commitment to Disciples of Christ principles remain resilient, with theological differences in communion meditations seeming secondary to practical considerations in navigating worship across diverse settings. The focus is on practical considerations in communal worship, where unity and commitment to these principles remain resilient despite the challenges posed by geography. The impact of geography on congregational dynamics is acknowledged, but the emphasis on the common principles of faith allows faith communities in varied geographical contexts to navigate worship with a shared foundation. This approach suggests that theological differences, particularly in communion meditations, are considered secondary to the practical aspects of worship in diverse settings.

Theological Differences vs. Practical Considerations: The distinction between the minimal impact of geographic factors on theological differences in communion meditations is an interesting finding. The emphasis on practical considerations influencing the roles of elders in communion suggests a pragmatic approach to religious practices that transcends theological disparities. The NE Oklahoma clergy person reflected on the evolution of the role of elders in their congregation, particularly in the context of the urban church this minister represented. Initially, elders were deeply involved in caring for members, with shepherding groups and responsibilities for prayers and meditations during communion. However, the approach changed over time due to challenges in finding elders comfortable with public speaking. The voluntary nature of prayers and meditations led to inconsistency and often subpar contributions. Eventually,

the decision was made to remove mandatory public speaking duties for elders, allowing them to focus on caring for the congregation. This change has led to smoother worship services and more effective fulfillment of the elders' primary role as caretakers. The transition aligns with a congregational approach, emphasizing practical care over traditional public speaking responsibilities.⁵⁰

⁵⁰. Northeast Oklahoma Clergy, interviewed by author in Perry, Oklahoma, November 20, 2023.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL MINISTER OF THE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN OKLAHOMA

The conclusion of the exploration into the relationships between geography, theology, and congregational practices within Disciples of Christ congregations in Oklahoma represents the insights and understanding as the Regional Minister in the state. The Regional Minister has deep roots and understanding of the churches in Oklahoma. She has been the Regional Minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma for nine years. She is retiring from her position in March of 2024. She is white and lives in a rural area but is a member of an urban church.

Integration of Geography, Theology, and Practice: The conclusion successfully tied together the three main components of the study—geography, theology, and congregational practices. This integration is crucial for a holistic understanding of how these factors interact and shape the experiences of faith communities. The focus on the rural-urban dynamic, especially in the context of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, added a contemporary and relevant dimension to the study. The observation of adaptations in the roles of elders in response to external circumstances highlighted the pragmatic nature of these faith communities.

Well, the answer to that is yes and no. Some of our congregations there are 122 congregations currently in Oklahoma, and some of our congregations, if we're going to talk about the order of worship, have communion before the sermon, and some congregations have the communion after the sermon. So I don't know that the theological preference. It's what they're used to. I do notice that the difference between mostly rural and mostly urban city is the culture of our rural churches is very different than the

culture of our city churches. That's true in Oklahoma City, Norman, and Tulsa. So when you move out of the metropolitan areas, you get people who are quite intelligent, but they're isolated and their knowledge of the broader church is pretty limited. And so while they do mission and ministry in their own context in their own community, they don't move past the city limits very often. And so I always wonder when we come to the table, how do they welcome all to the table? What does that mean to them?⁵¹

Resilience and Adaptability: The acknowledgment of the resilience displayed by Disciples of Christ congregations in adapting to shifts in communal practices is a positive note. It reflects the adaptability and unity within these communities, emphasizing their ability to evolve in response to changing circumstances. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma demonstrates resilience by navigating and maintaining its core values, such as celebrating the Lord's supper weekly. Also, it is vitally important to point out the lay-led historical traditions despite geographical differences. The enduring influence of communion and the essential roles played by elders serve as steadfast unifying elements. This resilience is particularly evident in smaller congregations, where elders, assuming primary leadership roles, exhibit a profound understanding of their communities on personal, informational, and emotional levels.

While these smaller congregations may be predominantly white and lack routine exposure to diversity, the acknowledgment of this potential gap in their prayers highlights an openness to self-awareness and growth. The fact that their prayers, while rooted in tradition, are not overtly exclusionary signifies a willingness to adapt and an acknowledgment of the evolving nature of the broader church even if some of the issues with the prayers are within their own embedded theologies. The recognition of the need to broaden perspectives, encompassing language, images of God, and an inclusive

⁵¹. Oklahoma Regional Minister interview, interviewed by author, November 29, 2023.

understanding of the communion table, reflects a commitment to fostering genuine inclusivity within these smaller communities. In essence, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma showcases resilience by balancing tradition and adaptability, demonstrating a commitment to unity amid diversity and an ongoing journey toward greater inclusivity.

Unity Within Diversity: Despite geographical variations, the enduring influence of communion and the pivotal roles of elders within the Disciples of Christ tradition persist as unifying forces. This underscores a shared dedication to fundamental principles that bind these communities, forging a cohesive identity amid diverse landscapes. In smaller congregations, where elders assume primary leadership roles, particularly in rural settings, they possess intimate knowledge—personal, informational, and emotional—of individuals within their community. While predominantly Anglo-white, these congregations may lack regular exposure to diversity, impacting the content of their prayers. The Oklahoma Regional Minister stated:

Not overtly exclusionary, their prayers often reflect a limited awareness of the contemporary church's diversity, illustrating a potential gap in understanding the broader denomination. Rooted in tradition, these prayers, while earnest, may not fully embrace a broader spectrum of language, images of God, or a comprehensive understanding of an inclusive communion table. This raises contemplation on the genuine inclusivity of these worship experiences in smaller communities.⁵²

In the interviews, the discussion around open communion in an evangelical protestant state dominated offered a gradated perspective on the challenges faced by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma. The focus on maintaining an "open communion table" in a state where evangelical Protestantism holds significant influence

⁵². Oklahoma Regional Minister interview, interviewed by author, November 29, 2023.

adds depth to the study. Evangelical Protestantism has a strong stance on who is welcome to their communion table let alone into their worship spaces. There is very little room for discussion theologically about what the Lord's supper represents for them or how they should participate in it.

The interviews with the clergy and the Regional Minister emphasized the commitment to inclusivity and the aspiration to transcend denominational boundaries, highlighting the role of communion as a symbol of unity and shared faith. It acknowledged that within the broader religious landscape, particularly in evangelical Protestant churches, there is often a prevalence of doctrines like blood atonement theology. The mention of the founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adherence to this theology contrasts with the evolving perspectives within the modern church.

By acknowledging the challenges posed by a dominant evangelical Protestant context, the interviews suggested that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma actively engages in a dialogue that challenges traditional theological perspectives. The commitment to open communion becomes a powerful statement in this context, reflecting a willingness to question and evolve beyond certain historical theological frameworks, such as blood atonement theology.

The discussion implied that, despite the prevalence of certain theological perspectives in the state, the Christian Church in Oklahoma is actively reexamining and challenging aspects of its theological heritage, particularly in the pursuit of greater inclusivity and unity symbolized by the open communion table. This highlighted the

dynamic nature of theological discourse within the church and its efforts to adapt to a changing religious landscape.

Implications for Further Research: The conclusion appropriately suggests that the research lays the groundwork for further scholarly exploration. This implies that the study, as understood by a Regional Minister, has opened avenues for deeper investigations into the intricate relationships that define faith communities in varied geographical contexts. The final parts of the interview effectively summarize the key assertions of the research, reiterating the resilience and unity of Disciples of Christ congregations in Oklahoma from the viewpoint of a Regional Minister. The emphasis on practical considerations over theological differences in shaping congregational practices is a central theme, reinforcing the enduring values that anchor these communities.

The conclusion provides a strong synthesis of the research findings from the perspective of a Regional Minister, offering insights into the complex interplay between geography, theology, and congregational practices within Disciples of Christ congregations in Oklahoma. It also encourages future scholars to delve deeper into these dynamics, contributing to a broader understanding of faith communities in diverse geographical settings.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The interviews conducted with two elders from the Southwest Oklahoma Area (due to lack of willingness to participate from others)—alongside discussions with five ordained clergy members, each inhabiting from the distinct regions outlined in the proposal and a Regional Minister, have added layers to this research. Their voices echo the broader patterns observed in the study, illustrating the dynamic interplay between generational perspectives, responses to changes in worship practices, and the complexities of public speaking fears. This thesis has delved into the intricate relationships between geography, theology, and congregational practices within Disciples of Christ congregations in the diverse landscapes of Oklahoma. Through insightful interviews with clergy members and two elders from the Southwest area of Oklahoma representing a spectrum of geographic locations, this study illuminates the subtle interplay shaping the communal experiences of these faith communities.

In the face of challenges posed by the rural-urban dynamic, exacerbated by the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic, these congregations exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability. The central role of elders, particularly in smaller settings, emerges as a focal point, with practical considerations often outweighing deep-seated theological disparities in shaping communion practices.

The commitment to maintaining an open communion table in a state dominated by evangelical Protestantism emerges as a powerful symbol of unity and shared faith. This is the identity of the (Disciples of Christ) congregation in rural America. A commitment to invite all believers to the Lord's supper regardless of if they fully agree

theologically or politically. This commitment underscores the enduring influence of communion and the pivotal roles of elders, forming a cohesive identity that transcends geographic variations.

In the context of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), inclusivity refers to the commitment and practice of welcoming and embracing individuals from diverse backgrounds, regardless of factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristic. It emphasizes creating an open and accepting community that values the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Inclusivity in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) often aligns with the principles of Christian love, compassion, and the understanding that all individuals are equal members of the body of Christ. This commitment to inclusivity seeks to foster a sense of belonging and unity within the congregation, reflecting the teachings of Jesus Christ to love one another and create a community where everyone feels accepted and valued. Inclusivity, both in the congregation and within the broader Disciples community, emerges as a recurring theme. Perspectives from interviews, particularly those from camps, reveal a shared sentiment among individuals longing for greater openness and inclusivity, challenging conservative ideologies. Acknowledging these sentiments aligns with a commitment to fostering genuine inclusivity within these faith communities. The minimal impact of specific theological differences in communion meditations in this sample research project, despite geographic variations, suggests a pragmatic approach that prioritizes practical considerations. Adaptations in the roles of elders, influenced by external circumstances, reflect the ability of these congregations to evolve while maintaining their core values.

Recognizing the potential impact of changes in worship practices since COVID-19 and addressing fears of public speaking, it becomes evident that the call for new resources is not a theoretical necessity, but a practical requirement expressed by elders who desire materials that engage them in thoughtful exploration and critical reflection on their beliefs.

The challenges identified—limited diversity in perspectives, insufficient contemporary relevance, and the need to address embedded theologies—find resonance in the experiences shared by those who graciously participated in this study. Their voices echo the urgency for resources that bridge the gap between traditional teachings and contemporary challenges, fostering a more inclusive, adaptable, and informed leadership.

In light of the diverse voices contributing to this study, the conclusion emphasizes that the scarcity of resources challenging embedded ideologies and addressing contemporary issues is a significant hurdle for congregational elders in Oklahoma. Acknowledging this need, as expressed by the individuals who generously shared their perspectives, opens avenues for the development of new resources that foster a more inclusive, adaptable, and informed leadership. By engaging in collaborative efforts, incorporating diverse perspectives, and leveraging technology, the creation of these resources can contribute to the growth and resilience of congregations in the face of evolving societal dynamics. This acknowledgment of the need for new resources is a crucial step toward empowering elders to navigate the complexities of faith in a changing world.

This exploration of the perspectives held by elders and clergy within Oklahoma's congregations has unveiled a significant disparity. The discernible difference between the

progressive inclinations of clergy members and the more reserved positions often adopted by congregational elders invites an in-depth examination of the primary findings, their implications, and potential avenues for bridging this gap within the state's religious landscape.

A consistent pattern emerged throughout the interviews, revealing that clergy members, regardless of denominational affiliations, consistently expressed a progressive and inclusive outlook. Their perspectives demonstrated a readiness to engage with contemporary social issues, embrace diverse theological interpretations, which is more than just inclusive language about God, and adapt to evolving cultural norms, particularly evident in discussions surrounding gender roles, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and advocacy for social justice.

In contrast, a substantial number of congregational elders exhibited a more reserved stance, particularly concerning changes in worship practices post-COVID-19 and a fear of public speaking. The hesitation to actively participate in communal practices, such as leading prayers or contributing to communion meditations, stemmed from the shifts in worship practices during the pandemic. Elders cited unfamiliarity with these changes and a lingering discomfort with public speaking as deterrents to resuming these roles. This observed gap signifies a subtle generational and ideological divide within congregations, potentially impacting the cohesion and unity of religious communities, particularly in decision-making processes and the adoption of progressive practices. The hesitation among elders to resume their roles may lead to tensions within congregations, affecting the overall sense of community and shared purpose.

Within the ecclesiastical landscape of the Oklahoma region, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) recognizes a refined distinction between two types of ministers: the ordained clergy and the commissioned ministers. These distinctions, while holding unique characteristics, contribute to the diverse fabric of ministerial service within the denomination.

In the realm of ordained clergy, individuals earn this status through two distinct paths. Some achieve it after fulfilling 16 designated ministerial proficiencies set by the denomination, while others attain it through traditional seminary training, earning a Master of Divinity (MDIV) or its equivalent. Regardless of the route, ordination is contingent upon maintaining a sponsor congregation and a consistent relationship with the Commission on Clergy in the Oklahoma region. This dual pathway underscores a commitment to ongoing education and ministerial development.

Commissioned ministers, on the other hand, are lay leaders, often without formal seminary training, serving within the church or the Oklahoma region. While some may be actively seeking ordination through alternative tracks, the majority are not pursuing ordination. They possess all the rights and privileges of ordained clergy, with their recognition based on the acknowledgment of their gifts and graces to serve by the Oklahoma region.

This multilateral categorization includes Commissioned ministers actively seeking ordination, those not seeking ordination, and Seminary-trained Ordained clergy. The significance of this delineation is underscored by the fact that over half of the congregations in Oklahoma are led by Commissioned ministers who are not seeking ordination and are influenced by their evangelical Protestant embedded theologies.

The historical context of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) sheds light on its distinctive approach. Rooted in a restoration ideology, the denomination emphasizes the priesthood of all believers. This stands in contrast to some Euro-centric North American Protestant Reformation movements, where elders assumed the role of clergy. In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the historical narrative reflects a departure from this norm, shaping a community where shared ministry and diversity of leadership roles are paramount.

Recognizing the influential role of clergy, there is an opportunity to leverage their leadership gradually to shape congregational perspectives. However, effective communication strategies are crucial to bridge the gap. Clergy must navigate the challenge of conveying their progressive values without alienating more reserved congregational members adjusting to changes in worship practices. Initiatives promoting open dialogue and educational opportunities can facilitate understanding between clergy and elders. Forums for respectful discussions on theological interpretations, social issues, and the evolution of religious practices can foster a culture of inclusivity. Implementing workshops that bring clergy, elders, and congregants together for inter-generational discussions provides a platform for mutual learning and bridge-building.

Actively encouraging and normalizing the participation of elders in communal practices, such as leading prayers or contributing to communion meditations, is a tangible step toward unity. Addressing apprehensions stemming from changes in worship practices and public speaking fears should be a focal point. Emphasizing the inclusive nature of such practices and providing support for elders to navigate the shifts in worship can alleviate reservations and promote a shared sense of purpose. Acknowledging that

cultural shifts within religious communities take time, there is a need for patience in facilitating this transformation. A long-term vision for fostering inclusivity and understanding should guide ongoing efforts. Strategies for encouraging ongoing generational dialogue and cooperation should be developed and implemented, recognizing that sustained efforts are necessary for meaningful change.

This study illuminates the dynamic nature of perspectives within religious communities. Ongoing research and analysis will be crucial to understanding how these perspectives evolve over time and in response to societal changes. As religious communities continue to adapt to contemporary realities, research can offer insights into the evolving dynamics between clergy, elders, and congregants, informing responsive strategies for promoting unity.

In conclusion, the evident disparity between the progressive leanings of clergy and the more reserved stance of many congregational elders in Oklahoma's religious landscape presents both challenges and opportunities. By recognizing the potential impact of changes in worship practices since COVID-19 and addressing fears of public speaking, implementing strategies for bridging the gap, and envisioning a patient and inclusive future, religious communities can work towards fostering a cohesive and dynamic environment that embraces unity in diversity. This conclusion encourages further exploration and proactive efforts to facilitate understanding and collaboration, ultimately contributing to the vitality and relevance of religious communities in the state. The challenges identified, such as limited diversity in perspectives, insufficient contemporary relevance, and the need to address embedded theologies, underscore the necessity for new resources. These resources should present diverse theological

perspectives, bridge the gap between traditional teachings and contemporary challenges, and encourage critical examination of embedded theologies. Collaborative development efforts, engaging theologians and scholars, incorporating congregational input, and utilizing technology are essential for creating effective resources. Recognizing the scarcity of resources, challenging embedded ideologies, and addressing contemporary issues is a significant hurdle for congregational elders in Oklahoma. Acknowledging this need opens avenues for the development of new resources that foster a more inclusive, adaptable, and informed leadership. By engaging in collaborative efforts, incorporating diverse perspectives, and leveraging technology, the creation of these resources can contribute to the growth and resilience of congregations in the face of evolving societal dynamics. This acknowledgment of the need for new resources is a crucial step toward empowering elders to navigate the complexities of faith in a changing world.

APPENDIX 1

First focus group questions on "Elders prayers at the Communion table" within the Disciples of Christ congregations: (this will be held in the second meeting after the group has had time to view the material on the website)

Discussion questions after reading One elders' prayers submitted to the website www.chaliceresources.com

- i. How would you describe this person's beliefs about the nature of God?
- ii. Could you elaborate on the aspects of Jesus' life or teachings that are central to their prayer practice?
- iii. How do they perceive the gender or characteristics of the divine?
- iv. Can you explain how inclusive or exclusive their prayer and communal worship approach is?
- v. In your view, what is the essence or significance of communion in their faith and practice?

APPENDIX 2

Second focus group including clergy questions for assessment purposes group on "Elders prayers at the Communion Table" within the Disciples of Christ congregations: (this will be held with clergy and elders in Rural and urban congregations.)

1. How do the geographical divisions in Oklahoma impact the theological perspectives and practices within Disciples of Christ congregations?
2. How does the rural vs. urban setting affect the role of elders in prayers and leadership within these congregations?
3. Could you share examples of specific theological differences related to communion meditations that have emerged due to geographic factors in Oklahoma?
4. Given the dominance of Evangelical Protestantism in the state, how do Disciples of Christ congregations navigate the challenges of maintaining an "open communion table"?
5. What theological aspects of communion make it unique within the Disciples of Christ tradition, and how do congregants understand and experience these aspects in their worship?

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