



## Academic Theology and Disciples Dissent

Distinguished Alumna Address  
by Bonnie Miller-McLemore  
July 11, 2011

*The Alumni/ae Council honored Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Pastoral Theology at Vanderbilt University, as the 2011 recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus/a Award at their luncheon during the General Assembly of the Christian Church in Nashville. She is the sixteenth recipient of the award, which was established in 1979. Her remarks follow.*

*The award commended her “for advancing the field of practical theology with exemplary scholarship and leadership; for distinguished service to the wider academy; for ground-breaking work that focuses on the messy glory of daily existence—on living and dying, on being a scholar and a mother, on parenting and children; for enriching feminist moral reflection; for generous and wise mentoring; and for outstanding support of Disciples theological education through the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago—and at Vanderbilt.”*

I am honored and immensely grateful to receive the Distinguished Alumna Award. I know many worthy

friends and colleagues more deserving (which says a lot about the Disciples Divinity House and its contributions). So, my remarks center around gratitude—for the House, those affiliated with it, and the Disciples tradition more broadly.

The House made all the difference in my life. If I have made a contribution to theological study, women in ministry, care of children, Christian life, or any other area, it reflects the gifts of the House and the University of Chicago. Without these two institutions, I would not be doing what I’m doing. I am especially honored to be the first alumna to receive this award. From the beginning I have had interest in women’s lives. Women’s advancement depends on women forging ahead. But twenty-five years ago, role models were scarce. My academic and ministerial mentors were almost all men, and opportunities for women scholars seemed especially vague.

Sometimes it pays to be oblivious of one’s circumstances. When I arrived as a student in 1978, I did not realize that the House had neither permitted women to live in its rooms nor supported them financially at the university until 1975. It didn’t occur to me that my women housemates and I were doing something new.

When I struggled over the years with whether to stay in the doctoral program, pursue teaching, have children, or write books, I sometimes had the fleeting hope that I might make a difference if I persisted, that a girl or mother, a son or male colleague might change their minds in response to a glimmer of possibility refracted through my life.

Without the House’s support, incentive, community, and friendships I doubt I would have had the confidence to persist. I would have found the competitive Divinity School atmosphere disturbing enough to leave. I was literally granted permission to stay and earn a PhD in a time when few Disciples women had done so. I am thankful.

Then there’s Don Browning, a stellar mentor and generous colleague. I had the good fortune to come to the House under his tenure as dean thirty-three years ago, to work with him as my primary advisor at the school, to join him in chairing the DDH Centennial Campaign in 1994-95, and to participate with him on several projects. I am glad he was honored as the Distinguished Alumnus during the last General Assembly in 2009. This award is more poignant to me because I am gratefully aware of following his footsteps.

On this occasion, I want to express deep appreciation not only for the gift of these years and for the House, but also for the House’s important work in sustaining the wider Disciples theological tradition that formed me and continues to shape my work. This is where I want to focus my remarks.

Historically, Disciples criticized creeds and formal theology as insufficient, even sometimes destructive, for the life of faith. This Disciples dissent influenced my choice of a doctoral area years ago, it has shaped my scholarship in the time since, and it continues to inform my driving conviction about the need for a richer lived theology that reaches beyond

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## Disciples Dissent

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the walls of the academy.

When I was in the House, Clark Williamson was invited to deliver a paper on Disciples theology. This was a pivotal moment for me. I still have my tattered copy of the manuscript he presented with my initial reactions scrawled in the margins (“good” and “yes...my own experience”). Williamson tried to unearth our Disciples “ethos” or what he also called the “forgotten” tradition—those deep commitments that activate us but of which we may have little conscious recognition.

What most interested me then and still does now is Williamson’s portrait of our suspicion about formal theology and our reclamation of theology as practice. As a rule, Disciples react negatively to the mere hearing of the word *theology*. Alexander Campbell forbade the teaching of theology at one of the movement’s colleges. Like creeds, systems of theology often encumber, truncate, or distort the truth of Jesus as the Christ as much as they confirm or embellish it.

Disciples want to avoid abstracting faith “from the whole of life,” Williamson noted, “rendering it into a property to be owned, dividing believers from one another, and substituting propositions about God for communion with God.” Faith is a “way of life,” oriented to practice and confessed primarily through deeds as much as creeds.

He likened our pragmatic orientation, as cast by W. B. Blakemore, to a behavioral system, more like Judaism. “How things are done, what one does, is a primary form of confession and a witness of faith.”<sup>1</sup> Disciples do not (or should not) measure a church member or minister’s faith based on their stance on eternal life, gun control, homosexuality, or any other issue. Our theologies on these matters are diverse; confession of Christ binds

us together in love.

Over the years, I have referred back to Williamson’s paper many times. It captures an important trajectory in Disciples history and theology that I now realize influenced my choice of a doctoral area—Religion and Psychological Studies—an area interested in formal doctrine only as it affects the hard day-to-day questions of religious experience and faith (and an area not coincidentally shaped by influential Disciples like Browning and Ames).

In the years since doctoral study, Disciples convictions have shaped the books I’ve written, the research I’ve pursued, and the courses I’ve taught—on topics like death, illness, women, children, families, and spirituality. A distinctive Disciples temperament supported my protest about conventional ideals of spirituality that exclude children and those caught up in their care. And Disciples dissent on doctrine and creeds fuels my current interest in understanding *theology as practiced* rather than as thought, systematized, and theorized.

In fact, there is an important parallel between my earlier work on spirituality and my current work in practical theology. Just as I sought to redefine spirituality to include children and adults in the midst of complicated mundane lives, so also am I working now to broaden definitions of theology to make theology more inclusive of what happens beyond elite academic institutions.

Recent scholarship suggests that early Disciples might have been ahead of their time in their frustration with theology as a nicely worked out system of cognitive belief. Let me offer a few examples. When Susan Ridgely Bales studied children’s understanding of First Communion in three Roman Catholic congregations in North Carolina, she discovered that what seven- to ten-year-old children believe and experience is not quite what adults or the wider church have in mind.

One of her more striking findings is the centrality of sensory experience. To her surprise, her conversations with children do not center on white dresses and parties, much less transubstantiation or the church universal. She discovers instead what she calls a “theology of taste.” Ryan, a communicant in an African American congregation, “explains that First Communion is ‘about tasting and learning about Jesus.’”<sup>2</sup> Another child explains her understanding of transubstantiation through taste, saying that the real bread tastes better than the practice bread.

Bales also uncovers what I would call a theology of sensory movement. Children yearn for inclusion in the community but they feel separate “because they cannot perform the necessary movement.” That is, they understand their disaffection as centering “on *action* as much as on *belief*.” Their interests are practical. They want to teach “their bodies to move as the adults moved during the liturgy.”<sup>3</sup> While teachers hoped to convey the sacred meanings of communion, the children’s attention was focused on their physical bodies.

Are these findings unique to children? Adults like to think we are different but this hides important connections. Most of us do not remember clearly our early sensory experiences, which are reshaped through memory, later experience, and learning, but our theology partly resides there nonetheless.

When I was in fifth grade, I was baptized by immersion. I don’t remember going under or coming up. Try as I might, I can’t picture the minister in the baptistery or recall water temperature, much less the baptism classes. But I do remember anticipating what new life would feel like, the weight of the white robe clinging to my body and dragging me back down as I stepped out, wet hair, a group picture, and pondering whether I felt different. I remain convicted that Christian baptism requires visceral

experience that sprinkling can hardly achieve.

We are naïve when we assume adults leave sensate knowing behind, even though much Western doctrinal and intellectual history implies that such detachment is possible and even admirable, a sign of intellectual and spiritual maturity. There is something to be learned from children. Adult belief is grounded in our bodies even though this escapes our notice. Sensory understandings linger longer than most people realize, and the bodily knowledge that forms us as children continues to play a role in adulthood. Our bodies mark our theology and knowledge of God.

Consider a second example from recent scholarship in learning theory: To move from a rule-based beginner to virtuoso expert requires more than analytical rationality, general theories, and the reduced formulas that comprise them. According to Danish sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg, rule-based knowledge is important for novices, but expert knowledge is context-dependent. It requires a dexterity of thought that builds on intimate familiarity with “several thousand concrete cases.” This undercuts the general assumption that “general, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than practical (context-dependent) knowledge.”<sup>4</sup>

Flyvbjerg reminds us about an insight from Thomas Kuhn, which in my reading is quite damning of formal theology as it has developed in the last two centuries and supportive of the direction practical theology has gone: “A discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and...a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one.”<sup>5</sup>

We know this colloquially when we say “a picture paints a thousand words.” When I lecture and write, people consistently remember my personal stories more than my theoretical points.



Of course, researchers create theories and believers seek dogmas. That is what we are trained and driven to do. But it is important to remember that “something essential may be lost by this summarizing” (Flyvbjerg). Theological doctrines are only maps or “models of reality” (Bourdieu). We should not mistake them for the “reality of the model” or the richer, fuller concreteness of Christian life.

In fact, *what people say they believe* in confession, creeds, and doctrines and *what they actually do* rarely cohere—a reality that religion scholars and the general public often refuse to admit. According to one study, “intrinsically religious people do not act in more prosocial ways than anyone else, but they think they do, or should, or would.” Religious confession and action are highly situational and instrumental. Professional athletes perform rituals to enhance performance but do not skip rigorous workouts, divine healers supplement prayer with medical intervention, and Native Americans pray for rain only in the rainy season. “If we want to predict someone’s behavior,” another study suggests, “we are better off knowing where they are rather than who they are.”<sup>6</sup>

Tonight I head overseas to attend the International Academy of Practical Theology, an organization Don Browning helped found twenty years ago. I will conclude my presidential address by observing that in the last quarter century practical theology has been disruptive to the space occupied

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## Internship

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that the other reason, perhaps, that church sounded relatively easy to me is that my gifts, abilities and experience make me well-suited to ministry. Indeed, the hodge-podge of experiences that make up my life seems to coalesce in a coherent and integrated whole when I bring those experiences to ministry. The lack of expertise that I sometimes feel in a university filled with experts, turns out to be the flip-side of being a generalist who brings a breadth of experience and depth of spiritual openness to ministry.

Learning how to relax and be myself in worship, learning how to trust how I feel and to share it with my church family, learning how to preach a word that speaks to me from within this church community, learning how to receive the hospitality of older or ailing members of the congregation in their homes and hospital rooms, this is the stuff of my work here.

As self-aware and self-reflective as I think I am, I am surprised by my capacity to love and to be loved. And this congregation can see this capacity in me and draws it out. I have much yet to learn, but I am ever so grateful for the opportunity to learn ministry in a congregation that is so healthy and nurturing. Thank you all for offering me this opportunity. It is with eagerness and openness of spirit that I look ahead to the coming months. Surely God’s Spirit moves about us, among us and within us. Thanks be to God.

*Through such internships, the Disciples Divinity House hopes to make available exceptional settings of ministry where students can explore their vocations and hone their abilities. DDH is grateful to the First Christian Church of Greensboro and to Lee Hull Moses for providing this remarkable opportunity.*

*Find more reflections from Thandwe Gobleddale at the church’s website, [fccgreensboro.org](http://fccgreensboro.org).*

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by academic theology. Like the liberation theologies that have had a steady influence since the 1960s, practical theology has been all about taking theology to the streets and using what it has learned from going out to assess the adequacy of biblical, historical, and doctrinal claims. This work has disturbed conventional boundaries and redefined what theology is, how it is done, and who does it.

The aim of good practical theology is to foster richer material understandings of embodied theology so that those who practice ministry and pursue lives of Christian faith will have a greater sense of their theological and religious vocation. Although restoring practical theology as an academic discipline has merit, practical theology has always been and remains far more than an academic endeavor. It has been about returning theology to the people.

Little will my colleagues in the International Academy know: *This is just good Disciples theology.* I am thankful once again for the Disciples Houses *plural*, north and south, Chicago and Nashville, and all they do to sustain this tradition. They are often its strongest and most vital backbone. I thank you for the gift of this award; it will be a wonderful reminder to me of these many good things. ☺

<sup>1</sup> The paper was published as "Theology and the Forms of Confession in the Disciples of Christ." *Encounter* 41 (Winter 1980) 56, 57, 69.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Ridgely Bales, *When I Was a Child: Children's Interpretations of First Communion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Bales, 91-92, 96, 103.

<sup>4</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (April 2006): 222, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Flyvbjerg, 242.

<sup>6</sup> Both studies cited in Mark Chaves, "Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010): 5, 4.

## News

Find more news and more details at <http://ddh.uchicago.edu> and on our Facebook page, Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago

**Rebecca Anderson (2007)** has been called as Associate Minister of Glencoe Union Church, north of Chicago.

Former Associate Dean **Brittany Barber (1995)** is serving as Interim Minister of University Place Christian Church in Champaign, Illinois.

June PhD graduate **Joe Blosser (2005)** is now Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy and Director of Service Learning at High Point University in North Carolina.

Northwestern University Press has published *Theater and Integrity: Emptying Selves in Drama, Ethics, and Religion*, by **Larry Bouchard (1974; trustee)**.

On October 28, **Matthew Myer Boulton** was installed as the sixth president and Professor of Theology at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis. He earned his PhD at the Divinity School. He is married to **Liz Myer Boulton (1989)**.



Congratulations to **House Scholars Brandon Cline and Tish Duncan and big sister Edy** on the birth of Vivian Margaret Cline on August 4.

This summer **Spencer Dew (1998)** received a grant from the Black Metropolitan Research Consortium for archival research on the Moorish Science Temple. He is a Lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

**Chris Dorsey (2001)** is the 2011-12 Faculty Fellow at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan.



June graduate **Anna Liv Gibbons (2008)** was ordained July 17 at First Christian Church, Eugene, Oregon, her home church. Liv is now the Minister in Residence at Central Christian Church, Lexington, Kentucky.

Congratulations to **former resident Ian Gerdon and Sarah Gerdon** on the birth of William Michael Quodvultdeus Gerdon on September 30. Liam arrived early by emergency c-section, but is doing well.

**Yvonne Gilmore (2001)** preached at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville during the General Assembly and performed a spoken word piece in the HIV/Aids healing service.

**Former resident Jimmy Hoke** has begun a PhD program in New Testament at Drew University.

**Angela Kaufman (1995), Jack Pohlman, and big brother Connor** welcomed Owen Reid Pohlman-Kaufman to the world on May 6 in Fort Worth, Texas.

**Michael Kinnamon (1973)**, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches (NCC) since 2007, will leave his position due to health reasons. His cardiologist insisted that he reduce stress and extensive travel immediately. The NCC's governing board "received the news with reverence and respect for his leadership."

**Jennifer Kottler (1999)** became the Associate Pastor of Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City on July 1.

Congratulations to **Dennis (1970) and Lana (1979) Landon** on the birth of their first grandchild, Harrison (Hank) Hoyt Landon, born on June 25.

**Paul Matheny (1978)** is the author of two books, *Contextual Theology: The Drama of our Times* (Pickwick Press)

and *The Theology of Christian Churches*. He teaches at Union Theological Seminary in Dasmariñas, Philippines (near Manila).

**Trustee Holly McKissick** is writing a book for Abingdon Press tentatively titled, *The Tall Poppy: How to Lead without Losing Your Head*. She preached the opening worship of the General Assembly on July 9.

Congratulations to **Lee Hull Moses (2001; trustee)**, **Rob Moses**, and **big sister Harper** on the birth of Jonathan Bruce Moses on September 27 in Greensboro, North Carolina.

On November 13, **Teresa Hord Owens (1999)** was installed as the senior minister of First Christian Church, Downers Grove, Illinois. She continues also as Dean of Students of the Divinity School.

**Ritch Savin-Williams (1971)** was quoted in an October 2 *New York Times* article about teen rebellion against gender conformity. He is Professor and Chair of Human Development at Cornell University, where he directs the Sex and Gender Lab.

**Laura Jean Torgerson (2002)**, **Tim Donaghy**, and **big sister Quinn** welcomed the birth of Maya Rowan on September 12 in Nicaragua.

**Beau Underwood (2006)** is now Assistant Pastor at National City Christian Church, Washington, DC, in addition to his fulltime work as Partnership and Outreach Coordinator at Faith in Public Life.

**Former Resident Ben Varnum** was ordained to the diaconate by the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago on November 1. In October he became the assistant rector of St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church in Overland Park, Kansas.

**John Weaver (1996)** is now Dean of Library Services and Educational Technology at Abilene Christian University. He was elected President of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) this year.

Congratulations to **Gaylord Yu (trustee)** and **Jihye (Jenny) Choi**, who were married November 11 in Rockefeller Memorial Chapel. ☺

## In Memoriam

**John David Sturman** died August 1, 2011, in Chicago. He was 62.

John Sturman was born March 12, 1949, in Chicago. He was an Air Force veteran of the Vietnam War. He attended Vanderbilt Divinity School and then, in 1978, became a Disciples Divinity House Scholar at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he earned the AM and DMin degrees.

He served as a chaplain at Cook County Jail, as the pastor at North Side Christian Church in Chicago, and as a chaplain on death row at the Pontiac (Illinois) State Prison. He was a consultant with the Public Defender's office on death penalty cases. He worked with the Coalition Against the Death Penalty and with Citizen's Alert. When a prisoner was executed in Illinois, he was one of those on site protesting with a candle-light vigil; Illinois now has repealed the death penalty. Fellow alumnus Dale Richesin observed, "John didn't just read theology, like the rest of us. He lived it."

More than thirty years ago, he was diagnosed with leukemia; recently, the cancer returned. He is survived by his wife, Maureen, to whom he was married in 1986, their daughters Emilia and Alice, and his sister Mary.

**Sybel A. Thomas**, church leader, died June 7 at her home in Chicago.

Sybel Thomas had been a trustee of the Disciples Divinity House since 1998; she and her late husband Harvey Thomas were involved with DDH for decades longer, investing attention and resources in future leaders there and elsewhere.

Mrs. Thomas was one of the most significant lay leaders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) through the period of the church's 1968 Restructure and Merger. She was a vice moderator of the first General Assembly of the newly restructured body,



and thus the first African American and first laywoman to serve on the moderator team. She held many other leadership roles, including President of the World Christian Women's Fellowship and of the National Convocation, and Elder of Park Manor Christian Church in Chicago. She received numerous awards including the Church Women United's Valiant Woman Award.

Sybel Amanda Clark was born September 3, 1923, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the eighth of nine children. Her family moved to Chicago when she was five; her mother died when she was fourteen. She graduated as valedictorian of her class at Wendell Phillips High School, and went on to study accounting and drama at DePaul University.

She met Harvey Thomas while acting with the Skyloft Players (founded by Langston Hughes), and married him in 1948. She began a twenty-six year career in accounting with the US Army Support Command. They joined Park Manor Christian Church in 1954, where she was mentored by Rosa Page Welch, who helped to inspire her conviction of women's creative role in church and society. The Thomases traveled to over fifty countries to learn about mission and to interpret it through curriculum and worship resources.

She was preceded in death by her husband in December 2010, and by their son Harvey, Jr. She is survived by their son Craig and by five grandchildren and five great grandchildren. ☺