

“Episcope or Oversight”

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In December 1998 Walker was asked to address a Joint Placement Conference of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Orlando, Florida, regarding the question of “oversight,” or episcope.

Her lengthy paper is divided into four parts: personal reflections about the concept of episcope, a short history of the conference minister in the United Church of Christ and the regional minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), some theological reconstructions of episcope for possible use, and an examination of the theological content of episcope for contemporary ecclesiology. The last section of the paper suggests that visitation, “the disturbing intrusiveness of love into business as usual in the church,” and oversight, “bringing the view of the larger church into the local scene,” stand at the heart of episcope.

Source: Randi J. Walker, an excerpt from “Episcopé,” an address given to the Joint Placement Conference of the United Church of Christ and Christian Church Disciples of Christ, Orlando, Florida, December 4, 1998, 10–12.

Recovery of the Theological Content of Episcopé in Our Ecclesiology

The first aspect of episcopé I wish to lift up for you is visitation and the Presence of God. Episcopé is really the disturbing intrusiveness of love into business as usual in the church. In a world where most symbols have diluted meanings, where memory of their meaning is not passed on from generation to generation, it is important for the symbolic presence of God in episcopé to be lifted up. In individual episcopé, such as a conference or regional minister, that person (in her or his office) serves as a symbolic representation of Christ. In collective episcopé, such as an association, the gathered churches are a symbolic representation of the Apostles.

Visitations of Regional and Conference ministers and of Associations to local churches, while they may carry some of the disturbing baggage of spying, simply remind the Church of the disturbing power of a visitation from God, a visitation of love, honest, open, caring but challenging, a reminder of things that it is in our nature to forget. But in my work as a historian, I have found no more powerful thing church leaders can do to strengthen the churches than to visit them with love. The first visit from the Home Missionary Society Superintendent to the congregations in Illinois in 1873 had surprisingly powerful results:

By the end of the year nearly every church will have been visited. The plan is this: special prayer and visitation of members are the preparation for one. A day is then given, with each church, to visiting in the forenoon; service for salutation, conference and prayer in the afternoon; and to addresses on Home Evangelization in the evening. Great good has followed. Weaker churches have been encouraged, the strong stimulated, and all have felt the quickened pulse of church communion.¹

Symbolic signs of a visitation from God can all be accomplished by either personal or collegial episcopé.

I would suggest the following three things as especially good symbolic signs of God’s presence in the community. Confirmation or Baptism, times when people are sacramentally incorporated into the Body of Christ are good times for episcopal visitation. Representing the wider church, the Association or the Regional or Conference minister remind people that the presence of God is not just present in the local church but also in its connections to other churches. Communion is another such symbolic sign. Sharing the same bread and cup, unity in the confession of Christ’s teaching, life, death, resurrection, and coming again, strengthen a church beset by secular concerns. For the church to continue to understand its center in Christ, being “in communion” with its episcopé is essential. In the communion service, the

Association, or the Conference or Regional minister sits with that congregation as Christ or as the Apostles, and once again passes down the tradition, re-presents the love of God to them. Finally in ordination, laying on hands, healing and anointing, recognizing and confirming what God has done for the people as they call forth leadership. Any such visit in the work of episcopé should include, as the Home Mission Superintendent quoted above included, preaching, communion, and prayer with the people.

The other main task of episcopé, oversight, depends on visitation for effectiveness. In one sense this is obvious. Effective oversight depends on having a view of things. However, in episcopé this is a deeper spiritual matter. This is a view not tailored to human measurements. While no human being can claim God's view, the visit of a conference or regional minister, or of the churches of an association, to a congregation is a symbolic reminder of the presence of God and should have the character of love. Greek has several words that relate to visiting. As a historian for instance, I am interested in the root word for history—*historeo* (historeo) to visit with the purpose of coming to know. That is not the purpose of a visit of episcopé. The visit of episcopé is a visit for the purpose of unity (of the congregation and among the larger body of churches), a visit to observe with care. The visit of episcopé brings the view of the larger church into the local scene; it conveys a sense of the whole to the parts. Doris Lessing in one of her novels, I think it was *Shikasta*, used an apt phrase, the "Substance of We Feeling." The function of episcopé is to renew the substantial reality of the Body of Christ, another reason why communion is such an important part of such visits.

Though the renewal of this sense of the Body of Christ is one of its primary purposes, oversight in episcopé is the service of *unity*, not *uniformity*. The authority of episcopé is not something granted by an organizational chart, but by the relationships within the Body of Christ. One scholar, Archie Smith Jr.,² reminds us that by baptism we are siblings by choice, not by kinship. We are responsible for our relationships with each other in the household of God. Such a household model of authority is rooted in the ancient church's origin in the household—the *oikos*—rather than in the polis, or political sphere. Within the *oikos*, even though certain persons were granted certain kinds of authority by law, in reality, the household was sustained by a system of relationships based on the decision to love and trust, or the obligation to care. The Christian bishop was considered the *pater* or *mater*³ *familias*. The power of Christian episcopé lies in bringing love to bear on the affairs of the church, the essence of the presence of God.

The task of serving the unity of the church has received particular attention in our ecumenical conversations, especially since the beginning of the Consultation on Church Union and the Lima meeting of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission. That body's consensus document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* has become the theological starting place for many churches' considerations of episcopé. The important Paragraph 23 of the Ministry section reads as follows:

The Church as the body of Christ and the eschatological people of God is constituted by the Holy Spirit through a diversity of gifts or ministries. Among these gifts a ministry of *episcopé* is necessary to express and safeguard the unity of the body. Every church needs this ministry of unity in some form in order to be the Church of God, the one body of Christ, a sign of the unity of all in the Kingdom.

Notice that the form is left open. Within the United Church of Christ, and I believe in the Disciples churches as well, the recovery of the gift of episcopé in our churches will be a collaboration between the people who hunger for a visitation from God, a sign of their unity in the body of Christ, and you who hold this precarious office.

In our churches so sensitive to the intrusion of episcopé on congregational prerogatives, it is I think necessary to maintain the ambiguity of collegial and personal aspects of it. Though the current ecumenical conversations about episcopé seem to call for hurry in this matter, lest we let a moment slip by, it takes time and great love to reshape a ministry for a time unlike any we have ever seen. I close with this ancient message of Paul to the leaders of the Church in Corinth:

You show that you are a letter of Christ . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming

from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor. 3:3–6 NRSV)

1. The Forty-Seventh Report of the American Home Missionary Society for Annual Meeting, May 7, 1873 (New York: The American Home Missionary Society, 1873), 74.
2. Archie Smith Jr. and Gill Gorell Barnes, *Navigating the Deep River: Spirituality in African American Families* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1997).
3. There is evidence of woman bishops in the earliest Christian inscriptions. For further information see Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1993).