



CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) in the United States and Canada

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Rev. Teresa "Terri" Hord Owens, General Minister and President

January 14, 2021

Dear Disciples:

Here at the beginning of a new year, there is no doubt that our church – as much of the rest of the world – is in a wilderness season. We find ourselves wandering, longing for the comfort of what we once knew and wondering what the future holds.

I believe that this moment, like all wilderness moments, holds great opportunity for us, if we are brave enough to imagine what might be. I want to invite you to imagine with me.

Several intertwining crises present themselves in this moment, each with a particular opportunity: The pandemic, which has caused the cancellation of our General Assembly and forced so many churches out of their buildings, provides an opportunity to re-envision what church looks like in all expressions and to explore what it means to be a church sent out. The racial justice reckoning happening across the United States gives us an opportunity to revisit our commitment to be a pro-reconciling/anti-racist church; that is, to be the church we say we are.

The economic crisis, in which the wealth gap is widening and leaving many without access to resources, gives us an opportunity to discern how we will love and serve our neighbors, even as we work toward a more just economy for all. The political unrest in the context of American democracy gives us an opportunity to explore what it means to be witnesses to the story of Jesus in a time of such division and change. And the ever-present crisis of climate change provides an opportunity to reaffirm our call to care for God's good creation, even as we confess and repent our participation in its destruction.

In this moment, then, our calling is clear. As a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, we are called to imagine a church that bears witness to God's limitless love. We will need to act with courage. We will need to give ourselves permission to change, to let go of processes and structures and practices that don't serve us well any longer. We will need to let go of fear – the fear of what might happen if we do change, and the fear of the unknown future.

I'd like to share with you some ways we can live into this calling this year by focusing on four key areas: covenant, story, tools, and practice.

Covenant: The Governance Committee of the General Board is doing some important work exploring what it means to live in covenant. They've been reflecting on the theological foundations of our governing documents, reviewing possible revisions to the Design, and reexamining how we make decisions and how we speak as a church. As we prepare to hear more about this work later this year, **I hope you will**

pray for those who are discerning a way forward, and for your congregation as it lives in covenant with the whole church.

Story: It is time for us to shape a new narrative for ourselves, particularly in terms of what we see when we imagine ourselves an anti-racist church. Establishing common values and practices lived out in individual contexts will help us shape a vision of a shared future. Every day we must tell our story, share the good news, and make decisions that hold us accountable to be the church we say we are. In the coming months, I will be sharing ideas and inviting others into conversation with me, as together we imagine our new story. **Please make sure you're signed up for my *Dear Disciples* newsletter and follow Disciples social media so you won't miss these opportunities to imagine with me.**

Tools: There are some new tools already in the works that will help us do ministry together. I hope you have heard about Alex, a new Disciples database that will eventually replace the yearbook. It will provide a *real-time* directory and help us track churchwide data trends and help our regional and general expressions support congregations more effectively. New communication tools are being developed as well; you can now sign up for email newsletters that bring you the news you want, whether that's updates on justice efforts, messages from me, news from the whole church, or resources particularly for pastors. In addition, increased collaboration among regional and general ministries are helping us work in covenant with one another. Building relationships across the church, across laity and clergy, and across generations will be key to infusing our church with new energy as we all share our gifts in ministry. **You can learn more about Alex at www.disciples.org, where you can also sign up for newsletters and connect with ministries across the church.**

Finally, practice: Grounded in spiritual growth and development, we begin with love, letting love lead us into action testifying to the church we say we are. Our faith practices help us understand that love: We share communion at the Lord's Table as an expression of God's expansive welcome. We practice baptism and proclaim that we walk in new life. We study and share the ancient stories that point to a new world. We pray together, a practice that reminds us that we are not alone, that we are created and loved by God. We serve our neighbors, acknowledging that we are connected to each other and that we are called to live not for ourselves but for the sake of the world. **I hope, as we move into this new year, that you will stay connected to your local congregation, and that you will embrace the practices of our faith that give you life.**

Church, we are called to imagine a new world. We are called to imagine God's reign fully come, and to discern how we can participate in making it so. We call ourselves Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. **It is time for us to be the church we say we are: to seize the opportunity of this wilderness moment and to move forward with courage, permission to change, and freedom from fear, to imagine a church that bears witness to God's limitless love.**

I'm glad to be in ministry with you.



Rev. Teresa "Terri" Hord Owens
General Minister and President

**We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for *wholeness*
in a *fragmented world*.**

**As part of the one body of Christ, we *welcome*
all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.**