

Imagine With Me: Rev. Yvonne Gilmore, National Convocation



Transcript

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Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples. This is your General Minister and President Terri Hord Owens, and I'm so excited to be with you for the very first session in our "Imagine With Me" series.

We're going to be sharing with leaders across the whole church, talking about what it actually looks like, what it feels like, and how we can move forward to being the church that we say we are.

I am so excited today that my first guest is the Rev. Yvonne Gilmore, newly installed as the interim administrative secretary of the National Convocation and associate general minister and president.

The joy of that is that this person sits on the staff of the Office of General Minister and President so, glad to have Yvonne as a new colleague in this work together. So, Yvonne, welcome, or Rev. Gilmore, I should say, welcome to "Imagine With Me."

We are delighted to have you here, delighted to be working with you, as we serve the general church together.

I wanted to first allow you to say a little bit about yourself and what you want the whole church to know about who you are. Many of us know you because of your work in anti-racism training over the years but why don't you just take a few minutes to talk to us about who you are, and how you came to this ministry.

Yvonne Gilmore: Absolutely. I'm so thrilled to be in this work and particularly in this program and the work of imagination and expanding imagination. I'm particularly excited about that in terms of this series. So, I'll say I'm Rev. Yvonne Gilmore. I had the privilege of serving as associate dean of the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago for 7 years.

I was thrilled to do that work and then have been a core trainer with Reconciliation Ministries. And so privileged to serve so many throughout the life of our denomination for 12, 13, 14 years doing that work and thrilled now to serve as interim administrative secretary of the National Convocation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

and associate general minister and in this work, I'm thrilled to be able to serve as a beacon of wholeness in our Black churches, to listen, to re-imagine who we are, what our merger means, what our needs are, what our churches need today, here and now, so that we can flourish, right? To think again for the next two years about what does flourishing look like, and how do we share in that work together?

I'll also say, I am a mom, Assata my oldest, is 22, and my youngest is 17, Kharis, and that certainly shapes who I am and want to share that as well. So, there's more to say. I just want to say I've been nurtured and loved in the Christian Church Capital Area, in the Christian Church in Ohio, and by the Christian Church in Illinois/Wisconsin and am so grateful and meaningfully shaped by those three regions as well. I certainly still consider them all "home" and Indianapolis now, with the general offices, absolutely.

THO: Well, we're excited for this work. It's a .. in full disclosure, you and I do share common roots at the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago, so we've known each other a long time with those connections. I was dean of students at the divinity school when you became associate dean at DDH. Who knew that we would be serving together in this way, but it's exciting.

You mentioned the merger and I know that's one of the things that we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the merger as well as the 50th anniversary of the Design or what people call "restructure," in Des Moines in 2019.

Maybe you could say a little bit about the importance of the merger. What does the whole church need to know about the merger?

YG: Wow. Um.

THO: That's an expansive question, why is it important, maybe?

YG: Absolutely. I think it's important for so many reasons. I'll say real briefly, right, that the relationship between, particularly African American persons and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) really extends back into the 1800s before the Christian Church became incorporated.

We look at Preston Taylor who, in 1917, started the National Christian Missionary Convention, that there were convention churches which were the Black churches and and there were assembly churches that were known as the General Assembly together. And then the convention and the assembly came together.

But before that, things were separate. And so from 1917 and then until we have the merger, where we say we are not going to have separate convention churches and separate assembly churches but we'll come together and we'll make a new covenant in terms of our relationship with one another and support one another in covenant in the merger.

Which is then the privileged office that I sit in terms of the administrative secretary and associate general minister and president - that was a byproduct of that merger. And ways of supporting and being in new relationship to say we want to flourish together.

So we're going to make provisions throughout the life of our general ministries, we're going to create merger staff positions that focus on education and transformation and our Disciples Women ministries.

Throughout the life of the church we're going to affirm, to grow and build relationship and to establish this new covenant together. The merger is so important for that reason. It's also so important that we revisit that merger, that we revisit our covenant to say "how do we flourish together?" What does that mean?

We have some documents and made our commitments of our dollars and our relationship and our programming some years ago but then to look at what does it mean to flourish together today.

So I'm especially excited to doing that work, particularly during this interim time, these two years. I think it isn't just that the convocation will revisit what does the merger mean to us but we'll do that in conversation with the wider church, to say how do we flourish together.

Our shared needs, what are those needs that are distinct for our congregations and our clergy, in terms of how we enable folks to flourish and how do we move forward together.

THO: Amen, amen.

We'll be talking throughout this series about work that we're doing as a whole church, to revisit. The governance committee of the general board is revisiting how we make decisions, establish our priorities, how we do the hard work of speaking as a church, and the notion of imagining and asking ourselves who do we say we are?

We have documents that say that. We have an identity statement that we are 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.

We say that we're an anti-racist, pro-reconciling church. I've been using the language of "let's be the church we say we are." And part of that work is to explore those documents, particularly of our founding, particularly of the theological foundations as well as the broader structural contours.

When you think about your work right now with the convocation, what do you imagine? What are you hearing from across the convocation about the ministry, the vision that you have for the National Convocation as part of our one body, as part of our whole church?

YG: So, I'm hearing many things. I'll say, one, I think is certainly there is the climate of anxiety, fear, and mistrust in our wider culture, and the trauma that inflicts on all of us to see the ways that fear is imposing destruction.

So I think there is a need, a yearning, to deal with that. To do some real education and to be clear about the sources of that, and the harm, and to shore up so that we're all secure and then, indeed, to do the work so that we can move forward together. But then I'll also say, and something I want to name, when we talk about beloved community and look at the legacy of even the civil rights movement, and we know the church was central in that nonviolent movement. And we talk about the Poor People's Campaign today and the wider work that we're doing then I would say that we can look at some legislative advancement and some changes and some wider transformation but also that it's really time for the church to be transformed.

I want to make the case that in many ways we can see transformation in the legislative sphere and yet church is still a pretty segregated hour. So much that needs to be transformed within us and so it's time for us to take a look, a deeper look at ourselves and what it means to be beloved community, certainly all around, but also particularly as Disciples.

To look at our hierarchies and the way that plays out with the priesthood of all believers, and I mean that. So, looking at how those hierarchies manifest themselves, how we're flourishing in that claim, but also the work that we still need to do so that all who are called to serve are equipped, and supported, and are enabled to serve together.

So I won't go on too much, but I think really building beloved community within the context of the church, the things we're calling for in the wider sphere, that we see equity, that we see hope infused and we're really transformed as the Body of Christ.

THO: Amen. You know, you speak about the beloved community and I think we sometimes forget that Dr. King was not only a pastor but a theologian, a trained systematic theologian, and he grounded his work in love and the transformative power of love.

The strong belief that based on that love and it being lived out through nonviolence, that transformation that, as he said, in the Negro in that day, had the responsibility of really holding the country morally accountable.

And Preston Taylor himself, said, that the white church needs the Black church in order to really be church. And I think those answers of transformation in terms of how we really build beloved community and how we work together has to be a reflection of God's limitless love. If that's what we really believe, there are some ways that we absolutely have to show up and ways that we have to behave.

You've been an anti-racism trainer, a core trainer, in our Reconciliation Ministry for over a decade now. As you think about that particular work, what might it look like within a congregation, to live out beloved community and reflect this commitment to being an anti-racist church?

What are some of the ways, I won't say measure, but how do we feel that? What does it look like? How will we know when we've gotten there?

YG: I'll say something general and then a few specifics on that question because I certainly believe that the church should not just mirror the wider political geography. That if I believe here and now that heaven's going to look radically different the now should look radically different.

That, one, actually naming, if that's what we believe, then not being content that our churches seem to just mirror and reflect the wider political geography. The naming that we care about that, that we value it.

And I'll say, that I'm a Disciple because I have been nurtured, I've been loved, I've been shaped by every hue of human. And I've seen beloved community and I'm committed to anti-racism work in that way. So I think that just naming that's who we want to be. And actually being clear and honest, which means we have to confront the truth about what we claim we want to be.

But then, for congregations in different areas, being aware of the ways that racism manifests itself which is to say in Berkley or Oakland, California, it may show up a little differently than in Kansas City, Missouri. And being aware of, was there red lining, what are the practices here, what's going on in terms of the school system, and the prison pipeline, the education to prison pipeline. What's happening? In Ferguson, Missouri, as it was uprising, we saw the people become aware of traffic tickets being an inequity.

And so I think that, one, there has to be a commitment to really looking and taking some assessment of what are the issues, how is hierarchy showing up in destructive ways in our community.

And then I think as we look at we look at who we want to be, there has to be a willingness to look in our liturgy, what are the images, what songs are we singing, are we willing to expand our music and our sonic palette to explore the songs and sounds.

Are we actually invested in multiculturalism? Do we want there to be diversity? And I'll say that I'm invested in it and I think the scripture calls us to be invested in it.

I'm mindful because I think that this is really being anti-racist is partly learning about the fact that the family, your family, is bigger than you thought it was. More connections than you realized.

There are connections that maybe you don't know how to honor, and there are connections where violence has happened. Maybe you didn't choose that violence, but it's there.

So, as we practice the ethic of love that undergirds beloved community, how do we tell the truth about those connections in our worship practices? In our faith life? In our policies on our board?

To say we want clergy - I believe we're going to know we're there because our churches are going to be diverse. They're going to look, they're going to figure out how to interview and honor candidates from a variety of backgrounds and make space for their gifts in our worshipping communities.

We're going to figure out how to reach out. We know that folks are moving, they're from different backgrounds all around us. And I believe God wants us to be equipped to be diverse bodies, that God wants us to have a variety of different persons and cultures in our congregations.

That means some education, continuing education for all of us. It means getting together. Everywhere in the Bible something amazing happened, folks were gathered. Folks were gathered and weren't concerned about their own resources or they weren't in isolation. I think, again, whether it was at a wedding where they gathered, where they needed to figure out how to transform water into wine, for those who are gathered. Where fishes and loaves happened because people were gathered.

I think we've got to make our connections, we've got to make the ways in which we gather essential, a priority, and then do the learning, get equipped, overcome, and take on our identity so that we can overcome the destruction that has prevented us from honoring God.

THO: Amen, amen.

You have, quite deftly, hit on some categories that I've been talking about in terms of reimagining our church or reimagining a new church for a new world.

One of those things is just living as church in covenant with one another and understanding what covenant really means.

As the regional minister from the Great River Region, Nadine Burton, says, "It means you are a 'want to' church not a 'have to' church." We want to do these things. We want to build this beloved community. We want to see the beauty of all we are reflected across the church. We want to understand relationship between congregations, regions, and general church. We want that flourishing for us all.

And we all have a story, a narrative. If, indeed, we are an anti-racist church, then we have to tell the truth about where we are now and what it means and how we'll move

into that state of being and what it will take for us every day to make choices that says this is who we are and so we're going to make some choices that get us there or that align and are consistent with that kind of human flourishing.

And the fact that we need tools. We need education. We need technology in this day and age. We need all sorts of ways in which we can be the church that we say we are and grounded.

And you mentioned scripture several times, and I appreciate that because I think it's so important that we are theologically grounded, both in scripture and as well as in our own spiritual disciplines. So that we're not just a 501c3 that's just a community club, we're the church of Jesus Christ. And so we have to be grounded in those things.

I am so grateful for this time with you, Rev. Yvonne Gilmore, and excited for what will be happening as the convocation itself works to reimagine what the convocation must be. I hate to say "they" because I'm a part of the convocation.

(laughter)

So it's important to name the fact that I'm the first GMP of color. But that doesn't mean that our work is done. It does not mean that our work is done. And so, while many people feel good about that we're not post-racial by any stretch of the imagination.

And we still have work to do even with women in our church. There's still a lot of work to be done.

So I'm so grateful for you sharing this time with us.

Disciples, I hope you will be tuning in week after week as we hold these conversations, "Imagine With Me." It's such a delight to talk with - we've got such wonderful gifts and graces in our church.

And I'm looking forward to sharing these conversations with you more in the weeks and months ahead.

So, in the meantime, take good care of yourselves. Stay well and be safe. And remember that God loves you, and so do I. God bless you.