

Imagine With Me: Disciples Justice Ministries



Transcript

February 12, 2021

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples. This is your General Minister and President Terri Hord Owens and I'm here this week with our edition of "Imagine With Me."

Today I'm so excited to be talking with three servant leaders from our church who are, each in their own way, involved in a collective of ministries who are focused on justice. That's the Disciples Justice Ministries. They made their official debut at the General Assembly in 2019, but the work to develop this new collective started long before that.

So, my three guests are here: Rev. Laurie Pound Feille, Rev. Brian Frederick-Gray, and Rev. Hector Hernandez. I'm going to start with Hector and ask each of you to just introduce yourselves briefly by telling us where you serve.

Hector Hernandez: I'm Rev. Hector Josue Hernandez Marcia. I am the director of community engagement of the National Benevolent Association and the National Benevolent Association is your ministry of health and social services.

THO: Amen. Laurie?

Laurie Pound Feille: I'm Rev. Dr. Laurie Pound Feille. I'm pastor of First Christian in Minneapolis, MN, where today it's in the negative degrees. I'm also the founder of Disciples Public Presence, a Facebook group where people can share the justice work that they are doing.

THO: Disciples can, amen, and Brian?

Brian Frederick-Gray: I'm the Rev. Brian Frederick-Gray. I'm the mission director at Disciples Peace Fellowship, which is the oldest denominational peace fellowship in the United States, something for us to be proud of, Disciples. I'm also one of the co-facilitators for the Disciples Justice Ministries cohort group along with Laurie.

THO: Great! Again, thank you all for your time today. I'm just so excited. Laurie, would you share with the church how Disciples Justice Ministries got started? What were the steps that led to this collaborative group?

LPF: Thank you. I think one of the beautiful parts of the story is that it happened in a very Disciples of Christ's way. Back in 2017 was when I created Disciples Public Presence. I felt like we needed a place where clergy and laity could share what they

were doing in justice work, how they were participating with the justice ministries we already have, and that they could post pictures and we could encourage each other and be support for each other at the same time. NBA - I'm not sure if they already had the position or not - but the Rev. Dr. Dietra Wise Baker came on as the program coordinator for activism and advocacy and she was having this dream of the justice ministries getting together and working together.

We began conversations in early 2018 and we brought our General Minister and President, Rev. Terri Hord Owens, into the discussion and asked her her thoughts. What if we brought all the justice ministries together and had a conversation on how we can work together and get that chalice out there so people can see that Disciples are truly doing things in the world, in the justice world.

Out of those conversations, and with I must say huge support from NBA as well as huge support from the Christian Conference Center for the Upper Midwest Region in Newton, IA, we held a gathering in September of 2018 where our justice ministries came together and began the conversation of how can we work together and how can we get the chalice out there where people know Disciples are working. It helped facilitate that we were very involved in the Poor People's Campaign, so everyone was already communicating in different ways, but this just brought everybody to the table together. I remember being at that summit at the camp and conference center in the Upper Midwest and there were probably close to 80 some people who were there, yes people from congregations, as well as people from established ministries, like people from DJAN-Disciples Justice Action Network, Disciple Center for Public Witness. Regional folks were there. It was a real cross-section of the church, so I was excited to see that happen.

And again, I think one of the most important things was that no one of us can do all of this work alone, right? And that, as a church, what we wanted, what we hoped would come out of it, is how do we all participate together so that if an issue arises we can mobilize the whole church in a very different kind of way. It wasn't one, but it was all of us kind of working in a more, in a broader kind of network understanding.

So yeah, from that we've continued to meet monthly. So it worked. And one of the great things that came out of that collective this summer, given the appearance, if you will, of the global pandemic, our Disciples Peace Fellows, who normally would have been visiting campsites across the church and working, weren't able to do that.

THO: So, Brian, would you tell us a little bit about what was Disciples Just Summer and how did the peace fellows participate in that?

BFG: Absolutely! I love telling this story because it was one of the ways that the intersections of our justice ministry really got to come to life, something that we had been talking about and thinking about in this sort of theoretical level that, yes, we believe in intersectional justice, we believe that the work of one of our groups

is the work of all of our groups together. And so, as our peace fellows, our peace interns, had a summer where suddenly they weren't going to be on the road going to church camps for 10 to 12 weeks in a row, but we're going to be working from home. The Disciples Justice Ministry groups said, well, we would love to have some of the time with the peace interns. We'd love to be able to find ways for them to be able to continue as ambassadors for peace and justice and ways that we can support them, ways that we can work directly together. And in those conversations, we were also having a wider conversation with Disciples Justice Ministry around, okay, what do we want to do this summer? What are things that we can do to lift up and highlight, showcase and amplify so much of the important justice work that is happening in our church? And so, this idea for Disciples Justice Summer, #docjustsummer, came together, which was going to be an opportunity for each of our cohort ministries to be lifted up, one a week, week after week after week for the entire summer. The peace interns, who normally would be spending their summer at camp building relationships, that way we're going to get the opportunity to interview someone or many people from the different ministry groups and then write a feature article about them that was included in the Disciples News Service.

And so, week after week after week we got to learn and be introduced to different ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that have this commitment to justice. And then when that article came out, typically the next day, that ministry group would have some sort of Facebook live event to be able to talk more specifically about, okay, here's a place where you can engage with our ministry, here's a particular avenue or aspect of what we are working on, so that we were able to highlight all of these different groups. And what was incredible about it is it's become this kind of evergreen introduction as well. You can still find every single one of those articles that the peace interns wrote. You can still find every single one of those Facebook live events that were recorded and captured on disciples.org/resources/justice. It's all right there and is a great way for folks to be able to learn a little bit more about Disciples Justice Ministries, about the individual groups that make it up and the ministries that are there. And we are hoping that this is going to be a taking off point for a #docjustsummer every summer. We are having conversations this week about what a 2021 #docjustsummer could look like, how we could build on, okay, now we've done the introductory piece, so we've done the 101 level. What's 201 look like? What are ways that we can work together collaboratively over the summer to be able to invite folks into something that might be, well, who knows, because we're still discerning and dreaming right now, but I'm really excited for folks to be able to hear about what's coming next this coming summer, and ways that they'll be able to engage with justice ministries.

THO: I can't tell you how excited I am about what's happening, with not only the just summer, but, as you were speaking, Brian, just the energy around the kind of collaboration that's happening across all of these ministries. I'm recognizing that, and it's really how congregations, we hope, will become engaged with each of these ministries - wherever you sit, wherever you are, how do you participate in imagining this new church for this new world in your context? What are the issues

the issues in one area are not the same issues in another area. We've got people also, another set of ministries, Refugee and Immigration Ministries that's part of DHM, Sharon Stanley Rea. Actually, they're holding a webinar this afternoon to give some updates on legislative matters that are happening with immigration. I've spent a lot of time in DC advocating and lobbying on the DREAM act. All kinds of things - we've been to the border. NBA hosted a group about a year and a half ago going to the border. So there's so many issues that we need to educate ourselves about and no one of us can do it alone. And that's why it's so important for this collaboration to happen. I just really continue to thank God that it's moving in the way that it's moving.

NBA, let's talk to Hector. Hector, help us better understand the role that NBA - we know that NBA is our health and social service ministry. You're the new director of community engagement, carrying on the work of Dietra Wise Baker. But how does NBA participate in this work and what would you want to say to congregations about how they can engage NBA when it comes to issues of justice?

HH: Thank you for that question. One of the core, not just values, but one of the core, or let me say different, the essence of what NBA is communities of compassion and care, is that a constant and intentional being, of being part of that reimagining, becoming some communities of compassion and care. So in that take you know we have moved into very concrete actions. One of the actions is to create spaces to support some of our leaders who are working, and this is my language, in the trenches, you know, some of our chaplains or ministers who are working in different areas of the prison and jail systems, working with immigration, working with inside populations or outside when they're returning citizens, offer support to them, offer a safe space in which, I don't know, they're validated.

We just concluded a few two-year journeys of a few different peer groups. One of the peer groups was with chaplains and how important was that space in the middle of the pandemic. And all those groups are centered into wellness - wellness for the person. So I'm saying all that because we have been working and we continue working and reimagining ways in which we continue developing leadership that works, not just in non-profit but on health and social work ministries. We continue with a clear understanding that advocacy and activism and organizing is a vital part. I mean, it's the story of the babies in the river that you have to save them but you also have to figure out what is happening that more and more babies are being thrown on the river. And we internally, in NBA, and it's something that is having an impact in everything that we are imagining, to become. We are going through a process of - oh my, the word eludes me - equity. We're going through the process of revising everything that we are and center that into equity so all those lessons, all those parts of who we are, all those parts of the ministry that we do,

I think are our key part of the collective justice work that that we are doing and, I think, the present and the future of the church. The other key part of what I am doing, and doing is that intentionality in collaborative partnerships and collaborative partnership development. And you are seeing here a snapshot of what happened when we are

intentional, when we intentionally decide to work together to create communities of compassion and care. So hopefully that answered your question in this short amount of time.

THO: Thank you so much, Hector, I think that intentionality is certainly part of what we see lived out, not only with NBA, but with the entire Disciples Justice Ministries. It can take - it's really important, I think, that we all remember that, no matter where we serve and what we're doing, we're all part of this covenantal body, this one part of the Body of Christ called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and we're all part of that that work together. My last question for you - and anyone can jump in or maybe you all. I think we've got about five minutes left here.

I've been asking the church, and saying "let's be the church we say we are." We have this identity statement that says, "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." Movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, and then we say that we are an anti-racist pro-reconciling church.

One of the things I think we have to ask ourselves is, what does that look like? What do we mean when we say that? How will we show up? What do congregations look like? What does justice ministry look like, if, indeed, we're a movement for wholeness? If, when we're, indeed, we're an anti-racist church? So maybe explore that with me a little bit. What does it look like? How does the work that you all are doing help us to be the church we say we are?

BFG: I think that justice ministry is fundamentally rooted in the imagination and looking at the world, seeing it the way that it is, but then envisioning the ways that God is calling it to be. Something else, something more, the ways that we can be a part of God's dream of a peace, of grace, of compassion, of care, of justice. And so, then, the work is about organizing and getting it done, recognizing that, yes, God is calling us to be more. And how can we be a part of that, building those relationships that help us to get there, recognizing that you are not alone in this work of justice in the world, finding those partners that you can support, that you can be in ministry and in relationship with. And all of that it is rooted in that dream. And so much of it is rooted in who we are as Disciples, of wanting to be able to be in relationship with one another, to see the world living into the fullness of God's promises.

LPF: I agree with Brian. I agree with Brian about justice work being rooted in imagination. And I think that imagination leads us to that. As church and as people that believe in justice, that we learn and we educate ourselves. And we have different experiences and we get out there and we do the work, knowing that at times we're going to mess up, and we're going to misspeak, and we're going to show up when we shouldn't have shown up, and we're not going to show up when we should have shown up. But in doing the work, that's where we learn. And we learn from each other and that to me is the imagination. As people - clergy and laity - of our denomination

are out there doing incredible work, it pops up on the Disciples Public Presence Facebook page.

And I'm amazed at what people are doing, but we're learning from each other and I think that's where we find wholeness with each other and we can begin to be a part of that wholeness of the world.

HH: And if I may add, we have to constantly question who is not in the conversation, what voices are we missing? Who, even though we have the invitation to the table, who is not there? And because this is something that is not done to, is done with. And anything that is a holy space and the more as a movement, the more we can stop and be critical, and really analyze ourselves and be willing to stop and look and connect and try and try again. And you know, then a new reality, the Gospel. I mean, not because the realm of God becomes a reality.

THO: Amen. Making sure and that's something that we still have a lot of work to do on as Disciples, making sure that all the voices are at the table, in the room, not just in a token fashion but as a in a very intentional way. Recognizing that the more voices that are at the table, the more we can shape the reality of the world that we're living in. That's just so, so important. I can't thank you all enough for being a part of this conversation today.

As Brian said, if you want to learn more about Disciples Justice Ministries - give that website link again, Brian. I think it's disciples.org/resources/justice.

BFG: [Disciples.org resources slash justice](https://disciples.org/resources/justice) and you can learn more about all of the ministries that are there are, what, how many are there.

LPF: There's a lot, there's a lot, I'm thinking. A dozen plus.

THO: A dozen plus and growing, easily, so just thank you, again, for your time.

Equity. Intentionality. Justice. The work of imagination. Participating with God so that we can be the church we say we are. And so that we can all show up, not only for the sake of the church, but when we show up for one another, that's showing up for the church, because that's the work of the church - to help one another flourish. And that's what Jesus calls us to do. That's the most important reason why we do all of this - Jesus has called us to this work.

So I appreciate your time today and thank you so much. Disciples, stay tuned next week for more from with our "Imagine With Me."

Thank you to Laurie, Hector, and Brian. God bless you and remember that God loves you, and so do I.