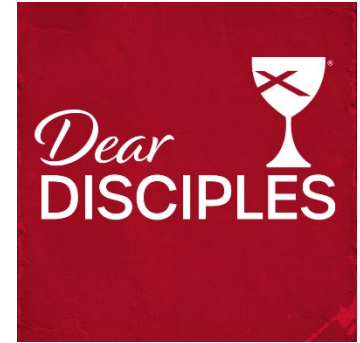


# Imagine With Me: Governance

April 9, 2021

Transcript



**Terri Hord Owens:** Welcome to another episode of Imagine With Me. In this week after Easter, I have invited the Rev. Dr. Bill Rose-Heim, regional minister of the Greater Kansas City Region, and currently serving as the chair of the Governance Committee of the General Board, to be in conversation with me today. So, thank you so much, Bill for making time in your busy schedule, particularly in this week leading up to General Board, to stop and have a conversation with me. We appreciate your being here so much. Thank you.

**Bill Rose-Heim:** Always a pleasure to talk with you. Thank you, and thank you for your leadership.

**THO:** Oh, thank you, Bill. You have been part of so many different conversations and as we move to the General Board meeting this week, I thought it might be good to give the church a preview of some of what will be shared with the General Board that the Governance Committee has been working on the past couple of years, and particularly in the last year. Perhaps you could share with us about the covenant education curriculum that's been developed and then we can talk a little bit about some of the review work that's being done with the Design.

In my State of the Church (address), I refer to it as sort of "sankofa" work. We're sort of reaching behind to bring what we need in order to move forward. So maybe let's start with the covenant education curriculum.

**BRH:** Okay, well, that came out of a retreat that we had together, you'll recall, in Arizona. And during that time we were invited to imagine what life could be like if we were living more deeply into a covenant relationship with God and with one another. And we came out of that retreat knowing that our purpose was to align the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with God's design for the church and to claim the power and the potential of covenant. And chairing the covenant education team - we had four teams - and chairing the covenant education team was Rev. Dr. Bill Lee, who was a pastor of the Loudoun Avenue Christian Church in Roanoke, Virginia, for so many years. And when he gave a presentation on his experience of what covenant meant to him, you could have heard a pin drop in the room. We were all held - we were spellbound, to see how much it meant to him to incorporate the Preamble to the Design into the worship life of the congregation, and to let that guide the work of the congregation going forward, and to strengthen the bonds of connection with the wider church.

So, on that team are Bill Lee, Allison Ruari, Rogelio Martinez, Nadine Burton, Pat Donahoo, Lori Tapia and together they have worked with several other people to create a curriculum that consists of five pieces. Some of these are videos; some of these are bible studies; and all of them invite us to ask questions about how we understand God's covenant with us and our covenant with one another.

And I happened to bring something along. I know that we're a people of the Word, and sometimes I get too wordy so I thought an example might be good. This is me, and there's a lot of potential that God has given to each one of us, but I can't think of too many uses for this. But if I take this and I immerse it in water, all of a sudden it opens up to something that can be truly useful and productive. And I share this because what I've learned through working with the covenant education team is that there's so much potential in the life of the church and in each one of us and it's in that covenant relationship that we get to explore what that might be, not just by ourselves in siloed relationships, and I don't want to go back to that.

**THO:** Amen, Amen, Bill. And I remember that retreat in Arizona. And as we have been talking, as I've been talking over the last year of the pandemic, you know, I keep going back to February of 2020, when I invited the church to imagine, right, who we could have the courage to be, imagine who we could be as a new church for a new world, and that we needed to give ourselves permission to change; that we needed to walk in in freedom from fear. The General Board, at that meeting, began to work through some of the concepts, right, that have now become part of this particular curriculum. And the new year's message that I laid out invited the church to think about this in really four particular ways. One is covenant. And I think the idea that we would remember that the Design is not just a bunch of standing rules and bylaws, right, but that the Preamble is really sort of a hymn, a theological statement about who we believe we are and who we can be as church together. I think the work of the Governance Committee, in reviewing the Design, has not just been about the bylaws and the rules, but how we make decisions together more faithfully, and understanding that we need to operate in an important sense of covenant. How do you think this this covenant education curriculum will empower us to be more imaginative and to see ourselves as that new church in the new world? What are your hopes for that curriculum?

**BRH:** I hope that we will engage with one another, that working with the curriculum, we'll get in deeper touch with our own stories. And in the stories, in the context where we're having that conversation, my hope is that we have these conversations in local congregations, across the life of the whole church in small groups, in regions, the College of Regional Ministers, general ministry units. It's an opportunity for us to explore again. The Design is 50 years old, and so it's great to sing "happy birthday," but it's also wonderful to look ahead and to see where God may be calling us. And so the hope is that these materials will catalyze, kind of stimulate conversation, that is authentic and organic.

We're not trying to direct anybody. We're not trying to, "this is what covenant is," and hope that everybody just kind of toes a line. No, it's not like that at all. It's

meant to generate conversation and engagement. And in addition, we hope that there'll be a feedback loop. We're working on that now, so that, as these conversations take place, we can receive information with the Governance Committee that will help to inform us about what is the whole church saying together about our covenant relationship with God and each other, so that, when it comes time for General Assembly, we have something very important to share with the life of the church that will be recognizable. It won't surprise anybody because we will have been talking about this with each other. And hopefully we'll get to be able to come to a place where we experience that covenant; we don't just talk about it but in having that engagement, it does bring us together.

I can remember a time at a leadership workshop when the facilitator had us in small groups, and we had a pile of materials. And we were told, if you'll accept the challenge, what you need to do is build safely build the tallest possible structure given the materials in this room. Those are the only instructions, and we had a time limit, and we were told to go. And we worked hard. Our particular group was six or seven overachievers, and we built this structure, and we finished in plenty of time - we had 30 seconds left to spare - and we're standing around and we're looking at everybody else working on their project, nobody got to finish it in time.

The facilitator stopped looked at us and said, "Did you complete the project?" We thought, "Well, sure of course we did. We got finished 30 seconds ahead of time."

"What were the instructions?"

"Build the tallest structure with the materials in this room."

"Did you do that I said?"

"Yeah, we did."

She looked at the rest of the group, and said, "They didn't finish the project, and you're okay with that?"

Now, not everybody in the small group felt bad about that, but my chin about hit the floor. And I thought, oh God, have I learned nothing from Jesus about working together? Somebody piped up from the larger group and said, "Well, nobody said that we couldn't work together."

And so the facilitator invited us to accept the challenge again, and we did, and this time we built something that went straight up to the ceiling. The facilitator stopped and asked us, "Did you complete the project?" We thought we did.

Somebody piped up, "You know, the facilitator didn't tell us we couldn't build this outside."

I later on took that exercise to a church in Northwest Missouri, and they got it and we were built. In fact, they did such a great job, we had to take those tall ladders that you used to change the light bulbs in the worship space.

They were out on the front lawn and they built this incredible structure out of just the things that were available in the room. And the thing we all noticed was that we were working together, although we were across every theological and political spectrum you can imagine.

We were laughing. We were feeling creative, and the people who had driven by that church many, many times without stopping were slowing down. What are these crazy Disciples of Christ up to?

And that was a reminder to me of what's possible when we take covenant seriously. There's so much that God could do through our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that has already done good work, but building on that for the future - there's so much more we can do.

**THO:** Amen, amen. Your excitement is palpable and I know that the Governance Committee, as we've all been working and discussing over this period of time, I know it's the hope that, beginning with conversations with the General Board, and then between now and 2023, as we, as you say, hopefully catalyze these conversations and think about what could possibly be, we will be energized by the fact that it is possible. We have permission to change. We have permission to be the church that we say we are. We have the permission to even shift how we do our work, how we make decisions, how we organize ourselves to make those decisions.

Could you talk a little bit about the conversation around what we're calling Design alignment? I think it's important that people know we're not at a point where we've got a document that we want to wordsmith, that we're not focusing on some new constitution or something, but could you talk a little bit about these concepts? That we want to discuss about how the church makes its decisions? And we've had some conversations with the cabinet and the regional ministers, etcetera, but could you talk a little bit about the concepts that we'll be in conversation about at general board this year?

**BRH:** Sure enough. And as you pointed out, we're talking about alignment. And if anybody's driven a car, they know that every once in a while you have to align the tires so that they're going all in a good direction. And, in this particular case, it's been great to work with incredibly talented people who are also humble and realize that we can't we can't sit in an ivory tower and dictate what should happen.

One of the concepts we wrestled with was, are we called to have boards and committees that are more focused on representation of a particular constituency or are we thinking more about what's needed for governance? And this would be with people who have the best interest of the whole church at heart and not

necessarily representing this group or that particular interest. And the idea is also that we're in a time of rapid change. And can you imagine if we had to hold a General Assembly for the Office of General Minister and President and the general units to put out as much really good material and aids and help for congregations trying to wrestle with pandemic; if we had to wait to a general assembly to be able to do all of that. It was a good lesson for us that we want to be able to have structures, governance structures, that are nimble and responsive.

And that's been a big part of the conversation. The other part is going back and looking on our history and realizing that the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a very permission-giving document. We are not restricted or bound by some bylaws like some other organizations. We have the freedom to be innovative and creative. And it honors the intention of those who had designed the original Design.

**THO:** Amen. And I know that those conversations will be fruitful as well. That "sankofa" moment, the mythical African bird with its head pointed back but its feet pointed fully forward. I think we want to assure people we're not giving up anything that's part of our heritage. We're using it to inform, you know, how we move forward and how we can continue to live into that idea of being this church that first of all professes Jesus Christ; a church that has developed language that says we're a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world; and that we say we are an anti-racist pro-reconciling church, one of the other key buckets, if you will, of messaging has been around story and narrative and understanding that we have so many different stories that are a part of our church, so many different voices, cultures, ethnicities, gender identities - you name it, it's present in our church. We have people all, whatever you want to put those axis or dimensions of difference. We have people scattered across all these different dimensions. We did some work last summer, in May, with David Anderson Hooker on a concept called "transforming community conference." And I think the 'aha' moment for me and others was that we needed to create. And he asked this question - "Did the Christian Church, when you decided you wanted to be an anti-racist church, did you decide what that was going to look like?"

And it hit me that I had never known that we had this picture of what this future narrative would look like. You've been involved in some of those conversations where we're getting ready to move into a time where we're going to invite the whole church to think about, what's our narrative as a church. Could you speak a little bit to the power of narrative and what you hope that work can do for our church?

**BRH:** Oh, amen. One of the realizations that we had doing this work with the Governance Committee was realizing that the people at the table when the Design was first formed were a smaller group than we are now and a less diverse group than we are now. And so part of the part of the question we have is, how do we how do we construct a narrative for the future in a way that includes all those voices so that all of those rich stories begin to form and shape the future that we have? I've also discovered, too, working with congregations, that sometimes are not very good at having conversations that are very productive. One of the pieces I love about the

transformative community conferencing is that it gives us a tool to have conversations about, well, in some cases, they may be difficult topics for us to talk about together. We may be coming at them from very different perspectives and we were reminded in that conference that the problem is the problem, the people are not the problem. The problem is the problem, which lifted that burden of, "Oh, I have to feel responsible for whatever came from the past." I'm responsible for what's happening now. I think about the image from the book "Caste" about living in an old house that that's now ours. We didn't build it, but we've noticed that there are some things that need some fixing and the responsibility for the for the condition of the house is now in our hands. And there's great possibility and, if we will have these conversations, God will reveal to us the great things that can happen going forward.

And this TCC process is easy to learn, easy to do, and very fruitful in a fairly quick amount of time. So I'm really excited that this could be a tool that congregations will find, regions other manifestations of the church will find, very useful not only for looking back at the racist narrative that we have inherited in this country, but also in every other aspect of the life of the church.

**THO:** Right, I think that's what excites me is that it is not only helping us or will help us to understand what that narrative needs to look like as an anti-racist church, but beyond that, right, this is not about more training. This is not about the even different training. This is about, and this is the way I express it, and I'm inspired by David Hooker's words on this. Once you have this narrative, a preferred future towards which you're moving, then everything that you do, you try to align with that every decision that you make, every priority that you set, you're constantly asking yourselves, "Is this getting me one step closer to being that church that we say we are? Are we continuing to move in that direction together?" And it's a way I think to hold ourselves accountable.

We only have a couple of minutes left, but I do want to allow you to maybe reflect on we've talked about. Tools. One of the tools I think that will be important is, not only TCC, but other methods to allow us to talk to one another better. But spiritual practices, and I know that you and I have had these conversations with other people, could you just say a word about the importance of spiritual discipline and practice in doing all this work to be the church we're called to be?

**BRH:** Amen. I have learned the hard way that Isaiah, the words in Isaiah 58, are really important for me to remember. "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my way,' says the Lord, 'for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts more than your thoughts,'" and I think about that. And I want to know what God wants for the future. That's the future I want to move into. Left to my own devices, I'll stay here. I want God's expansive future.

**THO:** Amen, amen. God bless you, Bill Rose-Heim. I thank you for sharing this time with us and really with the whole church. And I'll be excited for us all to be able to report back about the progress that we make as we continue to dialogue across the

whole church, not only with the General Board and leadership, but as our congregations engage in the covenant education materials.

I'm grateful to serve the church with you in such a time, and grateful for the leadership that you're providing to the church in so many ways. So, thank you.

**THO:** Disciples let's give a thanks to Bill Rose-Heim. Thank you for being with us today as we continue to imagine together who we will be as a new church in a new world. Stay tuned for more information. The General Board meeting begins this Friday (April 9) with the Administrative Committee and the General Board will meet through Monday, April 12th. We'll be sure to update you on that work as soon as we're finished deliberating and meeting. Pray for us, would you, that God's Spirit would meet us there.

And that the work of the church will be done not only with faithfulness but with energy and with love, whatever it is that we do. God bless you and remember that God loves you, and so do I.