

2021 State of the Church

address to the General Board

April 10, 2021

By Rev. Terri Hord Owens

Hello, Disciples. Welcome to the 2021 general board meeting. I vividly remember the last time we met, as the general board gathered together in person in Indianapolis, February 23, 2020. I gave the State of the Church address and I challenged the church and said that we must have the courage to imagine who we must be as a new church for a new world. I said that we had to give ourselves permission to change, permission to not only try new things, but permission to let some things go.



I said that we had to walk in freedom from fear of what would happen when we did let some of those things go, freedom from fear of what might emerge when we started to take new paths toward what God was calling us to do, and who God was calling us to be. And less than three weeks after that general board meeting, we were all in the midst of a global pandemic. Many of us were working remotely from home. Many of our congregants who were first responders had to figure out how to go to work in grocery stores, and first responders and other essential services.

Pastors became not only preachers and teachers, but producers and technologists. We struggled with how we do virtual worship. We struggled with how we might continue the ministry our communities needed now more than ever before; to provide food and shelter and clothing; to so many who lost jobs, lost homes, lost savings. We were hurt because we could not be with those who were sick in hospitals. We could not visit our loved ones in assisted and senior living facilities. We could not be at the bedside of those who were dying and we could not even gather as we're used to to say farewell to those we lost, to celebrate their lives and to comfort one another in the community rituals that give us such peace.

But in the midst of it all, church, you showed up. I convened a COVID 19 task force of our general ministries and we initially met weekly, trying to figure out how we could best use the resources of the church to respond to the needs of our congregations and families. I want to share a few examples of just what has happened in this past year.

Many of our ministries reallocated their resources to provide important grant opportunities to support clergy and families. [NBA](#) reapportioned more than \$900,000 to provide grants to health and social service community partners, as well as congregations, so they could continue the work in the ministry that they were doing. [Week of Compassion](#) collaborated with NBA and provided a different kind of COVID 19 grant program specifically for those who were ineligible for federal stimulus opportunities. They worked together to ensure that, between those two

ministries, you might not only be able to be supported by both, but that you might be pointed towards additional resources that were available.

The [Pension Fund](#) got even more creative with the clergy assistance program and worked with the other ministries to identify other opportunities.

They sponsored the use of a program to address clergy trauma called *Healing the Healers*, and a small work group from our general ministries has actually curated an important set of [resources to address issues of clergy trauma](#) and isolation that you can find on our website.

The [Disciples Church Extension Fund](#) offered automatic two-month loan deferrals to their customers, and they continue to advise congregations about managing their debt in these uncertain times. The Payroll Protection Program was offered by the federal government and DCEF was a key advisor with many congregations and ministries as they navigated the waters of that often-complicated piece of legislation, and ensured that congregations who were eligible to take advantage of it were able to do so.

The [Christian Church Foundation](#) kept its eye on our investment markets, paying attention to what was happening to key investments that serve to support and resource so much ministry across our whole church.

[Disciples Home Missions](#), through [Ministries Across Generations](#) which gives us not only Worship and Wonder, but created new resources for parents whose kids were now going to school from home, kids who weren't able to be in Sunday School, giving parents the necessary resources so they can continue with that important spiritual formation together as a family at home.

[HELM](#), our higher education leadership ministries, reached out to Disciples-affiliated colleges and universities and theological institutions, providing support for not only students but for campus chaplains and Disciples faculty. Grants were given to help students just get home during the pandemic, as well as provide the technological support they needed to engage in classrooms on these new virtual platforms.

We're grateful to our College of Regional Ministers, who began to meet weekly at the beginning of the pandemic. This is a group that usually meets only three times during the year in person, and it has become an important community for those 31 regions and their leaders, including myself and the leaders of [National Convocation](#), [Obra Hispana](#), and [NAPAD](#), meeting weekly to hear what was happening around the church, responding to the needs of clergy, continuing to support seminarians as they were going through ordination processes, giving care to commissioned clergy, providing opportunities for online education, for online prayer and consultation, providing resources when pastors were tired and needed someone else to preach, including live zoom preaching as well as pre-recorded worship resources. The College of Regional Ministers has truly been pastors to the pastors and we are grateful for that work in the midst of a global health pandemic.

The [Division of Overseas Ministries](#) continues to accompany our global partners. We know that because of persistent inequities around the world, many communities did not have the resources to respond adequately to COVID 19 and that made our work more difficult, but ministry co-workers were, in many cases, able to virtually itinerate and continue to accompany and support the work of our global partners. Sadly, we know that some of them had to close their doors, but we continue to be supportive continue to advocate for vaccine availability around the world to ensure equity in that process as well.

[Week of Compassion](#) continued to respond to natural disasters, which of course did not cease in the middle of this health pandemic, as well hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, wildfires, even ice storms continue to ravage communities in the U.S. and Canada and around the world. And thanks to the generosity of Disciples everywhere, that work continues as we respond, not only in immediate response, but also prepare for long-term recovery.

It's important that we recognize that systems of injustice around the world have been laid bare by the COVID 19 pandemic, and we are committed to continuing to do our work to ensure that we are accompanying our partners from our doorsteps to the very ends of the earth.

The [Office of General Minister and President](#) has been focusing on communications and connections across our church during this time of pandemic and physical separation. You may have noticed that I've been doing [weekly videos](#) to the whole church, a word of pastoral care inspiration, speaking to issues that we face as a society and as a church. I've been doing a weekly [Facebook live prayer](#) on Wednesdays, inviting anyone who simply wants to join and offer their prayer concerns, and I'm praying for those people. I have a weekly prayer call with clergy and chaplains on Friday and that conversation is rich as we listen to what others are sharing, praying for those concerns of our clergy and our chaplains.

I'm grateful for the work of communication ministries and ensuring that we have a central place on our website where congregations can go to find references and [information about COVID 19](#) response resources from all of our ministries and from important public health agencies. The list of resources that was curated by our small working group from the COVID 19 general ministry task force is also there on the website, pointing [clergy to resources](#) that they can avail themselves of to respond to issues of isolation, trauma, and simple fatigue as a result of the pandemic. It's been so important to use technology to keep ourselves communicated and talking with one another, and I'm grateful for the use of that technology as we moved into the spring of 2020.

The pandemic of racism hit an important tipping point in the U.S. In particular, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis - those eight minutes and 46 seconds - where

we saw a white police officer press his knee into Mr. Floyd's neck. George Floyd called out for air, saying, "I can't breathe," and called out for his mother. The response of rage and impatience hit not only the United States, but literally around the world those cries of rage reverberated.

As a church, people were asking the question, "what can we do" and we understood that we must do more to be the church that we say we are. It's more than reading books. It's more than anti-racism training. It's about the work of justice to dismantle systems of racism and oppression wherever they exist. We held a series of conversations called "[Love Is an Action Word](#)," hearing from voices across our church - from the Center for Indigenous Ministries to NAPAD and our Asian and Pacific Islander communities; the National Convocation, our African-American communities; Obra Hispana, our Hispanic communities; [AllianceQ](#), our LGBTQI communities - hearing from all of these voices about the injustice and racism that they experience on an ongoing basis. Church, we still have work to do to be the church that we say we are.

We had hoped to be in DC as part of the [Poor People's Campaign](#), but instead we were online in full force. Disciples were part of the almost 3 million people who participated in advocacy online, hearing from leaders, and more importantly, hearing from people impacted by poverty and low wealth wages, impacted by racism and other systemic injustices. Almost 3 million people participated in a way that we could not, and probably would not, have seen had we been gathering in person in DC. Disciples, you committed [in 2017](#) to encourage support of the Poor People's Campaign, and I'm so proud to say that we showed up, and we showed up in large numbers. So many of the state campaigns are co-chaired by Disciples. So, we thank you for your good work and we know that, in the midst of these multiple pandemics, our work must continue.

One of the hardest decisions we had to make as a church in 2020 was about the general assembly scheduled for 2021. The general board made the [decision](#) to cancel that in-person gathering. We will, however, be gathering in Louisville in 2023. And even as we grieve the loss of that opportunity to be with one another as whole church, we all know that it was the wise and safe choice to make.

We had hoped to celebrate the victories that we've won through [Vision 2020](#), with the priorities that were established over 20 years ago to develop leaders, to transform congregations, and to start new churches, as well as the statement of becoming an anti-racist pro-reconciling church. We'll continue to do all of those things. Disciples, this is part of our DNA. These are not goals that we set that will fade, but we will continue to live into those priorities as a church.

I want to lift up particularly the work of [New Church Ministries](#). We not only reached that goal of 1000 new congregations being planted, we exceeded it. A couple of important things to note about what happened: approximately 61 percent of those new church plants sustained their ministry after five years. The other important impact that planting new churches has had on our church as a whole is that it has increased the diversity and inclusivity of our congregations. Approximately 75 percent of those almost 1,100

new church plants were planted in BIPOC (Black, indigenous, people of color) communities. In addition, 22 new languages were added to the spectrum of congregational worship languages in our church, bringing the total to 28 languages now being spoken across Disciples congregations. We give God thanks, not only for new vision and new ways of being church, but for space and radical hospitality shown at the Table of the Lord to welcome all as God has welcomed us. Thank you to New Church Ministry for this important work which continues. We will continue to water those plants and start new churches as a way of reimagining who we must be as a church.

It has been a year, church, a year, not only of crisis and pandemic, but a year of finding blessings in unexpected places, learning things in new ways. So what now? Where do we go from here? What's next? I think you all know that we cannot return to normal. There will never be a way that we can be what we once were. But I believe it will be important to bring who we have been, the lessons that we've learned, with us as we move forward into our shared future. In my [New Year's message to the church](#), I not only reminded the church to continue to imagine with me, and to give ourselves permission to change, and walk in freedom from fear of what happens when we do make those changes, but I said that we needed to think about this change, in this imagination, in four ways.

One is covenant. Understanding ourselves as a covenant people, and how that impacts how we do ministry together. Two is our story, our shared narrative, if you will. There are so many contexts and backgrounds and histories that make up our movement for wholeness. We have to allow for that, particularity while agreeing on the universal nature of our shared values and our shared narrative. And, third, we need tools in order to do our work together, not just technological tools but ways of being with one another, ways of dealing with difficult and often polarizing and divisive issues, developing the capacity and competency to be in an ongoing state of transformation as we face the challenges that are ahead. And finally, being able to develop ourselves spiritually, engage in spiritual practice as a part of who we are. We are Christians. We are Disciples of Christ. Our engagement with our sacred texts and with spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation, however you connect yourself to the holy. We need to have those capacities as well. It must undergird everything else that we do.

The Akan people of Ghana have a concept called "[sankofa](#)." Sankofa is a word that literally means to fetch what is at risk of being left behind. The symbol of sankofa is actually a bird whose feet are firmly planted facing forward but the bird's head is turned looking behind. The Akan people understand that time passes and that there are new learnings and new understandings, but they also understand that one must consistently remember to look back so that one can learn from the past, however complicated and difficult that past may be. Critical examination and exploration are necessary, but we must always learn from the past in order to ensure a strong future for our church.

I'd like to talk about those four areas that I mentioned earlier - covenant, story, practice,

and tools - and how we might think about our work in those four ways. The governance committee of the general board has explored the history of our denomination, engaging in its own sankofa experience looking at the history, problematic though it may be in places, and understanding what our governance documents say to us and what is it that we want to take with us as we move forward.

We'll be having conversations during this general board meeting to ask questions about accountability and authority and how we work as a covenant church across all expressions of our church, how do we speak as a church, what changes do we need to make in our structures in order to allow us to do that work, not only more effectively but more faithfully.

We also have explored the idea that we need to reclaim this theological understanding of covenant. A lot of Disciples don't understand the role that covenant plays in our history, and what role it can play as we move forward. The covenant education team has prepared a multimedia, online educational series that we hope will invite and catalyze conversation across the church as we explore what it really means to be in covenant with God and with one another.

We're not preparing any formal proposal. You're not being asked to review a document to wordsmith it. We simply want your honest ideas and thoughts and reactions about the questions that we're raising and the concepts that we're considering. We hope that you will give your full and thoughtful and faithful attention to those conversations in your small group sessions later.

Another area of covenant is how we do the work of resourcing our church, how we fund the work of our ministries. The mission finance committee has been exploring whether or not Disciples Mission Fund is still doing what it was intended to do effectively. Are the special offerings working or getting in the way? We have to be ready to make some changes in order to think about new ways to resource our church.

Our general and regional ministries are constantly now in conversation about new ways to do the ministry together. There are general ministries who are having conversations about collaboration and new points of connection. Regional ministries are having conversations about rethinking what it actually means to do regional work and regional ministry. [Illinois/Wisconsin](#) and [Michigan](#) have recently begun conversations about how they might work together. That's not necessarily to say there would be a merger but minds are open to think about what are new ways that will help us to do this work more effectively. Three regions in the heart of the U.S. - [Kansas](#), [Nebraska](#) and [Kansas City](#) - are having a tri-regional conversation to ask some of those same questions. We're learning from one another as we have these conversations. And the important thing is that we're giving ourselves permission to think about change, permission to explore new ways of doing ministry together as a covenant people.

Remember that covenant all began at the Lord's Table, that "new covenant in my blood" that Jesus talked about. That covenant binds us to God and it also binds us to one another. So as we consider how we're organized and how we make decisions, let's do so from a theological foundation of understanding God's covenant of love that binds us all together.

When we think about a shared future narrative, we also have to think about the fact that there are many stories that are connected to that narrative. The importance of a shared narrative is that we have a set of shared values. And even though we might have particular contexts and communities in which we live and serve, and even though our actions are always based in those contexts and grounded in those communities, we are connected to a set of shared relational values to which we hold ourselves, not only as church, but a guide for decisions that we make each and every day about how we use our resources, and what program we decide to do. Each and every day, we should be asking ourselves, are we living into that shared narrative that we have as a church? If, indeed, we are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, what does that actually mean and how do we live into that? If we're to be an anti-racist pro-reconciling church, are the decisions that we're making, the choices that we're making in terms of what we do and how we use our resources, are we getting ourselves one step closer? Are we aligning ourselves with those shared values?

We are working with Dr. [David Anderson Hooker](#) who has a concept in a process called Transformative Community Conferencing. We held a TCC last May for several Disciples and one thing we understood right away is that what we need is not just a re-working of our anti-racism training, we need a way to align the decision-making and the ministry of the church at a higher level. Even though we have different contexts, the TCC is a very practical approach that serves to contribute to the construction of this preferred narrative or preferred reality and provides us with a framework for community-based action frameworks. Actually, I should say, because that action has to take place in a multitude of diverse contexts and communities. Again, as I said, it's not simply a new way of doing anti-racism training, but it's helping us to build this narrative of what our movement is supposed to be about as we imagine how God is calling us to work in the world, and even with our congregational polity and our fairly decentralized governance structures, it's important that no matter where we are, we share those same set of important values across all expressions of the church. While we may be in different contexts, if we're all committed to those shared values, we can begin to imagine together what we do in response to those same values in different contexts and across different issues. We have to be able to see ourselves as jointly responding, as different as we are, in a way that affirms this wider narrative of who we are as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

There are many tools that we're going to need as a church in order to move forward into this new world. One of them I've been talking about for a couple of years now, when I presented to the general board in 2018, and again in 2019, and in 2020, I said that

we needed to have a form of church intelligence data and information that helped us make decisions across the church, understand our congregations, and our ministry much better. This year, [Alex](#) has debuted and congregations are now, for the first time, entering their yearbook information not just to a PDF or a sheet of paper, but into an online database. That information will roll up, region by region, and ultimately as a church-wide expression of information. We'll still publish a yearbook in the short term, but this online database will now allow us to do analysis across time. Looking at financial data that we have through treasury services, each congregation will be able to access about 20 years' worth of financial history. And they'll be able to continue to look at their own data as they enter weekly giving and attendance information. We're working on links to accept data from larger churches and congregational membership systems, and working on a robust set of reports and query capability that will enable us to get the most out of this information.

Ultimately, we want to connect it with clergy data in our minister directory and other important pieces of information that perhaps we're not even collecting right now. As we explore the questions that we need to have answered, and the data that we need to gather to answer those questions, we'll need to develop a form of technological sophistication that we have not seen in our denomination. And quite frankly, Disciples, we are way behind the eight ball in terms of what other denominations are doing in this area. So I'm so excited that Alex is happening and, even though we have a wide spectrum of technological infrastructure in our churches, this is one area in which we're going to need to grow in order to meet the demands of not only the 21st century, but the generations of Disciples coming behind us.

Perhaps one of the more important areas of tools and methodologies that we're going to need are ways in which we talk with one another, particularly when we have high impact, highly emotional, highly opinionated issues that often create division. We are a church that embraces theological diversity and yet we are sadly not willing to give each other enough grace to occupy the same space. And while it is true that your truth cannot come at the cost of my humanity or my freedom, it is also important that we have to learn to hear and listen to one another and ensure that no matter where we are on a theological or ideological spectrum that we are first and foremost grounded in love and that we can hear one another. And we've got to develop that human capacity, a core competency if you will, to have those kinds of conversations and continue to see our work as being continuously transformative, that we're always on a journey to change and evolve and understand who we need to be as we move forward. That work is going to be difficult work, but it's important work.

And so I invite you to imagine with me what our church will look like when we have technological tools that assist us in our work, and where we are better able to have conversations that allow us to hear one another to explore our differences, but not be abound by an inability to make decisions. Unity does not mean uniformity. And we're all going to move forward sometimes with decisions that we don't completely agree with, but we've got to learn to talk with one another.

And finally, and perhaps the most critical area in which we're going to need to imagine in a very profound and prophetic way, is making a commitment to our own spiritual growth in formation, the formation of our children. Disciples, we are not just a 501 c 3 organization. We are part of the one body of Christ. We are followers of Christ. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and so our critical but informed engagement with the text is so, so important. I heard a preacher one year at the [Black Ministers Retreat](#) say, "You got to get you a verse." You have to know that text well enough for it to not only inform your development of ideas, but to inform your faith. It is a hard text but we have to spend time with it. We have to make it our own we have to develop the spiritual practices or disciplines, be it prayer or meditation, forming a bible study group or reading books that explore different ideas - However you're allowing yourself to feed your spirit; listening to music. There are so many ways in which we need to find our own way to make time with the holy, because until we do that, we are not equipped to actually do the work of the church. We become just another club or justice agency. But people, we are the church of Jesus Christ. I invite you to get into that text, explore it, make it your own, let it feed and fuel the ministry that you do, and ensure that spirit is giving you life, be it music, prayer, or meditation. These things are so, so important for our shared life and our shared work together.

So why does any of this matter? Why does it matter that we understand ourselves as a people in covenant with God and with one another? Why does it matter that we have a shared narrative set of shared values that allows for the diversity in our context and in our communities? Why does it matter that we have the right tools to help us do our work, not only effectively and well, but faithfully? And why does it matter that we spend time individually and collectively in building up our inner spiritual beings in order to do the work that God has called us to do? It matters because we are the church. It matters because we have confessed that Jesus is Lord.

And it matters because we believe that God has called us to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. And we need to live that out each and every day, making decisions that will move us to action, giving ourselves frameworks within which we can understand what our work is in a particular context. It matters because we want to be a "want to" church and not a "have to" church. It matters because there is a world out there in need of justice, in need of our witness to the limitless love of God. It matters because Jesus has called us to go into all the world and make disciples. It matters because Jesus has also said that when we feed the sick, and clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless, visit those who are in prison, that we're ministering to him as well. It matters because food pantries and homeless shelters cannot do the work alone of dismantling systems of poverty and racism and other forms of oppression that make those services needed. It matters because we need to move from mercy to justice. It matters because this is what God is calling us to do as church.

So, Disciples, what are we going to do well in a fragmented world filled with contracts and transactions? We are going to be a church that lives in covenant with God and with one another. We are going to lead and live with compassion and care, not because we have to, but because we want to. We're going to bear the good news of the limitless

love of God because there are people who are literally dying without it. That love makes itself known in the way that we address injustice in the world, and the way we welcome and create radical and open hospitality for all whom God has created, and in how we treat the rest of creation.

God's limitless love is where it all begins, so we must start there. We're going to be a movement for wholeness a church that acts to dismantle systems of injustice and oppression, not because it's a political endeavor, but because it's a moral endeavor. And God calls us to that work as part of bearing witness of God's limitless love. We're going to be bolder, not afraid of change.

Someone said to me when I became general minister and president, "Terri, if you're not afraid, we can make some stuff happen. We can make some change." And I am here to tell you and affirm for you that I am not afraid because my confidence is in the One who has begun this work in all of us. It is the Holy One who will bring this all to completion, and we're going to need to not only be bold and not afraid of change, but we're going to have to tell the truth, and name problems, and name injustice, and name systems that need to be dismantled where we see them, and work together faithfully to ensure that they are dismantled. And that there is hope and liberation, not only in the world in which we live, but in the church that we inhabit and the church in which we do our work.

I want to affirm for you that text that has become our theme for this biennium, Romans 8:38-39. "I am convinced that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus." Church, I hope that you, too, are convinced that you are committed, that you are committed to be in covenant, that you are committed to be bold and not afraid, that you are committed to tell the truth, so that we can dismantle the things that hold us back, the things that diminish our humanity, the things that keep us from bearing witness to God's limitless love.

We close with reaching back to bring something forward with us, the words of the Preamble to the [Design](#), a hymn that's not a test of fellowship. It's not a creed; it's not a statement of faith that we sign. They're simply powerful words that I believe we can learn from as we move forward, taking this understanding of who we are as the people of God with us as we move forward boldly, imagining who we must be in this new world, as members of the Christian Church.

"As members of the Christian Church, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.

In Christ's name and by his grace, we accept our mission of witness and service to all people.

We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in God's covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another.

Through baptism into Christ, we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God.

In the communion of the Holy Spirit, we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ.

At the Table of the Lord, we celebrate with thanksgiving the saving acts and the presence of Christ.

Within the universal church, we receive the gift of ministry and the light of scripture.

In the bonds of Christian faith, we yield ourselves to God that we may serve the

one whose kingdom has no end,

whose kingdom has no end,

whose kingdom has no end.

Blessing, glory, and honor be to God forever. Amen



Let's be the church
we say we are.