Imagine With Me: Virtual Gathering
June 4, 2021

Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples and welcome to another edition of Imagine With Me, a series in which I get to talk and share with leaders across our church to learn how they are reimagining who we are as church in this new world, giving ourselves permission to change, and walking in freedom from fear, what happens when we do change.

Today I'm so excited to have with us the Reverend Stephanie Kendell, who is the executive pastor at the Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City, and she also serves as the first vice moderator for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). So, welcome, Stephanie. It's so good to have you here with us.

Stephanie Kendell: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here with you.

THO: Why don't you share with folks a little bit about not only your ministry at The Park, but also people, I think people need to know a bit more about what exactly does the first vice moderator do.

SK: Oh, holy smokes! There's so much. Yeah, thank you. So I am the first vice moderator of the Disciples of Christ in the U.S. and Canada and that has come to mean a lot of things. But primarily one of the main focuses for me is what it means to bring a vibrant and faithful worshipful life to the denomination, especially for our larger gatherings - so administrative committee, general board, and, of course, general assembly. And, of course, this year it's Disciples virtual assembly and a Virtual Gathering and so it's been a really interesting and creative time, looking at what it means to bring people together and knowing that we are still worshiping, even though we are apart or in our digital spaces, and that God is still moving amongst us and doing something new and inviting us into imaginative spaces.

And this is a time to really lean into and live into these digital connecting spaces for us going forward. And so these last couple of years, because it seems like it's been a while that I've been in this position, and yet not too long, getting to be with the moderator team and thinking about what it really means to connect and how we connect Disciples in their faith and deepen their faith and deepen their relationship with God, especially in this time for digital technology, has been one of the things as first vice moderator that has kind of been at the forefront of what I do. I also do that for The Park as well, as their executive minister. I help lead worship in this digital space and in this way. And so these two gifts of mine, I suppose, have come together. And it's been really fun to bring and imagine and grow with all of these new Disciples.
THO: Well, we've been so excited to have you share your gifts with the general board and administrative committee as you've helped us plan virtual worship for our virtual meetings over these last, this last year and a half. Why don't we give the church some insight as to what they can expect on August 7th? What's going to be happening during that day and who can they expect to see?

SK: Oh my goodness! Well, I hope they can expect to see everyone, because I hope that you all have already registered to come to the event. It's a full day event on Saturday, August 7th. But more, in, you know, specifically, they're gonna come in and they're gonna be able to see - Pete, oh goodness - they're gonna see Yolanda Norton and Eric Smith, who are both leading Bible studies. They're going to be able to see you and I, and your moderator team. They're going to see all sorts of new vendors and people like that. To come and see what creative ministries are happening online, and how they can support local and global Disciples doing that type of work.

They're going to, we're going to have workshops. All sorts of ministries from around the church are going to be presenting and talking about the good work that they are doing with God and present that in a way that is expansive and shares. And so any of those spaces that, any of the things that you attend, you're going to get to see what Disciples are continuing to do, even as we have entered into this new age of digital spaces.

There's also going to be a worship at the end of the day that you won't want to miss there. We're bringing lots of people together, lots of different creative spaces, lots of different voices, all coming together to worship God and really remind each other that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

THO: Well, you've mentioned our theme text, Romans 8:38-39. And we had originally chosen that as the theme text for the 20, what was going to be the 2021 General Assembly in Louisville. And, of course, this is not a general assembly. We're not having business. We're just having Bible study and workshops and worship and a chance to gather.

Could you talk a little bit about the impact of that scripture? What that scripture has meant and why you still think it speaks to us in this moment?

SK: Oh, my goodness, yes! So, I mean, I think it's a real testament to what God continues to do and how God continues to work in our world that we chose that scripture almost two years ago, thinking what a beautiful reminder that in everything that is happening in our lives, and our faith in our churches, and our world - that nothing can separate us from God. And then, little did we know the foresight and the way the Holy Spirit works when choosing scripture that that scripture would be so helpful and so meaningful for this time of digital worship and digital connectivity. And I think it's just as meaningful, maybe even more meaningful, now.
I know a lot of people over the past year as we've kind of left the church spaces that we were comfortable with and knew, and to enter into these worshipping online and digital spaces that it can feel really lonely. And it can feel a little isolating and yet over this past year we have found new tools, new ways of relating to each other, that are just as faithful and just as holy as when we were in person.

And so that just reminds us so much that there truly is nothing that can separate us from each other and the love of God that is within each other, and the love of God through Christ Jesus. And talking about that, and thinking about that in ways that are helpful to each other, to say what's your church doing? What's my church doing? How do we come together? How do we remind each other that, even in the spaces where we seem so much alone, that God is there with us?

And it's going to be a real testament that we come back together in August to remind each other of that. Some churches are still, are, have gone back to worship in person and some are still online. And as we kind of move through the vastness of what that means for all of us, we could come together. We are still Disciples, and we are here together. Nothing can separate us.

THO: I can't tell you how many times I've used that scripture, thought about that scripture, prayed, and used it as my own devotional. And people will see that we've highlighted that word "nothing."

I mean, it's just that absolute. That absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, and, therefore, from one another.

We've been talking about what we're now calling the four reimaginings in my New Year's message to the church. I always comment on the fact that these ideas were first shared with the General Board February of 2020, about three weeks before the pandemic hit. So I was talking about the courage to imagine who we needed to be as a new church in a new world and, boom, the new world hit.

And so now, imagining is no longer this, you know, liminal luxury. It is a necessity as we think about the work that we're doing to better understand ourselves theologically as a church and covenant, and the kind of stories that we tell about ourselves, and tools and practice. How do you see this event helping to reinforce those things?

SK: Sure. Well, I think one of the things that has really been expanded in this time is remembering our covenant to each other. When you are baptized, when you are, when you join a church, and everything in between, you know, from now we are covenanting with each other, to be there for each other.

And that has always been true. We've had homebound members. We had, you know, people that have taken time off away from the church because they've maybe had a baby or on vacation. All the different ways in which we have thought about being in
church and out of church. And now, in this time, it is really said we are recommitting
to each other we are the covenant of each other that we have committed to each other
during those times is strong and that we are now finding new ways creative ways
inspired ways with God to connect to each other during this time, that this is a new
covention, in my opinion, that we are, that when a global pandemic hits, we will find
ways to maintain that connection, to worship, to do the things that are so important to us
- have communion, join the church, be in fellowship - and that this time. And what we
are doing here is a real testament to each of us reaching out and saying, I'm still
here, I still see you, I still support you and I still support the work that you and
God are doing.

And so covenant, for me, is really reinforced with this digital gathering, for us to say,
even in the times in which we are apart we are still Disciples. We are still connected.

And it tells, I think, right now, you know, the thing about being online is that most of
these things are recorded and captured, right? We're telling a story of this time
together in our lives. We are really grasping on to moment in time to look back. And
even though it's been really hard to be able to say I know where God was at work, I
know what God was doing, I know I saw really innovative and imaginative ministries
happening in this time that was so challenging and hard. And so, for me, we're telling
that new story of God's people in this moment in time.

THO: Amen, amen. I think I, too, have been thinking about that issue of telling our story
in the history and the legacy that all of this digital footprint, that footprints that we've
been making leave for us, and how the church will have a real record to look back and
not only see what we were doing, but how we were flowing and connecting with
one another.

I do want to leave us with just a little word about the kind of platform. So we're
not talking about a zoom meeting here, are we? Can you say a little bit about the kind of
virtual experience that we'll be having?

SK: Absolutely. We are going to have what essentially feels you're going into a large
digital space, kind of like we would normally. You're getting a kind of a big ballroom sort
of a thing that you walk into, and you're going to be able to go into different spaces. You
log in one time, which is really cool, and it'll take you to all the different places - all the
registrations that you've done to worship, to the Bible studies, to anything that you need.
You're going to have one thing to log in. You can learn more about this at
disciples.org obviously. And please make sure to register.

But the entire day is going to be held on one platform that is all housed in one space
and you'll be able to navigate that in different ways and see all the work that we are
doing. And it's so interactive and innovative I've just been blown away by what God and
the digital spaces and the digital partners that we are engaging have been doing. I had
no idea this stuff was out there and I'm so excited for everyone to see how this is all,
because it's really gonna feel like a large gathering space. It won't feel as kind of,
it will feel intimate. I don't want to say that, but it's gonna feel large. It's gonna feel
dynamic and engaged. And the energy is gonna be there. And it's especially going to
feel that way if all of you come to this event and show up with your families and your
friends and your churches. The more people, the better. The more people, the more
energy, and that's what this time needs. And I'm really excited about it.

THO: Well. I always like to describe it as sort of a big virtual convention center, right?
The screen, the different spaces.

SK: Yeah, you sort of visually have the idea that there are there are places that you
could go on the screen and not just these boxes, as beloved as these boxes on the
screen have become. This is a just a different level of experience, and so I'm looking for
tens of thousands of Disciples. We can handle all of you, so I'm hoping that you'll be
together for the Bible studies, where we're going to think about what does it
mean to be in covenant with Yolanda Norton, who is the developer and originator of the
Beyoncé Mass. She's a Hebrew bible scholar. Eric Smith thinking about connecting us
with Paul's experience in Romans 8, the context there.

THO: So I'm just really excited. And, Stephanie, thank you so much for all the work that
you've been doing to help us put the worship time together, and always remind us that
nothing can separate us from the love of God. So, Disciples, go to disciples.org to get
more information about how you and your family can register and be a part of this
Disciples 2021 virtual gathering on August 7th. I want to see and feel you in that digital
virtual space.

The church really needs to gather. We miss one another. And even though we won't be
physically present together, we will connect head and heart in this wonderful, exciting
new digital platform, which I think will give us some ideas about future gatherings of the
church and how we might adapt even a more hybrid mode.

So, thanks again to our first vice moderator, the Reverend Stephanie Kendell. I know
that you're going to want to get all the information on disciples.org as we continue to
imagine who we must be as a new church for a new world. And this virtual gathering
is certainly something that's new, and helps us explore the new possibilities that we
have to be together. Go to disciples.org to get more information. We're so grateful to the
support of several of our general ministries who've become sponsors, other outside
sponsors. All of this work is always supported by DMF, Disciples Mission
Fund, so be sure that your congregation is participating in that work by contributing
there as well. God bless you, Disciples.

Remember that God loves you, and so do I. We'll see you on the next issue of Imagine
With Me.