Imagine With Me: Disciples Mission Fund
June 18, 2021

Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another edition of Imagine With Me, where I get the awesome opportunity to talk with imaginative and creative leaders all across our church.

Today my special guest is the Reverend Chad McMullin, who is the senior pastor of the First Christian Church in Sedalia, Missouri, in the Mid-America region. Welcome, Chad. It's so good to have you with us today.

Chad McMullin: Thank you so much. It's great to be with you. What an honor to be on this Imagine With Me series, and a privilege to get to address the denomination. Thank you.

THO: Oh, we're excited about the story that we know you have to tell. Why don't you share with our viewers a little bit about your congregation and the kinds of - particularly, what's pandemic ministry been like for you and what's going on there in Sedalia?

CM: Yes, thank you. The congregation here in Sedalia, Missouri, is a historic congregation. It was actually the first church in this old railroad town that has now just begun to blossom and boom for a variety of reasons. The church, again, 150 plus years old in its third location. Very diverse in terms of theological spectrum or even political spectrum as a congregation. We worshiped about 300 on a Sunday morning pre-pandemic in person. We have a variety of worship styles. We streamed our services even before the pandemic, especially for our homebound, or people in the nursing homes, and so that was a fairly easy transition for us to continue that.

But one of the one of the things, and one of the reasons you're interviewing me, is because this congregation in its DNA has reaching out beyond itself, just as who they are. They've really taught me a lot about what it means to give, and to serve, and to be the church outside the walls of the church. So it's been a really neat 10 years of ministry here with this group of people who are just committed to making a difference for Christ in a lot of ways.

One of the big things they've done historically has been that they built these two senior housing facilities for low-income families, low-income people, and then they also built some really nice ones for people who can afford it, but to create reasonable retirement homes in this community. And so that's an ongoing ministry that our people
serve on the boards and help run these facilities. It was a partnership with NBA to begin with. Now there's partnerships with HUD involved and our church folks just keep doing that, but also in a lot of other ways. And we'll hear about more of those as we talk, but just a great congregation - vital - went through some difficult times but has really kind of transformed over the last 10 years. I've been blessed to have good timing and great leaders around me that have really helped and led us.

**THO:** Well, yeah, you mentioned that your congregation has a real heart for mission and in the YouTube video that we all saw which inspired this conversation, you shared about how the theological motivation for outreach really impacted your giving and how much of that giving you've committed to outreach. Can you share that story with us?

**CM:** Yeah. Again, in their DNA is just this desire to serve, and to give, and to be. And it just permeates who we are. And so it's always there. Unfortunately, through some critical and trying times, the budget wasn't always there. While the heart was there, the budget wasn't always there.

And so through a process of visioning that DHM helped us with, and some resources from DHM, and just some of my years in ministry and my experience - and I got my doctoral degree in ministry leadership - and a couple of good leaders, we have developed a process by which we're visioning together every three years. We're setting a whole new slate of goals. We are planning, and preparing, and doing the Bible study and discernment. It's a six or seven month process every three years.

And one of the big goals three and a half years ago was to take our outreach giving and get from where we were, which was about 5 or 6 percent of everything that came in, and get it to 20, which seemed absolutely ridiculous at the time. It was like, "How are we possibly going to do that?"

And so our vision team hands that to the congregation. Our board met and took the challenge on and said, "Well, let's try it this way. We'll go 6 percent the first year and we'll see and we'll kind of trust God on this. If we give, we're gonna trust that God's going to fill that gap that it looks like there might be."

And so that happened and we did that. And then the next year, we did another 6 percent because we were just flabbergasted that there was more than enough to go on. And then after that second year - so that was a 12 percent increase - so all of a sudden we're 16 or 17 percent of every dollar coming in is now going out - to the following year we got to 20. So we were like, "Three years we got there and we did it!"

And we were just willing to do it because of the vision process. And we wanted to be a spirit-led church and we wanted to kind of live into that vision we felt the spirit of God gave us. And it was just thrilling, and it has been thrilling, and it's led to all kinds of fruit. And so now we're visioning again, and we're wrestling with, you know, what do we do? And in my mind, I've got the number 50 for some reason and some
people are like, "Well, what do you know?" So we're kicking that around. What's it going to be over the next three years. But that's kind of the gist of it.

THO: Great! You know, what excites me about - and even in your video you talk about how this the increase in giving is really grounded in theological understanding and discernment. And your visioning process includes scriptural engagement and discernment. That's where it has to start. You know ,we've been talking about what we're now calling the four reimaginings: you know, covenant; the narrative, the story that we tell about ourselves; as well as different methods and tools that we use for ministry; and spiritual practice. So you kind of hit on your the spiritual practice, about how important that Bible study and theological discernment is as we do things.

I know that DMF - Disciples Mission Fund - is a big part of your giving. Can you share what giving to DMF means to your congregation in terms of why you give and what it does for your congregation to be a part of DMF?

CM: Absolutely. It's interesting enough. One of the things that that we've done is try to be a bit more organic, and so when the board says we're going to give 20 cents of every dollar away, we're talking a large sum of money. And one of the things that that we have done is we have an outreach team of people who are responsible for praying about and selecting who it is we want to partner with in ministry.

And that's one of the other aspects is we don't just want to write checks. We want to have relationships. And so as they go to the drawing board, it's not like you have to give to this group, you have to do this, you have to do that. They really gave them permission to pray about it, and look at it.

And you know, we came to this idea that DMF is us. It's who we are. It's of the churches that we're in covenant with. It's our home base. It's so much, but I guess the biggest reason that I'm a supporter - this congregation supports it - is that you guys set a framework for us to operate out of, and I don't know that everybody sees this, but you know for 20 years I've been in ministry and I've had this vision that goes along with the Scriptures that our denomination has given us, and it's to be a church where deeply spiritual Christian communities form. And where they are forming, where we're true in community, where we're passionate about justice. And so I always put slash outreach justice. And outreach for me - so those three things have been a huge part of my leadership. It's a big part of what our mission, our vision team, wrestles with. We get resources from the denomination all the time. The regional manifestation of our church is really healthy right now in in Mid-America, and it's a real blessing to us. We love the commitment to higher education that we've had two seminary students over the past five years who've helped us in ministry, have been a blessing to us. We use the DHM resources for congregational transformation and vitality on a regular basis.

I mean it's who we are and it's our number one on our list of who we want to support. And so it's easy to send the money there. It's easy to see the connection. It's easy to see the benefit and the relationship that we have.
THO: Well, one of our four reimaginings is indeed covenant, and I guess I'm just curious. Maybe you can say a little bit more about how you see - you've talked about vision. In your video, you talk about the way in which Vision 2020, as you said, impacted how your church decided to prioritize what it was doing. This being a deeply spiritual community and we've continued those foci, if you will, in these four reimaginings: spiritual practice grounding things, and the idea of covenant. In what ways do you think your congregation gets to see how that covenant is being lived out? And how that covenant is strengthened by your giving to DMF?

CM: That that has been a challenge for us, is to connect everyone to it. Now there are leaders who serve on, you know, general boards and their leaders who go to the general assemblies, or the regional assemblies. And so there are some who are lifelong, committed Disciples. But for the other part of our congregation, connecting them is difficult. We are a congregation that does video well in our worship. We integrate video all the time, so whenever videos are put out from, you know, the Pentecost offering or the anti-racism pro-reconciliation videos, and Pentecost offering - all of those videos are helpful for us. And that connects people.

We take those four special offerings on top of our giving every year to DMF and to the general church, but it is an ongoing challenge. How do we do better to connect our folks to the denomination. I mean, I've even had some challenges with people who are like, "Are we even a denomination?"

THO: You know, and at our roots and our identity, it's something that we need to continue to develop and get better at, right? And I think that's that diversity and how we see ourselves and our relationship is certainly part of our history. And I think that word "covenant" really speaks to the true theological nature of the way we believe that we're all connected, that it's not an assessment, it's not a requirement. It's something that we do because we believe in what we can all do together. And what we can all be stronger together. When you think about the future of our whole church - I know you've mentioned that your church is engaged in some more focused work on anti-racism for reconciling pro-reconciliation work - could you maybe talk a little bit about other things that you see, in terms of the future of your congregation and the ways in which that work will strengthen the whole church?

CM: Yes, absolutely. The anti-racism pro-reconciliation stuff is just beginning, and some of that is through a student minister that we've had who kind of was willing to take one of the seminary courses and introduce it in this congregation. And it's a challenging thing.

Our elders have picked up some readings from Washington University that are written from an African-American perspective and they're quite controversial. And so we've begun to engage the elders and myself in monthly conversations that have been fruitful and exciting and stretching - stretching all of us to see some of these issues from a different perspective. And we're trusting that that's gonna bear fruit.
But one of the neatest things that we've come to throughout this pandemic season has been the idea that our differences shouldn't divide us. And so I was driving home from a preaching workshop with a couple other Disciple pastors - we meet and we prepare some sermon series and we pray and we talk together and study the scriptures together - and I was on my way home and, of all things, I heard a song that talked about not allowing our differences to divide us and it just kind of hit me really good, like, "Man, I think that's what our church should offer folks." It should be a place where regardless of who you voted for or what you think about something theologically or where you land, these things shouldn't divide us. And it's so glaringly obvious to me that everywhere I look, people are finding ways to divide themselves from each other.

And you know, we had such political division, racial division, and theological division - we're watching it in the Southern Baptist Convention right now - we're watching more division, more division, all the way across. And so for me, I came back from that retreat and I tried it out on the church in front of everybody. I said, "Hey, what do you guys think about this as kind of a new motto, a new identity?"

And it was: First Christian Church, Sedalia, Missouri - where our differences don't divide us. Is that who we want to be? Is that who God is calling us to be? And it just kind of hit everybody right in the heart, like, yes.

So as we look forward to the future of the church, this is who I want the church to be. This is who I think our Lord wants us to be, regardless of where we're different, or how we're different. Let's be united. And so, in a weird way, it's reconnected us to what has been our polar star as a denomination all these years.

My hope is that stretches beyond our denomination into all the other churches that we're in covenant with as the body of Christ, so better together, you know, being stewards of this digital ministry, teaching each other, sharing knowledge, training, whatever we can do for each other. I think we'll be better together, right, but dividing ourselves.

**THO:** Amen, Chad. And what you've spoken to, it's like being a place where our differences don't divide is really what's at the heart of this saying that I keep saying over and over again and I really believe: Imagine God's limitless love, God's limitless love, is where it all begins.

And none of us have the ability to decide where that love begins and ends. And so our witness is Christian unity, is really about seeing that our commitment to the good news of Jesus Christ is really what unites us, and that we can't let those differences take away from that focus in, and from that mission, and so I couldn't agree with you more. And I'm glad that that message has resonated with your congregation.

So remind them that that's what we mean when we say imagine God's limitless love. It all starts there. If we can remember that, I think we can move forward.
I want to invite congregations and people everywhere to participate with us on DMF Day, which is June 24th. You've heard from Chad about the First Christian Church in Sedalia - how they made a decision to increase their congregational giving to DMF - and I would suggest that every denomination needs that kind of covenant understanding and covenant relationship. I invite you to give online on DMF Day. You can just go to disciplesmissionfund.org and learn more information. Throughout the day, we'll be on social media, live tweeting, giving updates and sharing our testimonies about why we give. So congregations give, but individuals, you can give.

Let's make this - this is our third annual DMF Day, and I hope that we'll be able to use this as sounding the clarion call of faith and hope, that together we can be a witness to God's limitless love by ensuring that the ministries that are funded by Disciples Mission Fund can support congregations like First Christian Church in Sedalia, and really work to be that church that is anti-racist pro-reconciling, a church that's committed to love and ministry, into being a deeply spiritually grounded church. Covenant, narrative, the tools that we need to do our ministry and, above all, grounded in spiritual practice. So again, go to disciplesmissionfund.org to get more information.

And Chad, we just want to thank you for sharing your testimony about how that theological grounding inspired your congregation to increase its giving to outreach overall, and especially to increase your giving to DMF as we're part of this one fellowship of believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

Thank you, Disciples, for joining us, and stay tuned for the next edition of Imagine With Me.

Watch for me online on June 24th. We'll be going in and out all day with leaders across the church. Again go to disciplesmissionfund.org and you can learn more about how you can participate on June 24th as we celebrate the work that our church does together on DMF Day.

God bless you. And remember that God loves you and so do I.