

Imagine With Me: Governance grounding

July 7, 2021

Transcript



Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples. Welcome to another edition of Imagine With Me, this exciting time when I get to speak with leaders across our church about what they're doing and about ways in which we all are reimagining who we must be as a new church for this very new world in which we find ourselves.

Today I am absolutely delighted to have with us the Reverend Belva Brown Jordan, who is the moderator of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and whom we're so blessed to have serving in this position. Belva all also serves as the interim president of Disciples Seminary Foundation out in California. And so, Belva, we are just thrilled to have you today. So glad to be able to see you again. We spent a lot of time on zoom together and I can't wait until there's a time when we can see each other in person, but welcome to Imagine With Me. If there's anything you'd like to say, not only about your role as moderator, but also about the ministry and leadership you're providing at Disciples Seminary Foundation, I invite you to share that so the church knows a little bit more about you and the work that you're involved in.

Belva Brown Jordan: Well, good morning, Terri. And it is a pleasure to be here with you. Thank you for the invitation.

Serving as moderator of the general board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, it's been my deep pleasure and privilege to do so. We're in a kind of an unusual season in that the moderator team is serving twice as long as usual with the adjustments we've made for general assembly this summer and our virtual gathering that will take place in August. So it's great to serve with the others on the moderator team and it's been a busy season because, yes, I'm serving as interim president at Disciples Seminary Foundation here in southern California. I have been in this ministry for the past 18 months and a lot of changes have happened. And where we were at a time of deep stress, we've really turned the corner. We have new energy. We're looking toward the future. We're going to do a great planning retreat in the fall and get ready to call new senior leadership - to call a new president - sometime in the next 18 months or so. So the combination of the two places of being able to serve and support the church is pretty amazing.

And I know we've been talking about covenant a lot - and we'll mention it again a little later in this this webinar - but, in both positions, it's about being in covenant with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). And even though we're not always sure exactly what that means, or exactly what that looks like, I feel like we are living it out, both as moderator team and as the staff of Disciple Seminary Foundation.

THO: Amen. I mean, we, in the covenant education materials which are, -we want to remind the church those are now available on disciples.org - and we're going to talk a little bit about the governance committee work that brought them, all that together. But, Rev. Dr. Nadine Burton always talks about covenant being a "want to," right, and not a "have to." So I think it's fair to say that you and the rest of the moderator team - Clyde Hunt, Néstor Gómez, and Stephanie Kendell - are doing this work because you want to and not because you have to. And the same is true, I think, for Disciples Seminary Foundation and other institutions in the higher education realm that that are connected to, and in covenant with, our church. I'm so excited for - most people, there's so many people across the church that know you, Belva, and have known you in different ways in which you've served the church - I think one of the most exciting and profound things that is happening in our church right now is the work of the governance committee, which is a standing committee of the general board, in which you, as a moderator - you choose either service chair or choose that chair - and I think it might be helpful for the church to understand how that committee is maybe structured, and the different things that we've been working on. So, if you could maybe share the different subcommittees that are part of the governance committee right now and I think that'll provide a good setup for us to talk about the work of the governance committee and how that relates to, you know, what we've been talking about - what we're calling the four reimaginings: covenant, as you said, story or narrative, the tools that we use for ministry, as well as spiritual practice, which, as you know, I'm always saying, that grounds everything, is important to everything. So maybe you could just give us an overview of how the governance committee is organized right now.

BBJ: Yes, it's been great to work with the governance committee. And, you know, we've really taken our our assignment and our lead, in terms of what we're doing, from our Design. And so we're looking at the whole church, and we have a really committed group of people who have divided into four teams of the governance committee - divided into four teams. We've got the covenant education team that's written curriculum which is out for congregations and other groups to go through the five sessions and give us some feedback, but also to use them as one of those tools that they can use to enhance their own spiritual practice as small groups within the denomination. And then we've got the design alignment team, a group of people who are combing through the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and looking for things that still fit with who we are, and, you know, because, as we age and change, everything doesn't stay the same. And so they're being very intentional about language about issues around diversity and how language reflects that, around our practices. So, the design alignment team work is working really hard. And then there's a communication team that's helping us with communicating and getting the word out, and helping to spread the news and to work with governance, with the covenant education, and the design alignment team in this, and how do we communicate.

And then the fourth group is called is the prayer team. And it's interesting, when the governance committee was in the room talking about how we were going to divide up our work, and, you know, covenant education, and design alignment, and

communication, and I don't even remember who raised their hand and said, "Well, we need a prayer team." But, once that got spoken into the room and people were raising their hands to volunteer to head up each of the teams, I raised my hand and I said, "I want to help lead the prayer team." And so it was. It's just really, it just kind of seemed to fit with my spirit. I tend to think of myself as a very kind of contemplative person and one who, in that spirit of being contemplative, prayer is the thing that helps to move me from point A to point B, from morning to night, for restful sleep, for rising in the morning, and always, always, being in a spirit of prayer. So, it just felt natural to raise my hand and say, "Oh, I'll lead the prayer team." And so we, for months while we were, it seemed that we were quiet and not doing anything, there are those who have been praying for the governance committee and all of the work that's being done around the covenant education, design alignment, communication, and even praying for our general ministry staff that's been working on the virtual gathering that's happening August 7th. There's just been constant prayer. And it's not just me. There are a number of people out there, and I don't know the names of everybody who's praying, but everybody is praying in their own way to support what we are trying to do in terms of our denomination and how we give support to the denomination and how we move us forward not based on any one of our individual wills but on the way that God calls us to be present with, and for, each other.

THO: Amen. Amen. I think one of the important things about how the governance team is doing this work is, not only bathing everything in prayer, but even choosing the name for that. You think about the the name "covenant," right? That's a spiritual concept. And we've been praying that we might help the church understand that as a spiritual foundation for the work we do. Not just hard and fast rules, but coming together out of a sense of spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood. And also, as the Design says, right, "bound together in the covenant of love with God and with one another." And I think those spiritual concepts are the things that we really have to reclaim. Rick Lowery, president of Disciples of Christ Historical Society, mentioned that when the World Council of Churches was beginning, they used that term "design," you know, some 70 years ago, and they were asking themselves, "What is God's design for the church?"

And so, when our Disciples ancestors were thinking about coming together in a new way in the late '60s, they also asked that same question, "What's God's design for a church?" And so, as a governance committee, we said we need to be sure that we're aligning our design with God's design. And, I think, even in in the title of that particular subcommittee, there was some prayer and some intentional thought that we want to stay connected. What are the, as we think about the work of the governance committee, and what's been happening so far? And, this may seem like an obvious question, but how have you seen the fruits of that prayer, in terms of the work that's happened? I know we've had some an opportunity to discuss some of these ideas with the general board twice now, and as we continue on, what do you think has been the most important aspect of that prayer under girding it? And what do you think will be important about prayer going forward?

BBJ: Yeah, well, I think that the prayer has kept things moving. You know, when we first started the conversations about what we thought we needed to do or wanted to do, there was some hesitation and part of it had to do with this question about authority. By what authority do we have to do any of this? And we looked to the Design, but we were prayerful about it. And I think prayer helped to open up and break through some of the hesitation. I think, by reading through the Preamble of the Design over and over again, and remembering that we're in - that God is in covenant with us. It's a covenant of love that binds us to God and to one another - that in that covenant, and in that way of being bound together that it helped to open up the possibility for the many of creative minds and hearts to put to work that which they know how to do best, which is to think through, to use their head and heart, to help to move things along the way.

When we got to a point, I noticed - I've been in lots of governance committee meetings - each one of the teams - I try to go to as many of those meetings as I can on zoom - and every now and again we get to a point where things kind of feel like we're at the end - are not really at the end of what we need to do but we kind of run out of energy. Yeah, and then all of a sudden we start talking to each other and exchanging ideas.

But I think that the energy re-emerges because somebody, somebody prayed for me, and beyond them, took the time to pray for me. I mean, they prayed for us and that prayer, I think, helped to re-energize us, even when we didn't know who it that was praying for us. And every now and again, and most of the time, when, because we begin things, meetings, with prayer, and end them with prayer, someone in their, oh, their verbal prayer, would say the thing that touched the heart and mind of others who were listening. And it wasn't always the same thing, right, but it also helped to energize people, and to kind of get them out of the, well, I just don't know, kind of low energy, and to lift us up to keep us moving forward. So that's one of the ways in which I think prayer has been helpful.

And with the covenant education piece, that the curriculum has been developed so finally at the end of each session there's just a prayer, a sentence prayer, and it's not meant to lock people into "this is the only way you can pray about this," but here are a few words, prayerful words, that help to hold what you've just worked on together in doing that particular session.

THO: Yeah. I think it's - that's so true - and I think we've all on the governance committee acknowledged that sometimes we feel like we've been doing so much and going for so long. We're not going to have an in-person general assembly, and we're not going to meet until 2023, so we can't make decisions until then. But it's also important, I think, that the church knows that this committee isn't one that just meets at general board. We've been meeting, really, for the past - since September of 2019 on a very regular basis monthly. And some of these subcommittees are meeting every two weeks, in some cases, at least there's somebody who's meeting, right, on a regular basis across those four teams. So I'm so grateful that you were the one who raised their hand to lead us in that work of prayer.

I shared that song on one of my videos a few weeks ago when I found out that the Water the Plants ministry - it just so happened that they tell me every week that they're praying for me - and that day I just needed that prayer. And so, when I got the text that said, "we're praying for you today," that song, Somebody Prayed for Me - for me, had me on their mind, took the time to pray. I'm so glad they prayed. Right? So, I think it's so important.

And church, I hope you're hearing the heart and the spirit with which this work has been bathed in prayer, seeking God's guidance above all, not just making changes to make changes, but seeking God's will and design for who we must be. And when we started this work, it was pre-pandemic, and now the challenges that face us are real. It's not an imaginary kind of change but literally, the ground has shifted underneath our feet.

So, Belva, I'm so glad for this time to talk with you today about the work of the governance committee, and not only prayer within that context, but you've helped us to better understand how important it is, as you've witnessed in your own life, just to cover your steps all through the day with prayer. And that the church, if we're all praying, right, for our leaders, for ourselves, our congregations, our regions, our general ministries - if we would just continue to just bathe the church that we love in prayer, we know that God will not only lead and guide us, but God will keep us. And God will keep us on the right path.

I'm so excited that we're gonna be together for the August 7th virtual gathering - an all-day along virtual affair. You're gonna be with us, along with the moderator team, and you'll be introducing our Bible lectures and leading that session, so I'm so excited - looking forward to that.

Well, thanks, Disciples, for listening to another edition of Imagine With Me. We've had a wonderful conversation with our moderator, the Rev. Belva Brown Jordan, and we thank Belva for the leadership that she and the rest of the moderator team are providing to the church - the first time in the church's history where a moderator team will actually serve two terms instead of just the one. So let's give thanks for Belva. Continue to pray for her as our moderator.

And I hope that you are planning to be with us on August 7th. You can go to disciples.org and register. You'll find the schedule for the day. There will be Bible lectures, workshops in the afternoon, and a worship service in the evening. I am so excited for that day at a time when we can be as close as we can to one another, using this digital space that God has given. So be sure to go to disciples.org and sign up and I'll see you on the next edition of Imagine With Me.

And remember, Disciples, God loves you, and so do I. God bless.