Imagine With Me: Regional Ministry
December 2021

Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another episode of Imagine With Me where I have the opportunity to talk to some creative, innovative, and powerful leaders across the life of our church.

Today I'm honored to have with me three of our regional ministers who serve across the church and I want to welcome them now. It's so exciting to have them. First, the Rev. Dr. Toni Bynum, who is regional minister of Northern California/Nevada, and she also serves as the president of the College of Regional Ministers; the Rev. Pam Holt, who is the regional minister in Oklahoma; and the Rev. Dr. Andy Mangum, who is the regional minister of the Christian Church in the Southwest, which includes Texas and a little bit of New Mexico.

So, we are so grateful to have the three of you here - such a hard-working group. The church may or may not know that the general minister and president is actually a full-fledged member of the College of Regional Ministers. I attend your meetings, not as a guest, but as a colleague. And boy, oh boy, has that fellowship been important to all of us in these past couple of years given all that's happening.

Maybe we can start by asking each of you to share something exciting or life-giving that's happening in your region these days. Toni, would you like to start?

LaTaunya (“Toni”) Bynum: Sure. We have a ministry in our church in San Jose and another beginning in our church in San Francisco, a congregation affiliated both with the Disciples and the United Church of Christ, called Recovery Café. And Recovery Café is exactly that - it's a place where people recovering addiction, people recovering from incarceration, people recovering from chronic homelessness, from being unsheltered, can come receive job training, receive services, but mostly receive the ministries of the church. And that helps to lead them to recovery, to being productive in society, and to offer them the skills. They're learning in cooking, in other ways, to both make their lives better, and to increase the quality - and the quality of life in the communities where they live.

THO: That's an exciting ministry and I'm really glad that we're able to host it here in our regions. I had the opportunity to visit the Recovery Café in San Jose on a trip with the National Benevolent Association in 2018. Some of the best latte I think I've ever had. It was really a great place, not only good food and drink, but, just as you say, a place to wrap your arms around and provide a safe space and support as people are going
through that recovery. And so excited to hear that it's now expanded to San Francisco. So, Andy, tell us a little bit about the Southwest. What's happening?

**Andy Mangum:** We're excited for a lot of different things. We've recently added a staff person - actually a couple of staff people. One, a person - all of our staff have localized responsibility for a portion of our region to provide those core regional ministry services - but we have Rev. Heather Reed who serves in west Texas, who's also helping coordinate our children and youth ministry. Excited about the work that she does. Got to teach boundaries training with her on Saturday, and she is extraordinary leader and convener, particularly of our youth and children workers. And then more recently than Heather, Rev. Al Walker has joined the staff. He's covering south central Texas but also bringing anti-racism for reconciliation. He has been doing that work - he comes out of Atlanta and has ties to the heirs of Martin Luther King's legacy and ministry tangibly - and is just an incredible, gifted pastor to pastors in south central Texas, and for the whole region a leader in anti-racism work. So that's, yeah, a couple of good things that are happening is the regional staff that we're excited about.

**THO:** That's amazing. I mean you've got large numbers, but also pretty broad geography there. So, and two things that we're so committed to - obviously, the work of anti-racism as well as raising up the next generation, so that that's exciting news. Thanks, Andy. And Pam, tell us about what's happening in Oklahoma.

**Pamela Holt:** Oh, we're excited about a few things, too, but one of the things I want to highlight today is a new ministry that I've just learned about that's happening in one of our congregations in Tulsa, Yale Avenue Christian Church. And they have started a ministry called the Village Fosters and it is a group that is becoming dedicated to support foster families, with not only resources, but also encouragement and creating a sense of community. The mission statement is actually the name of the organization - The Village Fosters - and so, it has three major components and one of those is a support group where they meet. And they meet weekly and they have speakers and they provide resources for foster families who are caring for very vulnerable children in the community. And it's also a time which is very emotional for them to share stories and to support one another in this very important work that they're doing. They also have some parenting programs that go alongside that and they are just now starting foster grandparents. And so if you want to be a grandparent-like individual to these foster children and foster families, they're beginning to have regular attendees at the support meetings, and so they're gonna start a grandparent foster group. So that's pretty exciting, because I'm always saying who are the most vulnerable in your community and how can you reach out and support, encourage, equip, those that are most vulnerable in your own community and develop some kinship with them? And so that's exciting.

**THO:** Oh, that is very exciting. I love pretty clear mission statement - the village fosters - that's awesome. You're hoping to replicate this ministry?
PH: They've been at it long enough that they believe they can replicate it and so they're going to give it a try in a congregation in Oklahoma City in 2022.

THO: Oh, that's awesome. That is just really awesome. We've been talking a lot about covenant in the life of the church. Many of you have congregations who've used our new Covenant Conversation curriculum that was developed by the governance committee and I've been talking a lot about, even lifting up those words from the Design that we are in covenant with God and with one another. How are you seeing that covenant and why do you, what do you have to say? I guess is the question about the importance of covenant in the regional life of our church. What's the covenant that congregations have with regions and even with the wider church? Why is regional life important in that sense? And any of you can answer that.

LB: Let me jump in and just say that I think one of the ways that that we see covenant is in our understanding that all of us are the region; that when I go to meetings and people are a little testy, as they are every now and again, and begin a sentence with 'the region did this' or that, it becomes a teaching opportunity to say, 'no, we're the region.' All of our congregations are the region. All of our members are the region. Our beloved camp up in the Sierra Mountains is the region. And so, this understanding that we are all together, the church. Our part of the church way over here across the mountains in northern California/Nevada belongs to Arizona, and belongs to the Southwest, and belongs to Oklahoma, and belongs to Ohio, where I lived for a long time. And so, we're all in this church together, doing things together that none of us can do by ourselves. And so, that's one of the ways that we are in covenant with each other, which I think of as a kind of holy agreement to be a church.

We've also been recipients of that when a fire several years ago destroyed a town in our region. We received prayers and gift cards and concern from all over the United States and Canada. That was covenant for me. That was the church saying, 'Paradise, California, you are us and we want to do what we can to uplift you in this time of real, real peril and destruction.'

THO: Right, I love that language, Toni, holy agreement to be church. Thank you for that. Pam or Andy, I think I'm gonna kind of follow Toni's language about covenant.

PH: Oklahoma, like California, regularly experiences a disaster, usually through a tornado or worse. But watching congregational members come together to be able to contribute to wherever that disaster is, and feel like they are helping one another, and so we rejoice together. And we, you know, share in the grief and the suffering with one another. And that powerful presence that we can offer with simple gifts - that doesn't matter how big or how small - but that we join our gifts and we work together to restore, help restore communities that are devastated. We also like to gather with one another to celebrate that covenant and, you know, Disciples are small. It's hard to gather and not see a brother or a sister, so to speak, or a sibling that you haven't seen
THO: Right, right.

AM: And we got holy agreement, too. We had a Disciples on Campus group formed spontaneously at a state university - Stephen F Austin University - which just happens to have as one of their primary faculty members, a lifelong Disciple. And some really active youth that have been a part of our camping program all ended up there at the same time. And so they have formed this Disciples on Campus ministry. Exciting, and so I've been down there had a dinner with the group. The pastor of a church in in Arlington, Texas, which about three hours away went down there with one of the other key leaders from that church to have dinner with them. And so, this community is formed. And I think covenant is this idea that we recognize each other as body, a part of the body of Christ, as Disciples, before we worry about the programmatic manifestation that's going to be there, and this is a beautiful example - that happening in Nacogdoches, Texas.

THO: That's awesome, that's awesome - seeing each other, right, and recognizing each other? I was just in Ohio for the installation of their new regional minister, Allen Harris, and I reminded them that the whole church had been walking this journey with that region. The whole church had been praying with them. The resources of the whole church had been involved in helping them to vision and think about the future. And so the whole church, then, was there to celebrate. Wherever two or three are gathered, not only is Jesus there, but the whole church is there, right? There's a congregation that's represented; there's a region that's represented; and there is the general or, that, really the whole church, that's represented. I think that's so important for us to understand, theologically and spiritually, and just relationally - that we are truly one.

We have a special offering that's coming up. It happens every year. We call it the Christmas offering. The funds that are raised from that offering go directly to the regions. Tell us a little bit more about why this is so important, and how the Christmas offering helps regions. Why should we be focused on giving and supporting our regions through the Christmas offering? Pamela, Andy, go ahead, and do your name, they say, because it takes resources.

AM: I think of offering as the most accessible way for any person to belong to the ministry of the life of the church. And not everybody can sing in the choir; not everybody can teach Sunday School; not everybody can serve as elder or deacon at any one time; but everybody can give to the offering. And so, for me, it's that participation. I'm never ashamed to ask people, invite people, to participate, and so I think the same way the special day offerings are a way - not everybody can go to to a Disciples-related institution, but we can all contribute to Thanksgiving Offering. We can't all be new church starters. We can all participate in New Church Ministry through Pentecost offering. And, just as you said, any time we are gathered together as
Disciples, the region is there, because we are the region, and this is a way for us to participate in the regional life of the church.

**THO:** Amen. I think it's a joy, absolute joy, for the Christmas offering in particular. It's a way that we get to celebrate the covenant that we live together in one particular offering, and celebrate the ministry; that our particular geographical region of the life of the church gets to come together and offer their gifts to support this continued ministry that happens throughout the year. But we only take that offering one time a year - Merry Christmas. It's just a beautiful, just a beautiful opportunity to give to a life-giving ministry.

**THO:** Amen, amen.

**LB:** And let me just ditto what Pam and Andy have said - that the I love the Christmas offering, Andy, because it's the one time that I am unabashedly asking people to give. You know, some of our congregations give generously to Disciples Mission Fund and some don't, frankly, but what I can say to them is if - and some support all of our special day offerings, and some do one or two - and so it's my opportunity to say, here's why you should support all of them, and here's why you should support Disciples Mission Fund. It's a way that we are church together. It's the family supporting the family; it's the church supporting the church. But if you can only give one, if you can only be with family one time a year, then let's do it at Christmas, and let's support the Christmas offering.

**THO:** Yeah, that's a powerful invitation to be family supporting family, the church supporting church. And, as I, you know, go around the church or talk with people, I try to remind people that it's not about how much you give, it's that you give, right? If every church that we're affiliated with in our denomination gave something to DMF, we'd be in a very different place. If every church in a region gave to the region, if everybody just gave something to the Christmas offering, then God takes our little and makes it all that it needs to be. It's not what you give, it's that you give. It's the act of giving that we want to lift up.

I know that the regional ministers are working on a beautiful devotional for the Advent season that will precede the Christmas offering, and I'm excited about that about that coming out. And so, everybody pay attention to the information from your regional minister about how you can access this awesome devotional to which all the regional ministers have contributed.

As we are entering into that holy season of waiting and anticipation for the coming of Christ, as we wrap things up here, I just want to invite you each to share a bit about your own imagination about what God is sharing with you, about what's possible for our church, and maybe you think about it in your region. How do you see life in your region really bearing witness to that limitless love of God and helping us to be the new church that God is calling us to be?
LB: I think in two ways; one is an example of one of our congregations that concluded its ministry, knew that was going to happen, planned for it and willed their property to one of our agencies that provide senior housing. And so they will leave a legacy that's a church living the limitless love of God. God's been gracious to us we can be gracious to someone else at the same time. I think what we've learned in this last year and a half or so is church, really, is not the building; it's the people; and it's the heart of God moving through people. That is the church. And we have seen that lived out in ways that are amazing.

THO: Amen, amen.

PH: I would echo that, for what Toni has just lifted up. We've had several congregations close and leave legacy gifts, as well to support continued youth ministry, or establish a new congregation, or to set up, you know, an additional school - all in the name of the Disciples. But also I think what I am dreaming about I - may be watch happening. Oklahoma is scheduled, like a couple of other regions, to receive about 1,800 immigrants and refugees through the Afghan program. And we have eight congregations who are making remarkable preparations for their new neighbors, who don't have - who are coming to our region with nothing and don't even speak our language. And so, we are making ready to receive these new neighbors with our ecumenical partners around the state. And how beautiful, when we can all work together to receive people in our midst and hope that they have an easier transition than what they've just come from.

THO: Amen, amen. Andy?

AM: I think just echo and amen my colleagues, and what they have said and for us, the thing I contemplated was just the - name a number of our churches before COVID hit were beginning to rethink this whole idea of building and even be better stewards of their space or leave their space entirely and be in a tabernacle space. And they are the ones who provided the model for us as to how to be church in this odd time. But they were already doing that in a similar vein. We have several churches who have rethought membership. Casa View Christian Church, an established church, two new churches, Galileo and The Gathering, both have really moved into a more of a ministry/partner mission/partner model of claiming the church as your church. And again, the ways in which they're teaching us what we will need as we move in further into the 21st century. So those are some things that I imagine. Things are going to look differently. We're creating new wine skin to create new wine.

THO: That's right. Exactly, exactly. We are, I think, seeing at the regional level, at the general level, and at the congregational level, people understanding that the ways in which God moves doesn't need to look like the way it has been. Before the pandemic, we were concerned, and we had issues, and I told somebody once, well, why are we now? You didn't like what was happening before COVID, why are you saying you
want to go back to that? That's exactly - that's not where we're trying to go. We're trying to move forward, open our eyes and ears, and let in our spirits to listen to what God is saying. The way in which we serve can look different. It doesn't need to look organizationally or structurally or institutionally the way it has been. And thank God for the lesson of really understanding that the church is not our building.

My friends, it has been so good to be with you. I can't say enough about how much your collegiality as regional ministers means to me personally and in my own ministry, and how much I appreciate the ongoing persistent and faithful work of the College of Regional Ministers, who have been there through thick and thin for our whole church. We thank you for your good work, and for all the colleagues who serve in the College of Regional Ministers, which also includes the leaders of Obra Hispana, NAPAD and the National Convocation. So, this is quite a group. We started out in COVID meeting weekly, now meeting bi-weekly, and I treasure the time that we have to share, to support one another, and to lift each other up, and to be excited and thank God for one another.

So, thank you, Disciples. I hope that when the opportunity comes for you to give as an individual or as a congregation to the Christmas offering that you will remember the good work that is happening at your regional level, a place where congregations receive God's good care, where clergy and lay people are nurtured and loved, and a place where you, as a congregation, can connect to the wider church. It's not important how much you give; it's that you give. So, let's see the participation in the Christmas offering reach new heights this year. And also be on the lookout for the wonderful new electronic devotional that the College of Regional Ministers has prepared. I know it will be a blessing to you.

So, remember, as always, that God loves you and so do I. And remember - support your region, support the whole church, through the December offering. God bless you.