

# GB-22-1209

**Name of ministry:** The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Mid-America

**Ministry**

**Executive/Regional**

**Minister name:**

Rev. Dr. Paul B. Koch Jr.

**Ministry**

**Executive/Regional**

**Minister email:**

[paul.ccma@sbcglobal.net](mailto:paul.ccma@sbcglobal.net)

**In what ways is your  
region/ministry  
thriving?**

During these past two years, that seem to be marked by national, political, cultural, racial, and community upheaval, recognition of and support for the Christian Church in Mid-America (CCMA) appears to be steadfast and perhaps renewed. People of God can and do celebrate what a church family means and identify the extreme hard-work and presence that our pastors provide. In moving to a necessary Zoom platform for many regional touchpoints, connections have been increasing and improving. When physical presence can be accomplished, all the more opportunity for rejoicing can occur.

We have presented, and thus have a remarkable resource library, a great wealth of regional webinars, conversations, instruction, spiritual communing, and praying. Some topics and venues have been frankly courageous, forward-thinking, and others provide necessary "bread and butter" touch tones for weekly church connection and renewal.

National headlines and community cries have called for the region to be especially proactive in our mandate to be an Anti-Racist and Pro-Reconciling Church. Our AR/PR Justice Ministries team presented four remarkable online trainings for ministers to maintain their standing requirements, for community leaders and for Eden

Theological seminarians. Our very knowledgeable and astute team from across the Region are well versed in the current literature, contemporary events, trends and history. Each training produced lively discussions.

Furthermore, even during COVID, we were able to provide another safe Civil Rights Pilgrimage. This year, 44 Disciples and a few ecumenical friends traveled to Springfield, MO to learn of egregious racism, and hope too, in our own region. We then traveled to Oklahoma in commemoration of the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre on how current structure racism still occurs in government. We traveled to the Cherokee Nation capital in Tahlequah, OK to learn of our own Trail of Tears ramifications and present challenges. (We may schedule a Trail of Tears pilgrimage for 2022.) Lastly, a visit to Central High School in Little Rock educated us about body trauma and lasting scars. Many presentations and next steps have resulted from this effort, funded in part by regional Reconciliation monies. (For those reading this report, our ARPRJM views it to be our mandate to help in training, pilgrimage planning and perspective to the entire General Church.)

While in Springfield during the pilgrimage, both Regional Ministers and a Ministry Associate were present at a forum to learn and share how improvements and differences can be addressed in a particular community. CCMA held title to two buildings and property in the west end of town that were no longer serving in parish ministry. Through a marvelous, God-given momentum of blessing and events, our newest church start in Springfield, whose origins arise in meeting human needs, were gifted these properties. They have transformed one building into a safe center for foster children and their non-custodial parent to maintain relationship while the parent is working on necessary improvement goals. This ministry is now accepted as a goal standard by the Missouri Division of Family Services as well as Family Courts. The deeded sanctuary needed to be gutted and remodeled. Hard-

working church staff and volunteers have gotten the attention of benefactors and foundations.....and "God provides."

Our Global Mission Co-Workers have blessed our Region in 2021. Elaine Huegel from Chiapas, Mexico, visited many congregations and clergy clusters and held a workshop on "Finding Resiliency in Hard Times." Larry and Debbie Colvin have also been sharing throughout our Region about their work in Ghana through cluster gatherings, morning worship and zoom meetings. They also presented at our Disciples Women virtual gathering. The richness of both of these Co-Workers have inspired many to renew their commitment to Global Ministries.

CCMA Disciples Women have embraced technology to host a live-streamed event that included a historical presentation on a Mid-America woman pastor pioneer and a fundraising drawing to support Week of Compassion and their relief efforts to congregations and individuals affected by COVID-19. Furthermore, they rolled out The Legacy Project which will include "StoryCorps" type interviews of church women and matriarchs to preserve and celebrate the decades of contribution by faithful women in the church. Recording equipment was purchased, an instructional video was produced and interviews are happening. These will be curated.

Mid-American Men & Friends (Disciples Men) are taking men's spiritual and personal transformation seriously. The pandemic and national public displays of the abuse of patriarchal power have motivated many mindful men to seek meaningful expressions of faith and brotherly connection - all beyond what many former CMFs saw as their purpose. Online forums have gained traction and bi-monthly regional Disciples Men's gatherings have resumed. In October, a number traveled to Ghost Ranch near Abiquiu, New Mexico for deep, introspective, vulnerable inner work to take back to their congregations.

The General Church's Disciples Men "The Jesus Way" curriculum is a valuable gift in our mutual efforts.

We re blessed that the National Benevolent Association (NBA) has provided, for the fourth year now, grants to support our Older Adults Ministry. A gerontologist and ministry professional has been contracted to shepherd this outreach. Addressing and aiding Senior ministries during times of isolation in the pandemic have been recent goals. As encouraged by wide participation in the Disciples Virtual Gathering in August 2021, we see our Older Adults Ministry as aiding the General Church, as part of NBA's intentions in our grants. We will need increased and new funding, and partnerships, as we learn to wean ourselves off of NBA support monies. Both CCMA Disciples Women and Disciples Men joined efforts in two of the Older Adults webinars.

While restructure and maintenance may not seem to fall within a thriving category, hats off to our coordinator and members of the Mid-America Regional Commission on the Order of Ministry. Three very complex meetings were accomplished online as well as numerous Commissioning Ministry Teams and Ministry Discernment Team meetings. Numerical demands and geographic concerns during the pandemic have provided appropriate incentive to look at how the region receives and nurtures our ordination and commissioning candidates. Each of our policies and timetable were reviewed by teams with a fine-toothed comb. We are much better off through this very hard work.

**What are the biggest challenges facing your region/ministry this year?**

The Mid-America Region (CCMA) has been experiencing growing pains in terms of staffing. The year 2016 was ushered in by a structural reorganization. One Interim Regional Minister and four Area Ministers were replaced by a regional ministry team consisting of two previous Area Ministers and two new Transitional Regional Ministers. One of the TRMs was called as settled; one TRM

transitioned to Global Ministries, while one of the returning RMs retired and another was called. Later, one RM retired and one resigned, leaving two relatively new RMs working as co-Regional Ministers. A third TRM was called but resigned before her 18-month contract expired. Since July 2021, CCMA has been operating with two Co-Regional Ministers in a structure, largely for geographical purposes was designed for a team of four. It is unlikely a third or fourth RM will be called again as we continue to transition in our model.

Not to be deterred, the Regional Board is listening to the Spirit and is in discernment on how to adequately staff to meet the needs of the congregations. In the meantime, two very accomplished and reliable support staff were elevated to become Ministry Associates with responsibility for their areas of ministry. A retired minister was contracted to be the RCOM Coordinator, also with authority. She complements seven other contract staff that address various ministry needs. Future staffing at CCMA may include calling Associate Regional Ministers in geographic strategic areas or a wide complement of contract staff to shepherd some responsibilities currently on the two Co-Regional Ministers plates. We pray for discernment as we also look to have a whole Regional Ministry Team (including Associates and Contract Staff) that is diverse in gender identity, skin color, gifts, and experience. The transition leading to this ideal has been fraught with some misunderstanding and issues relating to professional confidentiality.

Still living under the shroud of COVID-19, CCMA has discovered and benefited from an embrace of digital technology, largely using the Zoom platform. Our challenges, and great opportunity, remain on finding the right mix and nuance on digital and physical presence. This includes matters such as meetings, celebrations, workshops, clustering, care - everything. Cost and needed time savings during quarantining and precautions were

appreciated but, as obvious, nothing can replace in-person touch. Toward the end of 2021, thankfully, the regional ministries have been able to worship weekly as congregations are largely keeping up safety protocols in in-house worship.

The pandemic, as experienced across most service industry personnel, has resulted in an increased number of congregational pastor retirements and resignations. While worship service adaptation and most every other pastoral function had to be moved to a safe-distance or digital platform may have been a "fun, creative-juice" exercise, 18 months plus of this are not what "many signed up for." Shepherding search and call has been perhaps the number one need in the region. Adding to these endeavors are that many congregations, following long pre-pandemic trends of decline, have move passed the mark of annual operations viability. This, along with cultural/political differences, have stirred up some angst within churches, making recruitment, budgeting, and welcoming of a new pastor more tenuous among a limited applicant pool. Sadly, some churches are settling for non-Disciples pastor neighbors who have no interest in seeking standing.

Among other regional notes that fall within the challenge/opportunity/curse/blessing category:

\*Regional church camping ministry, which largely retained an Area imprint had just three summers ago, 860 campers and volunteers in 22 different camps through 8 different programs. No camps occurred in 2020. A limited offering of camps happened in 2021 but numbers were reduced out of parent precautions and two of our leased campgrounds not operating. Furthermore, school district calendars are fluctuating with classes well into the summer. CCMA Outdoor Ministries are working to adapt, especially for older ages, a year-round retreat mindset.

\*Disciples Women, under great leadership, continues to

provide significant ministry. Older generational women try to connect in ways other than in person but it is difficult. The DW ministry continues to try to reach younger women while respecting and honoring the legacies of the former CWFs.

\*Thankfully, some pastors are quite visionary in identifying that hybrid worship will be with us for the unforeseeable future - and needs to be. Some faithful worship attenders now prefer worshipping at home and fully see this as an acceptable and appropriate way to praise God. The initial ways of "using a phone to film the pastor at the pulpit in an empty sanctuary" will not satisfy or engage the at-home audience as desired. A cohort among regional and congregational pastors has been formed but the technology and ideas are massive. Results will be tremendous but demands of time, money, lay assistance, and creativity are not fully known. The luxury of reaching church members and others in new platforms is short. After all, one can worship any where in the world and support accordingly. How can the First Church family be retained?

\*The Regional Commission on the Order of Ministry (RCOM) has been working hard to recognize fully and procedurally the value of Commissioned Ministers and best serving the congregations that rely on them. CCMA is blessed that, perhaps aided by the pandemic, we have a wealth of new candidates coming from many diverse backgrounds and with incredible faith stories. We are in the midst of restructuring our nurture framework but this task is huge - and we dealing with tender individuals caught up in new processes and procedures. We pray for patience. We have also increased accountabilities for regional supply pastors which have been not embraced or supported by all.

**What is something you  
hope to accomplish in  
the next year?**

We thankfully acknowledge of fine regional full-time, part-time, and contracted regional staff:

Rev. Ron Routledge, Co-Regional Minister

Rev. Dr. Paul Koch, Co-Regional Minister

Rev. Dr. Larry Colvin, Sabbatical Interim Regional Minister  
(Oct. - Dec. 2021)

Rev. Dr. Christine Chenoweth, Transitional Regional  
Minister (Jan. - July 2021)

Susan Moore, Ministry Associate -  
Communications/Administration

Jeni Brown, Ministry Associate - RCOM  
Records/Administration

Rev. Katherine Kinnamon, RCOM Coordinator

Rev. Zane Whorton, Outdoor Ministry and Camps  
Coordinator

Rev. Jennifer Long, Disciples Women Coordinator

Paula Holliday, African American Convocation Co-  
Coordinator

Lewanda Jackson, African American Convocation Co-  
Coordinator

Jan Aerie, Older Adults Ministry Consultant

Sara Bright, Camps Registrar

Jackie Portier, Northwest Camps at Crowder Coordinator

Tyler Hoffman, IT Consultant

and our many Mid-America office holders and project  
volunteers!

As mentioned above, with a Regional Ministry Team half of what was designed, we look forward to and hope for a Spirited and continued structural transformation. As the timing of the pandemic coincided with our long-term restructuring prerogatives, there is much opportunity for flexibility with hired staffing, contract staffing, and consultants to meet present needs and to better serve in this new ever-changing reality. Possible areas of concentration might include a look at clergy clustering and moving toward or adding to a topic-oriented Zoom cluster group rather than/along with geographic proximity cluster



groups. This would require concentrated effort and leadership regionwide. We have so many talented clergy leaders who are experts in the realms of Process Theology, Liberation Theology, LGBTQ+, worship technology, Spiritual formation, Bible, Lectionary, Mission... that possibilities are endless.

The pandemic has also lifted a veil that many folks, whether confined at home or generally on the move, do not know how to "spend time with God." Meditation and contemplation could seem like a foreign language and certainly not the first topic in many church board meetings. The region is well poised to provide leadership in this area. We hope to reignite and passion and love for Spiritual practice, love, and discipline. To this end, all our summer camps will continue this mentoring for youth, Disciples Men is wholly dedicated, as well as Disciples Women. We hope to continue, as we did during Lent this year, to create Zoom and possibly physical gathering space for deep regionwide medication, introspection, and conversation.

We are planning in June 2022 to create a First Rites of Passage: Forty Hours in the Wilderness for newly-baptized Pastors' Class youth and their parent or same-gender elder. As approaches to spiritual direction are guided by the Divine Feminine and Sacred Masculine, concurrent retreats for boys and girls will be held - with complete welcome for non-binary people and their gifts. The purpose is the help congregations with promoting the "staying power" for youth and their families after Pastors Class has concluded.

Another goal remains to be congregational revitalization and new church development. COVID placed a pause in our "Cane Ridge Re-Vitalizations," a series of gatherings in congregations across the region for sharing experiences, mission and ideas. These were widely popular and successful and perhaps are even more needed once all can

gather again safely.

This summer we began a New Pastors Orientation that was open to all, including veteran pastors in new settings or veteran pastors in general. It was determined that it had been 25 years since any orientation had taken place regionally. We intend to repeat this on the other side of the region once or maybe twice next year. Points of emphasis include sharing the General Church's resources on Covenant, Revitalization needs assessment, general structural information (what is provided and who to call), regional mission, along with vital fellowship and collegial connections.

We hope to define and create widely understood portals soliciting input, contribution and ideas from among all across the region. We don't want any person's voice to feel left out, shut out, or wiped out. Some have expressed dis-ease in navigating a complex structure for a large region.

**What is something you would like the General Board to know about your region/ministry?**

While this report reflects observations on the ministry that is the Christian Church in Mid-America, there is not enough room, nor time, to adequately share all the wonderfully exciting news from among 200+ congregations in our region. We have so many gifted and talented ministers who are representing the Disciples of Christ well in their communities. Churches are affecting great change toward justice, inclusion, and embrace in towns all over!

While the terrain of our landscape on how to minister in this present age remains rough with unseen horizons, there is steadfast determination and resilience to report. Richard Rohr, Matthew Fox, and many other theologians state how we are entering a new era of Christianity in the third millennium - the age of the Cosmic Christ. This perspective of universal care and concern toward all of

Creation as well as every single entity and individual on earth is deeply rooted in scripture and has been widely anticipated and longed for. The structures of our movement embracing this permeable perspective will be very exciting in being a Movement for Wholeness in a Fragmented World. We are well-primed and positioned.

Thank you for the marvelous and technologically wondrous Disciples Virtual Gathering in August. It was fun participating in all the forums and wandering through the exhibit hall. (Note for next time: it would have been nice to be able to correspond with all others who happened to be in the same booth at the same time. We had no way to gauge if we were alone or among hundreds.) I hope the 2023 General Assembly, and perhaps a 2022 gathering will include similar technical options, even for those present in person.

Among the DVG workshops that I participated in, I especially found the Disciples Church Extension Fund presentation relevant. The topic was essentially: "How do we / can we minister effectively saddled in a church building that is way too large and expensive to maintain for our present and future needs?" The presenter was tremendous in 1) affirming that buildings are not going away or will become irrelevant as a ministry resource for practically every congregation. This was good to hear. Secondly, what theological astuteness and inspiration to go back to Scripture to understand how to minister in the future! He said that if we learn from an embrace a "tabernacle form" of ministry we can be portable, mobile, lean, and relevant in the way members of the community interact. To me, this is a clarion call and vision and I hope this perspective can be amplified by our entire church. Many of our Mid-America congregations are asking and lamented why so much has to be paid to minister in a means that was last necessary perhaps 70 years ago.... Keeping this conversation going would be good news indeed!

Thank you to GMP Terri Hord Owens, the leaders in all our General Units and faithful people across our church who keep us together and move us forward. The Christian Church in Mid-America is ready and willing to help in any way.

**How can we pray for  
your region/ministry?**

We feel your prayers weekly - from Terri Hord Owens' online weekly time for corporate prayer, through webinars such as "Love Is an Action Word," through any resource provided and distributed. Thank you!