

# GB-2205

**Name of ministry:**

Council on Christian Unity DBA Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry

**Ministry**

**Executive/Regional**

**Minister name:**

Rev. Paul Tch 

**Ministry**

**Executive/Regional**

**Minister email:**

[ptche@disciples.org](mailto:ptche@disciples.org)

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

As the new year in the church calendar started with the Advent in 2020, the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry (CUIM) was hopeful once again for its ministry. This first church season begins with the biblical narrative of the Three Wise Men, and this story always gives us hope for a new future in our lives. The Magi saw the star in the east and decided to follow it. They undertook the long journey hoping that the star would lead them to a new future. In the darkness, many people only saw an uncertain future ahead of them and were full of despair. But the Magi saw the star brighter than ever on the darkest night. This story reminds us that some people can imagine new directions in life, ones that may lead them to redemption and away from the depressing present.

The ecumenical movement is familiar with this narrative of hope, and we are living in the midst of it. Interestingly, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2022's theme is this story, based on Matthew 2:2. As the ecumenical communities in the world pray together and reflect on this story, we are inspired and strengthened to continue our journey toward unity.

Even in this global pandemic, many in the ecumenical movement and interfaith communities have proven how adaptive and resilient we are. Like the Magi, we knew we had to set forth on a new journey, following the star we saw in what some may regard as spiritual dark nights; we have engaged in conversations more now than ever, using new communicational media; we have checked on one another regularly around the world as the pandemic threw us into a life with an uncertain future; we have learned from one another how to rely on hope rather than fear; we continue to be a movement of unity in this divisive world.

I must point out, however, that this new journey has required us to take a leap of faith. Tremendous courage is necessary to follow the new directions of these ecumenical and interfaith journeys. Thankfully, we have one another on this journey. On the road, we are encouraging one another and walking together. There may be other life challenges ahead of us, but both ecumenical and interfaith communities will point to a bright star in the dark sky.

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

Whenever the Disciples of Christ is engaging in bilateral dialogues, regardless of the maturity of relationships with each partner, the very first question that is often asked is what kind of the church the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is in terms of theology and ecclesiology. As stated above, the first two meetings with the ELCA were fully organized to address that particular question. As we all know well, answers to the question of what makes the Disciples Disciples could be quite different, depending on whom has been asked, and the Disciples are very proud of that. We are not bounded by certain doctrines but exist in a covenantal relationship. To the Disciples of Christ, it has been our way to manifest God-given unity.

The Disciples of Christ in North America as a denomination is no stranger to the ecumenical community. As a matter of fact, the Disciples are well-known for their commitment to ecumenism and the openness of the Table. Our ecumenical

partners know at least that the Disciples are Congregationalists and non-creedal.

However, being a non-creedal church often misleads many ecumenical partners, as well as even ourselves, suggesting we are only defined as a denomination by practices such as the Open Table and the baptism by immersion, not by theological traits, except the fact that we are theologically diverse. Sometimes, it confuses our dialogue partners. This is because there have been certain ways of organizing church-to-church dialogues, and the Disciples are not a typical denominational body with a confessional identity like other ecumenical partners, which often disconcerts traditional ways of ecumenical dialogue and makes it hard to find a theological or ecclesiastical point where we can begin our conversations.

It should be noted that there are certain ecumenical trends of indifference toward confessional identities. There are many united and uniting churches in the world. Moreover, we live in a post-denominational era. These factors have made theologically or ecclesiastically engaged church-to-church conversations harder than ever. However, as long as the Disciples of Christ is a denomination with the desire to engage in church-to-church conversations, we should be able to declare who we are to our dialogue partners theologically.

As a confessional body, who are the Disciples of Christ? What makes the Disciples truly Disciples in terms of belief? Our founding fathers believed that this kind of question had always divided the Church, and that is why they wanted to rather be a non-creedal church, which meant they did not want to use confessions or creeds as a test of fellowship. It did make sense in the context of the late 19th century in the United States, a time when European divisions of the Church also prevailed. However, in today's context in which we are engaged in bilateral or multilateral dialogues to manifest visible unity of the Church, simply

stating that the Disciples of Christ is an ecumenical denomination, and thus we would embrace any theological differences to achieve unity, is not enough.

There are differences between these two practices: (1) we are willing to be challenged by and challenge our dialogue partners to reconcile the theological differences of others, and (2) we embrace theological differences simply because our theological tendency allows us to do so. The former requires official church-wide conversations about what challenges us as we engage in theological discussions, and the latter does not. Indeed, we acknowledge that engagements in church-wide theological conversations have often divided God's church and that it is why our founding fathers wanted to focus more on unity than to address church-dividing issues. This has marked what the Disciples of Christ have been as a denomination: achieving unity by allowing theological diversity among us. However, it has also handicapped us from developing church-wide conversations that could officially speak for all of us as a collective body. In contrast, our dialogue partners come from the complete opposite direction: to maintain unity, they must declare theological stances. Sometimes, that is why we do not understand why other communions simply embrace one another as they are. The Disciples may be able to do so, but it is not that simple for others.

As the CUIM engages in conversations with other churches and represents the Disciples of Christ at various ecumenical tables, we have asked ourselves what the best way would be to represent our church, especially theologically and ecclesiastically. It was the Council on Christian Unity (our former body) that formed the Commission on Theology in the past and published a series of theological documents and reports to answer some ecclesiastic questions. The final result was published as a book titled the Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today. About a decade ago, the CUIM undertook the Disciples Identity Initiative, and its final product was published on

disciplescuim.org.

As we started another round of dialogues with the Catholic Church and the ELCA, the same question regarding Disciples' theological and ecclesiastical identity has been raised again and again. To help our partners understand who we are as a church, the CUIM has gathered resources about the Disciples' identity and republished past documents. Even though the resources we have gathered cannot be regarded as completed, they are substantial. The list is published at <https://www.disciplescuim.org/disciples-identity-resources>.

Despite the fact the Disciples of Christ are a founding member of the WCC, the NCCCUSA, the CCC, and the CUIC, the Disciples of Christ never formerly made a church-wide decision to be part of these historic ecumenical organizations. A group of leaders of the church who were committed to ecumenical causes made decisions to join these bodies on behalf of the church. Although it can be regarded as our strength as a denomination, it also questions our decision-making process as a church because we are sitting at the ecumenical tables. What do we speak on behalf of the Disciples of Christ, and how can we relay what has been discussed at the ecumenical tables back to the church? I hope the CUIM continues to ask this question of authority among the Disciples in the coming years.

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

For the past couple of years, most ecumenical organizations, such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States (NCCCUSA), the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC), and the Christian Churches Together (CCT), could not meet in person. Considering human contact and dialogue are key to the thriving ecumenical activities of these organizations, the blows the global pandemic brought upon these relationship-based activities seemed irreversible. However, this whole circumstance has proven that our undeterred

longing for fellowship keeps ecumenical bodies vibrant and still relative in what could be the worst season of ecumenism.

As we note, the ecumenical movement was born through human challenges in the early 20th century, which seemed impossible to overcome at that time. In the eyes of many Christians then, the goal of establishing unity among Christians was regarded as ridiculously ambitious. At the very beginning, the ecumenical movement faced the worst challenges inside and outside the Church, ecclesiastically and mission-wise. To make matters worse, there were world wars that destroyed humanity's faith. However, even in these hostile circumstances, the ecumenical bodies have continued searching for new ways of being God's one church together, and those attempts have been meaningful, even though those new ways were not perfect. From this perspective, it might be better to describe the ecumenical community as a group of Christians struggling with human defects and wrestling with them theologically together for the sake of the world. This pandemic once again challenges the world's ecumenically minded Christians to live up to that task. In response to today's challenges, the ecumenical bodies have organized several opportunities to reflect on our situation under the global pandemic theologically, examining how harshly the pandemic has affected those who have already been alienated, marginalized, and oppressed.

In this time of trials, despite the doubts around conciliar bodies and institutionalized ecumenical organizations regarding their purposes of existence in this post-church era, they have shown to the world that God's church is still strong and still has the deep desire to manifest unity in Christ. Undoubtedly, the ecumenical community as a collective body is still on the journey to fully manifest God-given unity to the world, and the global pandemic could not interrupt that journey. On behalf of the Disciples of Christ, the CUIIM will continue to accompany the

ecumenical communities in this journey no matter what circumstances we will have.

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

The Bilateral Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) embarked on its journey toward the visible unity between two churches finally this year after a year of preparations. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the first meeting will be held via Zoom on March 10, 2021. This meeting was designed to introduce the participants to one another, study the previous meetings, and envision the dialogue together.

Likewise, the second meeting was held online on October 9, 2021. The first part of the October meeting was led by Dr. Toulouse and Dr. Hughes to address these questions relative to their traditions:

- What makes the Disciples Disciples?
- What makes ELCA Lutherans Lutherans? In theology and in practice?
- What are the historic roots of this tradition?
- How did the current expression(s) of this tradition come to be?
- What are the key challenges for this tradition currently and into the foreseeable future?

The second part of the meeting was planned as small group sessions. The core values and beliefs of the Disciples and ELCA were discussed.

The Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC)—now known as the Disciples of Christ World Communion (DCWC)—and the Catholic Church had two virtual meetings this year. Through the conversations in the previous phase, both communions have affirmed once again our hope to share together at the Eucharistic table one day. As the fifth phase concluded in 2018, the international commission for the dialogue realized that, after our forty years of conversation, the commission has not sufficiently explored the Holy Spirit's work in relation to our unity and the

oneness of the Church. At the “core group” meeting in January 2020 in Indianapolis, USA, the core group proposed that the sixth phase’s topic should be “The Ministry of the Holy Spirit” based on the Second Corinthians, chapter 3.

On September 30, the second introductory meeting was held online. Co-presided by Bishop David Ricken, Diocese of Green Bay, and Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh, former general secretary of the DECC, the meeting was organized to dig deeper into the proposed “Basic Outline” of the phase. The Basic Outline, a reference document, outlines all the steps, timeframe, and themes to be studied in the newly inaugurated phase. To this end, presentations were made by Monsignor Juan Usma, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, catholic co-secretary; Rev. Dr. Michael Witczak, Catholic University of America; and Rev. Dr. Tomas F. Best, Disciples of Christ. After a discussion, some changes were made, and a consensus was reached regarding the proposal, which has become the Basic Outline or road map of the commission. At the end of the meeting, Rev. Paul Tch , co-secretary for the Disciples, provided information regarding the plenary session scheduled for June 2022 in Lexington, Kentucky, USA.

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

The pandemic has revealed that it has been interfaith communities, which usually consist of immigrants in the United States, who have been the greatest target of racism. There have been many attacks toward Eastern Asian religious groups online and vandalism of sacred spaces since the origin of the pandemic. The CUIM has expressed the deepest concern regarding racism toward the interfaith communities in the United States, which has worsened those communities’ tremendous psychological and financial burdens. We ask the whole church to join us in prayers for those interfaith communities.