

2022 State of the Church

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February 11, 2022



Praise the lord saints there is mercy enough there is grace enough for all of us. Thank you so much to the Rev. Stephanie Kendall our First Vice Moderator for inviting so many of our chaplains to be with us both at Administrative Committee yesterday and today in so many different contexts in which they're bearing witness to the limitless love of God it's so good to hear them and see them and we recommit ourselves to ensuring that they stay connected with us and we stay connected with them. Chaplaincy can be a very isolating kind of ministry and so they're on our hearts. So thank you Stephanie as always for curating such wonderful worship but we're especially grateful to our chaplains and to Tom Yates our endorsing officer for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

It is so good to be with you please remember that I am literally 11 days back into the work of ministry after a wonderful time of sabbatical. Thanks to you for the time thanks to the whole church for the gift of time and rest and renewal. Thank you, especially, this has been the first time I've been able to address the whole church and the General Board since the passing of my mother in September. But you must hear and feel just the overflow of gratitude from me and my family for the many ways in which Disciples of Christ all across the U.S. and Canada showed up to share their support to send expressions of sympathy and support. It meant so much to me and to all of us. My mother was a longtime Disciple served on the church council, a real love for Disciples history and maintain that history for my home congregation. Someone told me she was so extraordinarily proud that I had become the General Minister and President. So, thank you. Thank you for your love for me and for my family during very difficult time and for allowing me again that three-month sabbatical.

I want to begin our time together tonight by just sharing a couple of the thoughts that were guiding my time of rest and renewal some of you may be aware of the Rev. Tricia Hersey who is on social media platforms and has the wonderful nickname of the Nap Bishop. Yes, nap as in taking a nap. Her ministry is focused on not just self-care but the idea that rest is actually a form of resistance and that it is a divine right. And even when we're not on sabbatical, even when we're not on the weekends, that the way in which we manage our time and our resources should be used to ensure that we aren't overwhelmed in ways that do us harm. Those of you who are in ministry be you clergy or laity whatever you do to serve the church you should know that if your spiritual well isn't full if your spiritual cup isn't full it's hard for you to do that work. So I'm going to get back to that. But I want you to think about that word of getting lost in the rest.

That was my prayer for my sabbatical that I would get lost in the rest that I would not feel pulled back into my email which I did not do that I would not feel pulled into social media or

feel the need to comment on each and every social issue or be available for consultations or my staff in the OGMP. God bless each and every one of them and the moderator team for ensuring that I could indeed get lost in the rest.

I've been re-reading a book which has inspired a lot of the visioning that we've been doing with Imagine with Me and imagining a new church for a new world. Walter Bruggeman's now classic text the prophetic imagination and in re-reading books sometimes you see things that you didn't see before or things that didn't hit you quite the same as they did the first time you read them and he has something in the introduction actually to one of the revised editions of this book. He talks about the prophet needing to get inside God's imagination because inside God's imagination the prophet is able to expand their own imagination. And we come to realize that what God is calling us to is an alternate--an alternative understanding--of the reality an alternative understanding to what the world is promoting. And the second question flows from this is what we're doing actually ushering in this kindom of God. Many of us are familiar with that term kindom that's a more expansive and inclusive term than the kingdom of God. We all understand how the scriptural text refers to the kingdom of God and many of us are using that word kindom. If we understand God's imagination just like God's love to be limitless and beyond all that we can think or even understand then surely God's ability uh to imagine what God wants for God's people is also limitless and expansiveness. And so the question for the church then becomes is 'what we're doing ushering us in or getting us closer to what Jesus called the kindom of God?'

I want to talk a little bit about the societal context in which the church is now living we're in year two of the pandemic...vaccines, boosters...this time last year most of us had not gotten our vaccines. Boosters weren't yet available. We've seen the surge of the delta variant. We've just recently seen the surge of the omicron variant. We have seen continued political upheaval and division. We are arguing about masked versus no masks. Mass vaccines versus no vaccines, whether or not we should have indoor mandates for masks or in schools.

We continue to see racially based violence by police. We see anti-semitic violence and terror anti-Asian violence and terror violence against our trans brothers and sisters. Natural disasters because of climate change more tornadoes, more fires, more floods, more hurricanes, more ice snow rain. Texas who knew that you would find yourself under a wave of ice and rain and be without power earlier in 2021. We are dealing with so much and so a good lament is probably in order. That's the world in which we find ourselves. Whether you be in the U.S. or Canada, you've dealt with all of these particular issues.

We've also moved as a church from totally virtual worship to going back to in-person worship coming back to virtual and trying to figure out the new way forward. We all understand that it's probably some form of hybrid worship that's created fatigue stress.

We're stressing out about decline in membership. We're stressed out about closing congregations. We're asking what do we do with our buildings and that's not just congregations. Regions have sold buildings. We've sold campsites. General ministries in the

Disciples Center in Indianapolis, we're concerned because we have a lease on space that for most of the last couple of years we haven't been able to use. What do we do with that space? We've seen DMF go from a stable move from 2018 to 2019 and then in the first year the pandemic we saw an 8.3% decline. We've seen an increase from 2020 to 2021 of about 1%. We continued to be concerned about the resources that we did...The pandemic saw in the giving in our special offerings particularly the Easter offering which benefits General Ministries. We saw a deep decline in the Reconciliation Offering. We saw a decline in the Pentecost offering we saw varying degrees of response to the Christmas offering which goes all to the region. But in the midst of all that we've still seen new ideas a new ministry new congregations new programs people redirecting resources in important ways creating new kinds of energy throughout the church and so in the midst of all this we all understand I think that we simply must continue to remind ourselves we have to imagine a new church for a new world and the power of imagining for me has been amplified when I consider that God's imagination is amplified and what God is calling us to do as witnesses to the love of Jesus Christ is to consider an alternate way that is more aligned with God's way in God's understanding and the fact that as my favorite scripture which was read before I began Philippians 1:6 "I have I am confident in this that the one who began the work will be faithful to complete it."

God's love is limitless. God's imagination is just as limitless and so we have what we need in God to complete to do to give ourselves space and room to think beyond what we currently see to see that prophetic alternative to what's currently going on I want to share a few highlights I always love looking at the various ministry reports and I hope that you've had the time to do that.

I want to lift up some specifics about our general ministries and then I want to talk about some trends that I think we're seeing across our regions and across our congregations first of all our financial ministries are strong one of the characteristics of the pandemic has been a really strong financial investing market the Christian Church Foundation hit a historical milestone in 2021. They reached 1 billion. That's billion with a b, one billion dollars in the assets they managed 15.9 million dollars in new permanent fund gifts and 81.9 million dollars in deposits one billion dollars being managed by the Christian Church Foundation President Gary Kidwell tells us that when uh that ministry began they had less than fifteen thousand dollars on deposit so to move to one billion dollars is a gift. Every minister I know even before they retire says thank God for the Pension Fund. So let's all say together thank God for the Pension Fund historic special apportionments and good experience credits record funding levels increasing the clergy assistance fund by one million dollars and an increase in the assets under management by one billion dollars just in the last five years the foundation helping us to take care of our ministries and our congregations this is the way in which people give so that the whole church can be blessed and the pension fund taking care of our clergy who have given their lives to the service of Jesus Christ through the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Christian Church Extension Fund has expanded its assistance to congregations through deferred payment programs they started a new technology grant program in 2021 helping congregations think through the technology that they would need to offer not just virtual worship but hybrid worship consulting on building use and repurposing their building disaster response ministry is

so vital and works right alongside with Week of Compassion and all of those things New Church Ministry continuing to focus on leadership development you may have heard that Terrell McTyer has left our church and Jose Martinez is serving as the interim leader of that ministry but these three financial ministries represent an important foundation for all the work that we do. Obra Espana is 30 years old in 2022 they are focusing on reimagining their structure and strategy. After 30 years, how does this ministry relate to the whole church and do the structures and relationships that exist currently still make sense?

And that's a question every minister ought to be asking. We've been noted even in Publishers Weekly about the rich set of published resources we have through Chalice Press. Focusing on anti-racism and other justice issues, we continue to struggle there because we're a small press in a very struggling market. Printed material continues to be a difficult space in which to operate so we pray for vision for Chalice Press.

We've begun a dialogue with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America being led by Paul Tche ecumenical officer and the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministries formerly known as Christian Church Unity Council. The Council on Christian Unity, that work is continuing in the World Council of Church's World Assembly will be happening in September of 2022 in Cologne, Germany. i'll be attending that and the National Council of Churches is now seeking a new general secretary. We will also be voting this summer on a new general secretary for the World Council of Churches.

There's a search underway for a new President for DHM. You may have seen the listing go out and we have a new Director of Christian Education and the Rev. Monique Crane Spells who has taken that position which is also a merger position serving both the congregation but also serving the whole church. Monique will be leading our efforts around adult education for General Assembly. We have a new leader for Disciples Women the reverend Angele Saunders Johnson who hails from Memphis, Tennessee working on attracting the next generations, moving from a blessing box generation to a digital generation so we welcome on Angele. The Disciples of Christ Historical Society Rick Lowry has announced his retirement. We're so grateful to Rick for reviving the Journal of Discipliana being edited by Mark Toulouse and also for moving forward with a digital strategy working to ensure that we can preserve all of our resources with current technology in march we will host the Kirkpatrick Conference at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, a place in a time where we're going to focus on the Historical society's goal to ensure that all of our stories are told and that we look at the often difficult history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to be sure that what we're doing going forward is inclusive of all of our stories. HELM, Higher Education Leadership Ministries the Leadership Fellowship programs have been stymied a bit by the inability to travel globally but that leadership fellow program now has 32 fellows and they continue to support our Disciples colleges and universities and theological schools as those institutions waded through the pandemic.

NAPAD, North American Pacific and Asian Disciples like also reimagining structures and processes for 21st needs. This is one of the most diverse parts of our church 18 languages

spoken among NAPAD congregations and among those 126 congregations 23 of those are new or have joined our fellowship as Disciples within the last three years.

The National Convocation has an Interim Administrative Secretary, Yvonne Gilmour, discerning priorities. The Black Disciples Endowment Fund will have a new grant cycle and actually issue grants for the first time in a while, looking at establishing congregational and intergenerational connections. They started a new podcast *Are We Whole Yet*.

NBA has continued to expand its ministry in social entrepreneurship the Sent Program and the Sent cohorts are still happening. They've expanded the mission and ministry grants in 2022 and they continue to provide necessary and such valuable support for mental health and wellness and focusing again on staff who can work with congregations around community engagement and justice. So much going on in all of our General ministries.

We do have two new leaders in our General ministries. Belinda King was named as the new President of the Church Extension Fund. Belinda is the first woman and first person of color to lead DCEF. And Marco Cable is the new President of the Division of Overseas Ministries and co-executive of Global Ministries. So we welcome these two new leaders along with the Rev. Angele Johnson. The face of our church is changing but I want to be sure that the substance of who we are and how we move and behave in the world also continues to change.

Across our regional ministries we're seeing new ways of considering and imagining what regional church life actually looks like. A couple of years ago we created a new region the Northern Lights Region from the Northwest region and Montana. We're intentional about saying we're not merging we're creating a new region. And now we have a new covenant partnership with the Illinois Wisconsin region and the Michigan region. Still two separate regions but covenant together to share regional leadership in the form of Teresa Delia Parker. They will be blessing that covenant the first weekend in March. Our regional moderators who used to only meet really twice, once every two years have been meeting monthly inviting guests from across the church so they have a better understanding of how our church works, the resources that are available to their congregations. Our great thanks to the Rev. Dr. Andy Mangum for facilitating that and for all the regional ministers who participate in those conversations. Our regional ministers are continuing to work to accompany our clergy in our congregations and finding new ways of being. There we went back to in-person worship and some of them are able to be there in visible spaces and we just have to continue to find new ways of ensuring that our presence is there. One of the most important roles that the regions provide is connecting our congregations with resources across the church and expertise.

With the increased frequency of natural disasters this is even more necessary and our continued challenges and make it difficult for us to be there in person. Clergy fatigue is real friends. It's real. The mental health of our clergy...we're seeing people leave the ministry. We're seeing churches not be able to pay for full-time pastors. That's been going on for a while but it's been amplified by what's happening with the pandemic.

And we're also seeing that regions have varying staff levels and resources across the region so there's an equity issue. Some regions are a solo shop with a regional minister maybe an administrative person. Other regions are multi-staff models. That impacts how they can serve and the strain that occurs with a regional minister, depending on the kinds of resources that they have. They've been working with the Covenant Curriculum put out by the Governance Committee of the General Board. And we've been working really hard to re-imagine what it means to be in Search and Call. How does the church call its ministers for our congregations? We're in lots of conversation with the regional ministers as well as GCOM to take a closer look at that process and also to bring our seminaries into the mix to level set expectations for what it means to accept a ministry call and to prepare oneself for ministry call so that visioning and consultation is happening all across our regions.

And it's so important that we recognize the important pastoral and executive work that our regional ministers do. Thirty-one regions the newest of which is the Rev. Dr. Don Gillette in Kentucky that was one regional minister installation I did right before my sabbatical. Alan Harris is newly installed in Ohio as the regional minister and we have several other regions who are in search. The Rev. Betsy Gehrig is retiring in Florida and they will be calling a new person soon the capital area is about to begin a search for their new regional minister having served with an interim we continue to be grateful for the work that is being done in our regions that they are so close to what's happening in our congregations let me get back in these last minutes to talking about what it means to get inside god's imagination.

I read a sermon that was sent to me and many of you may know Bob Howard who's the pastor of First Christian in Tempe, Arizona. Bob regularly sends me his sermons which blessed me. I'm always inspired I'm always fed by what he has to say. He recently preached a sermon called beyond the stakes and in this sermon he tells the story that was shared by our beloved departed brother Fred Craddock. Fred tells the story of being a kid in Humboldt, Tennessee and on summer evenings when the house was too hot they'd go outside and lie on the grass in the backyard. And sometimes his dad would join them and pluck a stalk of grass and look up at the stars and chewing on the grass he'd get philosophical and he'd say 'how far can you think?' Fred would say, 'well what do you mean?' Dad said, 'well think out there. Just think out there as far as you can.' And then he'd wait a bit and say, 'are you thinking as far as you can think?' Fred said, 'yeah, I think I'm thinking as far as I can think.' 'Well imagine you're driving a stake right there. That's as far as you can think. Put a stake there.' And then Fred said he would do that in his mind and then dad would say, 'what now? What's on the other side of your stake?' 'Well there's more.' Okay, then dad said, 'move your stake.' And in his mind he'd move the stake.

God's imagination is so limitless that we are called to continually move the stake. We can't think of anything beyond what God can accomplish. And if we don't believe that, I always say, if we don't believe that God can do exceedingly and abundantly as Ephesians tells us, all that we can ask or think, we might as well hang it up right now. 1 Corinthians 1 tells us that God's foolishness is wiser than human's weakness and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. A later part of that verse in the King James says that God uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.

Someone sent me a wonderful book as I began my sabbatical you may have read it it's called Trust your Crazy Ideas and inside on the first page of the book it said "crazy just might work." Another page says, "we need to be courageous in our curiosity." Another page said, "reality can be beaten with enough imagination, from Mark Twain.

Friends, if we are going to live into the kingdom of God there are some things that we're going to have to do. One of which is to move the stake beyond where we think is even possible and trust that crazy might just be the thing to get it done. Are we living into the kingdom of God? We say so many wonderful things about who we say we are, but are we actually living in a way that our actions are bringing about that kingdom? Where all have enough? We sang *there is mercy enough there is grace enough there is love enough*. We want there to be enough food, enough housing, enough for people to sustain themselves with dignity as human beings.

One of the things that we will be talking about very soon is we've talked about the Transforming Community Conferencing process that we've been working with Dr. David Anderson Hooker. This is going to become a church-wide event or series of events. And not even really a series of events but a processes. One of the things that we're going to have to do is together collectively develop a shared preferred narrative of which our what our future looks like. Once we determine what we think it needs to look like, we'll be able to understand, does that future align itself with the kingdom of God? This process, this Church-wide Narrative Project is going to continue in spring 2022. We'll be beginning with groups of ministries and congregations and folks and regions and as Yvonne Gilmour who is leading this effort on behalf of the OGMP says "it will be sort of like reverse musical chairs." We'll start with building this capacity to discern together so that we can move from conversation to action and every round will go higher and higher and include more and more people of the church. One of the things we really have to do is build in this capacity to have these deep conversations and plot a path that will move us from conversation to action, to the way in which we live into being the kingdom of God--live into being this anti-racist pro-reconciling church. And we have to continue to give ourselves permission to change permission to let go of some things and embrace others.

The Governance Committee is going to be leading us in conversation during this General Board meeting and while it's not the first conversation we've had. And part of the goal has been to ensure that whatever changes we're talking about are not just thrown over the transom in January or February of 2023 but the church has had a while to think about these things. The General Board will be discussing that feedback will be rolled out for further conversation across our whole church between now and general board next year so that we continue to get the feedback to finalize a resolution that will go before the General Assembly. Every ministry needs to ask and assess: Is what we're doing bringing about the kingdom of God? What are our priorities? Is this program that we're doing, is this meeting that we're having, how is that moving us forward towards bringing about ushering in that kingdom of God? The one that Jesus talked about where we love our neighbor as ourselves where the poor are lifted in spirit where Jesus says in Luke 4 and 18 that he has been called to set at liberty those who are captive and break apart systems of oppression. We must ask ourselves: what we must stop doing? And do

our current structures and processes still work for us to be that church that we say we are? Are there redundancies or overlap in ministry and programs that could be realigned? What ministry priorities are under resourced? What's really important but we're not giving time and attention and money to it? Does our ministry reinforce systemic inequity? Even within the church faces and representation do not dismantle oppressive structures, we have to pay attention to not only how we look but how we're behaving and how everyone is given freedom to be and thrive within our church. Are we living into the kingdom of God? Every ministry and I call on every regional ministry, every congregation, every general ministry to do this kind of assessment and ask yourself: Is what you're doing helping to bring about the kingdom of God? What are your priorities? What do you need to stop doing? What do you need to start doing? And are there places across the church where you can align for greater efficacy in ministry? Are there redundancies that we need to eliminate?

Saints, I've said it before we don't need a new identity, we simply need to be the church that we say we are. Being courageous to even think crazy thoughts grounding ourselves with the spiritual foundation of scripture and prayer, strengthening covenant and our understanding of relationships across the life of the Church, assessing the relevance and efficacy of systems and processes that are decades old, building within our church the capacity to discern together in this such a divided world, to collectively develop a narrative of a preferred future. And the reason that's so important is that we need to do more than just revamp anti-racism training. We have to get at the heart of what we say we want to be and then ensure that every part of who we are is aligned to get us there. The kingdom of God must be not only within us but among us. We have to move beyond charity to dismantling systems of injustice, continuing to ask ourselves that question. Is what we're doing contributing to the presence of the kingdom of God that Jesus taught? We've got to embrace the courage to let go of some things and to do things differently. Most of all we've got to get inside God's imagination. And I pray that as we move forward both in our meeting and in our lives together as church that we will continue to feed ourselves spiritually, so that we commune with that God who loved us all so much that God sent Jesus to be the revelation of that limitless love. That Jesus who gives us a model of what love and peace and fellowship among our brothers and sisters in this world looks like, it can come to pass. And we can help bring it to pass. A crazy idea, yes. But with God all things are possible. Let's get inside God's imagination and let's help ensure that our church is actively working to bring about the kingdom of God. As Fred Craddock's dad told him "when you think you've thought all you can think move the stake and go beyond." God bless you is my prayer. Amen.