

# 2023 State of the Church

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Thank you, all. It is good to be in your presence, to see you physically. There have been limited opportunities for some of us to continue to gather but there's an old spiritual that says 'tell me how did you feel when you come out the wilderness leaning on the Lord.' And we have certainly been doing that over these past several years I want to thank you for your patience, for your prayers, for your faithfulness, for your forbearance, as we have pivoted as a church to do our business and do our work and make difficult decisions like canceling a General Assembly, conducting General Board online for the first time. We need to celebrate God's resilience in us that we are still here.

[Applause]

Tonight I want to begin as I like to begin always when I preach whatever we do we must first begin with what it is that we believe about God, what we believe about God drives what we understand about Jesus and then it drives who we understand ourselves to be as church and the body of Christ.

I have a scripture here on this slide. Too bad Tom Murray is not in the room I was at Anointed Temple of Praise in Memphis, Tennessee, in January where I met representative Justin Pearson by the way who's one of our own. And he had just been elected in the special election there so we hold him close and we're glad to see that he's been restored to his rightful place. Thank you. But the title of my sermon was *I Want God's Foolishness*. You may have guessed over the past few years I kind of like Walter Bruggeman. I like James Cone I like a lot of people. Like Walter Bruggeman when I was on sabbatical I re-read probably three or four times prophetic imagination and the practice of imagination I read a lot of things and you know how sometimes when you read and reread and something hits you that you didn't see that was there before? In the introduction that he wrote to the 40th anniversary edition of that book he talks about getting inside God's imagination. And this is the text First Corinthians 1: 25-27, 'for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.'

We've been talking about imagining God's Limitless love I believe all those Omni words that I learned in Sunday School. That God is all present that he is all knowing that he is all loving that he is never failing, that God is limitless. I use he/she you may hear me go back and forth when I refer to God so don't be upset about that. I believe that God can do anything. I believe that with God nothing shall be impossible and that there is nothing that we can imagine for our future as a church that God cannot accomplish. And if you don't believe that we probably should just adjourn and go home. Let's go to the next slide. In January February of 2020 I had been in retreat with a few folks who I wanted to help me think and vision after being elected and after

our first General Assembly with me as GMP in Des Moines and somebody asked me we were in a safe space with folks who none of whom are on the General Board people that were all Disciples nobody who worked for the church just people that I like to think with and talk to and somebody said to me 'Terri, what excites you about what you've seen so far after two years of travel around the church?' And I said 'what is giving me excitement and joy is when I see our church daring to imagine that things could be different. Daring to imagine that things can change.'

And so I came to you as a General Board in February of 2020 and I said we must Imagine a new church for a new world. And I talked about having the courage to try new things the courage to imagine that what currently exists might be different that it might be possible that something different could actually work. I talked about giving ourselves permission to change, giving ourselves permission to do something different, to giving ourselves permission to change and I also talked about walking in freedom. Freedom from fear of what happens when we change, fear of what happens when we let go, fear of what happens when the shifting sands beneath our feet throw us off balance. When we're called to live and lead in situations that we've never seen before that was the middle of February of 2020.

A group of us from Global Ministries had just spent two weeks in southern Asia. Rick Spleth and Crystal Williams and I rejoice that we got home safely from that trip. Three weeks after that General Board we were in lockdown and I was recording a video saying 'my travel is suspended. You all follow the CDC guidelines and stay safe.'

Three weeks later the new world landed in our laps and we were afraid and we weren't sure what was going on. We didn't need permission to change anymore. We had to! We had to respond. We had to pivot. We had to figure it out. And the courage and resilience and creativity of our pastors all across the church, our regional ministers. We are coming out of the wilderness and we're still tired. We're still carrying the scars and the trauma and the fatigue of that experience but we emerge not afraid. Let us not confuse fatigue with fear. It's okay to be tired. It's okay to wonder what's next. It's okay to question how and why, but let us not be afraid.

My friend Bruggeman "The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that make it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king...or the institution...wants to urge as the only thinkable one."

Church, we must shift our understanding. Not only do we need to change. It should change and it can change.

When I was elected in 2017 when I think about the job description that I was given. I tell people it would scare you. We want vision. We want strategy. We want change. Do you now? Do you?

We must change. If the pandemic taught us nothing we can't go back. We simply there's no back to go to! Time has shifted. You may have seen in some presentations the Council of Theological Education President Charisse Gillette who chairs that body had a person from the Association of Theological Schools speak to us and they talked about the difference between some short time temporal changes, right? It's a bad storm that's coming through. And then there's a real tectonic plates are shifting beneath the Earth. There's an Ice Age the marker that something major has happened that's what happened to the pandemic. All around us people are choosing different choices for institutions. We're working differently. The General Ministries of the Christian Church are mostly working on a two to three a day week basis from space that's since empty. And we're trying to sublet as much as we can. We're working differently we've learned what we can do because we didn't have a choice.

We can no longer afford this meeting the way it's currently constructed a hundreds I'm telling we can't afford it. Pre-pandemic we would say 'oh, a general board meeting in person costs maybe ninety thousand dollars.' We're probably looking at this meeting being upwards close to maybe 120,000 for the Office of General Minister and President. What I can't do with that money. What I can't do with that money. We are no longer in a place where we have to mail out hard copy binders of board materials, where things have to go in the mail. We have different ways and we've learned because of the pandemic that we can! We just have to decide that we want to. Let's go to the next one...

Of the major items that's on the agenda for this meeting is what we've been calling the Covenant Project GA-2343 and part of your job in your small groups will be to review suggest changes and think about what that means for the life of the church before sending it on to the General Assembly with whatever recommendation you have. The governance committee began meeting in a retreat September of 2019 and we studied and prayed over the Preamble to the Design. Would you read it with me?

Together as members of the Christian Church we confess that Jesus is the Christ the son of the Living God and Proclaim him Lord and savior of the world in God's name and by his grace we accept our mission of witness and service to all people we rejoice in God maker of heaven and Earth and in God's covenant of Love which binds us to God and to one another through baptism into Christ we enter into newness of life and we are made one with the whole people of God in the communion of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ. At the Table of the Lord we celebrate with thanksgiving the saving acts and presence of Christ within the universal church we receive the gift of ministry and the light of scripture. In the bonds of Christian faith we yield ourselves to God that we may serve the one whose kingdom has no end blessing Glory and Honor be to God forever. Amen.

That line that we've highlighted is the line that resonated with our entire committee 'God's covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another.' Apart from a theological

understanding of Covenant there is actually nothing in our polity that makes us do anything. We're a little allergic to authority and sadly even accountability in places. But the why of this is as the called people of Jesus Christ the tradition that we have as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) this covenantal relationship, it begins at the table. We just celebrate celebrated Resurrection Sunday. Jesus says this is a new covenant in my blood as I used to say at the table as a pastor this is a new covenant between God and God's creation that's where it starts God has already Rewritten and changed and the revolutionary Christ that we celebrate as the resurrected Lord has shown us the way to have fellowship and reconciliation with God and so therefore we must live in Covenant and be reconciled to one another that's why we must live as a reconciled covenantal people followers of Jesus Christ. So the Covenant Project—we quit calling it the governance project because everyone is triggered by the word governance—but we wanted you to understand why it's so important because the goal of the Covenant Project is not to restructure the church that's not the goal. The why is not to make regions look different. We haven't redrawn any boundaries. We haven't marked off the paper our three expressions of Congregations, Regional, and General Church. We're trying to be better disciples for Jesus Christ and create processes and systems that allow us to work together to edify the work that God has called us to do. If one could put a thousand to flight two can put ten thousand. We are better together. We do not do ministry alone that's the purpose of covenant and we simply need to have structures and processes because we're a human system that allows us to live faithfully into that. Next one...

We keep going to this timeline because it's important to say we've been talking about this for a long time our original thought was that we would have a resolution to come before Louisville in 2021. And so we were working our way back after that retreat in 2019 we began even if you remember February of 2020 those of you who are on the board we had presentations on Covenant we did small group discernment about what it meant to live as a covenant church. From that work came the Covenant conversations online curriculum there was a subcommittee of the governance committee that developed this online curriculum. Those of you who participated in that work would you just raise your hand—Nadine Burton, several Regional ministers. Lots of folks were part of putting that digital resource online and we've had great reception we then began an iterative process starting with the Administrative Committee in the fall of 2020 after that General Board saying 'okay so how do we move forward?' We had three subcommittees—Design Alignment that were design alignment was intentional as we prepared to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the design.

My good friend Rick Lowry and former President of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society taught me so many things as we prepared for that and one of the things that he shared with me was that Paul Tillich invited the global church to think about God's design as they were creating the World Council of Churches and so as our forebears came together during restructure period in the mid-late 60s that language stuck. They found that to really resonate the idea is that we want to seek first of all God's design and so then our document follows that you know our design was provisional for many years they intended that we would revisit and rethink it we've just got to figure out what sense it makes for us in our time and how we move forward so

from...I'm sorry going back to this iterative process it's important for you to see it—April, October, February, October, the summer, we've been going back and around with the General Board, the Administrative Committee, Cabinet of General Ministries, Regional Ministers have had various conversations.

Last summer we decided that we needed to really start talking to the wider church in a very direct way. We've held over 30 digital town halls in which we've presented the concepts and I'm going to show you a couple of the slides. We didn't have the resolution. The resolution is just codifying the concepts but the concepts have been discussed in this body and in other places across the church for the past three years. Let's go to the next slide.

We found one of the things we learned is that people don't know our current process and most of the people attending these Town Halls were congregational leaders. I won't share the percentages of other folks who were or were not there but most of our folks were congregational leaders so we created these slides because we realized people need to understand. What you're doing now is a big mystery to some people. They don't know how the General Board works, how the Administrative Committee works, what happens at General Assembly. There's a lot of folks out there who think that having a chalice on the door it's just 'oh I get to do what I want by myself.'

John Emblar famously said to me as I began my tenure as GMP says 'Terri, autonomy is a theological heresy.' We do not do ministry alone and what I've learned in my travels is that we have a lot of disconnection across our church and people don't have a sense of themselves as part of a whole. They may or may not be connected to Regional life. They may or may not be connected to general life. The face of the college has changed. As of December 2022 I had installed 10 Regional ministers out of about 28 because some of them serve more than one region. Now we have six regions currently in search process 16 from 31 is over 50 percent within the next year during my time almost half of the college will have shifted. And what these Regional ministers are finding as they go out into their regions is that there is disconnection out there. There's disconnection in some cases there's disaffection. Relationships have been broken for whatever reason—people don't understand, we have not been able to reach people, sometimes they they're just unplugged because they just don't know anymore. In our capacity to do a lot of that work we can't just leave it to one region to do that work. We together have to join together to create a culture that honors all of our congregational presence, invites people to participate in Regional life and also helps them understand that this whole that came in the general Ministry stepped up. Regions stepped up during the pandemic. If we're not careful we won't have a whole to help the individual pieces because the weight of the structure financially and otherwise is onerous.

Currently ideas and recommendations come from congregations, regions, and general ministries that goes both to the General Assembly every two years as well as to the Administrative Committee and the General Board. We have about 117 people on the General Board...the next slide. Ideas still must come from congregations. General Ministries all of these entities that are part of our expressions of our church must continue to participate in the genesis of ideas in the

service of moving the church forward. What's exciting to me is not so much that the general board is smaller and we can talk about we have lots of issues to discuss there and I know many of you have lots of questions but the golden piece of this proposal to me are those red boxes. Because what they mean is that our congregations are on a regular basis...we're creating an environment where people will be invited to listen...deep listening. We don't we don't get to do that very much. We get this year's resolutions it's going to be a late year because of a late General Assembly. The resolutions that you're discussing when we're finished it's going to go out the church has about three months to get ready to talk about them. These are deep and heavy issues—Christian nationalism, Israel Palestine. Ideally we would have been talking about these things collectively across the life of the church to discern long before now what it is that we want to say. So having an opportunity during this virtual process in between these in-person meetings for people to listen learn and then decide. It should be possible to have a meeting where we just listen to one another and learn. We don't have to take a vote on everything at every meeting. And if we listen and learn then we're much more educated and better prepared to make a vote, instead of being triggered by an issue or not fully understanding what someone intended when they put an idea forward.

So that's the goal of this and it really is almost like a cloud of witnesses around the General Board, the General Assembly becomes not just an event we are you know as an incorporated entity the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that's our corporate name so that's the entity that we are it's not just an event we are the General Assembly the forebears intended that the General Board would do work on behalf of the General Assembly people gathered who would come together from across all congregations.

I remember the days of 9,000 people at General Assembly. I have a letter from to my son from Linda Allen. My husband was the music director in 1997 and Mitchell sang a solo the night that Marion Wright Edelman preached. He was seven and Linda said Mitchell you were such a brave little boy singing in front of over 7,000 people. Twenty-five years later we were budgeted maybe for about 2,400 because we have to be conservative. Because we bear financial risk as to who's going to show up so how we're educating how we're listening how we're deciding about things has to change. Let's go to the next...

The Covenant project acknowledges there is a historic and a current need for change we've been talking about some of these ideas for multiple GMP Administrations if I were to take depositions from the living former GMP's and I have in my own way done that work they would tell you that some of these ideas are things that we've been trying to move forward for a long time the first one of the first things we did in April of 2018 when Sue Morris was moderate. We had to make a decision about the pilot for Mission First and we decided to end the pilot but the church committed they said you must take the learnings from that process and move it forward and those of you who may be involved with Mission First a lot of what we're proposing was a part of the Mission First we celebrated getting together and sharing our ministries but there was real work and proposal about how to shift the work of the General Board to make it more sustainable and more effective it's not just about the money in today's environment it's much more important that we open up the conversations beyond people who are in this room to our

congregations that you all have opportunity to hear from more than just a region of your general Ministry General Ministries and regions need the opportunity to engage in different ways so that they can do their work more effectively and I think if we start building connection at the congregational level it's going to bless and enrich the work that you're doing strategically and prophetically in your regions and it's also going to be clearer to the general Ministries what our real priorities should be because you're going to hear from those people all the time we encourage the church to keep moving and dreaming you know what happens when you get into a comfortable seat in a system. You don't want that system to change because you feel comfortable doing what you're doing. It's hard to think about if you got a lot on you do I have to now shift and move.

Why now? Why not now? We don't have time to do nothing. We have to give ourselves permission and capacity to try new things learn and try again. Constant conversation across the life of our church on a regular basis. And when we say we've got to work out some things in implementation what that means is we know that all the dot eyes are not dotted and the t's are not crossed in terms of standing rules and special rules what it doesn't mean is that an implementation process will go into some dark hole and you're not going to see it again until it's ready to happen in 25. The culture of this church requires ongoing conversation. We've got to be an ongoing conversation as we move forward we're asking the church to bless this idea and help us move forward and over the next couple of years all of us together in every expression of the church working really hard to come up with the initial implementation. The work will probably not be done while I'm GMP if you elect me to a second term. And you got to decide that we've got work to do. But we've got to begin. We can't stay in ports and say, 'well when are we going to go in a different direction?' And we're just sit we've dropped anchor and we're sitting there. We've got to start moving. We got to move and start doing things and listen to one another and we'll be able to refine and change as we go this environment I believe creates an opportunity for us to teach and learn biblical literacy if you can imagine our seminaries are already doing an awesome job of reaching lay folks and digital education. Imagine having a greater access to a network of congregations that we can leverage. Imagine General Ministries being able to have greater access to congregations in this new way it invites us to be inspired across the life of the church. One of the awesome things about Mission First was that sharing of ideas, the meetings and the gatherings. And I believe we can continue to do this it's creating an infrastructure and an ecosystem to be able to have that conversation across the life of the church.

Next you are going to have the opportunity to review that resolution and you should review it and we need to talk about it together and have ideas about what needs to happen. But here is what I want to say to you: Let's move forward! We may have to measure the steps. We may have to decide that this next steps are different than what we initially imagined. But I do believe we need to move forward and ask the church to hold us accountable to come back to them with the next steps. And there is no idea whatsoever that this work would somehow be settled in a back room. This church doesn't work that way. I ain't no ignorant woman as they say. We understand that we're going to have to continue to have conversation and to work with people and get your ideas and think through it and it's going to take your hard work and engagement

and it's going to mean more meetings and more engagement because the governance committee didn't do this work by meeting once a year. The church can no longer just meet once a year and expect change to happen it's not going to happen so we'll have conversation about Covenant Project. But remember we got to believe. Do y'all believe God can do anything? Really? God can do anything but fail.

Church narrative project this is a project that began really out of an attempt to think about where we needed to move with Reconciliation Ministry. David Anderson Hooker who's our lead consultant on this project. And it's being shepherded by the Rev. Yvonne Gilmore helped me to understand that and we knew that we needed more than anti-racism training. We've been training people for 20 years. We know that we need we've been auditing. We've been doing all these things David's analogy is that our Narrative of the church is the highway and our stories are our cars and we can only go where the highway allows us to go I will say to you what I've said at the Kirkpatrick Lecture the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Our narrative we're predominantly white church and we feel good about the fact that we've invited other people to sit at the table we have not yet created a narrative that truly invites all to contribute to the leadership and the sharing of power in the church. We've got to write a new narrative with all of us sitting together at the table.

The Church Narrative project is going region by region by region as Yvonne says reverse musical chairs we have at least one region a month scheduled for the rest of the calendar year. I'm committing to be at all of them I won't be in Arizona at the end of April because I'll just be getting back from the Middle East. Here's what's happening we're inviting people to share stories and tomorrow night you're going to have the opportunity to experience hearing stories from people like Gary Kidwell and Diane Watkins and Paul Che, learning about one another, hearing those stories, builds community. Then we invite people to talk about what is the problem what are the problems in the church. Not who are the problematic people. David Anderson Hooker says the people are not the problem the problem is the problem. So what are the problems? Do you know how much energy comes when you give people space to tell what's wrong? People are almost can't believe it that you're inviting them to say 'oh you really want to hear what I think?' Yes, we do. And we're capturing and we're even planning for those first few regions for them to start to compare notes but it's not just talking about what's wrong what is your vision for the church what's that narrative look like what are the marks not just the marks of a faithful congregation but what would it look and feel like if we were truly being who we say we are? What is the movement for wholeness in a fragment of the world? What is that anti-racist church look like on the ground regardless of geography? Regardless of identity what are those common elements that you would walk into a church and say 'oh these are Disciples of Christ' beyond the communion table? Because the communion table as long as it's just a ritual and not a metaphor for inclusion we still have a lot of work to do.

The Church Narrative Project is inviting people to discuss and we've seen energy in each region that we've gone to and people are ready to share and talk about what's happening. Church Narrative Project will not replace your Regional strategic processes, it will fuel them. It will help folks get together to talk about what the polity, what the possibilities are across the life of your



region and your church. And it also starts to build capacity for them to participate in this new model of General Assembly and General Board. Can we go to the new, building capacity for deep conversation, creating investment in our stories, and letting people talk about the church that we want. Regions will have the opportunity to benefit from these conversations to help shape their own Regional vision. The regional life of the church doesn't disappear it becomes enhanced. And we're inviting people. That's why we're doing it region by region. Because that's where the community is. And then as we start to share across Regional we begin to see the benefits for the whole. Let's go on to the next...

We've been talking about the big three—Covenant Project, Church Narrative (and if you're interested in your region participating a church narrative if you're a General Ministry and you want to know how you can financially support that please see the Rev. Yvonne Gilmore), Proclamation Project. We just received a 1 million dollar Grant from the Lily endowment.

[Applause]

Yay! You can thank God for that. The Rev Lee Hull Moses has stepped over into the role of Executive Director of what we're calling the Proclamation Project to develop a Center for Proclamation. We had an online preaching workshop in January of this year over 200 people were online. We had three preachers. Each person dealing with one aspect of the General Assembly texts and boy it was energizing just to sit back and hear some good preaching. If you preach a lot you know that you don't have the opportunity always to sit and listen and hear people who are really effective in preaching. Let's move to the next slide...

We need to imagine who we are in a new world. We understand that the modalities for communication and preaching are changing and how do we continue to ensure that this core task, this core art of preaching and proclaim the gospel continues to speak to generations yet unborn and that those of us who may be mid-career and a little older or went to seminary during a time when it was just basic exegetical preaching and no one asked you to do slides or no one asks you to put nuggets on social media or nobody ask you to incorporate videos. You thought a 30-minute sermon was uh was exciting. In the black church you can preach for a good long time and a lot of folks today they're not interested in sitting to listen to a sermon for a good long time. We're getting snippets, Tic Toks, Reels, every shorts everything is quick and the way in which we communicate has to shift. So the goal of the Proclamation Project is to build a resource library for our church we're calling upon and Lee's putting together an advisory team we're calling on the academy great scholars we want great preachers to help us imagine what this is going forward. So she's just beginning that work and we're really excited about participating in this work with Lily.

So how do the projects connect in order to be the church we need? Spiritual depth, biblical literacy and relationship. Church Narrative really gets at the relationship and also the spiritual development. Because storytelling is really testimony. Those are practices that we're building and learning from one another together. The Covenant Project—GA 2043—begins to imagine what does the church look like when we have multiple possibilities to educate listen learn

discern and decide in new ways that allow us to be nimble. We had to issue a pastoral letter about Israel Palestine because we canceled our General Assembly in 21. There are things that we can't do on a two or three year cycle and the church is the General Assembly. Those representatives or if they're one or three serving for multiple years, understanding I really believe there's a spirit of volunteerism that we have not tapped into in our church. I think there are people who want to get engaged in our church and we just haven't provided with them a window to get engaged. The only way to participate cannot be just to be a General Board member. I think there are people in your regions and your congregations who will be like 'oh I can set up the hot link.' 'I can, we can have a cluster' and 'we can host people at here at our church for the conversation on question XYZ or for the education that's going to be delivered.' We gotta imagine it first we gotta believe that it's possible because people are hungry congregational leaders on these 30 plus Town Halls are excited that their congregation might be able to participate not only in their region but in the wider life of the church.

What does this have to do even with making disciples? We don't do ministry alone. We're all part of the one body of Christ. We have to understand that the strength of each Church contributes to the strength of the whole and if we don't work to find a way to strengthen the whole the whole won't be able to nurture the individual pieces. Let's go to the next one.

ALEX I'm just going to say a brief word and show you a couple of slides the point of this is to show you what's now possible we've been collecting data for ALEX like I think three years Dean three years meet our ministry information consultant Rev. Dean Phelps.

[Applause]

We are looking at um this is the third year we've had folks submitting. I've seen a lot of good conversation about now what we can start to do with the data but a Connected Church we have a couple of graphs that help you understand the things that we're now able to see because we now have data in a database that we can look at it. A Connected Congregation is one that's connected with the wider Church by submitting a yearbook report via Alex or giving to some form of Disciples outreach. DMF or one of our special offerings so this Venn diagram of the 2974 listed congregations you'll see on the right the sort of orange circle the numbers of people so you have to take the—you guys know how to read a Venn diagram!

What the both for once from the right side ALEX reporting plus the both in the middle means that those people are communicating with ALEX and uh or reporting the other side is how many of the people who are doing outreach so 2140 connected through either reporting or outreach 258 are the people who just reported 537 are the people who there are people who are giving who are not reporting. That's the point of the slide. If everybody who was listed gave our financial picture would be very different. So we're just showing you we're still doing a lot of work on what kind of data would be helpful but we have the data in a place now where we can start to play with it and start to query and start to ask questions. Let's go to the next slide...

So this is sort of a line graph of the same thing the numbers of connected congregations who

either gave or reported and there's a decline but we do have a number of people who are either giving or reporting. The question is we want to see more people doing both. Offering participation comparing all of the special offerings one of the theories that's been raised is did the creation of special offerings weaken DMF participation? There's a graph that John Goebel has it's kind of depressing to look at because DMF just continues on this steady slide but here you can see people love Week of Compassion and we understand why. It's tangible, there's a constant need and then we look at Easter offering which benefits the General Ministries you see a real dip for everything in 2020 Pentecost offering for new church um some of these things we think not only the pandemic but varying levels of how can have how ministries market their particular offerings can affect how people respond. The Reconciliation Offering, the Thanksgiving offering which benefits higher education and the Christmas offering which benefits the regions. We've shared these graphs with the Regional ministers and there's lots of good conversation about ways that we might use ALEX and so that's an ongoing conversation just wanted to share those things so that you can see that we're moving forward what's possible now that wasn't before to answer some of these questions you would have had to line up 11 yearbooks and go through them one by one. And put them together we approach Lily about funding for this initiative and Kris Coble just kind of shook his head. It's no longer considered strategic. We are literally the last of the mainline churches to have this capability. We're doing work with United Church of Christ because they're using Saran systems for their search and call. We're thinking about some partnership to leverage we have some strengths they have some strengths. Grateful for Dean and Adam Friedberg who are helping to bring this vision to pass but it's happening and people were like 'oh I want my paper.' It's 2023 we got to move forward. So that's what was possible we have so much now that's possible because by the end of this year we'll have a true data warehouse where data from ALEX is being put into a repository and we'll be able to query it and ask questions and mine data.

Ministry highlights I want to go through this pretty quickly because I know the hour is late but I felt I needed to take this time. Are you guys all right to give me a few more minutes? I hope that you've read the reports from your Regional and General Ministries please read those reports because in your small groups it's important that we hear from one another and this is the form of accountability that we have. This is not only the form of accountability but it's the place where we can go to get advice and counsel. The questions will say what do you want to celebrate what do you need help from the church, what kind of support do you need from the church?

In a very unpredictable Financial Market our financial Ministries are weathering the markets well. I appreciate Gary Kidwell every time there's some kind of volatile thing that happens with the market he will issue some missive of interpretation to help us feel better first of all but also understand that people are watching the markets and that we need not run and hide despite market headwinds. Foundation continues to contribute it's a huge contributor to DMF all the ways in which those donors wanted to move that money to Mission. It's happening. Pension Fund continues to be healthy and we're continuing to identify through the work of Church Extension ministry assets that can be leveraged to new ministries. It's not just making loans

but it's helping people understand how they can use buildings or other assets. They've been making technology grants to help people pivot after the pandemic so our financial ministers are doing awesome.

2022 we saw a return to in-person events. Celebrating the fact that we could be together how many of you went to the Pension Fund's Pastors Conference. I was at the World Council of Churches and couldn't go. But just being together it was wonderful that we were able to do that. We're starting now to evaluating how you gather how you do your Regional Ministries, your board meetings. We're all thinking about that and we're reimagining partnerships. In those reports you'll see lots of collaboration between regions and various Ministries in the church and that kind of work needs to continue.

We have a continued commitment to ecumenical partnerships. We're in a bilateral dialogue with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. We're not talking merger we're just in a dialogue. We're talking about how we can do work together. That the work is turning out to be a very fruitful.

The invasion of Ukraine lots of our ministries we're doing work everything from refugee resettlement to supporting Global Partners around the world that can address the issues in Ukraine. And ministries like NBA who continue to develop social entrepreneurship many of our ministries are still we're still committed to leadership development, right? That was part of vision 2020. That's part of our DNA. Mental health awareness and community engagement—mental health awareness is huge. I think we finally got to the point where we can openly talk about it as a necessary element of our own personal health and health ministry. I'm excited the NBA will be sending a person to the National Council of Churches who is convening a new health and wellness policy roundtable and we'll be part of that because we have a Health and Social Services Ministry to participate. So thank you Mark for responding to that call.

Increase in natural disasters we're seeing not only contributions to Week of Compassion but our regional ministers are in the position of having to do much more pastoral care to the communities in which they serve. It's amazing to me I'm always watching the news the storms floods tornadoes hurricanes fires our pastors are on the ground and our regional ministers are having to pastor and shepherd. There's so much more trauma and stress in our communities because of these natural disasters and so pastors who are experiencing these kinds of stresses are still being faithfully supported by ministerial relief and so we're grateful for the health of the Pension Fund that allows that. But we have to remember this is stress on our system this is stress on our system that takes us away from doing other things. Week of Compassion has added people to help congregations with Refugee resettlement. There's so much that's going on in the world that's why we got to be more nimble and be able to change and look at things and do things differently.

A lot of our folks are still planting new congregations it's exciting to me to see that NAPAD is one of the fastest growing parts of the church. Nineteen new congregations in the last year and these are congregations that are deciding to become part of us, right Chung? They're choosing

us. They're choosing us. That's one of the youngest boards in the church, the NAPAD board. So kudos to you Chung!

Technology everyone is investing in technology so that we can do our administrative work as well as reaching out. We have regions working to serve unhoused neighbors and support young mothers, developing new leaders. Everybody is trying to do that work people are trying to be creative in the ways in which they meet the needs of their community and so we're so grateful for all this collaboration to incubate new ideas.

I began by talking about what it is that we believe about God and I reminded you that back in 2020 we talked about having to imagine a new church for a new world and we're in that new world. We've got important work to do today. We have questions. Yes, things that are unknown.

But have you ever been on a cruise? One of the most fun parts of the cruise is leaving port big celebration right everybody gets out on the deck and we're all excited that we're headed on this new destination. We realize that we're not getting there tomorrow, right? If you're...we know that this journey we're not going to get there next week or even next year. But we got this big Battleship of a church that we got a shift and turn directions and we simply must begin. We can't stay in port and keep saying well "we want a leader who's going to change things." And then we don't want to change well what did you do? I don't have the authority to say 'so let it be written, so let it be done' if that were the case it would have been done, I assure you.

[Applause]

But I'm a part of this church and God has called us all just to continue to be faithful. I wear the address of this scripture around my neck. Many of you if you see me, you'll see it. It says Philippians 1:6. Here's where my confidence lies... 'I am confident in this,' Paul says, 'that the one who began the good work and you will continue to complete it by the day of Jesus Christ.' God doesn't promise a day of completion. That's not the point. And so my confidence quite honestly is not in any individual one of you. It's in our collective faithfulness to the God who has begun the work in us to the tradition that we carry. Like the African Sankofa bird we must have our feet looking forward. And it's okay to reach back from our heritage or things that have worked for us that we want to carry forward. That's okay.

but like that cruise ship we're not going to get anywhere until we leave port and I want to departure ceremony that celebrates the fact that we're ready to go. That we believe and trust God to say 'God lead me, guide me all along the way. For if you lead me I will not stray, Lord. Let me walk each day with you. Lead me, O Lord, lead me.' Let's go Church!

[Applause]