

Report to the Regional Board

Dean Phelps, Transitional General Minister, May 9, 2020

I began serving the Christian Church in Kentucky as Interim General Minister on May 1, 2019. The ministry here started at a trot with a day-long staff meeting, and it has been moving ever since. I am grateful for the opportunity to review some of my ministry activity and work of the Region over this past twelve months.

Anti-Racism Pro-Reconciliation Training

On the second day as Interim General Minister, I joined Regional Moderator Erin Cash and six clergy members in the Region in Atlanta, Georgia, for an Anti-Racism Pro-Reconciliation Train the Trainers Event. The joint training event was part of a collaboration between the eight Disciples regions of the Southeast Regional Fellowship (SERF).

Kentucky's Reconciliation Team has worked for several years both to provide Anti-Racism Pro-Reconciliation (AR/PR) training and to include it alongside boundary training as a condition for clergy standing. This training breathed new life into that effort.

Following the training event in Atlanta, the Reconciliation Team met with the individuals who had received the training. The group decided that the newly trained trainers would assemble the curriculum for Kentucky's AR/PR training and conduct pilot training events, anticipating action by the 2020 Regional Assembly that would require the training for clergy standing.

Two of three pilot training events have been held, one in Louisville and one in Madisonville. The third pilot training, planned for central Kentucky, has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The currently trained trainers are: Dennis Gray, Toni Hawkins, Stephanie Moon, Tracy Parker, Syvoskia Bray Pope, and Caitlin Simpson. The Region and the Reconciliation Team recognize the need for additional trainers.

Regional Restructure

Prior to the call of the Interim General Minister, the Regional Restructure Task Force had been working on plans to equip and structure the Region for effective and responsive future ministry. That work produced a restructure of the Regional Board that was approved by a called regional assembly at First Christian Church in Glasgow. The changes replace the district-driven model with a board of at large members. The criteria for board nominations are designed to satisfy ethnic, gender, clergy status, age, and geographic diversity. The changes will take effect with the 2020 Regional Assembly.

Congregational Connections

Since beginning my ministry a year ago and prior to suspending travel on March 16, I have been present in 68 of Kentucky's congregations. I have preached in 19 churches.

Search and Call

Over the past twelve months, I have worked with 24 search committees. Seven congregations have completed searches. The [search and call page](#) on the Region's web site lists 20 active searches and six churches in extended interims with no active search committee. Of the 20 active searches, three have extended a call but the new minister has not started their ministry at this time.

Regional Response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed congregational and regional life. The requirement to be healthy at home required quick adaptations. While some of these changes may be temporary, our life as congregations and as a region will be fluid for the foreseeable future. I believe the pandemic will continue to affect our life, our witness, and our ministry. We will never be the same.

We will never be the same, but in many ways, we have been given an opportunity. Our congregations and pastors have stepped up in unbelievable ways. They are displaying creative ways not only to maintain the worship life of their congregations but also to continue the congregation's sense of community.

As I have talked with pastors during this period, many have made one or both of these statements.

- "I have more people connecting to our online service than I ever saw at our in-person services."
- "Many of my home bound members feel more connected to the church now than they have felt in years."

I especially relate to the second statement. Because district clergy gatherings have shifted to Zoom, I have been able to meet and connect with many more clergy in the Region.

COVID-19 has changed us. In some ways it has reconnected us. In some ways it has revitalized our ministry. It has cast our ministry, mission, and call in a new light. That's a gift, and it's one that we should not lose. Even as we start to gather together again, we must do it in a way that is compassionate and continues those new connections.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Region has taken these actions.

- The office on Red Mile Road closed on March 16. All staff are working while staying healthy at home.
- Travel by regional has been suspended through the end of the summer.
- Camp programs at both Camp Kum-Ba-Ya and Camp Wakon'Do-Ho have been cancelled for 2020. Each camp team is looking at virtual camp options and considering ways to honor those seniors who would have had their last camp this summer.
- The Quilters and Knitters Retreat in July has been cancelled.
- All regional meetings are being conducted by video conference. This includes meetings with search committees.

- The Region has made its Zoom account available to search committees so that they can continue their work while being healthy at home.
- The staff of the Region and the West Area meet together once a week by Zoom.
- The Region produced guidelines for congregations to use as they plan their steps toward reopening. Congregations have received these as helpful. The Region's guidelines informed guidelines which the Kentucky Council of Churches provided to the governor's office as they prepare their guidelines for houses of worship. We expect to receive the governor's guidelines on Monday or Tuesday of next week.

Gov. Beshear announced that houses of worship may start resuming in person gatherings May 20. However, coming back together as a congregation carries several considerations. Each congregation carries the responsibility for its own decision about resuming in-person worship services and other gatherings. Pastors and congregations must make these decisions **cautiously, collaboratively, and compassionately.**

To that end:

- **How is more important than when.** As we consider various precautions, we also cannot lose sight of *why*. Loving our neighbor comes first. We give concern not to our own desires but to the health and safety of those most at risk. "Insomuch as you have done it unto the least of these..."
- **We cannot resume in-person worship without a plan.** The guidelines from the Region should help congregational leaders ask questions and formulate their plans.
- **Resuming in person worship requires a phased approach.** We cannot safely come back together with a binary, all or nothing choice.
- **Those most at risk must continue to be healthy at home** along with everyone in their household. We cannot resume in-person worship services in a way that leaves the most at-risk behind. We cannot lose the connections that have been regained.
- **We must maintain at least six-foot social distancing.** This cuts the seating capacity of the worship space to 25% or less of what it was. Even in larger worship spaces, we expect that we will not be able to have gatherings of more than 50 for several more weeks or months.
- **Worshippers should wear masks unless speaking or leading music.** A mask does not protect me from others. It protects others from me. Wearing a mask is not a sign of fear; it is a sign of grace.
- **Serving and sharing communion will be radically different.** We cannot pass trays to one another, and any form of common cup communion is strictly off the table.
- **Congregational singing will be strictly limited.** It hurts my heart to say it, but singing is the most effective and efficient way to aerosol and spread the virus. The first Kentucky cases were traced to a choir rehearsal.
- **Choirs will not be leading worship music.** Use soloists, duets, or very small ensembles.
- **Child care and children's Sunday school will not be available.** Churches should attend to state guidance for commercial child-care settings.

- **The decision to resume or to defer in-person worship is not a test of faith.** It is also not a test of fellowship, and it is certainly not a test of party loyalty. We are together the body of Christ. We are Disciples of Christ, and Christian unity is still our polar star.
- **We will still need to be flexible and graceful.** We don't know what we don't know, so we will continue to be flexible and adaptive as circumstances change. It is likely that we will be in a start and stop society for several months.

Red Mile Road

Working while healthy at home has raised questions about the ongoing purpose and function of the Red Mile Road office. While the Region still needs some administrative space, the Region should engage in conversation about the long-term use of the Red Mile Road office. It was built for a different day and time. What does the Region need to administer its ministry effectively? Is there a way to provide that function in a more effective manner? What other options are available?

Looking Ahead

Care. Connect. Equip.

The regional board in 2016 determined that these three words encompass and describe the call, ministry, and purpose of the Christian Church in Kentucky. It reminds me of a line from an old cowboy song: "And that song ain't so very far from wrong."

The regional board, if they missed the mark, didn't miss it by much. For several reasons, though, the Region—that is, its clergy, congregations, and leadership—never really embraced this as an expression of our call to service.

Still, the song ain't so very far from wrong. You have chosen to retain me in a transitional role for an additional 16 months, through the General Assembly next summer in Louisville. Let's use this time to seek God's *yes* hidden in the *no* of COVID-19. Let's use this opportunity to imagine how we might staff and structure the Region to care, connect, and equip the witness and ministry of Disciples congregations and clergy across Kentucky.