

2009 General Board Report

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Michigan Region

The primary purpose of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in regions is two-fold: (1) to extend the ministry of Christ in mission, teaching, witness and service among the people and social structures of the region; and (2) to establish, receive, and nurture congregations in the region, providing help, counsel, and pastoral care to members, ministers, and congregations in their mutual relationships, and relating them to the worldwide mission and witness of the whole church.

The economic recession has continued its spread and effect far beyond Michigan with regional, national and global ramifications. The difficulties experienced by Michigan families have spread to our congregations, but of even more importance for many of our churches is the population drain which is taking a heavy toll upon our communities, including our congregations. The gross effect has been to weaken a number of our congregations, two in 2008 announced plans to close altogether and by this report both have done so. Some of our pastors have been forced to follow the outflux; others have been forced to accept reduced compensation or benefits—health care premiums have been a specific burden for congregations.

These seismic shocks coupled with the Region's recovery progress with state and federal tax issues have certainly challenged us spiritually and Holy Spirit's presence with us within the struggles has sustained many among us. Nonetheless, a number of our congregations are being pushed to the brink; the Region itself is in the process of reinventing itself to faithfully carry out the mission of the region. The challenges aren't over. While we thought we were emerging from our financial crises as a Region with reserves to help us rebuild, as with many, our reserves have been eaten away by the decline in the markets. Our best creativity, while retaining our focus upon the mission spelled out above, will be tested. Most regional ministry programs will be in review. 2009 will be a critical year for our critical witness as Disciples in Michigan. We do not have a need to candy-coat the seriousness of our tasks.

This context being laid out, here's a summary of ministry highlights since our last report to the General Board:

Regional Staff: Dr. Jon A. Lacey, Regional Minister for the Interim, Male, Caucasian; Beverly Peeler, Office Manager, Female, African American; Brenda Murphy, Camp Manager, Female, Caucasian; Pat Cast, Women's Ministry consultant, Female, Caucasian; Ann McCauslin, Dean, Systematic Training for Effective Ministry program, Female, Caucasian

Number of Congregations: 42 (two congregations closed) Total Members: 6150(?)

State included in Region: Michigan

Ministry Planning Strategy Development and Implementation:

1. The Christian Church Michigan Region (CCMR) began in 2006 a guided, long-range visioning process termed the "Joel Process" with regional leadership and the consultant

services of Dick Hamm. Jon Lacey was called as “Regional Minister for the Interim” to facilitate a regional renewal process which has included an emphasis upon a return to fiscal responsibility and accountability to the Region. The Joel Committee completed a “future story” and a timeline for transformation over the period from the present through 2014. The future story was presented to an assemblage of regional and congregational leaders in the Fall of 2007 and the basic benchmarks for 2008-2009 were accepted and endorsed. It has taken an enormous effort of staff and office volunteers to restore accountability and provide increasing transparency to our congregations. A key premise of the “Joel Process” plan has been on transfer of staff responsibilities to regional volunteers; the membership drain being experienced by many of our congregations following the Michigan’s population drains is testing that premise. The planning team will be reassembled in Spring 2009 to carefully review essentials for the Region’s mission.

2. CCMR has reaffirmed the goals of the region are to:
 - Revitalize existing congregations through
 - Strategic planning
 - Leadership training
 - Camping and outdoor education
 - Information distribution and networking
 - Evangelism training
 - Other emerging revitalization planning and processes
 - Establishing new congregations
 - Conflict management
 - Becoming an Anti-Racist/Pro-Reconciliation Region/Ministry
3. CCMR has a long-term, established relationship with the United Church of Christ, Michigan Conference. The Regional Assembly and the UCC Conference’s Annual Meeting are held jointly, as are educational events like the Love of Leadership. Several program areas – and staff – have jointly appointed staff. Anti-Racism training, Boundary training and history and polity are either jointly offered or offered by one partner inclusive of both traditions. The Regional Minister and the Conference Minister meet on a regular basis and the organizations share a consultant staff member.

The United Church of Christ, Michigan Conference, faces its own challenges parallel directly to the Regions. The Conference has authorized their executive body and conference minister to meet with counterparts in the Region during the Spring and Fall of 2009 to discuss new levels of cooperation and collaboration. Given the history of significant relationship, there is a promise in these discussions of breaking new ground with importance to other Regions and Conferences across our sister churches.
4. The Love of Leadership event is a major annual joint effort with the UCC designed to provide skill training for congregations around a number of issues designed to assist in

congregational renewal and revitalization; 2008 and 2009 events had as their focus anti-racism. STEM(Systematic Training for Effective Ministry) is also geared toward leadership development utilizing two tracks (lay ministry and licensed ministry) to provide empowered and educated Disciple and UCC leadership for our congregations.

5. Special concerns: CCMR is struggling to move beyond financial crisis and disillusionment to restored trust and continuous accountability. Instituting technical and institutional change is critical, but is not the “end all.” CCMR is struggling against some ponderous odds to enter a new era of mission-centered church life as congregations together, not merely together for convenience and rescue in crisis times. We have some critical decision’s to make. Some are listed here:
 - Regional leadership. The Regional Minister Search is currently on hold while the region and the congregations attempt to find solid financial footing for going forward. The Region/UCC Conference discussion may have effect upon decisions; the current regional plan is for calling and installation of a regional staff person by May 2010.
 - Can the Region employ any of its resources to help support precarious congregations?
 - Can we find ways to better help congregations in conflict which is being exacerbated by the economic crises?
 - Can we find ways to stabilize and support our minister’s in crisis? This will help keep ministers in Michigan.
 - Can we find ways to attract minister’s to fill our vacant pulpits when few find Michigan attractive for relocation?
 - A number of our congregations are engaged in transformation planning through a variety of mechanisms and programs, some studying Gay Reese’s revitalization writing, some using Church Extension’s New Beginnings program. Most have undertaken their efforts within this past year and are in mid-stream of their efforts.
 - We have a need for “truth in packaging” as a region as we look at some of our “new church starts” over the past years and some of the older congregations which have little to no participation beyond themselves and have not responded to regional contacts. Several who have been reported as new church starts were more properly adoptions of existing congregations which have disappeared or become disinterested in affiliation after financial support ended.
 - Congregational indebtedness with the Region being the co-guarantor. As the recession deepens and congregational resources wither, guarantees to Church Extension will push the Region beyond its means. One congregation has already defaulted and its building is for sale in a very poor market area; another is seriously behind in payments. There are also a number of congregations with other obligations not secured by the Region who are seriously behind in those obligations. Will the Region be able to find some creative responses?
 - Key stewardship issue: Encouraging ALL congregations to move towards full participation, including financial contributions, in the life of the Region. This is a long-standing area of concern which precedes but underscores the current crisis. A large number of our congregations depend upon the Region’s support by a few. This also is of importance to the Disciple Mission Fund as

congregations not undergirding the region do not support the General Ministries. Sustaining the Region, but also making its current footing all the more precarious, are individual Disciples contributions, often in place of their congregation's commitment.

- Deepening the Region's commitment to global partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kinshasa Region.

Paul Harvey, the recently deceased news commentator and critic of culture, had the famous device "and now for the rest of the story." "The rest of the story" in the congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Michigan is a constellation of stories which might not be filling coffers and balancing Excel spreadsheets, but which illustrate faithfulness to our mission and visions for wholeness:

- Active Ministry with Women
- Over 100 Disciples and UCC's weathering a terrible storm to hear our General Minister and President at Love of Leadership. The event focused its programmatic focus upon anti-racism.
- One of our oldest congregations in a rural area feeding on a regular basis over 8000 families through a food pantry.
- Offering a seminar on domestic violence prevention and understanding of church responses to perpetrators and those victimized.
- Creation of a clergy seminar on suicide prevention especially focused on the effects of the recession.
- Completion of 7 years of audits and bringing finances to current status!
- Uncounted hours of a volunteer corps which supports an understaffed Regional Office.
- A special draw upon financial resources to help move our goal of "every one who will come" to our outdoor education program. Realizing that this coming summer will be very stressful upon families in many of our congregations.
- A number of faithful Disciples who have notified the Region of inclusion of the Region and its ministry in their wills and bequests.
- 3 ordinations in 2008; 3 more planned in 2009; 2-3 expected in 2010. Seminary studies supported in a number of institutions for students under care and admission of several students to care status, plus a number of STEM participants in the Licensed Ministry track. (A note here to the General Church and our colleague regions: Michigan's "retention rate" of seminary graduates has suffered with the economic downturn. Michigan is proud that our faithfulness in undergirding our seminarians results in trained pastors for other regions. This is part of our larger church participation.)
- Conversations with the Regional Minister of Canada about the possibilities of a "border-crossing" ministry, if not congregation, at Windsor-Detroit.
- Providing a gift of medical testing equipment and supplies to Kinshasa Region in the DRC when the Regional Minister visited with the team from other regions and Global Ministries.
- 150 anniversary of First Christian Church, Ionia in Spring 2009. This congregation sent its first missionaries, the Dye's, in 1899 shortly after their marriage and ordinations to ministry. Dr. Royal J. Dye is remembered as the carrier of the deeds to the Bolenge station and hospital and the formal beginning of our Disciples work in Congo.

Willis Fisher, an Old Testament professor at the School of Theology at Claremont and Chapman University, taught as a summation to scripture a phrase that is a watchword: “With God, keep on keeping on.” Struggle is not new to God’s people in any land, certainly not to Michigan, once viewed as a desperate wasteland. Nor is our commitment to keep and deepen the faith.

Jon Lacey, Regional Minister for the Interim

Recommended Action:

The General Board receives the report from the Michigan Region.