

**CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN THE UPPER MIDWEST****For the Period April 2008 – April 2009****Submitted for General Board Consideration APRIL 2009**

2008 into early 2009 was a period of preparation for transition as Richard Guentert, Regional Minister, announced his retirement effective December 31, 2008. Knowing that the Region would likely not fill this vacancy in regional clergy staff, and under the guidance and leadership of the Regional Board, volunteer units and task groups began to “gear up” for increased levels of leadership and involvement, and less reliance on regional staff in the mission and ministry of the Region. The business operations of the Region have been consolidated to the Christian Conference Center in Newton, Iowa for what is anticipated to be a two-year period of visioning and discernment, and the Regional Church Center building in Des Moines has been closed. Two full-time clergy staff, one full-time camp manager, three part-time adjunct regional staff persons, one full-time administrative coordinator for ministries, and a minimal number of camp staff and part-time employees comprise the regional staff.

**The Christian Church in the Upper Midwest has fulfilled the regions’ primary purpose as stated in paragraph 20 of *The Design* through, among numerous other ways, the following examples.**

1. Under the banner “*Disciples Together,*” increasing volunteer involvement throughout the Region emphasizes enhanced collegiality. With the exception of one part-time adjunct regional staff person, all educational events are planned and implemented by volunteers. Interestingly, it appears that absent the reliance on regional staff for planning and implementation, the number and quality of events for mission, teaching, witness and service has shown significant improvement.
2. Disciples are intimately involved in voicing their understanding of the Gospel regarding many and varied social concerns throughout the Region through involvement with such agencies as AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy), The Interfaith Alliance of Iowa, and many others throughout Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Iowa. A very recent testimony to that involvement is demonstrated in the Iowa Supreme Court decision of April 3, 2009 that overturned a 10-year-old ban on same-sex marriage and puts Iowa squarely in the center of the nation’s debate over gay rights.
3. While the Region has not been very successful in new church formation, providing counsel and pastoral care to ministers and congregations has developed positive relationships that were previously unthinkable. One of the primary foci of the Regional Clergy Staff is to provide pastoral care with congregations and clergy, with the understanding that healthy congregations and clergy will lead to a healthy church.
4. Through increasingly positive relationships with General Church Ministries, including the Office of Disciples Volunteering and Global Ministries, a number approaching nearly 500 Upper Midwest Regional Disciples were engaged in living the Gospel message through involvement in mission trip opportunities (both work and interpretation) at home and abroad.

**The Region has been involved in meaningful mission and ministry regarding the four mission priorities of the Church, examples of which are briefly demonstrated in the following remarks.**

1. There is certainly a perceived need for New Church ministries to become a growing edge for the Region. Through conversations with New Church Ministry staff, new methods of church planting that might be appropriate for the Upper Midwest Region are being identified. Systematic new church planting might be a direction for enhanced mission and ministry as a result of the Region’s two-year period of visioning and discernment. Conversations are proceeding regarding the possible calling of a new church pastor for a new church in a major city in Minnesota. Numerous congregations are providing their church building as a resource and/or as a nest for new or emerging congregations of other faith communities.
2. A significant number of transformational events are occurring throughout the Region. Those dealing specifically with congregations will be discussed below.

The Upper Midwest Region itself is undergoing a major period of transition and transformation. Over the past decade we have observed several growing trends that have now become obvious and unavoidable. We have watched Disciple Mission Fund income decline at a steady rate. We have noticed a slow but steady reduction in the number of congregations and individuals within the Upper Midwest. We have experienced a steady reduction of regional clergy staff and a corresponding reduction in contact hours with congregations. It is our belief that without meaningful contact and relationship with congregations, the

purpose and understanding within a congregation of why it should be involved in mission and ministry beyond that local congregation is likely to become confused. Add to the above issues the present economic concerns, loss of jobs and a potentially bleak financial future for endowments, and the Region is in a

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position requiring decisive change. The Region's two-year period of visioning and discernment will help to rebuild and refocus who we are as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and give new purpose and meaning to what it means to be middle judicatory in the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The ultimate result of the regional transformation journey will be a focus on strengthening congregational life for mission and ministry.

3. A catalogue of activities and events, including the summer camp and conference program, reveals a number approaching 2500 individual souls, and literally tens of thousands of contact hours, in leadership development in the Upper Midwest Region. The Licensed Ministers Education Program continues to be strong with nearly 40 participants in preparation for ministry. A growing number of young people are exploring ministry as a career option or are actively engaged in undergraduate or seminary preparation for ministry.
4. Pro-Reconciliation/Anti/Racism – at the request of the Regional Board, the 2008 Regional Assembly approved the suspension of the by-law definition of “Unit” in regard to the Pro-Reconciliation/Anti-Racism Unit, so that the Unit would have the spiritual reflection and discernment time to deepen the continuity, clarity, and authenticity of this mission imperative of the Church. Distribution of the Region's share of the annual Reconciliation Offering continues to be a fulfilling experience for the Region. A number of vital projects are supported by this ministry, including such things as 1) English as a Second Language/Immigrant Assimilation Program; 2) a program that will educate and empower people of faith and goodwill to speak out and create a “welcoming” atmosphere for immigrants, and to counter the negative public rhetoric against people who migrate to the region; and 3) funding for a two-year transitional housing program providing housing and needed services for homeless women with children.

**It seems that perhaps congregational transformation is the denominational foci around which the Upper Midwest Region has been able to generate the most energy.**

1. The Region's Congregational Transformation Task Group was awarded an Oreon E. Scott Foundation grant to develop a model for transformation entitled *A.C.T.S. OF THE DISCIPLES - A Spiritual Journey*, based on the following characteristics: **A**ction – A new and intentional response to the leading of God; **C**ourage – Confidence in the Spirit to do a new thing; **T**ransformation – Continually becoming a new creation; **S**pirit – The renewing presence, promise and power of God in our midst. Nine congregations are involved in the first 18-month process, and it is anticipated that at least two additional 18-month processes will be initiated with a like number of congregations participating in each. Many region-wide events over the past half-decade have focused on congregational transformation, and approximately eighty percent of the congregations in the Region have participated in some form of orientation to and/or participation in a transformational process. Wonderfully new and exciting things are happening through these varied spiritual journeys.
2. In addition to the regional model discussed above, congregations have found, among other processes, the following resources, listed in random order, to be helpful and effective: “*Unbinding the Gospel* and the *Real Life Evangelism Series*; Natural Church Development; Understanding Missional Church; *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*; Purpose-Driven Church (with the theological position modified to reflect Disciples of Christ beliefs and practices); various spiritual development resources; The Alban Institute resources; The Columbia Partnership; Faithful Planning; The Jesus Connection; Percept and Link2Lead; a building project; a new pastor.
3. Additional resources needed include, but are not limited to: financial; passion-driven congregations and pastors; evaluative assistance to help a congregation determine which CT process would best fit their particular situation; evaluation tools to know exactly when and how CT has transpired.

**Recommended Action:**

The General Board receives the report from the Upper Midwest Region.