

**Christian Church in Ohio
Regional Church Council Meeting
Northwest Christian Church
April 21, 2018**

Regional Pastor's Report

I begin my report by expressing appreciation to Rev. Steve Bentley. Steve is not here today. He is officially on vacation for four weeks beginning April 16, 2018. His final day of employment by the Christian Church in Ohio will be May 15, 2018. I am grateful for his 12 ½ years of faithful service to our regional church as a member of our regional of our ministerial staff.

I am confident the final two years, or so, of his ministry was by far the most difficult. And yet, he only speaks well of his experience while serving on the regional ministry staff in Ohio. His ministry will not end on May 15. I am confident Steve will be called, in due time, to another place to serve in ministry. I hope you will join with me in wishing Steve and Julie the very best in the years to come. For now, I simply want to say, on behalf of the Christian Church in Ohio, Thank You, Steve!

At a recent district clergy meeting, I made this observation: "I wish I could say the regional operation part of our annual budget was, at this point, fragile. But that would not be truthful. It is broken, maybe beyond repair." The Camp Christian side of our annual budget is rather healthy, but needs constant attention in order to remain so.

The regional operation side of the annual budget has but a few options left. As of June we will see a positive cash flow bump as Steve's compensation is no longer in the budget, but a portion of his compensation is in the Camp Christian side and therefore, will not be fully realized in the regional operations budget. We will move out of our current office space in October. That too will add some positive cash flow to our operational budget. But after that there is not much left to cut from the budget, and stay functioning as a regional church. Therefore, the primary move left is for congregations, and/or, individuals, to increase giving to the regional operations budget.

Recently, I was asked by the pastor of a congregation planning to do some fund raising projects Camp Christian: When these projects are presented to the congregation, I know someone will ask: How the church can be certain the money is going to Camp Christian and not to something else? My reply was as follows:

"Here is my response—I apologize if it is too blunt.

1. *Since July 2017 no money has been spent in any way other than what it was given to in the CCIO.*
2. *We have a completely different bookkeeping system, as of July 2017.*
3. *If money is given that is designated for Camp Christian it is unethical and likely illegal for it to spend it anywhere else.*
4. *If money is given for a particular project at Camp Christian, we can confirm with the congregation when that project is complete and paid for.*
5. *The staff members that, in my opinion, made extremely poor decisions about the regional finances in the past—which includes Camp Christian—no longer work for the region.*
6. *Finally, when trust is broken, as it has been in CCIO, it means that we have to go the extra mile in order to regain that trust. We are willing to do that. But at some point we must choose to trust each other again, with the full expectation that we will be accountable to each other.”*

I am not necessarily an advocate for the basic model of regional ministry we have used since Restructure in 1968. It began to show signs of significant stress fractures—financially and structurally—in the early years of this century. I am an advocate for a model of regional ministry that can faithfully offer support the mission and ministry of the congregations of the Christian Church in Ohio. Whatever the model is, it must be lived out ethically, effectively, efficiently, with integrity and justice for all. And, for that to be successful, the congregations and individuals of our regional church must support it financially, and with a mutual practice of accountability and transparency. The involvement of our congregants and clergy is essential.

A clergy colleague out west, resigned from her position as pastor of a congregation that she learned, after her arrival, had, for different reasons from us, experienced significant conflict, trauma and broken trust. After five years of pastoral presence and care leadership, preaching and nurturing she resigned and took intentional time for herself and her family. As she prepared to return to a position in ministry she wrote:

I learned in my last job that administration is not my favorite aspect of ministry. I also learned that I can do it, so long as people are willing to work together as a team. I do not believe a church can administrate its way to health. It can only pray, listen, love, study and serve its way to health. But I have made the mistake of spending too much time around the board room table and not enough around the communion table. I have covenanted to learn from this and to take the responsibility of leading people toward holy conversations and consensus rather than win/lose scenarios or contentious divisions within the Body of Christ.

I pray this might be the fabric of who we are in the days to come as the regional church in Ohio.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Community of Disciples of Christ in the Congo is strong. They have little money. They don't much in worldly possessions, at least by our standards. But their faith is powerful, and their ministry is vast and life changing.

One of the distinctive outward expressions of the Disciples in D.R. Congo is the common fabric of their clothing—shirts for men and dresses for women. They purchased large bolts of fabric custom made, and printed with words from scripture, the name of their church, the symbol of the Chalice, and other distinctive marks of who they are, printed on the fabric. They wear clothing made of this fabric when they worship together, when they gather as church for fellowship, and when they represent the church in doing ministry.

May the fabric of who we are as the Christian Church in Ohio—possibility printed on our clothing, but more importantly on our hearts and souls—become the clothing we wear in our life together as church: A church that understands we cannot administrate our way to health. We can only pray, listen, love, study and serve our way to health. Maybe, we too, have made the mistake of spending too much time around the board room table and not enough around the communion table together. Can we...will we...covenant to learn from our brokenness, and to take the responsibility of leading people toward holy conversations and consensus rather than win/lose scenarios or contentious divisions within the Body of Christ?

Such a covenant for our life together, does not in any way negate the importance of mutual transparency and accountability, it simply places who we are, as followers of Jesus, and what we are, as the church of Christ, at a higher priority than what we have.

I have been on board with you for the past ten months. We have journeyed together on a stormy and difficult voyage. The trip is not over, but we have removed, so to speak, all the wood from the deck and from the sides above water line of the boat we call CCIO. By the grace of God we are still afloat. We are taking on less water than a few months ago. But we must decide if, and how, to rebuild the boat in order for it to be seaworthy.

Right now, in my opinion, we do not have enough financial support to rebuild the CCIO boat and expect it to have a functional, even though small, crew.

Respectfully submitted,

John M. Richardson
Interim Regional Pastor

(The following three pages is a copy of the report submitted to the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), for their annual meeting.

**Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
General Board Meeting
April 14-17, 2018**

**Christian Church in Ohio (Disciples of Christ)
General Board Report**

Current Staff: John M. Richardson, Interim Regional Pastor
Jennie Stoddart Bernard, Office Administrator
Al Channel, Camp Christian Supervisor
Donna Channel, Food Service Director (Part-time)

Congregations: 153

*“How the gold has grown dim,
how the pure gold is changed!
The sacred stones lie scattered
at the head of every street.
The precious children of Zion
worth their weight in fine gold—
how they are reckoned as earthen pots,
the work of the potter’s hands!”*

~ Lamentations 4:1-2

I do wish this report could reflect how the ministries of the Christian Church in Ohio have furthered the priorities of the church. Many of our congregations faithfully offer ministries that do. But, as for the regional expression of the church, we have not, at least since the last General Board Report. In fact, the Christian Church in Ohio has been brought to its knees during the past year—a year in which decades of poor fiduciary practices, personnel conflicts, and lack of honest dialogue, brought our regional church to a precipice, and we are confronted with the question: Can we continue?

Through life experiences, I have learned that when one is brought to his or her knees—be it a person, a family, an organization, or a church—there is the hope of rising. But, while on our knees one must make a decision: Do I want to rise up? If yes, do I want to rise up and rebuild what was? Or, do I want to rise up and be open to a new way of being?

With deep humility, we are thankful for the prayers and support of the whole church. We are profoundly grateful for our deeply rooted faith in a God who journeys with us. Because of this, we know there is hope for the Disciples of Christ in Ohio. However, we know we cannot simply rebuild that which was the regional church in Ohio. There has been too much hurt, and trust has been broken. In addition, over the past 9 months we have learned our financial debt is overwhelming.

This General Board report is very different from the previous 14 General Board reports I have written for another region. Therefore, assuming most have heard something about the state of affairs of the region of Ohio, I feel it appropriate to give you a brief overview of what we have learned and experienced in the past year.

When I began serving as interim regional pastor on June 26, 2017, one special investigation task force had just completed its work on the oversight of new church pastors. A second investigation task force was reviewing a variety of complaints and made their report to the Regional Church Council in October of last year. The focus of that report was on finances. Their conclusion was that the Christian Church in Ohio had over spent its annual income by one to two hundred thousand dollars per year for over a decade. And, even though all the of the transactions were approved by the appropriate oversight bodies of the regional church, the deficit spending was covered, in part, or in whole, by spending into undesignated permanent funds, or reclassifying permanent funds in order to spend them. The report admonished former regional pastor, Bill Edwards, the Regional Church Council, and the Ohio Region as a whole, for poor fiduciary practices.

We stopped spending what permanent funds we had left, and we moved those investments from a for-profit investment company to the Christian Church Foundation. And as of August 1, 2017, our bookkeeping was moved to Treasury Services.

We also received a report from the CPA firm who had done our audits and/or financial reviews for several years. They were asked to determine if our policies were followed in the manner in which money had been spent by the region. The report concluded that although all funds were spent appropriately—at least according to precedent and practice—there were no current policies to benchmark.

The same CPA firm had said for years the Ohio Region is “not a going concern.” There was a demonstrated pattern of expenditures exceeding income and no plan in place to correct it.

On October 1, 2017, we terminated two full-time staff positions, and two part-time positions. As of May 15, 2018 another full time position will end, with the resignation of the Reverend Steve Bentley who served as associate regional pastor for over 12 years. In October of this year our 3-year office space lease will end, and we will seek the least

expensive option available. We are cutting expenses in every way possible. And yet, even if we were to balance our operational budget, we still owe the OGMP money, as well as the Lilly Foundation. And, we have an ethical, if not legal, responsibility to restore several trust funds—up to as much as \$1.6 million.

Regretfully, we withdrew from the Lilly Foundation grant program that we were awarded. The grant was designed to provide grants to pastors to help with educational debt, and to congregations to strengthen clergy compensation. But we simply did not have the capacity to raise the required matching funds. The Lilly staff was gracious in their response to our notice of withdrawal.

With all the downsizing and cutting expenses, there is also the question of how much income can, and will, our congregations provide through DMF, Christmas Offering, and other direct giving to the region. In 2017, 77 congregations in Ohio gave to Disciples Mission Fund, and about half of that number gave monthly or quarterly.

In the mist of all the difficult issues, a bright spot is the ministries offered at our regional camp and conference facility—Camp Christian. The financial challenges are not as serious, and there is a lot of interest and energy about Camp Christian. However, with Steve Bentley leaving our staff, the overall leadership for our camp programming will be challenging this summer. Steve has been our camp director for many years.

Another bright spot is the imagination and energy being given to conversations about what might be, as models for regional ministry in Ohio are discussed.

However, the question looms before us: Did we wait too long to take action?

The text from Lamentations, with which I opened this report, was written in a different context, but caught my attention because of the once significant amount of invested funds about which some in Ohio took great pride, is no longer there—how the gold has grown dim.

Today our focus must be on the people—our congregants, they are the work of the potter's hands and the people called to offer ministry in our communities and to the whole world.

May we be open to the future to which God calls the Christian Church in Ohio.

Respectfully submitted,

John M. Richardson
Interim Regional Pastor