

GB-22-1216

Name of ministry:

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma

Ministry

Executive/Regional

Minister name:

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Ministry

Executive/Regional

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**In what ways is your
region/ministry thriving?**

The Oklahoma Region continues to have a faithful and resilient ministry throughout the Region and denomination. I am grateful for the excellent leadership on the Region's Executive Committee and Board. I am also grateful to serve alongside gifted staff, Marla Hensley, Ellen Beer, and Rev. Michael Davison. The clergy in Oklahoma ministries, congregational, chaplaincy, and non-profit, are dedicated and resilient and strive to shepherd and lead their flocks to serve with love and grace in a broken, covid-stricken world. Congregations continue to be faithful in online and in-person worship and through their generous giving to their local congregation, the region, the denomination, and most especially Week of Compassion. Despite the ongoing pandemic, congregations continue to reach out to serve their communities in a variety of ways through ministries of sharing food, back packs, shoes, cards, prayer and hope.

The 2021 Camp & Conference season was in-person and was led by an "all star team" of volunteers. Participating were: 28 congregations; 154 camp participants, 65 who were first year campers; 36 volunteer directors and counselors. We are celebrating their presence and that due to safe practices by all participants, there were no

reports of COVID-19.

Oklahoma also provided Virtual VBS. Participants included 80 children and adults from 12 congregations. Again, this was led by an "all star team" of children's ministers.

The Commission on Clergy walked alongside 12 incare students throughout the year who are in seminary and/or attending the Center for Ministry Training at Phillips Theological Seminary. In 2021 the Commission on Clergy approved the ordination of 3 students: Gregory Chambers, Coy Remer, and Kelsey Cobbs. In 2021, 4 Commission on Clergy members took the FaithTrust Institute Train the Trainers and were able to resume teaching Healthy Boundaries online this fall for clergy to be in compliance with requirements for Ministerial Standing. In December the Commission on Clergy approved and blessed standing for active and retired ministers.

While we lament congregations closing, in 2021 Midwest Blvd. Christian Church, Midwest City, took extraordinary measures to close well and leave a legacy story. Over the last 2.5 years these members prayed and planned. This year they finally closed on the sale of their building. With their assets, they contributed 10% to DMF, made large contributions to both the Christian Church Commission and the Region to support new church starts, the camping ministry, and the Region's general budget, and created an endowment with Oklahoma Disciples Foundation. They also gave generously to the local ministries they supported throughout the years. Their legacy story will live on for many years to come, and equally as important, many are remaining Disciples of Christ by attending First Midwest City.

What are the biggest challenges facing your region/ministry this year?

There is much to lament in our region, and our lives for that matter. To quote Rev. David Spain from his January 2, 2022 sermon:

"The ongoing pandemic and the associated frustrations that it continues;

The stubborn inequities that exist not only racially but economically;

The increasing divisions of people into seemingly irreconcilable camps;

The abhorrent historic behavior by those in power including those in the church who have been complicit in caring more about protecting the institutions they serve than serving the people for whom the institutions exist;

The Orwellian use of language proclaiming lies as facts and facts as suspect;

The challenges of living on this earth so generously given by God and so callously disregarded by those to whom it has been entrusted."

This said, I also believe "grief" is one of the biggest challenges. Everyone is covered in a shroud of grief which clouds the heart and mind and makes us all long for what once was. And for some, anger is a big challenge. Anger that the pandemic is still among us and anger that when a loved one is in need of health care, the hospitals are full and cannot tend to our loved one. Anger that has washed ashore to many of our health care workers and has overwhelmed and exhausted them.

Thus, COVID-19 and its variants have led congregational members to heated discussions, harsh words, painful decisions, and unimaginable conflict over masks and vaccinations.

This year Oklahoma had three congregations struggling with surprises in their pastoral leadership which resulted in conflict, hurt, and division. Interestingly, none of these three pastors had current standing in Oklahoma, and all

three were in the process of removing their congregation from Disciples of Christ. After intervention by the Regional staff, much prayer, and hours of coaching, all three have made difficult decisions and taken corrective action to remain Disciples of Christ Congregations.

This season also presents some challenges for Search and Call. The pastor pool is low for congregations to call a new pastor, particularly in rural Oklahoma. Search committees have criteria that is no longer attractive or acceptable to pastors: low pay, no benefits, conservative theology, gender expectations, etc. Congregations want to "save" money by calling a bi-vocational pastor, having them live in the community, but have no bi-vocation to offer.

This season of pandemic has also revealed yet another layer of who's in and who's out, particularly in the tech arena. Our region has provided webinars to help clergy and lay people learn about tech and licensing requirements, and some have managed to make the leap. But some have not and have given up finding it to be too difficult or time consuming. Also, clergy have discovered that the aging population has so many obstacles to receive the gift of online presence and participate.

We lament that neither Oklahoma Women's or the Oklahoma Men's ministries have found a way to transition to online support and fellowship.

Pastors are depleted of creativity and energy. While our staff encourages self-care and sabbaticals, congregations can be hard-hearted. We have provided a series of webinars to help clergy identify their needs and to be supportive in this strange and difficult time of ministry.

I am always concerned that Oklahoma has not started a new congregation in four years.

An ongoing challenge is finances. We are always wondering how the health of congregational giving is to their own congregation as well as DMF, Special Offerings, and Annual Fund. Oklahoma is blessed to have a variety of sources of income: DMF, Christmas & Pentecost Offering, Annual Fund, Endowments, Rent, and some miscellaneous funds.

Oklahoma is scheduled to have a hybrid Regional Assembly in April of 2022. Due to the pandemic surges, we really find it difficult to plan.

Having just heard the stories once again of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, I hope and pray that Oklahoma Disciples (all Disciples really) can reimagine their own stories as they follow along with the magi. The magi came to the powers that be and asked, "Where is the child who has been born?" Then remarkably, they trusted and followed a great light beyond their own knowing to encounter the glorious baby Jesus. And then, they went home by another way. I want Disciples to find that same trust and have that same encounter!

What is something you hope to accomplish in the next year?

In the year to come, I long for Disciples to discover ways to offer a healing path for the vulnerable and broken, and among those divided to build community and common ground. I long for Disciples to work to reform and redeem those deeply hurt and burned out, to offer courageous care to all those who have been impacted these last two years, and to find the courage to speak the truth in love, not just for now but for the generations to come.

Specific to Oklahoma, how can we become leaders who proclaim an unimaginable invasion of love and joy and grace and peace for all? How can we live so that those who encounter us will ask, where do you find this love and joy? How can the women and men re-discover and

re-claim their joy of serving?

Oklahoma will soon receive the third largest group of Afghan friends. We are working toward being open and welcoming, but the needs are great. I hope that Disciple congregations can work together to provide a simple home of love and grace as our Afghan friends arrive to such a foreign land.

On a more practical note, the Region's lease with OKC First Christian Church ends in 2023. I hope our Regional Board can see that far ahead and find a way to a new home for the Regional Office. After 60 years in one location, there will be much organizational work on the staff to get ready for a such move!

What is something you would like the General Board to know about your region/ministry?

Despite the ongoing pandemic, despite the politics in Oklahoma, and despite the racism and misinformation which continue to thrive in Oklahoma, we have two state of the art museums which have opened in 2021: Greenwood Rising in Tulsa (www.greenwoodrising.org) which opened in May, and First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City (famok.org) which opened in September. Both of these very fine museums are wonderful teaching tools for Pro-Reconciliation Anti-Racism. It is the first time for both for Black Wall Street in Tulsa and the 39 Native American populations to tell "their" stories.

As I mentioned above, after 60 years in our current location, the Regional office will need to move in 2023 or before. This will be in addition to all the other responsibilities the staff carries for the work of the Region.

How can we pray for your region/ministry?

Give thanks for the leadership in the Region of Oklahoma, both the staff and the Regional Executive Committee and Board.
Give thanks for the 263 pastors who currently serve in Oklahoma, and the 80 pastors who have retired from

ministry.

Give thanks for our 136 congregations who long for more people sitting in their pews and struggle to re-imagine "church".

Give thanks for all those Disciples who witness by their living and give voice to God's justice.

Give thanks for all our young people who are yearning to be together and who are learning how to dream with God.

Pray that Oklahoma Disciples can open their hearts to Afghan friends and be willing to help provide for some of their needs.