

GB-22-1223

Name of ministry:

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the Upper Midwest

Ministry

Executive/Regional

Minister name:

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Ministry

Executive/Regional

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

Against the backdrop of a challenging year, there are signs of hope and growth. Congregations are adapting and adding more digital pieces to their ongoing ministry -- online worship, electronic giving, video conferencing, email/text updates, social media usage, and much more.

There are new outreach and justice ministries among many of our congregations -- supporting refugees and immigrants, advocating for fair treatment of all, meeting needs in communities, and more. Even more, our region continues to deepen our commitment to the vision of being an anti-racist, pro-reconciliation church under the guidance of an engaged and passionate regional team.

The long history of a strong camp program has continued. While camp participation was down this year compared to pre-pandemic numbers, it exceeded expectations. And the region's conference center hosted an increasing number of events through the year, suggesting strong usage in 2022.

Our region continues to nurture new ministry. We support three new church plants in North Dakota and

Iowa. We actively support people discerning a call to ordained or commissioned ministry; this year we celebrated the gifts of three newly ordained ministers. And our regional provided grants to a dozen congregations who were developing or expanding ministries in their communities.

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

Ministry during and after a global pandemic is incredible challenging . It is likely that most congregations and ministers in our region find it easier to identify challenges than to name successes in the past year. Many congregations are experiencing declining participation and some declining giving. Some leaders are worn out; some are burned out and stepping out of leadership.

Perhaps the great challenge of the past year and the year ahead is the shift that we need in perspective. By the end of 2021, all of our region's congregations had returned to in person worship, usually with online options too. Virtually all of them have noticeably smaller in person attendance than in 2019. So in each worship service the church feels much smaller -- even if an equal number are participating in a hybrid model of worship. From conversations with pastors and participants in various congregations, I can tell how repeatedly demoralizing worshiping in person can be. This observation was highlighted by comments in services where the opposite was true. Twice I joined congregations marking ministry milestones and the sanctuaries were fuller than they'd been all year. So many people shared with me how nice that was... and how different it was from every other Sunday.

Judging the effectiveness of ministry has always been a challenge for Disciples because so many of us shy away from metrics. This means that we each get to create our own baselines for what good or effective ministry looks like. and feels like. Very little of our ministry in 2021 has

looked or felt successful based on these internalized baselines rooted in the past.

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

We hope to develop and deepen networks of lay leaders across the region -- connecting elders with elders, congregational treasurers with other treasurers, etc. Previously, there was some opportunity for this in geographic clusters, though cluster activities have decreased in recent years. We anticipate that regional conversations planned for the spring will help to kickstart this effort.

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

This is a challenging time for congregations who are seeking pastoral leadership. There seem to be many more congregations seeking ministers than ministers seeking new calls. At the same time, we are leaning heavily on retired clergy to serve in some of these congregations in transition.

This mirrors a wider phenomenon. Demographics from other mainline Protestant denominations suggest that there are fewer people in formation to be ministers than the number of ministers who are retiring (not to mention those who are leaving ministry before retirement). And the median age of active ministers is older. This suggests that we are approaching a shift in the availability of congregational pastors in the next few years, which will be a challenge for our congregations, our region, and our general church.

Our church is resilient and congregations often find creative ways to engage in ministry without having a settled pastor. Still, for all of the changes caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, a change in availability of settled pastors will likely have large ramifications for this Disciples.

**How can we pray for your
region/ministry?**

Pray for our congregational leaders, for chaplains, for pastors. It has been an emotionally draining year for people in so many areas of life, including in ministry. There are so many anxieties and fears as we adapt to changes accelerated by the pandemic, including fears about job security, congregational survival, and more.

Frequently, I encounter people who are physically and emotionally drained. Some put a good face on it, though the challenges of recent months have slowed them and dulled their energy a bit. Some frequently voice fears and seem resigned to living into a broken future. Others appear to be withdrawing completely.

And pray for our regional staff and leaders as we strive to provide safe spaces for people to express grief and fear, to nurture resilience, to resource growth, and to glimpse God's hope and possibilities for such a time as this.