

Dear Congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Mid-America

Greetings in Christ's love to all the individual members, congregations, and manifestations of the Body of Christ known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Mid-America. Your Regional and Area Ministers constantly raise prayers of thanksgiving for the faithfulness and sacrificial love you express for Christ. We give thanks for the leaders who have been called of God to serve in this Regional expression of Christ's Body.

Recently the Area Ministers and Regional Minister spent two days in prayer and consultation. We were blessed to have Dr. Richard Hamm, former General Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), consulting with us during our conversations and prayers. Our time together was dedicated to earnest sharing about the current situation of the Church and to prayerful discernment of next steps God may be inviting us to take. The purpose of this letter is to provide a brief description of where we are at this time, how we came to be here and to invite your participation in the continuation of our efforts to respond to God in our midst in a timely discernment of next steps.

Where we are

It is no secret that there is a global economic crisis. This economic stress is creating financial difficulties for everyone. The financial effect is impacting all ministries. During the Regional Assembly in October, we adopted a budget committee recommendation with the understanding that these challenging times meant we would be regularly reviewing our financial status and adjusting our budgets in light of those changing times. The newly appointed budget committee and newly constituted executive committee have been diligently pursuing this task. The original budget has already been altered, eliminating any cost of living adjustments for staff and making deep reductions in many operational items. Considering the possibilities of even more difficult times ahead, contingencies have been identified for even more reductions in the budget that will be painful and that could eventually result in staff salary reductions or consolidations.

Serious financial considerations have been a constant concern for our Rickman Conference Center operations for several years. The Rickman Future Mission and Ministry Committee is working to insure financial soundness and effective ministry now and in the future. Steps have been taken to increase usage fees and to determine significant costs reductions that are being considered by the budget committee.

The Region receives funds that are given for specific purposes—such as bequests, designated gifts, scholarships, etc. The Mid-America Foundation, now over 100 years old, manages our longer term funds. Those funds that have been given with specific uses in mind are not used for any other purpose. All of those funds continue to provide income for specific ministry purposes—such as scholarships, new church support, transformational church support, etc.

The Region has also been steward of funds given for regional use in case of emergency or for use as reserve funds. These unrestricted resources have been under the management

of the Mid-America Foundation, where these funds are managed in two ways. Some of the funds are placed in interest earning cash accounts and others are in investments. In lean years, the cash accounts may be used to cover a shortfall or emergency need. After covering the losses in the Rickman Conference Center operations for this past year and covering shortfalls in the Regional Operational budget from the recent economic downturn, these cash reserves are running much lower. Invested funds are in stocks and currently are less in value than if they are left alone until the value rises. The total market value of the cash and market funds varies with each year. For example, the economic conditions after 9/11/2001 brought the value of the funds down to \$248,500 and the economic upturns brought the market value of the funds to \$453,600 at the close of 2007, when the current economic downturn began. On 12/31/2008, the total value of these historical funds is estimated to be \$306,800 (including the value of loans to Areas and Rickman). The Region budgets to operate within the bounds of the gifts being currently received so that these unrestricted funds function as our "seed corn." Over the past few years, these funds have been utilized to provide loans for capital needs in short term situations. For example, such loans have enabled purchase of autos for Areas when requested and the replacement of parts of the Heating and Air-Conditioning System at Rickman.

Area Ministries face significant financial issues. All four Areas have expressed needs for additional funds, some even having difficulty meeting payroll needs. Areas have made special appeals to congregations and individuals over the last year. All of us as family of faith have responded lovingly and sacrificially and will continue to walk together through these difficult times. A proposal for considering how the Region may assist Areas in times of emergency from the unrestricted funds is being presented to the Region's Executive Committee.

Realistically, if the Region seeks to underwrite losses in operations from the Regional, Rickman and Area Ministries at the present and in the near term, the unrestricted funds would be exhausted in two years or less.

How we got to where we are

While it is true that the current financial difficulties are so severe as a result of a global economic crisis, where we are today is not just the result of the economy. There are other factors. Who we are and how we live in Mid-America is a product of more than 190 years of service to Christ in this part of the world. Some of the earliest Disciple congregations started in this Region. From the outset, congregations understood their own identity as congregationally constituted and governed and, at the same time, as being inherently connected to all others in the Body of Christ. The first Disciple congregation started in Missouri was at Salt Creek in 1816. By 1837, the first District meeting of congregations was held at Bear Creek in Boone County. The first State meeting of the congregations was held in 1841. In pursuit of the mission of reaching the frontier for Christ, congregations banded together to provide for District Missionaries and State missionaries to spread the gospel.

During this same time period, members and congregations were joining together to form ministries that went beyond state and national boundaries. Missionary Societies formed. From our very beginning, congregations supported District/Area, State/Regional and national/international ministries. This meant that congregations were constantly raising funds to assist with numerous efforts to spread the gospel.

There were times of constant growth and economic expansion for the country as well as for Disciples. Eventually, as congregations became more established and the frontier became more civilized, the functions of District and State Missionaries and the functions of national and international societies evolved. Congregations found the constant appeals for funds to be duplications of efforts and began discussions about how to be more efficient in supporting ministries. Ministries beyond the doorsteps of the local congregations began cooperative efforts to raise support for ministries and to share information about ministries. Unified Promotion was born. This effort was later changed to the Basic Mission Finance effort. In the recent past this common fund was renamed the Disciples Mission Fund.

As the entire nation became more prosperous, the focus of attention shifted from spreading the gospel across the frontier to spreading the gospel around the world. Years later, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Disciples adopted the current denominational structure. As these changes took place, changes also came to the organizational life of District and State Ministries. District Missionaries became District Ministers whose tasks were serving the near-by needs of the congregations. State Missionaries became State Secretaries, providing services to congregations. State staffs were designed to provide expertise and District Secretaries were to provide pastoral care to clergy. Later, under the new Design, State Missions became Regions.

In Missouri, the inclusion of congregations in Illinois led to a change of our name to the Mid-America Region in 1978. At that time, the name of District Ministers was changed to Area Ministers. The entire support structure for congregations was provided by 9 Area Ministers and the Regional Minister with 6 Associate Regional Ministers who provided program expertise. During this period, additional financial stress was generated by the withdrawal of congregations who chose not to “cooperate”. The widely recognized decline of mainline churches became more apparent in this environment.

In 1982, the Mid-America Region restructured, merging the 9 Areas into 5 Areas and forming the Council of Areas. Financial constraints were a major rationale for the effort. Areas provided near-by ministries of pastoral support for clergy and congregations. The Regional Staff provided administration, representation for and to the wider church, and program responsibilities relating to and guided by commissions and constituencies. Since that time, there has been a continued shrinkage of the staff of the Region and a continued concentration of responsibilities into the portfolios of remaining staff. Shortly after the restructure in 1982, the Kansas City Area withdrew to become a Region. We now have one full time Regional Minister and three full time Area Ministers and two part time Area Ministers. Areas provide much of the programmatic ministries in the Region.

Even with the entire organizational effort attempting to do more with less, still, funds dwindled. The basic support for Areas is provided as it was in the earliest times by the congregations contributing directly to the support of an Area Budget. The 1982 restructure document established Area boundaries with expected numbers of congregations and financial support capabilities. Funds for the Region have been generated by a proportional share of the Disciples Mission Fund. As a DMF covenant partner, the Region receives a portion of the funds given to the Disciples Mission Fund by our Mid-America congregations (currently 40%). Our Covenant with Disciples Mission Fund prevents the Region from directly soliciting gifts from congregations. It similarly restricts General Ministries from directly appealing to congregations except as a whole church. Special Day Offerings are part of the Disciple Mission Fund structure, with receipts of the offerings designated for specific ministries. The Christmas Offering is designated for Regional support. Some funds are designated for specific ministries in the region—such as the Reconciliation and Pentecost Offerings. These funds cannot be used for regular Regional or Area causes.

Next Steps

In prayer and consultation, we are calling upon congregations, Areas and Regional leadership to enter into a time of prayer and collective discernment to determine next steps toward whatever God is calling forth in and among us. Even as we continue to make sacrifices, find ways to share resources and determine efficiencies in operations, we continue to seek God's direction in how to be faithful and effective in serving Christ.

As our consultation retreat came to a close, we were in deep agreement that we will work together intentionally and consistently at developing a new model for the ministries to which we are called. We committed ourselves to participate in a process with congregations and leaders to arrive at a recommended model by October 2009.

This letter is one of the next steps to be taken. Three Area Ministers (Bill and Donna Rose-Heim and Kris Tenny-Brittian) will develop an instrument to request feedback. Two Area Ministers (Mike Weinman and Penny Ross Corona) will work on a process to be recommended to Regional and Area Executive Committees and to the Council of Areas. We have covenanted together to encourage the Council of Areas to come together with Area Executive Committees August 28 & 29 at the Rickman Conference Center in a time of consultation and discernment. We believe it is possible to determine a model for how we might proceed in to the future and to circulate the model among congregations with the intent of completing our discernment by October, 2009.

As your Regional and Area Ministers, we invite you to join us in this time of prayer and discernment. Pray with urgency and with confidence in God's guidance. Our mission is not completed. God is calling a new work among us. Please, join us in the new adventure of God's love.

Prayerfully in Christ,

Danny L. Stewart
Regional Minister

Kris Tenny-Brittian
Northeast Area Minister

Bill Rose-Heim
Northwest Area Minister

Donna Rose Heim
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W. Michael Weinman
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Penny Ross-Corona
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