

Regional Assembly State of the Region November 2008

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Georgia is making progress. We are in better shape than we were a year or two ago. We have good staff who work hard and achieve great things. Give your thanks to Betty and Michael for the work they do under sometimes hard conditions. The uncertainty of finances has been hard on them and harder even on our support staff who for the first time in many years are not present because of the cost cutting measures.

Many people would talk to us of depressing things like the smaller number of members than 10 or 20 years ago; or the number of churches which are declining; or even the churches that have closed or left the denomination, I think we need to focus on the successes and the positive moves by the church. We serve a God that is good and even in the roughest times we can be thankful for the goodness and faithfulness of our God. Our Region is a story of working to be true and faithful; recognizing God's presence with us in that endeavor.

We have many things to talk about and to share with people as our story. We can share about the child at camp who discovered faith in the experience of one week in that special community. We can talk about the woman at Women's Retreat who found a supportive shoulder as she shared her tough times. We can talk about the willingness of people to give again and again to help the Region and Camp Christian through the financial rough spots. We can talk of the mission trips congregations have taken, or of the bold new step to connect with overseas missions through the Pilgrimage trips to India.

This Region has a lot of good things going for it. And we need to be sure we are talking about that. I remember serving a congregation with an image problem. I told the board they had a task. It was to be sure that the last thing said in any conversation about our church was something positive. That task is yours and mine for this Region. We need to remind people of the good things happening and be sure they are thinking of those things rather than past or present problems.

In recent times In Assemblies and around the Region we have been talking about Transformation. Recently the Columbia Partnership said Transformation is ongoing rather than a one time process. As we seek God's direction for the church, moving into the future, we need to continue referring to transformation as a progressive thing.... Moving and continuing.... Never can we stop and say "Well, we are transformed, and now we can do something else..." At most we can say that we are different.

Romans 13:11 refers to the idea that Transformation is an ongoing process rather than a destination. "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed." Similarly, the ministry of the church is a process. It is continually moving and we are closer to God's ideal now than when we first believed.

That is a stirring thought for us as we consider the church moving ahead. It will not be the same as it used to be. We are moving closer to God's ideal and the calling and mission for us. We are, if we believe the Holy Spirit of God is still working in the hearts and lives of God's people. When God's Spirit is present we will be changing, in structure and ministries as we get closer to salvation than when we first believed.

Within the congregations of the Christian Church in Georgia we have many stages of health. Some congregations are strong and robust condition having seen a new vision. We have congregations with new ministerial leadership who have gained a new spark of gospel fire. This year we have had 8 congregations call new ministers to begin ministry. That means a new sparks of ideas and leadership for our Region.

At the same time there is an incredible concern. We have 15 congregations which will have to face the question of continued existence in the next 5 to 10 years. There are another 5 – 10 who will face that question in the 10 to 15 year period. For some, things are inevitable. For others there remains the chance to become intentional about a new start and renewed life. That will take intentional work to grow numerically and to discover new callings in ministry. For those who face the reality of these numbers the only option to dying as a congregation is to revitalize and be transformed. We are here to help but we cannot do it for you. That is between you and God.

The reality is that all of us need to focus again on growth. Statistics tell us that unless there is a gain of 10% in your membership each year, you are shrinking. We must begin to hold ourselves as congregations accountable to our efforts in evangelism and church growth. Church Growth ideas that were popular twenty or thirty years ago must be ramped up again in our congregations. The mission of Jesus Christ to spread the gospel cannot be ignored even as we move ahead with other things.

The face of our Region is changing. We need to embrace and rejoice in that change. The Christian Church in Georgia is becoming more like the face of our society. We are more urban than rural. We are more technological than print oriented. We are more diverse in terms of culture and race. This is reason to celebrate because the mission Jesus has laid in front of us is to go into all the world. To go into all the world and make Disciples. That world is different than it was 30 years ago. The face of our Region means we are being faithful to the call and we will continue to be faithful to that call.

We have been working towards the accomplishment of the 4 priorities which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adopted.

Establishing New Congregations has progressed in this Region. Since 2000 we've had three successful starts. We currently have 6 attempts either in the emerging or formation stage. We anticipate two new church starts will be recognized as full congregations at this Assembly. Finances inhibit us in this effort. The Pentecost Special Offering provides the training for New Church Planters.

Congregational Transformation has risen as a priority for us. We have an established Congregational Transformation Task Force to guide efforts in our Region. Five congregations this year have been in intentional transformation efforts. Michael Weeks is trained to assist congregations in their transformation efforts through Strategic Spiritual Journey. We are also hosting a General Church Conference on Congregational Transformation in Atlanta, January 23 – 25, 2009.

Training new leadership for congregations is a major concern for our ministry. The Ministry Commission currently has candidates for transfer of standing, ordination

and licensing. We have an agreement with the Christian College of Georgia, for courses to provide comprehensive training for those who apply for licensed ministry. This summer at General Assembly we anticipate a new Ministry Document will provide us the opportunity to revamp our own documents about qualifications and process for recognition of ministry in this Region. Our goal is to provide a trained ministry and lay leadership for the congregations in Georgia.

The fourth priority of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is to move ahead as an anti-racist, pro-reconciling church. Towards that we have entered into an historic agreement with the other 8 regions of the South East Regional Fellowship to call a Minister of Antiracism and Reconciliation. Rev. Sekinah Hamlin is with us this Assembly and has begun her work of guiding our committee on the path towards this work. As well, we are hearing a call from the Reconciliation Committee for more permanent status within the structure of the Region.

Where does this leave the Christian Church in Georgia? I remember during my growing up years standing on the muskeg in northern Alberta. Muskeg is almost like a bog, where the ground shakes and quivers as you walk. Each step risks sinking into bottomless muck and gook. The trick is to find those places where you can stand firmly and then scout out where you are going to go.

I think the Christian Church in Georgia is at the point where the sinking sand and shaky quagmire upon which we have been standing is firming up. I believe we can see ways out of our financial stresses. We recognize that it is time to stand and look for the direction we will go. With our feet firmer we can work now at looking about to find the path onto which God is beckoning us. We will be able to discover God's mission and the structure for us to work with. I believe we will worry less about where we are stepping day by day and discover more of the ways we can help others discover Jesus Christ.

The mission I see for the Christian Church in Georgia is to help congregations be the best possible outposts of God's love and grace which they can be. As we do that the mission of God, to go into all the world, will be closer to being reality. May God bless us and assist us as we venture forth to do God's will.