RICK REISINGER’S PRESENTATION

NEW CHURCH SUMMIT

AUGUST 19, 2020

Thank you, Terri. Thank you for your vision, support and overall friendship with me and with DCEF as well as the whole Church. It really is appreciated.

Greetings everyone. I want to greet you myself and welcome you to this New Church Summit. It’s something we’ve been planning for a while and I am really looking forward to what will happen over these next three days. It really is wonderful to look around this Zoom room and see the diversity that exists here today. It is something we have worked on as a Church for a long time and we have a long way to go. It is representative here and I think will really reflect well on how we do New Church in new ways and how we move forward and share the gospel and make disciples. Thank you for being here today and participating in the event and, as Terri said, I wish we could be in person too and hope we can do that as we continue our work beyond this Summit.

Terri was just talking about not focusing on how things have always been done or how we used to do it. My task really is to share with you the evolution or history of New Church Ministry and Disciples. Fortunately, Disciples only has about 200 years of history. Unfortunately, it takes a long time to talk about 200 years so I’m not going to do all of that. I am going to compartmentalize a few things and talk about eras with just some highlights and hopefully not take too long. I think when we look way back there may be some things we can learn that will be helpful today as we try to do things in new ways and without perhaps a lot of structure.

The first period of time I call pre-1832 to 1929 so we are covering a little over 100 years. The new church movement really has been a part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) since before the day in 1832 when Barton Stone’s Christian Churches and Alexander and Thomas Campbell’s Disciples of Christ Churches joined together in a new Christian movement. It was a time when sharing the gospel, making disciples and organizing new communities of faith, new congregations was most of what was being done. New congregations were planted throughout the Midwest. As the population moved west, Disciples moved west and new congregations were started all the way to the west coast. I really believe that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) started as a new church movement and has been from its beginning. One example that I would like to share from that period of time is that new congregation establishment never ceased during that period. There was a continuous flow of new congregations all across this country and into Canada. One of the examples that I found in some of the history of Church Extension is that in 1902 Disciples were organizing over 300 new congregations a year. Those 300 congregations were looking to Church Extension for some funding to help them get going and have their first house of worship, but at the time we could only serve about 100 of them. Things were moving so fast. That continued through the 1920s until the Great Depression.

When the stock market crashed in the 1930s and to 1945 there was little new congregation work and nothing much occurred during that period of time. The country was focused, the world was focused, on different things—the Depression and then WWII. When the war was over it was time to get started again with the new church movement and Disciples did. There was a rebirth of the movement and great accomplishments were taking place in the 1950s and early 1960s, but it really didn’t have the kind of momentum it had before that. The country was recovering. Churches were being started and many were started by 1965. In fact, it was really our most active period of new congregations up to that point and until the 2020 Vision. The congregations, instead of being started in the new territories and new communities, were beginning to happen in the suburbs. By 1965 I think we all are probably familiar with things that began to happen at that point. The momentum moved away from new church establishment because of funding but also because of the events happening in America that led to another period of time of about 15 years with little or no new congregation work.

This was the period of 1966 to 1979 the Vietnam war, civil rights movement and, I believe, the restructure of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were issues that needed attention of Disciples. That moved attention away from starting new congregations. As an example of this, in 1971 the General Assembly adopted a resolution that placed an emphasis on development and renewal of existing congregations rather than starting new congregations.

That led us up to 1979 when one of these kinds of Summits first happened. In 1979, in true Church Extension lingo, it was called a consultation. It called together 75 people representing Regions, Areas, General Church Ministries, clergy and lay. The purpose of the consultation was to plan, strategize and set the course for a new emphasis for new congregation establishment at that time. The program for the 1980s set a goal of establishing 100 congregations, with 30% of those congregations being people of color. There was strategized fundraising and a recommended process to start these congregations. That process was an expensive model called the pastor/developer model. I know some of you are familiar with that. Church Extension and DHM had distinctive roles and they were given the responsibility of presenting a resolution to the 1979 General Assembly to create this movement and begin again.

During that 1980 program, Church Extension hired Jim Powell to be the Director of New Congregation Establishment. He and his team worked for Church Extension and technically for the whole Church to develop this program and to move forward. It was very successful in terms of numbers. The goal of 100 was exceeded with 128 congregations started. 36 of these represented Black, Hispanic, Korean, Filipino and multi-cultural congregations. Didn’t quite reach the 30% goal, but about 28% was achieved.

As the 1980s program neared its end a resolution was adopted in 1987 to begin entering and planning for a process that would result in an enhanced church-wide strategy of targeting, establishing and funding new congregations through the 1990s. This was a period of time that demographic work was brought into play and we were looking for specific areas that were right for Disciples development. A goal of 200 new congregations with the emphasis being to start African-American, Hispanic, Asian and congregations for people of color. We called Deborah Thompson as the new Director of New Congregation Establishment as Jim Powell had moved more into an administrative role in Church Extension. It was successful although the goal of 200 new congregations was not met. 186 congregations were attempted and 148 were active at the end of the decade. However, the best news was that of these 148 congregations 92 were congregations of people of color, 6 multi-cultural congregations and 50 Caucasian/Anglo congregations. So, we exceeded the goal for congregations of people of color.

Once again as we neared the end of that 20 year period, the Church called together a task force to begin planning for the next century. In November 2000 Church Extension held a New Church Summit and invited Regional New Church Commission members, Regional Ministers, General Ministry Presidents and seminary representatives to consider the future of the new church movement. George Bullard was the consultant for the Summit and provided the keynote address and future direction advice. One of the interesting things about George’s presentation and the Summit was that it was at a time when our General Minister and President, Dick Hamm, was creating the 2020 Vision. He shared that 2020 Vision during a plenary session and in that was a goal to start 600 new congregations. George Bullard in response to the presentation said something like 600 would be fine but if you want real growth a goal of 1,000 new congregations would be much better. Those attending the Summit agreed with George and Dick agreed and wouldn’t you know in his actual 2020 Vision there was the goal of 1,000 new congregations. That is the power that you can have when you come together to talk and think about the future and you release some of the constraints that you have.

Rick Morse was called to be the New Church Ministry Director and a new team was put together that included Gilberto Collazo from Puerto Rico, Judy Turner from DHM staff (at that time Judy was secunded), and Dee Long was named Program Administrator. That new church program is coming to the end of its phase. It grew over time and had different configurations and staff members, but really was successful in working towards our goal of 1,000 new congregations. We’ve reached the 1,000 in new congregations and there are still a good number of those in existence today. I think that is around a 57-60% level of success at this point.

It was important to have past New Church Summits and it is important to have this New Church Summit. We are in a completely different time. I think this team is the place that can help lead us in a new direction. Sometimes it is really hard to get passed things and we just have to. I think we have learned things through the 200 years on how to start new congregations and how not to do it. Today is just nothing like we have experienced before.

Disciples Church Extension Fund has changed through the years. Terrell asked that I share a little bit about the connection with New Church and DCEF. When DCEF was started as Board of Church Extension in 1883 it was started as an organization that could provide funding for new and mission congregations. The purpose was to make small loans to help a congregation get its house of worship when they were at that point. Funding was not really existent. There were traveling evangelists and others that started the congregations. When it came time to build even in those days it was difficult although the building may only have cost around $1,000-$1,500. At that time Church Extension made $500 loans. Today we are making multi-million dollar loans to help congregations, both new and established. The real purpose of Church Extension was to supplement and help fund new congregations. I think we are faithfully doing that today.

I really do think this Summit will continue beyond these three days. This isn’t going to be the end. There will be subsequent times that we will ask you to gather again as we put together a strategy of how we move forward. How we reimagine New Church Ministry; how we reimagine funding New Church Ministry; and, how we together create a unified approach. We need to be unified in that strategy and we need to be unified as a whole Church. We need to find ways to remove some of the constraints. Change the expectations on how we do it and create new ways. I really love “1,000 new churches in 1,000 different ways.” I think something like that will continue and it needs to continue and we need to do this work. My passion is around New Church and this next period of time is going to be challenging, but I think we have so many opportunities and I know that we will be able to discern God’s call and direction. Thank you.

Question following presentation: Any ideas you have about our future in light of COVID-19 and the pandemic in which we are now? Any thoughts about how we might move forward given current state of society.

Response from Rick: What I do know is that we need to move forward and we need to figure it out. I really think that it is providing us with some opportunities. Opportunities to really change. I think there will be buildings, just going to be different. I think there is also going to be a place in the cyber world; a place where we are doing ministry online virtually. And it is not just for the members of that church, but it is a ministry to the community. I think that is a change that will come and I think it is good. For example, take my congregation where I attend. We have been worshipping online, but it is a recorded worship and different members record certain parts of the service and our church staff pull it all together in a video. We are a church without a building. This is a congregation that was established in the 1950’s. We sold our building and are moving to a new area. We have been meeting in a school. We’ve just found a place to rent so now we have a place we can use 24/7. We really aren’t seeing many people coming back. We are developing a minimal type video setting so that we can broadcast. As we begin gathering again or even before, we are looking to shift to having live online streaming and changing our focus from just keeping everybody that has been a part of us active to reaching out to new people and that is starting to work. I think the pandemic is giving us a chance to restart things in new ways. I think new congregations have the ability to do that better than some of the established congregations. I hope to see some intermixing with New Church Ministry doing it and then helping other congregations do the same thing. That’s the main thing that I see.