Report to the 2017 General Board and General Assembly

For over 100 years, the Council on Christian Unity (CCU) has served as a general ministry of the church that carries the institutional memory and focus of the Disciples of Christ in seeking unity, and in resourcing and encouraging all Disciples to seek the oneness of the church and the unity, reconciliation and peace for all peoples and nations.

While the nature of the CCU’s ministry remains the same, specific works and initiatives have changed in order to respond to God’s call in varying times and spaces. Below are some highlights of the work and ministry of the CCU that were accomplished from April 2016 to January 2017, in striving to fulfill its vision of living life together in unity.

Transition in Leadership
In 2016, there was transition in the executive leadership upon the retirement of Rev. Dr. Robert K. Welsh, the sixth President of the CCU, after his 16-year faithful service to God’s church. Dr. Welsh’s ministry was celebrated at a special banquet on April 8, 2016, with his family members, friends, colleagues, and ecumenical guests including Mr. Jim Winkler of the National Council of Churches and Rev. Doug Chial and Fr. Ioan Sauca from the World Council of Churches. Rev. Seung Un (Paul) Tche was installed as the CCU’s seventh President at a service that very same day.

The seven-month overlap between Dr. Welsh and Rev. Tche has proven the importance of having this kind of transition—not only for the incoming president’s sake, but also for the sake of the entire church. This transition has definitely helped the Council to sustain the integrity of this significant ministry of the church and has assured the continuity of the ministry between the outgoing and incoming presidents. The members of the Board of Directors hope that the CCU has set a good example for other ministries in the transition of leadership within the Disciples.

Setting Overarching Directions for the Council in Responding to God’s Calls for Today
The CCU believes that our call to be a movement for unity and wholeness requires us to theologically reflect on the time and the space in which we live. Upon our reflection on today’s world, the CCU has taken two initiatives, which the Board hopes to be overarching directions for the mission and ministry of the CCU and the Disciples of Christ.
The first initiative is, **“Becoming a Just Peace-Making Church.”** Without addressing issues that hinder our unity, we are unable to experience the wholeness that God has created for us. The CCU recognizes 4 major areas of injustice today that divide the church and human communities: 1) racial injustice; 2) ecological injustice; 3) economic injustice; and 4) international/intra-national injustice. The CCU urges all Disciples and ecumenical friends to work in unity to tackle these issues. The Council believes that this is the true spirit of ecumenism that we must show to the world.

The second initiative is, **“Interfaith Engagement.”** People in the US and Canada have observed the political rhetoric that condemns people of different faiths. The CCU urges Disciples to find the best ways to share lives together with all neighbors by actively reaching out to them.

**Working in Unity with All Expressions of the Disciples for God’s Mission**

The CCU’s journey with Disciples Home Missions (DHM), the Division of Overseas Ministries (DOM), and Disciples Women (DW) continues by exploring organic relationships with one another to work more closely. The overarching areas that require intentional cooperation among the 4 ministries have been identified: 1) climate change, 2) migration/refugees, 3) human trafficking and 4) interfaith relations.

Rev. Tche participated in the All Canada Convention—the Canada Regional Assembly—in Milton, NS, Canada, in August 2016, where he led a workshop on the CCU’s ministry. Rev. Tche and Rev. Jen Garbin, Regional Minister, invited Dr. Gail Allen, Ecumenical Officer of the United Church of Canada, to the assembly in hopes of deepening the understanding of each communion.

The CCU continues to provide leadership for the Mission Council. Rev. Tche was part of the session planning team for the very first Mission Council meeting in Dallas, TX, in December 2016.

The 2015 General Assembly’s resolution, GA-1524, called on the church to consider a new process that enables the Disciples to discuss important issues with one another at future General Assemblies. As a result, the Social Witness Task Force Team was formed, and Rev. Paul Tche has participated in discussions as a team member.

Rev. Tche has accepted an invitation to be a team member of Green Chalice, the Disciples’ ecological ministry. Climate change is one of the issues that the CCU currently identifies as church/community-dividing.

**Seeking Deeper Ecumenical Partnerships**

The National Workshops on Christian Unity (NWCU) was held in Louisville, KY, in April 2016. Rev. Tche had meetings and conversations with other denominations about whether it would be possible to create an ecumenical network of several denominations to train new and seasoned ecumenists among the Disciples.

The National Council of Churches (NCC) held two major meetings in 2016. In May 2016, at its Christian Unity Gathering, Rev. Tche had opportunities to share the CCU’s
Interfaith Engagement Initiative with the Convening Table of Interfaith Relations and the Educational Convening Table.

As the General Secretary of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council (DECC), a World-wide Fellowship of the Disciples Churches, Rev. Tche attended the Executive Committee meeting of the World Communion of the Reformed Churches (WCRC) in Havana, Cuba, in May 2016. It was an important meeting for the WCRC since there will be a 2017 General Council Meeting in Germany commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

The National Stone-Campbell Dialogue Team gathered in Lexington, KY, in May 2016. The Dialogue Team attended the celebration event of the 200th anniversary of Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which was established by Barton W. Stone and is regarded as the mother church by the three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement. The new leadership team was formed for the Dialogue, and Rev. Tanya Taylor and Rev. Tche will serve on the leadership team on behalf of the Disciples. The members of the Dialogue teams from the Disciples were as follows: Rev. Dr. Newell Williams, Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh, Rev. Elizabeth King, Rev. Tanya Taylor, Rev. Ron Deggs, and Rev. Paul Tche.

The Fourth Session of the Fifth Phase of the Disciples of Christ—Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue took place in Calgary, AB, Canada, from June 17-22, 2016. The general theme for the present phase of dialogue is “Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist.” The members from the Disciples of Christ were as follows: Rev. Dr. Newell Williams, Rev. Dr. Robert Welsh, Rev. Dr. Thomas Best, Rev. Dr. Merryl Blair, Rev. Dr. James O. Duke, Rev. Angel Luis Rivera (absent), Rev. Dr. David M. Thompson, and Rev. Paul Tche (absent).

The World Council of Churches (WCC) held its Central Committee meeting in Trondheim, Norway, in June 2016. Rev. Tche led a worship service and was fully present with Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins throughout the meeting. The Central Committee is the chief governing body of the WCC until the next assembly, meeting every two years.

There were a series of meetings of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC throughout 2016, and Dr. Kristine Culp, Dean of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago, has represented the Disciples at those meetings.

The Alliance of Baptists, which has entered into the “Ecumenical Partnership in Mission and Ministry” with the Disciples, extended its invitation to Rev. Tche to serve on the governing board. The board meeting was held in November 2017. The Alliance is an association of churches and individuals that recognizes that the freedom we know in Christ is at the center of the Gospel, and leads us to live respectfully in relation to the discernment of the individual believer in matters of his/her own faith convictions.

The ecumenical partnership between the United Church of Christ and the Disciples was strengthened through a two-day meeting in October 2016, in Indianapolis.
As the General Secretary of the DECC, Rev. Tche attended the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions in Rome, Italy, in October 2016, where the secretaries of the Christian communions had a private audience with Pope Francis. Pope Francis expressed his concern for persecuted churches in the world.

The Coordinating Council of the Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) gathered in Dallas in October 2016, to plan the 2017 event to celebrate the CUIC’s achievements as a historic ecumenical organization in the US. During the weekend of June 4, 2017, there will be a worship service, pulpit exchanges, and a forum on racial injustice in Dallas, TX. Rev. Dr. Timothy James, Associate General Minister, and Rev. Paul Tche serve on the Coordinating Council.

For the first time, the Disciples were present at the Multiple Religious Belonging Consultation, which was organized by Seattle University, the World Council of Churches, the United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Christ. This consultation was held in October 2016, at Seattle University, and the theme was, “Charting New Frontiers: Multiple Religious Participation and the Changing Religious Landscape.” Rev. Dan Bryant, First Christian Church, Eugene, OR, and Rev. Tche attended.

**Forming New Ecumenical Relationships**

The CUIC (formerly, COCU) had been the sole ecumenical arena for the Disciples to pursue the reconciliation of the ordained ministry—often understood as a full communion relationship—with other communions. At the St. Louis Plenary in 2016, however, the 9 member churches of the CUIC concurred to give their full attention to “combating racism” in the United States, rather than to pursuing the reconciliation of the ordained ministry. This recent development with the CUIC has prompted the Disciples to pursue bi-lateral relationships with other communions, and as the ecumenical office of the Disciples, the CCU has initiated very preliminary conversations in seeking new relationships, particularly with the two denominations below.

The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME) is a historic African American church established in 1870 in the South. As its name suggests, the church is in the broader context of Methodism, and thus, is led by bishops. Its ecumenical bishop, Bishop Teresa Snorton, is currently serving as the President of the CUIC. After preliminary conversations between Bishop Snorton and Rev. Tche about exploring the possibility to build a relationship between the two churches, Bishop Snorton invited a Disciples representative to the 5th Annual Unity Summit of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in September 2016. Rev. Dr. Timothy James, Associate General Minister, was present at the gathering on behalf of the Disciples.

The United Church of Canada, the largest protestant denomination in Canada, was inaugurated in 1925 in Toronto, Ontario, when the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, and 70 per cent of the Presbyterian Church of Canada entered into a union. The Canadian Disciples have also been part of a so-called “union talk” over three decades with the United Church, but the Canadian Disciples decided to remain as a distinctive community. Today, the United Church and
the Canadian Disciples are forming a closer relationship in working together for ministry and mission in Canada and beyond. Recently, the United Church of Canada entered into a “full communion” relationship with the United Church of Christ, and thus, Global Ministries of the Disciples and the UCC have started working together with the Church in Mission of the United Church of Canada in mission fields. In December, 2016, the Disciples made a historic visit to the United Church of Canada office in Toronto. Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, Rev. Dr. Jen Garbin, and Rev. Paul Tche from the Disciples had a meeting with Dr. Nora Sanders, General Secretary, Rev. Dr. John Young, Dr. Gail Allen, and Rev. Alan Hall of the United Church. At this meeting, future meetings have been set for laying out a foundation of appreciation and respect for the ministries, theologies, and sacraments of the two communions.

Publications and Resourcing the Disciples
In July 2016, the DECC published a response to the recent WCC Faith and Order Commission’s theological convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (TCTCV). This response was prepared by theological professors and scholars, with input from representatives of various national churches of the Disciples. This document has been posted on the Council’s website.

In response to requests from the Disciples, the Council published a liturgy for an Ecumenical Prayer Service for Election Eve/Day. The Council wanted to help the Disciples and other ecumenical partners organize this type of service, and Rev. Kara Markell, Lake Washington Christian Church, Kirkland, WA, led this project.

The most important resource project of the Council is to create a Sunday School curriculum that can help the Disciples to learn about other interfaith neighbors. Rev. Dan Bryant, Frist Christian Church, Eugene, OR, has been undertaking this timely project.

The General Board has reviewed GA-1706 Council on Christian Unity. The report is submitted to the General Assembly for presentation and discussion. No action is required. (Discussion time: 12 minutes)