The National Convocation gives thanks and praise to God for 100 years! We are the Christian Church Disciples of Christ (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. It was September of 1917, Rev. Preston Taylor called together the first National Christian Missionary Convention in Nashville, Tennessee. Like a good Disciple of Christ, Preston Taylor desired trained and prepared ministers to lead in African American congregations. In the turbulent times at the turn of the century, African Americans wanted to share the democracy of an America built on Biblical principles. We appreciate the wisdom of our predecessors and their commitment to the Disciples of Christ and the Great Commission. (Matthew 28: 18-20). As we look back with reverence on the early theme “One God, One Church One Mission”, we also look ahead to continued participation in the movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. In recognition of church anniversaries, we in the African American church like to sing, “We’ve come this far by faith, Leaning on the Lord. Trusting in His Holy Word, He’s never failed me yet.”

The 24th Biennial Session held in 2016 was a blessed event. We were blessed with 725 registrations and a Spirit-filled occasion. The work of the Local Arrangements Committee was outstanding. Chairperson Annetta Vertreese, rallied her team together with great results. The presence and support of MOKAN, the African American congregations in the Greater Kansas City region, led by Dr. Kevin Harris along with Rev. Bill Rose-Heim, Regional Minister and the Greater Kansas City Region we had a host region that worked hard for our success. The Merger Staff participated in workshops, plenary and our Mission Gathering Experience. We were deeply inspired Dr. Brad Braxton, lecturer for the Preston Taylor Institute, directed by Dr. William Lee. This Biennial Session has served to be an example and model for future national gatherings of our Racial Ethnic Ministries in various regions across the country.

Staff changes in the Office of General Minister and President have produced more partnership and collaboration within the office where we share support staff and communicate much more regularly, getting more things done with less staff. Chandra Haskett, Director of Meetings, gives part-time service as Administrative Assistant to the National Convocation. The National Convocation fully supports Mission First and its implications for the future. A Mission Gathering was conducted during the 24th Biennial Session with more than one hundred persons participating. It is hoped, the energy and momentum from this experience will carry over into the 2017 General Assembly in Indianapolis.
The church and the nation have been challenged to face what long has been recognized as the “American Dilemma”, race. Within the past five years we have witnessed a resurgence of hate crimes directed at minorities, the deaths of unarmed Black men, voter suppression and widespread xenophobia. The National Convocation is the place for the discussing and confronting matters and issues pertinent to the African American community and the Black Church. We are involved with and close to the justice movements in the life of the Disciples of Christ and ecumenical organizations. Black Lives Matter is still a major movement begging the conversation on race in America. The presidential election has caused much fear and anxiety in many homes and communities. We cannot let our faith falter. We may be encouraged in difficult days, because “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed but not in despair.” (2 Corinthians 4: 7-8).

Looking ahead, our Board of Trustees is committed to be a working board. Working to strengthen our communications and relations with our more than 450 congregations. We endeavor to reclaim inactive congregations and members and increase broader church participation. We are eager to have more of the church understand our Disciples of Christ history, particularly the Merger Agreement. The principles and values of the Merger Agreement still serves as a genuine call for the church to live into its vision of oneness and wholeness. We look forward to the 50th Anniversary of the Merger Agreement in 2018 with full hopes that this will be a whole church celebration.

Members of the Board of Trustees are: Patricia Penelton, President; Donald Gillett, Vice President; Edward Cushingberry, Secretary; Gloria Gilliard, Treasurer; Preston T. Adams, Valildra Berry, Irvin Green, Shannon Dycus, Milton Bowens, Ken Brooker Langston, Delesslyn Kennebrew, Antonio Redd, Arnold Hayes, Wanona Redd, Sue Gray, Edward Williams. Merger Staff: Sheila Spencer, Director of Christian Education and Faith Formation; R. Wayne Calhoun, Evangelism and Congregational Transformation; Chesla Nickelson, Disciples Women. Ex-officio officers: Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President; Ronald Degges, President Disciples Home Missions; Timothy M. James, Administrative Secretary.

The General Board has reviewed GA-1713 from the National Convocation. The report is submitted to the General Assembly for presentation and discussion. No action is required. (Discussion time: 12 minutes)