

GA-1907

**Disciples of Christ Historical Society
General Board Report
January 2, 2019
Rick Lowery, President DCHS**

A stable foundation for the future

Disciples of Christ Historical Society has been in a period of transition the last few years, as we have relocated from Nashville, Tennessee, to Bethany, West Virginia. The move is now complete, and DCHS is well positioned to accomplish our mission to preserve and proclaim the story of Disciples of Christ within the broader Stone-Campbell tradition, with its distinctive witness to the essential unity of the church as sign and “harbinger” of God’s transforming work of justice and peace in the world.

Our finances are stable. Our budget is balanced. Our future is bright.

Thanks to the strong leadership of our Board, the prudent investment strategy of Christian Church Foundation, which now manages the bulk of the investments that help fund our ministry, and the competent and rigorous accounting of Treasury Services in the Office of the General Minister and President, we are financially secure and transparent in our stewardship of resources devoted to this important ministry. We have strict and reasonable rules in place for the responsible management and growth of our endowment. Our finances are audited as part of Treasury Services’ annual audit. We are living within our means. We are hopeful about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

In 2017, the Historical Society conducted a national search for a new president, following the Executive Search Process established by the General Board (rev. 04-08-2013). I was called and subsequently installed as president on November 5, 2017, at National City Christian Church in Washington, D.C., an event that coincided with the dedication of DCHS’s Oscar Haynes Exhibit on African American Disciples History, on permanent loan to National City. In 2019, we will update that exhibit with additional papers, photographs, and other important artifacts that chronicle the historic contribution of African-American Disciples to the life and witness of our church.

Under the leadership of archivist Shelley Jacobs, a team of part-time workers, including several Bethany College students, continues to organize the archival collection and unpack our extensive library of books and journals related to the Stone-Campbell movement. We continue to receive and process files and documents from congregations, regions, and various ministries from the three major “streams” of the Stone-Campbell tradition.

In the coming months we will begin the long, careful process of checking and digitizing our card catalog and making it available online. We are, in the normal course of responding to research requests, scanning materials and increasing the number of

documents, files, and photos stored in digital as well as physical form. That process will continue and, we hope, accelerate in the future. Our goal is to make the collection more accessible to researchers who may not be able to travel to Bethany, WV.

In 2018, we responded to research requests from scholars and other researchers from around the world from all three streams of the Stone-Campbell movement and from a variety of other Christian and religious and non-religious backgrounds. For example, we hosted and assisted a prominent Church of Christ historian writing a new biography of Alexander Campbell, and, in the process, discovered what we believe is a never-before-published image of Campbell. We provided access to materials for use in books, articles, genealogical research, and televised documentaries. In August, for example, in collaboration with Global Ministries, we hosted a television crew from Nanjing, China, making a documentary about Disciples mission workers Lewis Smythe and James McCallum, who helped protect Chinese civilians during the Nanjing Massacre in 1937-1938 and later filed affidavits with their diaries and letters to document the atrocity. DCHS preserves many of their papers and diaries. This documentary, which aired recently on Chinese television, was a follow-up to an earlier documentary that also featured materials from DCHS about Nanjing Disciples mission workers Minnie Vautrin and Miner Searle Bates who, in an effort to protect civilians, also stayed in Nanjing when the Japanese army entered the city. (A striking bronze relief of Minnie Vautrin facing off soldiers to protect Chinese women and girls behind her outstretched arms is prominently featured in the Nanjing Massacre Museum in Nanjing.) Preserving and telling these and other stories of courage and faith is the beating heart of our mission at DCHS.

In 2018, we closed our “Welcome to Bethany!” Capital Campaign, which brought more than \$300,000 of gifts and pledges to complete renovations to the Bethany facility and thus support the work of the Society. DCHS is especially grateful to our capital campaign chairs, Peter and Lynne Morgan, whose good names, diligent work, and unyielding faith in the mission of the Historical Society inspired the many contributors who made the campaign such a resounding success.

We are continuing to improve our website, having accomplished a major overhaul in 2018. We plan in 2019 to add features that will increase the usefulness of the website for online research.

In 2018, the DCHS Board took the initial step toward a strategic planning process with a day-long session immediately before our fall Board meeting. We anticipate refining the results of our initial conversation in preparation for our Board meeting in March of 2019.

Additions to our 12-person Board of Trustees, effective in January 2019, enhanced diversity, giving us 50-50 gender balance and increasing representation by persons of color to 33.3%.

Collaboration among the three “streams” of the Stone-Campbell tradition

DCHS has a distinctive mandate to promote collaboration between the three major streams of the Stone-Campbell movement: Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and a *cappella* Churches of Christ.

To embody that mandate, our ByLaws require that we have at least one representative from the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and one representative from the Churches of Christ on our Board of Trustees. We are in compliance with that requirement and cherish the insightful contributions and dedicated work of these Stone-Campbell partners.

In other ways as well, we have worked to maintain and strengthen ties with all three streams of the movement. In June 2018, I attended and staffed a DCHS booth at the North American Christian Convention in Indianapolis. Also in 2018, DCHS participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities grant proposal led by Abilene Christian University to digitize and connect backlist titles related to Stone-Campbell history. Our hope, should the grant proposal succeed, is to create a place on the web where researchers can locate and access basic resources in the various Stone-Campbell collections. This effort is consistent with the explicitly stated desire of our Board that DCHS encourage collaboration between the various libraries and archives of the three streams of the Stone-Campbell tradition.

Here at Bethany, we continue to arrange for tours of the Campbell Mansion for pastor's classes and other visitors from congregations representing all three streams.

Among constituencies within the Disciples stream of the Stone-Campbell movement in 2018, I represented DCHS at General Board and General Cabinet meetings and at the biennial assemblies of National Convocation, Obra Hispana, and NAPAD.

In 2018, I covered both ends of the Stone-Campbell historical spectrum, giving the Founder's Day Address at Bethany College in March and the Cane Ridge Heritage Day address at Cane Ridge Meeting House in Kentucky in June. In these lectures, I explored the morally mixed legacy evident in the writings and practices of Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone with regard to the abhorrent American practice of human enslavement.

Telling stories suppressed, ignored

An especially important part of the mission of DCHS in the next period will be to help recover and tell stories that have been by default or design suppressed or under-reported in the overall telling of our story as a church.

We will take a significant step in that direction at General Assembly this year.

In the 1880s, Preston Taylor, an African-American Disciple born in 1849 as an enslaved person in Louisiana, started a funeral business and bought land for a cemetery on the top of a hill in Nashville, Tennessee, the current site of the historic Greenwood Cemetery. It was a humane and revolutionary act, because African Americans had

severely limited access to proper funeral care and burial in Nashville at that time. In fact, cemeteries there typically had rules explicitly forbidding the burial of people of African descent. Taylor also created an amusement park on the property he bought that allowed African-American children to have access to recreation otherwise available in Nashville to “whites only.” Taylor also organized the first black bank in Nashville and took the lead in creating the Tennessee State Agricultural and Industrial Normal School for Negroes (later, Tennessee A&I State College), which is now Tennessee State University, an historically black state land grant university that today serves a diverse population of students from Middle Tennessee and around the world.

In 1917, Taylor was instrumental in forming the National Christian Missionary Convention (NCMC), an auxiliary organization to the International Convention of Christian Churches (ICCC), to serve needs of African-American Disciples being inadequately addressed, he and others thought, in the agencies and structures of the ICCC. Taylor served as president of NCMC from its founding until his death in 1931.

In the mid-1950s, under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. R.H. Peoples, pastor of Second Christian Church in Indianapolis, NCMC began to develop a process to eventually merge the work of NCMC with that of ICCC and the United Christian Missionary Society.

In 1968, Disciples approved two historic documents. The first, “A Proposed Recommendation on Principles for Merger...” (commonly called “*The Merger Agreement*”) formally brought together NCMC and ICCC, to bring to full fruition a process that had already begun in 1960. The second document, *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*,” was, effectively, the constitution of our denomination. In 1969, the restructured church held its first biennial General Assembly in Seattle, Washington. The 2019 General Assembly marks the 50th Anniversary of that first General Assembly of the new church that emerged from the *Merger Agreement* and *The Design*.

On Tuesday evening of the 2019 General Assembly, we will commemorate these two historic documents and look to the “second fifty years” of our life as a denomination. DCHS is collaborating with the Office of the General Minister and President and the General Assembly worship committee to plan and conduct this liturgical celebration of our past and our future at this key moment in our church’s history. As part of this evening celebration from the main stage of the Assembly, we will show a brief video of interviews with people who were close-up eye-witnesses to *The Merger Agreement* and *The Design*.

At this General Assembly, we will also sponsor a panel discussion evaluating *The Merger Agreement* and *The Design* at the half-century mark.

DCHS is also collaborating with Chalice Press to publish a book centered around transcriptions of audio-taped interviews conducted in 1990-1991 by James Seale, former president of DCHS, with a number of key figures in the process of Restructure

that led to the *Merger Agreement* and *The Design*. The book, co-edited by myself, Duane Cummins, Peter Morgan, and Lawrence Burnley, will include comments on the broader social-historical context of Restructure, as well as reflections by Disciples leaders today on where we stand as a denomination at the half-century mark. This will be the first volume in the new James and Mary Dudley Seale Series on Disciples and Public Engagement. It will be available for purchase at General Assembly.

There, we also will launch the multi-year “Make Disciples History” audio archive project. Modeled on NPR’s “StoryCorps,” “Make Disciples History” will invite people to record about 5 minutes of response to the questions, “What difference does my church make in my life?” and “What difference does my church make in the world?” We are particularly hopeful that this project will highlight the racial-ethnic diversity of our church and give voice to those who often have been underrepresented in published histories of our tradition. In concert with this project, we are offering a workshop on storytelling.

We also are joining with the Council on Christian Unity for an evening meal at General Assembly featuring the Rev. Peter Marty, publisher of *The Christian Century*, who will speak about Disciples minister C.C. Morrison, who bought the failing Disciples publication in 1908 and refocused it as a “nondenominational” magazine committed to the “social gospel” understanding of Christian faith. Marty will explore how Morrison’s vision of faith for the public good plays out today, particularly in issues of interfaith understanding and collaboration.

A final word

My colleagues in the General Cabinet have been wonderfully supportive of the Historical Society and of me personally as I have worked to get up to speed in the job. I particularly appreciate the leadership and support of the DCHS Board and of our General Minister and President Terri Hord Owens. I am honored to serve in this important ministry of remembrance and ongoing recommitment to the core values that have sustained and defined us a movement for wholeness in this fragmented world.

Respectfully submitted,

Rick Lowery

Recommended Action

The General Board receives this report from the Disciples of Christ Historical Society and forwards it to the 2019 General Assembly for consideration and discussion.