

GA-2307
General Ministry Report of Disciples of Christ Historical Society

Disciples of Christ Historical Society
2023 General Board Report

Introduction — Who Are We?

The Disciples of Christ Historical Society (DCHS) is the premier collection of Disciples and Stone-Campbell Movement materials in the world. The mission of DCHS is to preserve and proclaim the story of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) within the context of the broader Stone-Campbell tradition out of which it grows. We are a general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with the special mandate to serve all three major streams of the Stone-Campbell movement: the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We preserve records and artifacts common to our traditions and foster collaboration and conversation through historical research, publications, and lectures. Our ministry is driven by the belief that by celebrating our past and telling its hard truths, the church is empowered to make history now and is better equipped to help shape a future ever more faithful to God's dream of unity and justice for all.

Since 1941, DCHS has preserved the many documents, books, periodicals, audio and visual materials, and precious artifacts that tell the story of the Stone-Campbell heritage. We have made these available for personal and academic historical research. We hold the largest collection of Stone-Campbell material in the world, including a large number of historic photographs and paintings, a great number of rare books and artifacts, biographical files and congregational, regional, and general church records and documents. We promote original research by scholars, students and other interested persons. We have a global audience for our materials posted online on our Digital Commons website. We are focused on telling the whole story of our church within the broader Stone Campbell tradition, with a special emphasis on stories of historically underrepresented communities. Currently, we are digitizing and publishing scores of important journals and other resources directly relevant to African American Disciples history and will be increasingly adding materials pertinent to Asian and Hispanic/Latinx Disciples experience. We are also leading the way among other denominational historical repositories in implementing a digital humanities approach for church history archives. We would love to have interested Disciples visit us, in person or online, in the coming years to learn more about our work and our shared history.

Our Recent Work and Accomplishments

I (Joel Brown) have only been on the job as President for a few months as I am penning this, but one thing I do know is that the future of DCHS is bright, and I want to tell you why I believe that to be the case. DCHS has benefitted from strong and innovative leadership in recent years. I am extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to build on the tremendous work of DCHS's previous President, the Rev. Dr. Rick Lowery. Rick helped guide DCHS to a place of stability, respectability, and ministerial effectiveness, so that DCHS is not only surviving but it is positioned to thrive. This is a

testament to Rick's leadership and to our Board of Trustees' vision, courage, and stewardship.

Our finances are sound thanks to strong endowments and solid management of them by CCF, DCEF, and Treasury Services, as well as the careful stewardship of our Board. Our budget is balanced. Gifts and memberships continue to be strong. In addition to our ongoing work of receiving and processing papers and important records from pastors, congregations, regions, and general ministries of the church, we have worked on several important new initiatives this year.

The Historical Society is currently engaged in and committed to a robust project of digitizing artifacts from our physical archives. Whoever writes Volume Two of DCHS's published history will likely title the chapter covering these years, "The Digital Turn." This is the future of the humanities and archival preservation, and DCHS has positioned itself to be a leader in exploring this digital frontier and determining what the digital turn means for denominational archives and historical societies. At DCHS, we are forging a digital humanities approach for historical preservation and public history that will help us better fulfill our mission to *preserve* and *proclaim* our history for the betterment of our church, the Stone-Campbell Movement, and the world. As an organization engaged in the work of public history, the goal of digitization is not only to make our archival materials accessible, but also to help our churches, ministries, and partners make sense of the texts and artifacts they encounter in our archives and understand their significance for our history, identity, and mission as a church. The digital *proclamation* of our history will require collaboration between historians, archivists, and digital humanities scholars, among others, and we will have to raise additional funds to support it. However, the return on our investment for expanding our "digital" presence will be worth the cost. Our churches, ministries, and partners in the other streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement will have ready access to quality digital content that not only invites them into the history of our movement but also helps them understand its significance for our life and witness as a church, and they will be better equipped to engage and narrate that history more faithfully.

Our digitization efforts have been blessed by several gifts donated for this project, and especially by a major gift from Dr. Edmund Short, which has helped us purchase the necessary equipment for our digitization efforts and supported digital archival staffing. Thanks to these gifts, we are well on our way toward digitizing the history of our church, and we are leading the way for other church-related historical repositories in this work. Our digital presence (which includes our online publications, digital newsletter, our Digital Commons website, and our online *Journal of Discipliana*) is allowing us to reach a wider and more diverse audience than we have since our founding in 1941. We have some incredible digital projects coming up that we look forward to debuting in the next year and beyond (see below).

One of our most significant accomplishments in the past year was the DCHS Kirkpatrick Academic Conference, "Visions of Wholeness: Systemic Racism, Antiracism, and Reconciliation in Our Shared History and Tradition," which took place at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma in March 2022. This historic gathering of scholars, church leaders, and participants throughout the church, in-person and online via livestream generated new scholarship and conversation about this critical topic in our history and in our life as a church today. We had a day and a half of intense,

informed reflection on the experience and witness of Indigenous, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Asian American communities in Disciples and broader Stone-Campbell history. The response has been very positive, and the conference is continuing to bear fruit. Since the conference, videos of the presentations, which are available online, are being used by regions and congregations for education and conversation in their own locations, as well as in seminary classes and for continuing education for ministers. We are also working to publish some of the papers/presentations in our *Journal of Discipliana*, and we are hopeful that we will have the edited book with the conference presentations ready for purchase at General Assembly. In the Kirkpatrick Conference, DCHS lived out its vision that denominational historical archives are not just repositories of religious texts and ideas, but at their best they are sources for the church's work for justice and wholeness in the world. We look forward to continuing in this work.

As we live into our mission to *preserve and proclaim* the history of our church, we are committed especially to telling stories of historically underrepresented groups in our church. We are using awarded grants and special donations to fund projects that help to elevate and share the fuller history of our church. One placed where we focused our efforts in this regard this past year was in the installation of the Oscar Haynes Exhibit at Light of the World of the Christian Church in Indianapolis. The exhibit explores the history of African American Disciples, and it currently focuses on the histories of institutions of higher education. We look forward to working with churches, regions, and general ministries to put together more exhibits like this one that can be experienced digitally or in person.

We are also sponsoring and publishing significant research about the church's history and identity this coming year. We have a number of historical manuscripts that will be published in the coming year (see below), and we are gearing up for a productive year with our *Journal of Discipliana*, which is the scholarly journal for the study of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Stone-Campbell Movement. We recently named Dr. Timothy Lee, as the new General Editor for *JoD*. Dr. Lee is Associate Professor of the History of Christianity as well as Director of the Asian/Asian American and Pacific Islander Church Studies Program at Brite Divinity School. We are thrilled about Dr. Lee's vision for the journal and look forward to seeing how it will help shape the activities of our church's scholars and institutions of theological education.

Ministry Challenges

There are three significant challenges we face in the coming year. First, our ministry is still in the midst of a season of leadership transition (that said, we are in the latter stages of that season). In September 2022, Rick Lowery retired as President and Joel Brown began his tenure. As far as presidential transitions go, this was one has been relatively smooth—thanks be to God! The DCHS Board of Trustees also welcomed five new members at the start of 2023. We are thrilled about the energy, ideas, and support these new members will bring to the board, but it will take some time for everyone to get oriented to the organization. We are excited about our new leadership, but we would also cherish your prayers and support as we learn to work together in this ministry.

Second, we are still working to fully inventory our collection following the move from Nashville. Moving a massive historical repository from one location to another is a monumental endeavor, and reassembling that collection is also no small feat. We employ one full-time archivist for a collection whose size probably requires several. With the help of support staff and volunteers, we have been able to make significant strides toward having an updated inventory/catalogue of our collection, but we still have significant work to do before our collection is fully accessible for the public. One of our goals is to publish an electronic catalogue of our entire collection, so that anyone with internet access can explore our holdings, but we are not able to do that until we have processed everything that was moved from Nashville. We look forward with great anticipation to the day when we will have completed this work related to our move, but we are not there yet.

Finally, we are continuing to address issues related to archival space. As we reported last year, since our move to Bethany, WV, we have received a number of new files and boxes from regions, general ministries, congregations, and individual ministers. This, to a large degree, is a sign of confidence in our work. People in the church know we have the capacity and the expertise to care for these precious records that tell the story of our church. Although we are not yet “at capacity,” we are aware that we will reach capacity sooner than we had first anticipated. We have taken two steps to address our space issue this year: First, we hired an archival consulting firm to do a space consultation with us. Second, we partnered with Bethany College to lease space on their campus to serve as offsite space for additional storage at an easily accessible location close by. It is likely a temporary solution to a pressing problem, but it gives us the breathing room we need to plan carefully for the longer term. We give thanks for the partnership and hospitality of Bethany College, and we covet your prayers, support, and suggestions as we move forward in each of these three areas.

Looking Forward

We have a great deal we are looking forward to in the coming year. The Historical Society will embark on one of its most ambitious projects in recent years. As part of our digitization program, we are going to be leading a collaborative project to compile, digitize, and make available the entire corpus of Alexander Campbell’s writings, along with many of the writings of his father (Thomas) and family. The “Campbell Papers Project” will unite several institutions associated with the Stone-Campbell Movement to bring together all of the extant writings of Alexander Campbell and make them available in a single online digital repository. As the institution that has made significant technological advancements for digitization, DCHS will lead the project and will also be host it on our Digital Commons website. We are in the process of applying for grants to help fund this project.

We will publish a number of books this year: We are nearing the release date for the memoir of John Humbert, adding to the already existing biographies of Dale Fiers and Kenneth Teegarden, giving us books on our first three GMPs. We also will publish biographies of African American Disciples leaders Preston Taylor (by Edward Robinson) and Sarah Lue Bostick (by Yvonne Gilmore) within the next year. We will also publish the theological memoir of Keith Watkins. Finally, we are nearing completion of the manuscript with the presentations, lectures, and sermons from the Tulsa Kirkpatrick

Conference (see above), which we hope will be ready for purchase (or at least preorder) at General Assembly in July.

We are also thrilled to be launching the Disciples Oral History Project this year, an effort to support the church's larger Church Narrative Project. We will be hosting workshops and producing materials to help congregations, regions, and general ministries conduct their own oral history interviews to capture the stories of our sacred past that are living in our pews. We believe that telling and hearing these oral histories can be transformative for congregations, and we also hope they will share these oral history recordings (audio and video) with us so that we can preserve those as part of our history as a church.

We are looking forward to General Assembly in Louisville this year, where we will be hosting three events. First, we are co-sponsoring a dinner with CUIM which will include our biennial Reed lecture, which will focus on "Christian Nationalism and Our Churches: Past and Present." The lecture will be given by one of the foremost scholars of Christian Nationalism, Dr. Andrew Whitehead, Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Association of Religion Data Archives at the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University (IUPUI). Second, we will be hosting our Stalcup Congregational History workshop as part of our Disciples Oral History Project. The session will train clergy and lay church historians to conduct oral histories in their contexts and will include a panel of experienced church historians and ministers who have engaged in oral history collection. Finally, we are co-sponsoring the Sunday morning excursion to Cane Ridge, which will include worship, lunch, and a tour. Our President will be preaching at the Cane Ridge service.

Pray for Us

We cherish the support and prayers of our Disciples churches and ministry partners. We would ask for prayers as we are coming out of a season of leadership transition and are gearing up for a season of ministerial effectiveness. Pray also for our continued financial well-being and faithful, effective stewardship that we may live more fully into our stated vision of "celebrating our past and telling its hard truths, [seeking] a church empowered to make history now and thus to shape a future ever more faithful to God's dream of unity and justice for all." There is much work yet to be done on this front, but we are so grateful to have your prayers and support as we work to realize this vision.

The General Board receives this report and forwards it to the 2023 General Assembly for consideration and discussion.