When I addressed the HELM Board of Directors on November 12, 2022, it was my 89th day as the Interim President of Higher Education and Leadership Ministries (HELM) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I reminded the Directors that in the field of numerology the number 89 is a building number generally with a humanitarian objective. The number 89 builds institutions, systems and procedures, buildings and roads: it builds infrastructure. It is always considerate of natural resources. What 89 builds are large structures that benefit society and that endure for a long time – like HELM’s 128-year history. Eighty-Nine is efficient and pragmatic. It tends to manage teams effectively for achieving a common goal. People with that energy see the steps required to get things done.

I would like to think that HELM is in such a numerological space having transitioned from the seven-year leadership of Chris Dorsey to my interim leadership. Eighty-Nine days into this position and my focus has been on building, organizing, communicating, and partnering with staff, board, and other General Ministry, Regional Ministry, and congregational leaders to strengthen the relationship between our higher education communities and the church. As former HELM President, Dennis Landon, wrote in the June 2004 issue of “Tomorrow’s Leaders Today,”

“Before anything else, we are a ministry of the whole church focused on nurturing leaders for a faithful future. We will continue our work with and on behalf of Disciples educational institutions and campus ministries, but we now understand that work in a larger context. We want to do everything in partnership with other institutions and ministries.”

It is precisely in the act of extending partnerships that the miracle of networking occurs, allowing us to create greater synergy that strengthens the whole of institutional life. If there has ever been a time in our denominational history for re-building our partnership capacity and accentuating relationships between institutions, it is now. For over thirty years we have witnessed the growing cracks and gaps in our institutional foundation.
We have patched the cracks and plugged the gaps, buying us a little extra time. But at some point, temporary fixes will no longer hold. I believe that the very foundation of our faith is calling us to greater collaboration between all segments of our church which will lead to a new found institutional vitality to the glory of God.

To begin the process of greater collaboration between HELM and our educational institutions, I penned a letter back on August 30, 2022, to College, University, and Theological School Presidents and Deans. In part it read:

“I am truly thankful for the contributions you and your educational institutions make every day to the lives of students and the betterment of society. The quality education you provide produce learned citizens and leaders for church and society. There is no greater calling than this.

“In the beginning days of my work, I wanted to introduce myself, reach out to you, and pledge my support to the vital work you do. I will be intentional about recommending our colleges, universities, and graduate schools of theology to our congregations, prospective students and their families. I will be respectful and supportive of the institutions you represent, and of your educational mission. I will advise benefactors of the important role higher education plays in the life of our church.

“In partnership with you and the wider church, it is my prayer that our divided world might become a little less divided as we embrace the blessings of diversity, truth, integrity, and love. Please know that I am here to provide support and encouragement to you during my time as Interim President.”

I assure you that Higher Education and Leadership Ministries is all about leading our church to a new found institutional vitality. The General Ministry leaders of our church met in retreat September 26-27, 2022. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the narrative metaphor and ask the question: “What happens when the dominant narrative does not empower anymore?” Retreat leader, the Rev. Dr. David Anderson Hooker, provided leadership responding to the question, “When the dominant narrative does not
empower anymore, it creates a problem story.” Dr. Hooker led us through a process of externalizing the problem, mapping the problematic story, reverse mapping through story sharing, choosing a preferred narrative, and building a transformative, not restorative or reconciling, but transformative action agenda. It has the promise of helping our church develop the capacity for greater collaboration leading to a new found institutional vitality. You will be hearing more about this in the days to come. Our General Minister and President, Terri Hord Owens, is providing leadership for this initiative. Both the Administrative Committee and General Board are charting a pathway to the future.

On September 28, 2022, I was privileged to meet virtually with the Kentucky Region’s District 9 clergy, Transylvania University’s President Ryan Lewis, Director of Spirituality and Religious Life, Emily Miller, Director of Alumni Relations, Katherine Alexander, and the Kentucky Regional Minister, the Rev. Dr. Don Gillett. President Lewis spoke about the challenges and triumphs of university life. I was invited to present an overview of HELM’s ministries at the gathering by Convener, Deb Phelps.

On October 7-8, 2022, HELM hosted the Association of Disciples for Theological Discussion (ADTD) annual conference at Butler University in Indianapolis, IN. Theological discussions ensued around three topics: (1) Eva Gore-Booth with a presentation by Tish Duncan from Texas Christian University, (2) The State of Brite Divinity School enrollment and the future of theological education by Michael Miller from Texas Christian University, and (3) A panel discussion on “Public Theology in a Divided Society.” Both Rick Lowery and Newell Williams received honorary retirement status. President-elect, Michael Miller, will serve as Convener of the October 6-8, 2023, as well as the October 5-7, 2024, conferences. The group offered kudos to Scott Seay from Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis for his leadership of ADTD over the past two years. Many thanks to Luke Soderstrom for serving as HELM Staff assigned to this event.

On October 12-15, 2022, I was privileged to attend the Beecher Lectures at Yale University Divinity School in New Haven, CT. Professor Enjoo Mary Kim of Vanderbilt University is the first Asian female to ever deliver the Beecher Lectures over the past 155 years. Her lecture title was: “Preaching Jesus: Postcolonial Approaches.” It is interesting to note that the last time the name Jesus was in the title of a Beecher Lecture series was in 1945 when Reinhold Niebuhr delivered the lectures. Yale Divinity School submitted an article for the November 2022 issue of the Higher Education Digest. We lift up our two Disciples students at YDS, Mark Dingler from Texas and Lily Jurkis from Florida.
On November 3-6, 2022, thirty-one HELM Fellows met in Washington, D.C. Students from across the life of our church engaged in conversations around environmental justice and public witness. Each of the four cohort groups (freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior) met with theological guides to explore the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jamaica Kincaid, and Parker Palmer. The Steinbruck Center housed the students. We met at National City Christian Church on Thomas Circle and toured both National City as well as the National American Museum of African History and Culture. We offer thanks to the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Bruce Epperly, the Rev. Dr. Delores Carpenter, and the Rev. Dr. Ken Brooker-Langston, and President and Founder of ecoAmerica, Robert Perkowitz, for providing a contextual context to our meeting. At the event the HELM Fellows presented former HELM President, Chris Dorsey, with an appreciation gift from the HELM Directors for his leadership to the Leadership Fellows Program over recent years.

Of course, we thank our HELM Leadership mentors: Christian Watkins (new as mentor to the first-year cohort group) and co-Mentor with Christian, Brandon Johnson, Joshua Mata (second year cohort group), Lonora Graves (third year cohort group), and the Rev. Colton Lott and the Rev. Michelle Scott Huffman (fourth year cohort group). Of course, none of this would have been possible without the steady leadership and administrative support of HELM staff member, Katy Wing Sundararajan. The Leadership Fellows Retreat was by all measurements a great success. The 2023 Leadership Fellows Retreat will be held November 2-5, 2023, at a Wildcard Event location still to be determined.

HELM was present at the November 19-22, 2022, American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Denver, CO. Our Disciples scholars and emerging scholars need to be supported by the whole church while attending such prestigious academic events. HELM sponsored a wine and cheese reception to which, over the course of two hours, 38 Disciples scholars gathered for fellowship and relationship building. HELM is working with HELM Board member and President of the Council of Colleges and Universities (CCU), Dr. Lester Newman, to identify ways to support the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). The theme for this January’s gathering of CIC is “Designing the Future of Independent Higher Education.” The President’s Institute is an occasion each year for Presidents of Colleges and Universities across the United States to be present with one another to build collegial relationships and exchange information about each other’s institutions. It was a joy to
attend this event and visit with some of our College and University Presidents who attended the event.

Our theological schools that participate in the Council of Theological Education (CTE) have selected March 9 & 10, 2023 to hold an in-person CTE meeting. The location of the meeting will be Indianapolis, IN. Plans are underway for three additional 2023 events:

(1) The Global Mission Trip for HELM Fellows Cohort Group 3 is scheduled to be held May 26 through June 1, 2023. The place is still to be determined, and

(2) The Emerging Leaders Conference (formally Seminarians Conference) which was postponed from November 2022 to sometime in 2023. General Ministry leaders and the Presidents and Deans of our Seminaries, Divinity Schools, and Graduate Schools of Theology are currently being polled about available dates to meet in 2023. Once a date is identified a location will be chosen, and

(3) The General Assembly to be held in Louisville, KY, July 29-August 1, 2023. There will be a HELM dinner on Sunday, July 30 where the Alexander Campbell Award will be presented, the name of the recipient presented to HELM’s Executive Committee and Board meeting next Spring. In addition to the Alexander Campbell Award, the first notices have been distributed to identify the recipient of HELM’s T.A. Abbott Award for Faculty Excellence. The Executive Committee and Board will also act on this at the Spring 2023 Executive Committee and Board meeting. There will be a HELM table in Exhibit Hall near the displays of our colleges, universities, seminaries, and theological schools. The theme for the 2023 General Assembly is: “Kindom of God Within Us Among Us.”

I have been attentive to some important business concerns for HELM. I worked with Carole Veatch, HELM’s account representative at the National Bank of Indianapolis, to add greater fraud protection to our operating accounts – Reverse Positive Pay and an ACH Debit Filter. Both protections will keep our accounts safe from fraudulent activities. I have worked with Elizabeth Knysak, CPA and Managing Director at Forvis, who manages audits for HELM. The last completed audit for HELM was the 2016 audit. The 2017 audit was initiated but never completed. Our ministry finds itself now in early 2023 with many years of unaudited books and records. The audit firm recommended to me that it would be in HELM’s best interest to roll audits from 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 into a formal 2022 audit and bring our audit trail up to date. After consultation with HELM’s Board of Directors and Finance Committee, I have signed a letter of engagement with Forvis to bring everything up to date. We anticipate that the 2022 audit will be completed by April 2023. It is my recommendation to the HELM Board of
Directors and Finance Committee that HELM conduct biennial audits and in the off years a formal review of its financial statements.

There is one other business item that was recommended by the Board Life and Work Committee at the Spring HELM Board Meeting, April 1-3, 2022. This item regards identifying HELM Ministry Associate, Lisa Hubbard, to serve as the Corporate Secretary for Higher Education and Leadership Ministries. Lisa has agreed to serve in such a capacity. In this role, she will organize and maintain files of all documents relating to HELM. She is currently brushing up on parliamentary procedure and soon to become a notary. The Board Life and Work Committee plans to incorporate this position into the organization’s By-laws as they are reviewed with the newly called President.

Let me express deep gratitude to the National Benevolent Association (NBA) for the services it provides to HELM in terms of accounting support. Lesley Durham, Director of Operations Accounting; Amy Johns, Chief Financial Officer; and, Christie Koetting, Associate Vice President of Accounting, all three provide accurate, timely, and professional financial recordkeeping, reporting, payroll, grant and scholarship payments, as well as advice to HELM regarding our investment strategy and calculation of investment returns. The support they provide is critical to HELM’s well-being.

On October 20, 2022, General Minister and President, Terri Hord Owens, met with HELM’s Executive Committee to provide information about the Executive Search Process and tips on conducting a search. A Search Committee was chosen during HELM’s November 12, 2022, Board of Directors meeting and authorized to conduct a search for an individual to become the next President of Higher Education and Leadership Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Rev. Colton Lott was named as Chair of the Search Committee with members, H. Ben Bohren, Charisse Gillett, Billie Lynch, Carmen Waters, and Khalia Williams. Dani Loving Cartwright is serving as a resource and consultant to the Search Committee. It is my desire as Interim President that the Search Committee identify a leader who will guide this General Ministry into its next chapter – a leader with a heart for our colleges, universities, seminaries, divinity schools, and graduate schools of theology. There is no doubt that God is preparing an individual right now to accept the mantle of leadership that comes when the church extends a call.

My dear General Board members, it is no accident that the first name given to those who followed Jesus was that they were followers of ‘the way’ or ‘the road.’ When they found Jesus, they found their way and it became for them their hope. It is what moved them forward. Don Sarton, retired Executive with the Christian Church Foundation and my colleague and friend for many years would say, it is what moved the early Christians ‘onward.’
I have always loved that great story about the Mission Board Executive who was talking to the great Livingstone, of Stanley and Livingstone greatness, who were missionaries to the continent of Africa. The Executive said: “Dr. Livingstone, is there a good road to where you are?” If so, we have a couple of men who would like to come and help you.”

David Livingstone replied: “If they need a good road, don’t send them. I need men who can come, road or no road.”

I often think that our women would not have thought twice as to whether there was a road or not. They would just go. And our Disciples Women did just go when the American Christian Missionary Society created the Christian Woman’s Board of Missions on October 21, 1874. It would take two decades longer for our beloved church to create the Board of Education (1894), the Association of Colleges (1910), the Board of Higher Education of the Christian Church (1938), the Division of Higher Education (1977), and HELM (2004).

Do you remember how I started my report to you at the beginning – referencing the field of numerology and my 89th day on the job? That the number 89 is a building number generally with a humanitarian objective? That the number 89 builds structures that benefit society and that endure for a long time – like HELM’s 128-year history?

Now listen, if we are to move forward as the church it is imperative that we let our creative juices flow forward and onward. It never hurts to take a look backward, but to get stuck there prevents us from looking through the front windshield of what is yet to be.

Kierkegaard would challenge us to take a “leap of faith” into the future. Cicero would call us to gaze at that ‘somewhere beyond the stars.’ It is our faith that calls us to walk forward into uncertainty of all kinds with the surety that God is with us always, even to the end [Matthew 28:19-20].

We know very well what kind of church we have been over the past years. We know that our church and higher education institutions share the same DNA. What kind of church is God calling us to become? We can only discover this as we move forward into God’s future. So, let’s use the gifts that God has given us – church and academy – to create a narrative that captivates us, seals our life together, and reaches out to a world longing for solutions to real problems. We can help the world be a better place for everyone. We must help the world be a better place for all.
I thank the church for giving me the opportunity to provide interim leadership to HELM during this period of transition in its organizational life. I will always hold the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) near and dear to my heart. Now, let us continue to be about moving forward into HELM’s and our church’s future!

Ronald J. Degges,
Interim President HELM
January 30, 2023

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