

**Meet Rev. Teresa “Terri” Hord Owens,
Nominee for General Minister and President
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**



Vision Statement

John 17:23 – *“...that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (NRSV)*

Micah 6:8 – *“[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (NRSV)*

As we approach the 2017 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the election of a new General Minister and President, I write to share the vision that God has laid on my heart for our church as a candidate

for the office of General Minister and President.

The vision of the movement that has become known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has always focused on the unity of believers, even amidst and in spite of differences that may seek to divide the church. We give each other permission to disagree and we offer love in all things. We declare that we are a pro-reconciliation and anti-racism church, and that we welcome all as God has welcomed us. In these ways, we have sought to live justly, in unity, in the midst of many differences. In these times in which we live, an active understanding of unity is even more important to our church, our movement in the U.S. and Canada, and around the world. John 17 has long been one of my favorite New Testament texts because I believe it sets forth the reason why we are to execute the Great Commission, and why we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus’ prayer for unity is not to establish “kum-ba-yah” moments, “feel good” experiences that evaporate after we release our neighbor’s hand. Jesus’ intent and vision is that we are one “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:23b, NRSV). Our striving for unity is perhaps the most powerful way in which we bear witness that the love of God is real and present in the world. If we can hold one another in community, even in the presence of tensions that result from human differences of various dimensions of identity, socio-economic status, geography, theology and politics, it should be our goal that the world will see in us what is possible through Christian love and unity. We can be an example to the world to say that we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and his church are so important that we can work together despite those differences to ensure that God’s message of love is shared and lived out in the world, as we work for justice for all. This is, I believe, what Jesus prayed for, and it is what I believe we are called to live out as disciples/Disciples of Christ.

A noted Disciples theologian has often stated that unity “is not a human agreement; it is a gift from God.” Anyone who has worked among and within human organizations understands that despite our loftiest goals, our noblest visions, our most faithful theology, we are yet humans—flawed even as we

are sincere. And yet God can use us in our imperfections to be an example of what is possible when we are able to create community in the midst of tensions that may be created by difference in identity, geography, politics and theology. Imagine what it can look like---looking at a community of believers who have placed the love of God and neighbor above all else, who do not demonize differences as deficient but seek to understand one another in light of our uniqueness and diversity; who are willing for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ to stand shoulder to shoulder, working through differences in priorities, opinions, methods and goals—always yielding to the vision of how the world might be able to see real love among us and through us. This is not an easy vision, and it will take not just the best of what is in us, but it will also take the best of what God can do in and through us. It is a beautiful, gritty, necessary vision that we must pursue, empowered by the love of God, led by the example of Jesus Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit. We will need to learn how to have difficult conversations, to go beyond the standard training sessions, to sit with one another, be uncomfortable at times, and learn how to hear one another fully, to place ourselves in one another's shoes and honor each other's identity and lived experiences. Imagine what a blessing we can be to creation if we can face this challenge and model this work before the world!

Our historical structure (since the inception of the Design) has sought to honor, respect and bridge difference, to respect the agency of the local congregation, and to ensure that resources were in place to support the work of ministry at the local, regional and national, and even international level. The racial and ethnic diversity among our congregations has been instrumental to our vitality, and we must continue to work to ensure justice and prevail across our church in all its manifestations, honoring the covenant made before us. We must continue to build an inclusive church where all are welcome to God's table, fellowship and service. Our goals for mission and ministry should guide any decisions about structure and organization. With faithful stewardship of our resources, we can engage decisions together, focused on the community in which we all hold equal standing before God and one another. The gift of God that is the process of unity will give us grace to do the work of shepherding our human, physical and organizational resources.

Like politics, ministry is local. The regional and national expressions of our church must have as their focus ministry to and support of local congregations. Vital congregations are the key to our future, and as we continue to plant new churches, we must not only "fold the tent" when necessary, but in many cases, "open the flaps" so that new voices and ideas can come alongside existing congregations. Whether the congregation is new or has a 100+ year history, whether the congregation has less than 50 members or more than 1000, we need members with "the heart of a planter." We all need to serve our congregations realizing that we are building and serving not for ourselves, but for those who will come after us, seeking God, seeking spiritual connection, seeking community. There are many congregations where membership is healthy enough to invite such transition, and we can work with congregations to help them prepare to "open the flaps" to allow others to join them in a new phase of ministry. It is always true for any generation that we must be open to different ways of being church, ever ready to try new ways of engaging God's people. We must invest time and energy in our next generation of leaders, listening as they tell us what is needed to reach these next generations. Technology can afford us exciting ways in which to communicate with other and the world. As technology evolves, we will need to evolve so that we can communicate and fellowship effectively, sharing thoughts and ideas, supporting one another, allowing voices across our church to be heard, reaching a world that is rapidly changing with the news of God's love through Jesus Christ. We must support families as they seek to build spiritual foundations for their children, and we must engage, respect, and leverage the wisdom of our elders on whose shoulders we stand, and whose hands we must continue to hold as we move forward together. An intergenerational church allows us all to

benefit from the joy and wisdom of each phase of life.

I often describe ministry as being priestly, pastoral and prophetic. In our tradition, all believers participate in the priestly work of leading the people in worship and community-building. We all share in the pastoral care of our congregations and communities, and our traditions of lay leadership among elders and deacons is vital to our care for one another. We will continue the collaborative work in ministry to the world with our congregations and global partners. Perhaps never before in recent times has the prophetic role of the church been so important. The prophet Micah reminded the people of Israel that they knew what God wanted them to do, that God had already shown them what was good. What does the Lord require? "... to do justly, love kindness [mercy] and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8, NRSV). Our prophetic stance as we work for justice must be grounded in a thoughtful engagement with scripture, in deep and honest theological reflection, and commitment to prayer all along the way. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are instructed by Jesus to follow his example of time spent with God to prepare for the service we are called to render. The work of justice requires spiritual resources that are beyond our own limitations, and the work of justice requires that we have a clear focus on collaboration. Having prepared ourselves spiritually, the work of justice becomes the lived theology and expression of our love for God and neighbor. It is in our solidarity and action that we live as witnesses to the call of God for justice and unity.

As we prayerfully discern together how God is leading our church, I am committed to my relationship with God, my discipleship as a follower of Christ, to walk humbly with God so that I am prepared to do justly and love kindness. I offer myself in fellowship and covenant to my fellow believers to do the work of ministry, to be a faithful leader and co-laborer, a servant within our movement and a faithful steward of all its resources. I am committed to the work of justice, and will work collaboratively as together we I pray that together we can provide the world with an example of the radical love and hospitality of God that will allow us to be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this time, working in solidarity for justice among us all. May they look at our fellowship, with all its diversity, with all its struggles, and marvel at God's goodness and love. May it be so.

Biography

Rev. Terri Hord Owens is a native of Terre Haute, IN, and a descendant of one of Indiana's oldest African-American free settlements. She earned her bachelor's degree in Government with a minor in Afro- American Studies from Harvard University. Terri began her professional career in the area of information technology, spending 23 years in the area of management consulting, data management and data warehousing. She previously held senior management positions with IBM, Ernst & Young, Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and SBC, consistently earning recognition for excellence and leadership. An active lay leader throughout her youth and adult life, Terri has worked with children and youth ministries, taught Sunday School and Bible study in Christian Education departments, and worked to create drama ministries in several congregations. Despite professional success, she felt God had another assignment, and she accepted her call to ministry under the pastorate of Dr. T. Garrott Benjamin, Jr. at Light of the World Christian Church, Indianapolis, IN.

Rev. Owens earned the Master of Divinity degree at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where she was a Disciples Divinity House Scholar, and recipient of the John Gray Rhind Award, given to the top M.Div graduate at the Divinity School. She was ordained at Light of the World Christian Church, wearing the robe of her paternal grandfather, the late Rev. Noel Hord. In August of 2005, she was appointed

Dean of Students at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where she is responsible for administration and development of academic policy, student advising on personal matters, students' academic progress, admissions and financial aid, recruiting, and PhD student professionalization and placement. She is a member of the Divinity School's Diversity Committee, and the University's Diversity Leadership Council. She manages the programming of diversity and inclusion events within the Divinity School and is regularly engaged in this work across campus. Because of her previous professional experience, she also serves on the Student Health Insurance Policy Oversight Committee, and the Data Stewardship Committee. She also represents the Divinity School on the boards of both the Hispanic Summer Program and the Hispanic Theological Initiative, programs focused on providing support for Hispanic students in master's and doctoral theological education.

Alongside her work at the Divinity School, Terri serves as Senior Minister at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Downers Grove, IL. She is the first person of color to serve as pastor of this predominantly white congregation. A small congregation with a large heart to serve and give, FCCDG's ministry reaches to the homeless in DuPage County, as well as families with children in the surrounding area. Each year, the church hosts a Back-to-School Fair, serving nearly 800 people each year. In addition to school supplies, the church offers a fun afternoon of food, games, haircuts, health assessments—all at no cost to needy families. The church also supports the Isle of Hope Camp and orphanage in Belarus, which ministers to children affected by the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. FCCDG also supports local service ministries such as LOVE Christian Clearinghouse, Hope's Front Door, FISH food pantry, and its members are active across the Chicagoland area in a variety of service agencies/ministries. Unity, liberty and love are the core values of this congregation that seeks to be the presence of Christ in the community. Under Rev. Owens' leadership, FCCDG is now an open and affirming, anti-racism, pro-reconciliation congregation. FCCDG also nests an independent Hispanic congregation, Fe Y Esperanza, with whom they share in a variety of ministries throughout the year.

Rev. Owens is a member of the Board of Trustees at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis and serves as Secretary of the Board. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Higher Education and Leadership Ministries (HELM) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She is a founding member of the Advisory Board for the Center for the Study of Black Faith and Life at Chicago Theological Seminary in Chicago. She is also active in denominational work at the regional and national level of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Over the years, she has leveraged her executive management experience as an initial screener of applications for several executive searches for general units of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and two regional minister searches. She served on the IT Advisory Committee for the Pension Fund during its recent systems upgrade to provide online member access. Rev. Owens was honored to be the preacher for the opening worship service at the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in July 2015.

Rev. Owens is widely sought after as a preacher, speaker and workshop facilitator. Her ministry and intellectual interests include a theology of reconciliation, cultural intelligence, developing inclusive and multi-cultural congregations, and the mentoring of youth and young adults. She is married to Walter Owens, Jr., with whom she will soon celebrate 30 years of marriage. They are the proud parents of an adult son, W. Mitchell Owens, III.