



CAPACITY PLAN

For Michigan Disciples
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WHY?

Michigan Disciples are in a unique spot at this moment in their history. After years of decline in congregations and a weakening financial condition that date back decades, the region is at a crossroads as their Regional Minister and the Office Manager near retirement.

Michigan Disciples leaders have concluded to continue to operate as always would be unrealistic given the circumstances, and have had many ideas about what the region should consider for the future. After nine months of listening, prayer, and discernment, the Futures Team has created a Future Story that outlines what the region *could* look like in five years (2026).

The purpose of this report is not to give background on how we got to this point; we have another report that will help you with the data. The purpose of this report is to paint a picture of our imagined future and how we can get there.

The Capacity Plan is meant to be a guide rather than a rule book. It should serve as a roadmap for the region as it enters these next few years of transition. In some cases, these transitions may take place much faster or slower than anticipated. The goals of this report must be reviewed at every board meeting for the next five years to measure where we are in the Plan.

Michigan Disciples exist to resource one another in our congregational development (new and existing), to nurture clergy and congregational leaders for connecting people to God's mission in Michigan and beyond.

MICHIGAN DISCIPLES IN 2026

St. Francis Conference Center--September 2026

The dining hall was filled with 40 clergy from throughout Michigan. It was the annual Disciples Clergy retreat at the St. Francis center near Lansing. While 30 were Disciples, there were also ten additional UCC pastors engaged in serious, clergy-like conversation. Like any group of clergy, there was a variety of people; some were button-down and serious, some were bearded, some wore bright floral tops, while others dressed in jeans and sweatshirts. They were men and women, black and white, gay and straight. They were retired clergy, while others were just starting. Like all groups of clergy, they did not agree with each other on the fine points of scripture. But like Disciples, they agreed to focus on their oneness in Christ.

A bell rang, and the Regional Minister invited people to be in an attitude of prayer, as she blessed the food and rededicated each other to our common call in mission. After the amen, there was a charge for the buffet.

Bill Buster was new to the group. A recent graduate of Lexington Theological Seminary, he was rather quiet as he took in his new surroundings and this eclectic group of colleagues.

“Would you like to join us?” said pastor Tim, recognizing Bill’s awkwardness.

The group introduced themselves to Bill; “I’m George from Adrian. I retired a few years ago, but got bored and am now serving this delightful group.”

“I’m Stan from Burt Lake up north.”

“I’m Jerome from Flint”

“I’m Sally from Detroit”

And, of course, Tim needed no introduction as he was the Regional Elder for Bill’s church in the North District.

“Why don’t you tell us a little about yourself?” Tim invited. “How did you get here?”

“Well, that is a long story. I grew up in Wisconsin in a small Disciples church, and where I felt the call for ministry, but not in Wisconsin. I fought off the call, and went to college and got a degree in marketing, then worked for a printing company awhile. After five years, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t living my call in life, and so went to Seminary at LTS. While in seminary, I started looking around, and when the time came, the Michigan Region was the only place where I put my papers.” Bill admitted.

The group of seasoned pastors, who were well through the salad course, looked at each other in disbelief. “You mean you **wanted** to be here?” Sally said incredulously.

“You bet. When I was in school, the BLM movement was taking force, and our country was really facing the issue of systemic racism. This region was engaged in lots of intentional work, more than other places, in just trying to understand one another. As I read reports on social media, and saw reports, it was interesting that the region wasn’t forcing people into the conversation, but inviting them to grow.”

Bill continued. “But that wasn’t all. I went to a virtual, online Seminary. I feel like I got a great education, but I knew I lacked a lot of pulpit experience. I also knew that congregations were slippery little devils.” The group said “AMEN”.

“I saw that this region had lots of resources for my congregation and me. Like this Clergy conference. I’ve had this date on my calendar for six months now. The fact that I can come here and learn from more experienced colleagues, and not have to even pay a registration fee, is great.”

“Well, I don’t know how much wisdom we can bring to the table...” Tim started to say, but then Bill interrupted.

“I didn’t say learn from your wisdom, I mean learn from your mistakes as well!” he said with a grin.

Sally had to keep her milk from shooting out of her nose. “Oh Bill, I think you’re going to fit in with this group!”

Jerome served a mission congregation in embattled Flint. “I’m really glad you are a part of our ongoing conversations about reconciliation. Your generation has a really different view than mine did. I agree, it is an important conversation to have, and I am glad to have you as a partner in this. I appreciated you and your people who showed up to help move our foodbank last week.”

The group paused a moment to savor Jerome’s thought. He rarely spoke, but when he did, it was worth listening to him.

"Tell us about your church, Bill?" Tim inquired.

"We're small, about 30-50 on Sunday. I'm only part-time. My wife is a teacher, and we were lucky to get this small town setting with a teaching position she could fill. I'm still looking for something else to fill my work week," Bill admitted.

"Sound like you guys made quite a commitment to serve this church," Stan said. "My wife and I had the same kind of luck. It doesn't always come together for folks.

"That's an understatement," said Tim.

"In the West District, we have 13 congregations, almost all of them are served now by bi-vocational pastors. It takes a lot to get the planets to line up so that we can get qualified people like you in the right spot," Tim said.

"Oh, Tim," Sally interrupted. "Tim is being modest. The Regional Elders and the Regional Minister have worked hard to move mountains in this regard. By putting together support systems for clergy resourcing their congregations and being present in congregations, they have created an atmosphere for growth and vitality in our churches," She said with pride.

The group nodded in agreement as they started dessert.

"So, what does a Regional Elder do?" Bill asked.

Tim replied, "We are called by the region to serve a district. There are three in Michigan in size from 7 to 18 congregations. As elders, we connect with each church, listen to them express their needs, and develop programs that support the church. We always had elders, but about four years ago, we really stepped it up."

"You see, we could no longer really afford a full-time Regional Minister, and so in order to multiply that person's work, we called Regional Elders. Our region spent money training them, and we now compensate the elders."

"Some of the elders are retired clergy, while others are part-time pastors who have agreements with their congregations to serve the other part of their portfolio as Regional Elder."

Bill lit up. "What would it look like for my church if I was to become a Regional Elder?"

Tim smiled, "I'm glad you asked. Because the Regional Elder needs to be in congregations on Sundays, their church would have to release them once a month so they can visit another church in their district. Not every church can do this. They usually fill the pulpit on those Sundays with a lay preacher. This works out well in some cases because the church realizes they are not paying a full-time preacher, and it gives them quality pastors who can augment their salaries. But I have something else in mind for you, Bill."

Tim continued, "What did you do for a living before you went into ministry?"

Bill smiled as he told the group about his career in marketing for a printing company in Wisconsin Dells.

"Did you see that the region is looking for a part-time communications person?" Tim asked.

Bill's smile told everyone he was already considering it.

The group broke for the next set of presentations. They were in workshop presentation form and engaged the pastors in deep conversation. The first was entitled "Lessons from the New Church Movement for Existing Congregations" by the Director of New Church Ministries in Indianapolis. The pastors pressed one another about thinking outside of the box with their congregations and imagining different models of ministry.

Another Pastor in the region did the next workshop. It was a focus on looking at different spiritual disciplines and made a connection about how community service is as important a spiritual discipline as prayer or daily scripture reading. Clergy shared ways in which they connect with their community outside of church circles to live out their calling.

Before breaking for dinner, the Regional Minister gave some announcements.

She invited pastors to get their church treasurers to the “Church Finance Workshop,” which was being led by Church Extension, in each of the three districts. “It is a resource packed 2-hour gathering that will help your church treasurer reevaluate your financial models—you may want to attend with her/him,” she urged.

She also mentioned that there were three consecutive sessions in the districts on a Saturday and Sunday for Church School teachers. “There will be breakout sessions for those teaching adult classes as well as those teaching children.” The event was led by a Faith Formation director of a church in Illinois that had an excellent education program.

Then each district elder made announcements regarding upcoming events in their districts. The North District and East District told the group about their pulpit exchange. While the purpose was to promote the region’s anti-racism values, it was going to especially focus on pastors sharing with each other’s churches the realities of their situation, and communicate our respect for differences while lifting up our oneness in Christ.

Bill was taking notes since he was in the North District and asked how he might connect with a church for the exchange.

As the group was breaking for some outside time before dinner, Bill asked Tim if he could answer another question.

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but what does the Regional Minister do anyway?” he asked.

Tim responded with clarity, “We wish we could afford a full-time Regional Minister, but we don’t have the funds for that right now. Our Regional Minister is also the pastor at a part-time congregation. This allows her to have full benefits, but it also makes some things tricky; that is why we invested in Regional Elders.”

“I get that,” Bill said. “But what does the Regional Minister do as opposed to Regional Elders?”

Tim went on, “The Elders focus on congregational development. The Regional Minister focuses on regional administration, resourcing the elders, connecting with the broader church, and the big one is running the search and call process. She runs a staff meeting once a month with all of us. And, if there is a congregation in conflict, she resources conflict management.”

“The Regional Minister works with the Church Vitality Commission to train the Regional Elders. With their direct contact with congregations, they feed into the commission issues that congregations are facing in real-time, and together they find ways to provide collaborative inquiry into ways they can resource congregations,” Tim explained.

“So, how does the region pay for all of this?” Bill asked, still confused. “It sounds like we have more structure, not less.”

Tim explained how the region sold its office building and has used those assets to provide annual income through the investment. “We used to spend a lot of money keeping a building heated and repaired.” He explained that they had a full-time assistant, but were able through the new ALEX app to do former church data

and annual report tasks more efficiently. They had automated camp and event registrations. “We reduced our salary expenses and improved our connections with congregations.”

“We reduced the administrative position to 20 hours per week and created a new position to do our communications, largely through digital technology,” he concluded.

But that was not all. Tim went on to explain that the result of constant contact by Regional Elders actually increased the income. “Churches could see the direct correlation between their support of DMF and how their congregational life was being improved by quality regional programs.”

“You haven’t seen it, but running in the background is our extensive Biblical Institute, which is taught by the pastors of our larger congregations. This provides quality training for our Commissioned Ministers. We also utilize your old alma mater (LTS) for online courses. Our Commissioned Ministers are doing some great ministry.”

“I was reading about the Institute this week. You know, I did really good on Hebrew Bible studies in seminary, perhaps I could help teach one of those classes,” Bill offered.

“That would be excellent. With our growing numbers of Commissioned Ministers, we are going to need a lot of help. We currently have about 20 pastors enrolled and working for their certificates. That number could double in a few more years. We are always looking to our pastors in the region to teach these classes. Since most course work is virtual, we often get instructors from outside the region as well,” Tim said with pride.

Sally came to walk with Tim and overheard the conversation.

“Don’t let him fool you into thinking that setting all of this up was easy,” she said as they both laughed.

“No, in the early days, there was conflict. First of all, people were upset that they couldn’t go to a regional office for a meeting,” Tim explained. “For many of us, that was our main contact with the region. We had a number of congregations who basically sent very little support to DMF because they were angry about progressive church stands and were focused on the things that divided us rather than our unity in Christ. We’ve worked hard to create an environment of openness to one another and of civil conversation. I have to admit, some of those conversations have been pretty difficult, but it is important for us to listen to one another. It is still a growing edge,” Tim confessed.

“We aren’t done yet,” Tim said as Sally was tugging on his sleeve to take the walk.

“This model has been developed for our first five years—but we have also started some talks about possible new forms of ministry with some others. We have empowered our Regional Minister and a couple of our regional leaders to begin informal, non-binding conversations with some of the surrounding regions about possible partnerships. We are also in conversation with the UCC Conference about the same things, that’s why there are Michigan UCC pastors at this event with us. We are not sure where these conversations will take us, but we have some criteria.” Sally grew interested in this information, as it was new to her.

“So what is the criteria?” Sally asked.

“We really want to develop the Crystal Conference Center and continue its use for numerous events in the future. We need to develop this to accommodate groups of adults as well as kids, almost like hotel rooms, and increasing utilization by casual use as well as more retreats. That is why we would want to retain some assets, so we aren’t really talking about a merger, but a way of shared ministry.” He concluded.

Bill understood. “So we would share administrative things, but still do program in some sort of new structure?” he asked.

Tim smiled. “Yes, we are still figuring it out. For example, we are increasing our work with boundary training, and we do history and polity with the Institute. The UCC’s are currently considering recognition of our Institute for their licensed ministers. We know that from these conversations, a willing partner will hopefully emerge, and a new futures committee will work on that.”

The three pastors took to the road, to walk alongside the lake before dinner. Tim was grateful to God for his colleagues, and especially Bill, whose energy and excitement helped him see that the decisions they made five years ago were working well. Within his heart, he knew this pastor would inspire his congregation, to be the hands and feet of Jesus within their community. He could see the congregations coming together, in some cases sharing Habitat builds or other community ministry programs. He heard conversations about youth groups coming together to do mission trips together. He saw the strong congregations helping weaker ones, and everyone proclaiming their love of Christ together.

Tim’s heart was filled with joy when he confessed with his fellow pilgrims on their walk; “You know, God is doing a new thing with us, and I am thankful that we can be partners in this.”

OBJECTIVES

- **To create space for the region, while serving congregations in a robust way, in order to achieve sustainability.** Future sustainability may be exemplified by: 1) Better financial support from Michigan congregations, 2) potential merger with neighboring Disciples of Christ regions as the denomination is in consideration of new borders for middle-level judicatories, or 3) Potential partnership with other denominational mid-level judicatories in Michigan.
- **Recognizing the severe decline of most congregations in the region, we will work to provide direct program support and development of congregations and their leaders by creating our districts as instruments of collaborative inquiry.** With higher levels of engagement, congregations will be given new tools to expand the Disciples' witness in Michigan utilizing the talents and skills of one another and additional resources as needed.
- **To recreate the economic model of the region that will seek sustainability within five years.** This will include changes in staffing configuration, sale or lease of the current regional office, and providing more program support for congregational development.
- **To create a region that attracts clergy because of its support of clergy, opportunities for expanding their skill base, and effective collegial opportunities with skilled Regional Elders facilitating.**
- **To take advantage of the region’s diversity as an opportunity to address systemic racism.**

THE GOALS

Creating space to achieve sustainability:

The region is not sustainable financially in its current configuration. The purpose of this 5-year Plan is not to achieve sustainability, but position the region for more long-term sustainability. A new economic model,

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as given in this report, can gain sustainability for the short term, but the region needs years to explore a new model for sustainability.

The team came up with three ideas for long-term sustainability:

- 1- Better financial support from congregations. Some churches in the region provide extensive financial support for the Disciples Mission Fund (DMF), half provide little or no support to DMF. An active district model, with more direct contact between the region and congregations, would allow the opportunity to challenge non-participating congregations with quality programming and support.
- 2- Potential merger with another region. This approach will require time and relationship building. There would be sticky questions regarding regional assets (i.e., Crystal and endowments), as well as finding a regional partner that would be compatible with Michigan. A merger would eventually transfer all assets, which would then come under new leadership in which Michigan would be a representative. Finding a region that would have interest in this conversation is not a given. There are currently conversations on the General Level about the reconfiguration of regions as well. It seems prudent to not force this discussion at this time but allow for the next regional minister to begin inquiries.
- 3- Partnership with another denomination. The Michigan Region has had a long-term relationship with the much larger UCC conference. They have shared programs with good partnership in the past. Such a partnership, however, would still continue the regional structure in a reduced way with the sharing of staff. The region would still maintain its assets separately. Due to size differences, it would not be practical to assume that this would be an equal partnership.

District Development:

A consistent message throughout our listening indicated several things: 1- the need for congregational and leader development, 2- the vast geography of the region, and how difficult it was to travel a great distance for what might be a mediocre workshop, 3-Lack of regional initiated contact. (Everyone expressed the availability of the Regional Minister in a time of need).

It also became clear that the demographics of the region demonstrated that we have distinctly different areas where congregations reside and that strategies for one demographic will not likely translate to another congregation.

In order to address this need, we see the need to invest in the development of our districts. There are currently three districts in the region (North, East, West), each with a distinctly unique ministry opportunity. There are big differences between urban, suburban, and rural congregations in their size, strategies, and ministry plans. This will allow for customizing offerings for congregations in like situations rather than trying to include all of these contexts in all program offerings.

A Regional Elder (see staffing) would serve each district. The Regional Elder will have regular contact with congregations, their pastors, and people. They would reestablish regular gathering opportunities for congregational leaders and be able to facilitate the offering of quality program that would benefit the congregations, either by having congregations share successful strategies with each other or utilizing outside resource people.

Districts would also engage clergy in effective Peer Groups. Studies on Peer Groups for pastors demonstrate highly improved performance of clergy in all areas if they are engaged in a meaningful Peer Group. These groups would be resourced by the Regional Elder and provide opportunities for

theological reflection, emotional support, and inquiry into areas of concern. They should also include times of intentional play, which is a great dynamic for building trust and collegiality.

Regional Elders will gather monthly with the Regional Minister to share updates, do strategic planning, and coordination of annual regional gatherings (i.e., the annual Clergy Retreat or Regional Assembly).

Economic Model:

Staffing:

Regional Minister: The five-year Plan assumes at least a half-time Regional Minister. This position could be shared with a local congregation that is seeking a part-time pastor. The Regional Minister would oversee the work of the Regional Elders and other regional staff. They would also represent the region (as time allows) in the College of Regional Ministers, General Board, etc. The Regional Minister would be the primary driver for potential partnership and oversee the administration of this plan. They would also provide oversight of the Search and Call Process.

Office Manager: The office manager would work half time and provide administrative support to the Regional Minister and Regional Elders. They would maintain Search and Call records and other administrative functions.

Communications Director: 10 hours per week. Working in close relationship with the Regional Elders and regional staff, this person would develop contact lists, create a current web-presence, and stimulate social media.

Regional Elders (3): Regional Elders could be compensated by a small stipend and would work to develop congregational engagement in their district. The districts vary in size (7-18 congregations). It would be beneficial for the Regional Elder to be retired clergy, who could be free on Sundays to connect directly with their congregations. They would also develop program and facilitate the District Clergy Peer Groups. In addition, they would meet monthly with the regional staff.

The Regional Office:

Operation and maintenance of the regional office consumed about a third of the region's operational income. Since this Plan involves decentralizing program, the need for an office is questionable. Added to that is the need to have a part-time Regional Minister, who may need to share his position with a congregation that could be located in some place other than Lansing. Many smaller regions are virtual, with staff working out of homes, except for perhaps the office manager. While most churches have surplus space, it would be easy to rent space from a local congregation for a fraction of the cost of maintaining and operating the current facility. This agreement would also include the ability to have small group meetings with task forces or committees or even the board.

The current regional office is about 2000 square feet and is directly adjacent to First Christian in Lansing. A long-term relationship with the congregation has benefited the region, as the church owns the parking lot in front of the office. A sale or lease of the property would require conversation with FCC regarding use of the parking lot with another occupant.

We believe this asset is worth about \$200,000. In order to ascertain its “market value,” I would suggest contacting the Disciples Church Extension Fund and, for a small fee, order a Brokers Price Opinion (BPO). The BPO would estimate the market value of the building based on current market conditions. Selling commercial real estate can take a while.

Should the market value be less than \$200,000, the region may consider leasing the property. The rate for leasing could be \$8-\$15 per sq. ft. We are not sure of the market potential for that. As lessor, there would still be expenses related to owning the property, but this would solve the Sunday parking issue with FCC. A comp of similar office space is \$10 per sq. ft. 2000 sq ft. est. would be \$20,000 annually less upkeep and management expense. (Comp. <https://www.loopnet.com/Listing/809-Center-St-Lansing-MI/6847037/>)

Should the region sell, it could invest cash for the asset to supplement the regional budget. A current Church Extension rate of 2% would hypothetically add ~~\$40,000~~ **\$4,000** annually to the income of the region (based on \$200,000 net on sale of building)

Requirements for new office space in a church would be approximately a room of 200 square feet adjacent to an entrance. The space would be secure and on zoned heating/cooling. The region would provide their own internet service. This space would house the office manager and appropriate files. The church would allow for meetings outside of the office space as needed. The region would pay about \$500 per month to the church to offset utilities.

Other staff would work virtually from their homes or other offices.

Program:

Program expenses are the deliverables the region offers to congregations. These would include items like trainings, programs, assemblies, and costs associated with promotion, etc. Currently, participants bear all program costs, with only about 3% of the region's budget going to this item.

Participants bear the cost of participation in these programs. For example, we are asking people who volunteer to teach Sunday School at their church to attend a program designed to help them become better teachers. This person is likely purchasing supplies for their class, and now we ask them to give up an additional day and pay a fee to improve their leadership. A small investment by the region can serve as a stimulus to higher participation by congregational leaders who give so much of their time and talent.

We would propose tripling these budget items, as incentives. Workshops would be delivered in districts, rather than region-wide, to reduce travel time, and events designed to improve congregational life would be offered at no fee, perhaps with lunch covered as well.

There may be times when a certain program offering may be appropriate throughout the entire region, with perhaps a national workshop consultant. This could be delivered in all three districts in the region on one weekend. (i.e., E-Saturday Morning, W-Saturday Afternoon, N-Sunday Afternoon).

Increasing Participation in Regional Support:

It is somewhat alarming that only half of the Disciples congregations in Michigan support DMF or the region directly. This has happened over time. In some interviews and in the survey, some of those respondents named the fact that they felt they received little from the region in terms of support and so cut this budget item when things got tight.

These congregations need to be challenged from an ethical standpoint, and a practical point. Once the region is able to offer church development support, localized in the district, District Elders will have the opportunity to challenge their participation.

Synopsis of New Economic Model

<u>Budget Goal 2026</u>	
Income	
DMF & Designating Giving	
Increased participation	\$100,000
Endowment	\$5,000
Income from Building	\$30,000
Total Income	\$135,000
Expenses	
PT Regional Min	\$30,000
PT Office Mngr	\$15,000
Stipend Reg. Elders (3)	\$21,600
Comm. Director (PT)	\$12,000
Benefits (RM)	\$7,500
Rental Space (church)	\$6,000
Travel Allowances	\$5,000
Program Budget	\$9,000
Total Expense	\$106,100

Attracting and Enriching Clergy:

Throughout the research phase, a constant theme regarding the ability to attract and enrich clergy emerged. This goal is primarily about putting resources in place that would:

- 1- Be attractive for clergy who primarily earned their M. Div. virtually who may be looking for active support systems as they begin ministry. (Lifelong learners make the best pastors)

- 2- Recognizing the giftedness of pastors currently serving and allowing for cross-fertilization of ideas by means of active Peer Groups for clergy (by district). Peer Groups are proven support and stimulate pastors to become high performers. Clergy throughout the region mentioned the support they feel through the annual retreat. They also had no problem listing areas of expertise that they could share with one another and other church leaders. Peer Groups would facilitate collaborative inquiry areas based on current realities that relate directly to their context for ministry.

- 3- The region has a high need for Commissioned Ministers. This will continue to grow in the future as the economic realities of our congregations continue to be taxed. This objective will require putting in place something like a Biblical Institute that would offer on-line instructional resources for those seeking a commission, perhaps in partnership with a seminary (a number of DOC seminaries currently offer such a resource). Commissioned Ministers would need to complete basic courses for their commission, and additional courses each year to continue their commission. Ordained clergy can also be a resource in providing face to face instruction in some arenas like practical theology.
- 4- Non-Disciple clergy serving DOC congregations comprise a unique group within this region. This group of clergy is doing us a favor in many cases, even though their theology and culture may not match the Disciples' values. I do not believe they appreciate Disciples' values because of the way we welcome them into conversation. While we have reasons to be suspicious of their intentions and have history with sheep stealing, we also must confess we are not always welcoming as colleagues (as a former Presbyterian, I can relate to this during the time I moved into the Disciples of Christ).

Congregations that have had difficulty getting candidates have often had to reach beyond our denominational boundaries in order to find pastors. Hopefully, with the new models, Michigan Disciples will be able to fill these spots in the future with Commissioned ministers; however, until then, the region will need to focus on this subgroup and welcome these clergy in the District Peer Groups and other functions. This will only happen by intentional efforts by Regional Elders, not by requirement, but by the integrity of relationship. Persistent mentoring relationships with neighboring clergy will also help. It will mean listening to what they have to offer and not treating them as second-class participants.

Leveraging diversity to end systemic racism

For the size of the Michigan Region, it has amazing diversity, not only racially but socio-economically as well. Numerous participants expressed how they felt this diversity was a gift. In this era of awakening realities of systemic racism, this provides the region a unique position to offer experiences that would create awareness and create together images of God's beloved community.

This region has modeled many of the qualities of being an anti-racist, pro-reconciling region. Yet we know there is still more deep work that needs to be done, and the church could be the force that leverages the work of reconciliation to the front of our society today.

The region could offer opportunities for service with neighboring congregations that serve people in very different settings, and not even leave the region. Offering youth and young adult opportunities to explore what it means to live in different socio-economic areas may lead to opportunities to understand not only how our culture has developed, but chart new images for congregations and people to aspire.

With little effort, sharing in worship experiences, pulpit exchanges, choir exchanges, and claiming our oneness in Jesus Christ are all unique opportunities available to this region.

TIMELINE

TIMELINE	General	Sustainability	District Development	Adapting Economic Model	Clergy Development	Becoming a Reconciling Church
4Q--2020						
Reg. Board Receives Report						
1Q--2021			Clarify district shapes and size by congregation	BPO sought for Reg. Office	Through Commission on Ministry, inventory clergy by category: Retired, Ordained active, Commissioned Active, Chaplain, etc. Make list available for Reg. Min & Elders by district	
2Q--2021	Overlapping search for Regional Minister begins	Congregations introduced to Plan, encouraging financial support	District Gatherings to introduce the Capacity Plan	Leasing option explored with representative board determines List/Lease		
3Q--2021			Search for begins (Given new Job Description)			

4Q--2021	Regional Minister Retires-- Ministry celebrated		Regional Elders selected, approved by board	Disposition of Reg. Office completed Asset invested	Regional Elders receive Peer Group facilitation training	
1Q--2022	New Regional Minister installed	(Regional Minister begins relationship building with neighboring regions & UCC)	Regional Elders begin their work. Training by vitality team, Hope Partnership (DCEF)	New staffing configuration to budget	Annual Retreat with National figure, no fee for Disciples clergy-- Introduce Peer Groups	District Elders begin exploring Reconciliation Opportunities with Clergy Peer Groups
2Q--2022	Monthly staff meetings begin-- Office Manager called	Spring annual emphasis on supporting the region with congregations	Clergy Peer Groups begin	Program Budget now available for District Programing	Clergy Peer Groups Begin	
3Q--2022			District assemblies and workshops begin	Budget for 2023 developed for Regional Board	Commission on Ministry explores relationships with on-line seminaries for development of Commissioned Ministers	District meetings with emphasis on Racism and Unity
4Q--2022		Budget reviewed, new income stream from building	Regional Elders interview clergy individually in their district, make an inventory of talents and skills for cross development of congregations			

1Q--2023	Communications Director Called	Regional Elders reach out to non-participating congregations (goal 20% growth in participation)	District Assembly or workshop	Begin living in new budget parameters transitioning to the 2026 Budget proposed in this report	Commission on Ministry recommends to Regional Board a preferred Seminary for Commissioned Ministers to attend. Explores formalized requirements for growth of Commissioned Ministers, curriculum requirements, and cost-sharing. The commission will also explore potential instruction that could be augmented by talented clergy in the region	Consultation with National Office on Reconciliation ministries for Program development for the next 3 years
2Q--2023						
3Q--2023			District Assembly or workshop	Budget for 2024 developed for Regional Board	Commission on Ministry gets adoption by Regional Board on Commissioned Minister development--Week of Ministry and Clergy recognition at District Assemblies	Implementation of Reconciliation on program goals
4Q--2023						

1Q--2024		Regional Elders begin outreach to non-participating congregations (goal 20% growth in participation)	District Assembly or workshop		New requirements for Commissioned Ministers begin	
2Q--2024		Regional Minister recommends merger or partnership partner to Regional Board-- Listening Conferences to Districts before 4Q	Districts listen to recommendation from Regional Board/Regional Minister about potential partner-- receives input from congregational leaders on what this could look like.	Regional officers review impact of potential partnership for Budget implications	Clergy Peer Groups explore Regional recommendation and give input or ask questions to the region and the Commission on Ministry	Ongoing implementation
3Q--2024			District Assembly or workshop	Budget for 2025 developed for Regional Board	Commission on Ministry adopts online Polity course requirements for non-disciple clergy serving congregations*	
4Q--2024	Note: It may be at this point that the region is very sustainable; the board may choose to continue under the	Regional Board decides to begin Partnership/merger talks, with guidelines for discussions-- Partner affirms conversation		Regional officers report budget implications for potential partnership/merger to Regional Board	*NOTE: It is likely that this may compel some DOC congregations served by non-Disciple clergy to leave the denomination	Ongoing implementation

	current model at that point.	and sets their parameters			n, or require new clergy in difficult situations.	
1Q--2025		Regional Elders reach out to non-participating congregations (goal 20% growth in participation)	District Assembly or workshop			
2Q--2025		Discussions with potential Partner begins--Points of agreement affirmed, sticking points named		Regional officers prepare a model budget for new relationships as internal document to guide discussions		Ongoing implementation
3Q--2025			District Assembly or workshop	Budget for 2026 prepared for Regional Board	Week of the Ministry formally celebrated by District	
4Q--2025		Agreement reached with potential partner--Timeline for transition set for 1-year for asset distribution and other legal issues				
1Q--2026			District Assembly or workshop		Commission on Ministry notes standing requirements and transition	

					points for new partner or region	
2Q--2026					Clergy Peer groups consider continuation as a result of new partnership or merger	
3Q--2026			District Assembly-- Decision about continuation of gatherings for future configuration	New Economic model and completed for Regional Board approval		
4Q--2026	Transition Completed	Transition completed	Transition Completed	Transition to new partner	Clergy move into new relationship with new colleagues and commission on ministry	Emphasis continued with new partnership

BUILDING CAPACITY

Leadership:

Navigating this plan will require the regional leaders (staff, pastors, board members, etc.) to become transformational leaders. That means moving away from “transactional” leadership toward the kinds of leaders that inspire the region to become more than we imagined. Transactional leaders only look to replace the systems we currently have in place. That system is no longer sustainable by most metrics in the Michigan Region.

A transformational process cannot occur unless leaders commit to becoming that kind of leader. We know that you cannot transform a congregation without this unique transition from past ways of leading.

Success on this Plan is heavily weighted on creativity and self-starting. The next Regional Minister position looks daunting for most, especially since it is a part-time position. In a perfect world, we would hope for a full-time regional minister, the cost of which would not allow other aspects of this Plan to take place.

The new Regional Minister will, however, have three District Elders who will handle most of the relational development work with congregations. The Regional Minister will have the Search and Call Process and Relationship Building with ecumenical and Disciples entities. This means the Regional Minister will need to be a creative, systems thinker. Systems thinking requires a broad view and the ability to link things that seem to be unrelated into a cohesive structure. He will provide connection to the Commission on Ministry.

District Elders will need to be seasoned veterans of the church who know about adaptive change and who are not married to trying to create the church of the past. They should have experience with church development and be capable of facilitating Clergy Peer Groups. They will work with the Congregational Vitality Commission.

At monthly meetings, District Elders and the Regional Minister will meet to discuss the needs of clergy and congregations and collaboratively develop regional programming.

Board members and commission chairs will need to be appraised of this plan and work collaboratively towards the implementation of the future story of this region. There are likely many more details than a plan of this nature can imagine, and they will have to maintain the day-to-day needs of the region with an eye towards building capacity for the future.

Overall, it will require our A-Game to transform this region over the next five years. The potential of utilizing the giftedness of current regional participants in new ways should be inspirational to us all.

Technical Skill Development:

Technical Skill Development is our way of identifying areas of expertise that may require outside sources in order to help the region live into its future.

These areas of exploration include:

- Church Development (New and Existing) resources within the region and from partners in the General Church (like Hope Partnership).
- Leadership Development. There are 28 notable forms of leaders of which transformational leadership is needed for this plan. Again, Hope Partnership can be a resource for providing workshops and resources for exploring this leadership style.
- Seminary Partnerships. There are underutilized online seminary resources available that can be used for the development of Commissioned Ministers and for polity work with pastors who are new to the Disciples.
- Exploration of the Disciples in Puerto Rico and their Institute for Ministry may be worth your time. This model utilizes ordained clergy in the training and development of Commissioned Ministers.
- Clergy Peer Groups: The Lily Endowment has done extensive research on the effectiveness of Clergy Peer Groups and has noted the elements that are most effective in clergy development.

Adaptive

What is it that the region is willing to “Give up” in order to achieve this Future way of being? A review of the interviews on the Implications Report may give you some insight into this. This is an area of honest discussion by the regional leadership at some point.

The obvious things to me appear to be:

- Eliminating face-to-face meetings requiring long drives.
- Providing workshops closer to congregations to increase engagement with programmatic support of congregations.
- Giving up the thought that only regional leaders can be tapped for expertise
- Giving up on the requirement of the Regional Minister being the source of all conflict resolution or clergy development issues.
- Giving up the idea that congregations exist to support the region, instead of the fact that the region exists to strengthen congregations.
- Consideration should be given towards streamlining the structure of the region at some point during the next three years.

Resources

The three main resources that fuel a region are staff, finances, and volunteers. Staffing and finances appear earlier in this plan. How the region chooses to spend volunteer time is an additional area of concern during this period of transition.

Consideration should be given towards the streamlining of the regional structure. As the focus for programing moves to districts, the question should be asked: what matters are best handled at the district level and what needs to continue at the regional level? For example, the Commission on Ministry should be handled at a regional level, whereas the congregational vitality issues may be best addressed at a district level. Perhaps Disciples Women's Fellowship would be administrated at the district level, rather than the region.

CRYSTAL CONFERENCE CENTER

Michigan Disciples have long enjoyed the Crystal Conference Center. Despite the pandemic, this resource has seen an increase in bookings for individuals and small groups. The center is already finding new ways to live its life. This success is largely due to a 2-year-old management agreement with UCCR to manage Crystal during the summer season.

According to a Facilities Condition Assessment by Criterium Kessler Engineers, the camp is generally in good to fair condition. Some infrastructure was not inspected in the report. The report shows a need for some major projects that will need consideration in the near future, such as the replacement of water tanks, well valve issues, and heating units.

The report made no evaluation, however, of programmatic suitability of the facility. Regional congregational participants have been aging, and the conference center may have the opportunity to provide more service to a growing older population as well as its youth and children's programs.

Crystal has its own oversight committee, even though it is part of the regional structure. Its finances are kept separately, but there is still overlap between both the region and the conference center in its administration. Should a merger or partnership be considered in the next five years, it might be wise to contemplate separating Crystal as its own non-profit entity. There are many pros and cons in this area that will require deeper conversation.

It is worth noting that there is a high level of pride within the region about this resource. That level of pride goes down as we get into Detroit. Since the camp is 5 hours away, it is difficult for parents in that area to

drive kids up for an event and come home in one day. The accessibility of the camp, geographically, is an issue for some. For future camps, facilitating transportation, especially to lower-income families in the Detroit area, should be given serious consideration.

Crystal Conference Center is a good resource that has much love and attention by a number of volunteers who find great meaning in that setting. It is a resource just waiting to become a Great resource for helping people discover their faith and spirituality.

CLOSING WORDS

Over the past year, I have come to fall in love with Michigan Disciples. The darn pandemic made this a much more virtual relationship than I would have wanted, but I think we found a way to persist in this process. I wish I had more time with creative leaders in retreats rather than just online. I regret not getting to see Crystal in person. I oftentimes learn more from side-bar conversations than just through a facilitated process.

Overall, I feel good about this process and the creative input I received from the numerous people who were surveyed, interviewed, and who engaged directly in the process. This region is well served by people who value being Disciples in a unique setting. I marveled at how pastors, in their different places with waning resources, were so faithful in our mission of being a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. I was impressed with the honesty and integrity of how people spoke of one another with great respect as this region faces its transition. It was apparent also that this region appreciates and respects the quality leadership they have received from their Regional Minister, Eugene James.

I want to thank Neil Topliffe and Eugene James for all of their help during this process. They were both incredibly responsive to my many questions, and they helped keep things rolling in the midst of this pandemic. Special thanks to the writing team (Anne McCanslin, Rick Mogdlin Green, Tim Murtaugh, Yvonne Christopher, Neil Topliffe, and Eugene James) for their work on the development of the future story. They spent two days in meetings and numerous hours writing between sessions. This group had to read more than 60 pages before writing, and they did their jobs very well. Special thanks to the Regional Board for their participation in the initial research retreat, which led to the surveys and the eventual Future Story.

A vision without a plan is just a fantasy. A plan, however, without a will, is just an empty document. The will is where the rubber hits the road. That is why the objectives set forth in this vision should be reviewed religiously at each board meeting until it is satisfied. Any organization must keep its vision in front of leaders.

I have hope because of the vision of what the world would be like under God's reign. During this time, when the world seems to be falling apart, riots, systemic injustice for many in our society, the pandemic, the inability of churches to gather as before, economic injustice—things seem to be going the wrong way, and many are suffering. I take hope from this passage:

Romans 8: (MSSG)

22-25 All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is

arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.

²⁶⁻²⁸ Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

There is a pregnant hope within our congregations, despite declining resources and people. They still find a way to be God's hands and feet in the world. We still work together to be a place of wholeness in a broken and fragmented world, because we know God walks beside us. As an older man, I ache for God's realm with you.

St. Augustine wrote: Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger at the way things are and courage to do something about it.

My prayer is that Michigan Disciples will continue to remember that this is not about the survival of an institution (the region, or the Disciples of Christ), but that this is about creating and recreating faith communities that are signs of hope for this world. Michigan Disciples exist to resource one another in our congregational development (new and existing), to nurture clergy and congregational leaders for connecting people to God's mission in Michigan and beyond.

May God bless us all in this continued endeavor.
Rick Morse