



Interview with Rev. April G. Johnson Executive Director of Disciples Ministry of Reconciliation

By Janis Pyle

The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada will hold its biennial gathering in Des Moines, July 20 - 24, 2019. This is the first time in decades the assembly has met in Des Moines, and, to make this event even more exciting, Ames First Christian Church will be a host site for worship on Sunday, July 21.

On that Sunday, we will be joined by a special guest preacher — the Rev. April G. Johnson, Executive Director of Disciples Ministry of Reconciliation. As Minister of Reconciliation, Rev. Johnson facilitates the church-wide process of



awareness, analysis and action toward healing the fractures in the body of Christ that are caused by systemic racism. She brings to this work a deep passion for racial understanding, justice and compassion.

In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved the formation of a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and develop ways of helping congregations address racism. Out of this process, an Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative was put to the church and approved in 1998.

Rev. Johnson previously served at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, as Assistant Dean of Students/Director of Diversity Services and as Associate College Chaplain. She received her degrees from the University of Illinois-Champaign/Urbana and Howard University in Washington, D.C. Rev. Johnson is a native of Chicago, Illinois.

I. Where in Chicago did you grow up? How does your upbringing connect to your career/calling?

I grew up in the south suburbs of Chicago. My parents moved there on my first birthday. Folding under the pressure of tuition of parochial school for my two oldest siblings, they anticipat-

ed a better public-school education for their children in the suburbs. Our subdivision was entirely populated by Black residents. Seeing the disparities in my own education as well as the lack of businesses owned by people who looked like me, propelled my nascent passion to right-align opportunities for all people. I was no young version of Angela Davis in my formative years by far, but the differences simply did not make sense to me and kept me exploring new ways to understand and change a system that excluded and withheld opportunity for 'some' people.

II. How do you keep from being overwhelmed by current political/racial divides?

Our choices today regarding the divisive rhetoric and tribalism in our current national and global dialogue for me are clear. It is our imperative to affirm each other's humanity. We have made "othering" an art form. Sadly, when we legislate making people 'other' while affording a dominant group access to more resources and a better quality of life than those excluded or impacted by such legislation, we justify racism and other oppressions. I simply find no justification for dehumanization. So, I am not overwhelmed by the ministry and work of changing our churchwide and national narrative of division and devaluing people as a standard. Where I do get overwhelmed, or more accurately exasperated, is by the fear that is generated that halts dialogue that keeps 'good people' silent and inactive toward promoting inclusion and human dignity for all. As Christians, God reconciled us to all be in God's beloved "in" group. We are all "A-listers," as annoying as that can be.

III. Was there a story or a turning point connected to your calling toward a ministry of reconciliation?

As a College chaplain, I received an e-mail from a staff person that encouraged travelers to be aware that Middle Eastern men were storming airplane cockpits. I ripped the e-mail off my printer, "stormed" into the President of the College's office, insisting that this use of the College's e-mail platform was unacceptable and must be denounced. Subsequently, I was promoted to Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Diversity Services. It became crystal clear that this is the work that I cannot not do.

IV. What is your vision for the denomination? The world?

It is my desire that as a communion we embody this work by turning our outrage into action on behalf of those whose lives and stories are dismissed, distorted and diminished by a narrative of exclusion and American exceptionalism. For those of us who are new to being outraged by racism and oppression, I hope that we can support and mutually develop new ways to be in dialogue and relationship with one another that transforms the way we worship and the way we vote. It is my hope that we become leaders in thought and deed that transforms our world where exclusion is the exception instead of the norm.

V. Possible to share a couple of story-based examples of types of groups or personal differences you have been able to mediate or bring together?

The work of reconciliation is very often most visible when we are intentionally engaged in mediation of conflicting perspectives. I was invited by an anti-racism team in one of our Regions to facilitate a dialogue with two groups who were in conflict over the use of a racial stereotype at an area convention during

registration for the event. The offending party opted not to attend. We shared a meal together. Then we began a listening session by paying particular attention to allowing each side to describe what was experienced during the incident. I then invited persons who were not involved in the incident to recount what they heard said by both sides. Next, each side was allowed to speak directly to each other. There were tears and anger on both sides. At one point out of frustration, a participant said in anger, "The worst thing you can say to a white person is that they are a racist!" Ironically it was a God moment. Silence lingered for a moment. Then dialogue continued, exploring the comment and naming new ways forward that would be life-affirming for both sides. They agreed to meet again to get to know each other better. It was amazing. God doesn't ask us to agree to disagree. God asks us to love one another. We know that it is hard, which might be why we avoid the work of relationship with people who are not like us. God keeps calling us into opportunities to birth new relationships and new perspectives.

VI. Who was/is your mentor, someone who modeled reconciliation for you?

There were many people who influenced and encouraged my proclivity toward justice. As a college student I was very active in student government. In my second semester of freshman year, the Black Alumni Association named me "Most Outstanding Black Freshman" which honored me and served as encouragement. So, too, did the Director of Housing and my area housing director by exposing me to opportunities to meet civil rights leaders. After my undergraduate years, my pastors Rev. Leroy Haynes, Rev. Dr. Frank Thomas and Rev. Dr. Alvin O'Neal Jackson, invested in my leadership skills and nurtured my justice bent. Specifically, Alvin Jackson, shepherded me during my semi-

nary years as a trusted advisor and mentor while I navigated a career change and the rigors of seminary. All of this while himself fielding covert and overt racism in his ministry with a reticent, yet growing and increasingly diverse, Church and congregation.

VII. Where do you see hope?

In the continuous commitment to change the world for good, we are called into conversation and relationship with one another. We have a program called "One Bag of Tea, One Conversation, One Relationship," where congregations and individuals are encouraged to invite other congregations and individuals to a conversation over tea, following a prescribed list of questions printed on the teabag cover. It has been well received.

VIII. Your sources of renewal?

Family, friends, my four and five-year-old great niece and nephew, and yoga.

IX. Fill in the blank: What the world needs now is _____.

Courage to love. A colleague said after visiting the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, AL, that he was amazed by how many stories shown in the museum were told from the perspective of scripture interpreted that enslavement was a form of love. We clearly have differing perspectives on what love means for each of us. We are commanded to explore and stay in the exploration and work of loving one another as Christ has loved us.