

Celebrating Connections – Profile of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Nebraska

Our Mission: *To Build Community, Celebrate Diversity, Foster Collaboration, Inspire Creativity, Worship Joyfully*

The Christian Church in Nebraska has 33 congregations in cities and villages which stretch 230 miles east and west from Plattsmouth to Cozad and 98 miles north and south from Omaha to Falls City with a majority of the churches in the eastern part of the state. Current total membership of these congregations is around 3,300 members with a total outreach giving to the region, to DMF and to special offerings of around \$150,000. Overall, it is one of the DOC's smallest regions in a large geographical area. The region's visible diversity is represented in Omaha's Iglesia Cristiana Discipulos de Cristo congregation and Cozad's Chuukese (Micronesian) Christian Church with a very small number of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) people in more urban congregations.

Governed by the Regional Church Board, the Nebraska Region is organized around four Centers:

Center on Church Development: *To establish, receive, and strengthen local churches by providing pastoral care and counsel to ministers and members of local churches;*

Center on Church Leadership: *To teach and witness to spiritual practices that enable leaders and emerging leaders to serve the people and the structures of the Local, Regional, and General Church;*

Center on Church Mission: *To relate the local church, its members, and ministers, to the mission of the church and the wider community locally, regionally, nationally, and globally;*

Center on the Regional Church: *To ensure that there is a framework in which the other three Centers are able to fulfill their purposes.* (from the ByLaws of the Region)

One of the unique aspects of the Nebraska Region is its strong collaboration with the United Church of Christ through joint youth and outdoor ministries. For many years, youth and adults have attended summer camp and retreats at Kamp Kaleo, in central Nebraska, near Burwell – 250 acres of diverse ecology with 1.5 miles frontage along the North Loup River. Under new leadership beginning in 2023, Kamp Kaleo is experiencing increased attendance each year, while rebuilding after COVID. The strong non-profit board, Kaleo on the River, just revealed plans to build a new, spacious retreat center. A capital campaign will begin later in 2026 to fund this endeavor which will benefit not only the DOC and UCC

churches in the region and conference, but will also serve the surrounding Sandhills (north central Nebraska) communities.

Christian Churches in the Nebraska Territory were established very early and thrived into the 20th century. In October of 1854, a staunch Disciple, Joel M. Wood, came to Brownville, NE and began preaching in the growing village. In January 1855, a church was formally organized, being the first regular church organization in the Nebraska Territory. Part of the early history of the Christian Church in Nebraska includes Cotner College (originally called Nebraska Christian University) which was formed in 1889 and operated until 1933, closing during the Great Depression. Cotner reopened in 1946 as a Bible College and eventually became associated directly with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). By the late 1970's the Nebraska School of Religion, as it was known by then, ceased to exist but a Cotner Chair of Religious Studies was established and endowed at UNL in 1976 and continues to this day.

Nebraska has a population of 2.03 million people which equals approximately 26.1 people per square mile (while raising about 85 cows per square mile). Immigration has contributed to much of its growth in recent years with its numerous jobs in the agricultural sector and meat packing plants. The growth of tech companies and other industries in urban areas contributes to the vitality of the state. Politically, Nebraska is a conservative state; however, pockets of progressive politics can be found in the largest cities, Lincoln and Omaha.

Strengths of the region include involvement and commitment to shared ministry by geographically close congregations. Outreach is strong in the communities served. Omaha and Lincoln churches joined together in their respective communities in 2022 to sponsor Afghan refugee families. General Assemblies have enthusiastic attendance and participation from Nebraskans. The summer camping program is thriving with opportunities for youth and adults of all ages. Many of the congregations have celebrated notable anniversaries -160th, 150th, 125th- as Disciples began planting churches in Nebraska very early on while Nebraska was still a Territory.

The Nebraska Christian Church website, www.disciples-ne.org, indicates areas relating to addiction, disabilities, mental, emotional, and behavioral health are valued ministries of the Region. Specific ministries include Disciples Behavioral Health Initiative and Refugee Mission. The website also indicates a strong commitment to Boundaries and Ethics and Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation training and continued involvement in the Tri-Region Partnership Initiative (Nebraska, Kansas and Greater Kansas City Regions).

The biggest challenges facing the Region are similar to struggles experienced by other regions: declining church membership and aging congregations, shortage of trained clergy to lead congregations, and decline in offerings while operating costs rise. The good news is the financial condition of the Nebraska Region has improved greatly in the last couple of years. While Disciples Women have a part-time staff person and plan spring and fall retreats, Disciples Men disbanded due to leadership aging out several years ago. There is a desire to revive the men's ministry, however new leadership would be needed. Not all DOC congregations are tech savvy, especially rural churches, so communication from region to church and among churches is not as efficient as desired. While the camping program is strong, not a lot of youth go on to becoming active members of their congregations.

Despite the challenges facing it, the Nebraska Region is committed to its call to provide support to its congregations, to youth and camping ministry, and to new ways of doing effective mission and ministry. A special fund, which is still to be named, is currently being established for congregation transformational grants; the seed gift came from a congregation that recently sold their building. Its members are now worshipping in a non-traditional alternative location.