

My First General Assembly

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NBA Prison and Jail Ministries Guest Blogger

October 2017

We asked Ria M. Riesner to share her reflections after attending the 2017 General Assembly. Ria was part of a two-person team, along with Johnny Perez, that was invited by the NBA to bring the National Religious Campaign Against Torture's virtual reality display to Indianapolis this summer. This display, visited by hundreds of people, gave participants an opportunity to learn more about solitary confinement. This emphasis on solitary confinement was one of several initiated by the NBA in response to Resolution GA-1525 that was accepted in 2015 and called for the church to engage in reflection, prayer, education, and possible action around the practice of solitary confinement of incarcerated youth and adults. -Rev. Dean Bucalos, Mission Specialist, NBA Prison and Jail Ministries

As we all move forward through the fall, I look with great fondness back to the week this summer when nearly 4,000 Disciples convened at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis for the 26th Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) General Assembly.

A few high points of the assembly were a rally for family justice held at the Indianapolis State House, where several key Disciples advocates spoke. Rev. Dr. William Barber, Rev. Sharon Stanley Rea, and many others gave rousing sermons on the call to service shared by all Disciples at congregations scattered across the city. At the business meeting, several critical resolutions were adopted, including a resolution to re-assert the Disciples position on welcoming refugees and immigrants, particularly critical in light of renewed refugee bans being proposed by the current administration. Another resolution was adopted with unanimous votes by delegates, to support the re-invigoration of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor Peoples' Campaign under the leadership of Rev. Dr. William Barber. At one point, after a business session, a prayer walk was held where prayers were offered as the walk proceeded.

History was indeed repeated with the election of Rev. Teresa Hord Owens, the first African-American woman elected as General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), also notable because this makes Owens the first African-American woman to lead a mainline denomination. This happened, of course, after Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins was elected, in 2005, as the first woman General Minister and President of the Disciples, and the first woman to lead a mainline denomination in the United States.



I was delighted to catch up with Disciples who were taking part in, or alumni from, the NBA XPLORE program, which connects young adults with a 10-month service residency. Hundreds of exhibitors ensured a lively and interactive exhibition hall. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture brought a Virtual Reality Experience for the first time to a General Assembly, where hundreds of Disciples were invited to take part in a 9-minute virtual reality experience, produced by Frontline, titled “6X9”–

you can view the video (or in VR Google Oculus VR equipment) here: <http://bit.ly/23F22Uk> – which gives an immersive enactment of what being placed in solitary confinement is like for those incarcerated. Extended solitary confinement has been shown to have lasting psychological effects on individuals, and multiple efforts are ongoing to limit the practice, particularly for young people.

As Disciples all over the country stay engaged and active in advocacy on multiple issues central to the church’s mission, I hope everyone will take inspiration and a strong sense of community togetherness from that week this summer, the power of the broad Disciples family, to lift up and strengthen the work that goes on in cities and towns across this country, and around the world. What an uplifting and inspiring experience I had for my first General Assembly, but I hope not my last.

Grateful to Disciples leadership and everyone who played a part in making the 2017 General Assembly such a success! And after that, it’s on to Des Moines, IA, in 2019, which will once again bring together Disciples from across the globe to share in worship, advocacy, and fellowship. #DOCWeAreOne!

*Ria M. Riesner is an ardent lover of life, just full of wanderlust, and a tech-savvy political strategist from Washington, D.C. who also enjoys working with clergy on legislative initiatives of concern to their congregations and communities. She can be contacted at ria@post.harvard.edu. **NBA Prison and Jail Ministries** is one way in which the National Benevolent Association supports congregations and individuals as they engage in prison- and jail-related work, focusing on inspiration, education, and advocacy. Learn more at www.nbacares.org/prison-and-jail.*