

## CLMPI Pre-Meeting Work Hub: Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Inc.

The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Hub of the Lilly “Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose” has been honored to serve clergy and congregations in the work of improving their capacity to serve by providing resources and education. These cohort members, in return, have created and are continuing to create new models of ministry that reflect their own growth, their expanded understanding of what ministry is and how far it reaches, while at the same time addressing the specific needs of African American clergy and congregations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The pandemic forced both congregations and clergy to pivot, i.e., to deviate from their initial plans in order to meet the crisis afforded by the pandemic. “Our mission and ministry look different,” offered one “Called” cohort pastor. Another said, “In a lot of ways, the pandemic was a blessing. It forced us to look at ministry in a different way.”

### Other comments:

- Churches used to be full time. Now, we have adjusted hours and things work better.
- You have to be forced to change; I realized that our congregations have talent within them that we had not tapped.
- The necessity of using technology forced people who had previously refused to consider technology and who were actually afraid to learn it, to step out of their comfort zones. As a result, our members are present with each other and in ministry in different ways.
- We have found that hybrid worship works; it increases our numbers and our offering, and it is perfect for our sick and shut-in, and our older members who had difficulty getting to church, especially in bad weather.
- We found that we take our worship experience more seriously.

### **In 2021 we hosted:**

- Called and Black Clergy gatherings. Clergy were invited to participate in six calls, held once a week, to discuss their issues and struggles, as well as their victories, in an environment in which they felt safe to share. Led by the Rev. Dr. Melinda Contreras-Byrd, the sessions proved to be a fertile space for bonding for clergy who might otherwise not have even known each other. The initiative was led by the Rev. Dr. Janae Moore and the Rev. Marcus Tabb.
- Daily services of song and prayer, beginning the Monday after Easter and remaining a daily (Monday-Friday) event until October of this year, where we moved to make it a weekly (every Friday) event. Held on the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Facebook page, this was seen as necessary to attend to the anxiety and suffering clergy, lay people, and churchgoers were experiencing as a result of the isolation caused by the pandemic. Each day, clergy from congregations and ministries from around the country offered a prayer and music was also included, as music is such an important component of Black worship and spiritual healing in general. It was a ministry of presence in a time where presence was difficult to achieve. The prayer

call was careful and intentional about including all people to offer prayer – from disabled, to Jewish, to Muslim, to LGBTQIA. There was actually a month where members of the LGBTQIA offered the prayers - every day, and the response was bigger than we ever expected.

- Held sessions on leadership for all cohort members, teaching the Baobab coaching/leadership model. The session was led by Dr. Itihari Touré. Those participating in the training were identified as “Wisdom-Bearers” and were charged to take the training model into their congregational settings.
- Held monthly meetings of the MICAH and Called Congregations cohorts in order to foster community building, understanding of the expectations, and deeper knowledge of the importance of work they were doing.
- Held a virtual retreat for both the MICAH and Called Congregation cohorts in August. The event included instructions for the MICAH and Called Congregation cohorts that are ending their grant period, and in-boarding for the new MICAH and Called Congregation cohorts.

In 2022, we do not have dates set but we plan to do the following:

- targeted discussions on how clergy and congregations are dealing with the "new church reality" caused by the pandemic
- participate in a "Black Church Summit" in April
- CC cohort members will be sharing what we have discovered as ways that clergy are building a new reality and compensating for the loss of community that has been so important to the survival to the Black church historically.
- talking to pastors of mega-churches, large churches, mid-sized and small churches who have successfully pivoted spiritually, economically, and as a community, but we are also going to be talking with pastors of churches that have not pivoted so well, to find out the reasons why and to get these churches to work together as units to help each other.

### **What we are discerning for 2022**

Based on a survey we sent out to congregations, a significant issue is pandemic fatigue, followed by a need to increase youth engagement, and third the loss of community. In other words, the pandemic has caused a shift in our understanding of what ministry is all about, and much of what we do going into 2022 will be centered around addressing those issues and concerns. *How do we have a hub team help guide congregations who are fatigued, eager for young people to be with them, and the losses they face?*

### **Congregation Activities**

The congregations that are a part of the Called Congregations cohort have been innovative and creative. Some of them have created ministries within their traditional church environments, but others have pushed away from what has been traditional. Others began with what might only be called expanded and newly defined congregations. For one cohort member, who is the chaplain at the United Nations, her “congregation” is, literally, the world. Her work is eclectic, but one of the ways she participated in the daily prayer call was by bringing attention to the plight of

gender-based violence against women which is a global problem. She made a pitch for people listening to the prayers to remember these women every Thursday with her “Thursdays in Black” campaign. Another cohort member, who has a congregation on the north side of Chicago, ministers to the entire North side of the city with her food cooperative. And yet another cohort has a congregation which includes, they say, “the South,” because their work is involving them researching the Christian wing of the United Church of Christ. (UCC) and Black people within that wing. The “Afro-Christian” churches have been mentioned but basically ignored by the UCC in its teaching about the origins of the denomination, but these cohort directors are visiting Black UCC churches throughout the South and getting their histories. They have realized that the Afro-Christian “wing” of the UCC is actually a denomination! Their work will culminate in a book they are writing and has caused the UCC to alter its descriptions of the denominations and add Afro-Christian as one of the denominations which merged to form the UCC.

One particularly exciting cohort member is Trinity UCC, Gary Indiana. They write:

*The most significant change in the congregational perception about calling and vocation is that pastors, ministers, and deacons are called by God to do the work of God but the work can't be done without the congregation and the assistance of community partners. They are starting to understand that ministry work is done outside the four walls of the church in the community. They understand the importance of the vertical arm of the cross that reaches up to heaven and gives us Holy Ghost power but they also understand that the horizontal arm of the cross is just as important because it allows us to do the work of the Lord on the horizontal axle of the cross in the community we serve.*

Activities this congregation is doing, has done, and will continue:

- Formed the **Baobab CDC**, a community asset-based community development initiative seeking to engage in economic development, education, community organizing, and real estate development throughout the city of Gary;
- Created the “**Real Talk With E3 Teen Pregnancy Outreach Ministry**,” a ministry that provides services to the pregnant and parenting teen population in Gary in order for them to receive the education, health care parenting skills, and additional support needed to have healthy babies and to be better parents. The ministry provides caring adult mentors who guide the teen moms through the challenges of parenthood and partners with community agencies for the purpose of providing education, support, and referrals. This ministry is reaching out to a group that no other church or organization in Gary has attempted to serve.
- Formed **Surviving the Storm COVID-19 Support Group Ministry**. This is a space for those who have had to deal with a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 and for those taking care of someone who is ill with the disease.
- **Hosted a luncheon with the Henry Luce Foundation**. It was billed as a collaboration between public theology and racial justice work and was sponsored by Vanderbilt University Divinity School. The event connected local churches with funding agencies. Partners included the SDPC MICAH Institute and Fund, the Lilly Foundation, and the UCC Church Building and Loan Fund.

**In addition:**

The SDPC has been and continues to be committed to finding and sharing the truth about Black history in this country and sharing it as widely as possible. There were no events in 2021, but it is important that this work be highlighted, as it will go forward in 2022. From Rev. Tiauna Webb, the director of this initiative:

Giving the growing urgency of what is taking place in our country in reference to miseducation, voter disenfranchisement and the growing overarching culture of violence, truth telling and sacred memory will be a part of our 2022 agenda beginning in January, highlighted in our annual Clergy and Lay Leadership Conference in February and culminating with an in-person Commission Hearing in July.

The opening plenary session of the 2022 Samuel DeWitt Proctor Clergy and Lay Leadership Conference will highlight the imperative of a national truth telling movement to address the imperatives of a painful, but necessary, racial reckoning in the U.S. With eyes to see and the spirit to discern, SDPC proclaims that America is at a crossroad and its spiritual and material fall or rise from its legacy is fueling the current war within. National truth telling and consciousness raising is also more essential as this nation moves out of a global pandemic and into new realities of its global geopolitical positioning. To that end, a pedagogy of theological, historical, and sociological analyses to illuminate the ecclesial and communal choices of reconstituting American “democracy” is essential. Ultimately, newness requires spiritual and material healing being demanded by a process of reparatory justice.