

GB-26-1339
Regional Report of Florida

Report to the General Board

April 2026

Submitted by: Rev. Sandy Messick, Regional Minister

Celebrations: 2025 was the year of laying the groundwork and beginning the promotion for our Comprehensive Campaign. We chose “Imagine, Believe, Become” as our theme as we imagine what God is doing in our midst, believe that God is calling us to this moment, and looking forward to what is “becoming” as the Florida Disciples Regional Church. This 2.1 million campaign will be divided 3 ways: 70% is allocated to infrastructure improvements at our Regional Conference Center, The Retreat at Silver Springs. 20% is allocated for Regional Priorities that focus on youth and young adult leadership development and congregational vitality. Our 10% tithe is earmarked for Week of Compassion which has been a valued partner in this region that knows a thing or two about natural disasters.

I continue to be thankful for our Regional Staff that offers wisdom, and direction to our work. I am grateful to work alongside Rev. Mary Beth Harper, director of The Retreat at Silver Springs, Rev. Selena Reyes, Regional Support Pastor for Hispanic Ministries, Rev. Merline Pierre, Regional Support Pastor for Haitian Ministries, and Brenda Turrentine, Brittany Swink and Tina Christian, our Administrative Support Staff.

I am also grateful to work with our Regional Moderator Team: Rev. Dr. Alan Smith (moderator) and Rev. Liza Miranda (moderator-elect.)

Another celebration is that we continue to operate with a balanced budget that provides not only for our ministry and staffing needs but also providing grants for mission transformation, new church ministries and emergency responses to disasters.

The Retreat at Silver Springs, our regional camp and conference center, continues its work to offer a sacred space of rest, welcome and learning. Our camping program is not limited to summer months, but has events throughout the year for children, youth and adults. Other religious and non-profit groups are also finding welcome at The Retreat. In addition to providing a solid source of income, these outside groups are becoming an entry point for people to experience the Disciples of Christ and Christian Fellowship.

In 2025 we welcomed a new congregation, Hacedores de Vida Discipulos de Cristo in St. Petersburg. The pastors, Peter Jimenez and Darlin Guevara have embraced the Disciples of Christ and are wonderful ambassadors for our denomination.

Our Hope for 2026 is to launch a successful campaign and begin seeing the priorities realized through improvements to The Retreat, additional staffing for Young Adult Ministry and Congregational Vitality, and grants to support congregations as they seek to be innovative and visionary in their ministry contexts.

Challenges: Many of our congregations continue to struggle. Two of our congregations will have celebrated their final worship services before we gather for General Board. These decisions were long coming and carefully considered, but naturally we are grieving their loss. On the positive side, they will both leave significant legacies to bless generations to come. Other congregations are wrestling with similar situations, and we may have other congregations close this year.

For many of our immigrant congregations, the political climate continues to be a heavy burden. Attendance and participation have been impacted within our Haitian and Hispanic congregations, and pastors report that members are struggling regardless of immigration status. The region has attempted to offer support through sharing information and resources, making grants available for clergy and congregations, and being a presence whenever possible.

Finally, I have given the region notice of my intent to retire at the end of 2026. Both a challenge and a hope is the transition the region will face in seeking new regional leadership, but our hope is in God's presence that will guide this community through the process.

Palm Lake Christian Church, St. Petersburg: A Story of Imagination and Hope

One of the (many) bright lights in the Florida Region is found in the story of Palm Lake Urban Sanctuary. Realizing one of the gifts the congregation had to share was unused property, and that the need for affordable housing in the area was real, Palm Lake Christian Church, under the leadership of Rev. Oscar Banks, is working with the city and county to develop affordable housing. They have officially broken ground on what will be 86 apartments reserved for households earning 30-80% of the Area Median Income. This four-story project nestled on the church grounds will feature energy-efficient apartments, EV-charging stations and surface parking. At the recent ground breaking event, Pastor Banks was quoted saying, "Today marks a pivotal moment in our church's journey to live out our faith in action. This ground breaking represents our commitment to extending God's love beyond our sanctuary walls and into the fabric of the community providing homes and hope for neighbors in need." This fits well with the church's identity statement: Love is the Key at PLCC.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Sandy Messick
Regional Minister

ADDENDUM:

Report from Florida Disciples Regional Church Moderator, Alan Smith

My name is W. Alan Smith; I serve as the Moderator for the Florida Disciples Regional Church for the 2025-2026 biennium. Rev. Sandy Morgan Messick has asked me to add a brief description of an accomplishment within our Region as she files her report to the General Board. The Women's Ministries group at Brandon Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Brandon, FL began the 2025 church year by discussing ideas for a year-long mission project. The group heard about a Regional project of Disciples Men that encouraged congregations to assemble five-gallon buckets (the kind one finds at Lowe's or Home Depot) filled with supplies that could be

used for emergency clean-up in the case of natural disasters. These buckets would then be donated to Week of Compassion/ CWS for distribution as needed. Since the Gulf Coast of Florida had been devastated by two major hurricanes in Fall 2024, the need for such supplies was clear to the group.

The women collected soaps, disinfectants, rags, scrubbing sponges, gloves, and other items during the Spring and Summer of that year by encouraging donations from the congregation. The goal was to assemble five buckets for the project. In Fall of 2025, they enlisted the Girl Scout troop that meets at the church building (none of whom belong to the congregation) to assist them as they completed *ten* clean-up buckets which were then delivered to The Retreat at Silver Springs (near Ocala) during the October Men's and Women's Retreat and subsequently delivered to the CWS distribution facility.

A project that Florida Disciples *Regional* Men began to help a General Church unit (Week of Compassion and their partners, CWS supported by the General Church's Disciples Men) inspired a small group of women (no more than a dozen) to solicit support from a small congregation (usually 25 or so on a given Sunday) to enlist the support of a small Girl Scout troop with no formal association with the congregation other than meeting space in church buildings to provide local relief in times of disaster. That is a clear illustration of the "community of communities" that Sandy Messick uses as a description of the Region. The congregational level of Women's Ministries responded to a call for support from the Regional representation of Disciples Men (at the General Church and Regional levels) in partnership with a collaborative manifestation of a General unit (Week of Compassion) and the multid denominational CWS to respond to disaster needs throughout Florida and the Southeast and reached out to a community resource (the Girl Scouts) to make the clean-up buckets available. That is who we are as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

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