



***Jackie Compton Bunch, NBA Board Chair
Disciples of Christ Historical Society
Reed Lecture, General Assembly 2017***



Good afternoon! I want to start by expressing my sincere thanks to Dr. John Imbler for the invitation to be part of this wonderful luncheon and gathering. Our Disciples of Christ Historical Society is the “keeper” of our church’s history and stories. As a ministry, it is the earthen vessel that helps to remind us of where our origins began, as well as the many faces, voices, special moments, and communities that make up who we are as church.

It’s my humble privilege to serve as the chair of the Board of the Trustees for the National Benevolent Association of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We are your Disciples’ health and social services general ministry.

I serve on the board with 20 Disciples leaders from across the life of the church, and they send their greetings.

This year, the NBA is celebrating 130 years of ministry! Some of you know about NBA from our historic ministries with children and youth, older adults, and people with disabilities. Others of you may know our work today through the NBA XPLOR program with young adult Disciples or our support and accompaniment with new and emerging health and social nonprofits.

The NBA's story is complex, joyful, filled with complicated personalities and generous supporters...yet always with the faithful witness of being God's hands, heart, and feet in the world. It is my pleasure to share more of this story with you today.



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Come with me to February of 1886. We are in a church basement on the corner of Olive Blvd. and 17th street in St. Louis. Around us are six women gathered to pray. It's cold outside, and each of the women is looking stern and also concerned. They see neighbors in need, and they want to do something.

These six Disciples women found themselves in a time of social change in the post-Civil War years in our country. "In the transition to a world that became increasingly mechanistic and pluralistic, cities became cauldrons of poverty and disease; social and medical technology had not kept pace. Many children suffered the misery of being left abandoned... By 1880, the streets of American cities had become the only home for tens of thousands of children."

"...A concerned churchwoman Sarah Matilda Hart Younkin could not understand why so many local churches seemed oblivious to the human misery of city slums, especially those in St. Louis, where the Christian Church was strong. Her own childhood memories of losing her father made her search for ways to alleviate the hardship of the orphan and the poor." (Inasmuch, p23.)

So Matilda, or Mattie as she was also known, gathered her friends to pray. During their prayer meetings over that year, these women conceived as their "sole purpose the task of helping the helpless—to give a home to the homeless, to provide care for the sick, and comfort for the distressed."

They turned their prayers into action. These six women were the start of the National Benevolent Association. The purpose of this new organization would be "to restore to the church the brotherly love and benevolence taught by Christ and practiced by the disciples in the early days of the church." (Inasmuch, p21.)

Landonia Hansbrough, one of NBA's co-founders wrote, "Vivid in my memory of the first steps in accomplishing this is the staunch character of Mrs. Younkin...Tirelessly she went up and down the land—as much as a woman could in those days—preaching the gospel of help for the needy,". "From house



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to house, from church to church, day after day Mrs. Younkin went, urging cooperation in organizing for benevolent work."

Even though they received "little male encouragement," the founders' goal was not "women organizing women to do women's work." These women aimed to "galvanize a whole brotherhood to restore the early church's concern for the helpless to the center of its spiritual life."

"On January 10, 1887, the women formed a permanent organization and elected officers. They took the name The Benevolent Association of the Christian Church." Truly they had "taken up their crosses" to "hear with radical freshness" the call of compassion and care. (Inasmuch, p24-25.)

The State of Missouri granted a charter to The Benevolent Association of the Christian Church. Several of the leaders who signed this charter would continue to serve with the Association for the next 30-50 years.

The women and their Association took in children who needed homes, mothers who needed work, food, and shelter for their babies. To secure funds for their mission, "Mattie took to the field..." (Inasmuch, p29.)

Mattie Younkin, the first ordained woman Disciples minister in Missouri, nagged the chairmen of conventions to get five minutes, just three minutes, to say something about Benevolence, a time when that theme was not recognized...At one state convention a preacher, refusing her permission to speak, blurted out, "There is not time to hear you—we are here to preach the Gospel!" (Inasmuch, p33.)

"In 1895, the women succeeded in getting the General Convention in Dallas to consider a petition to recognize the NBA as an official agency of the church, only to have a hostile majority table the resolution. According to the association's magazine, 'elders, ministers, and convention managers, who saw



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no place for a woman in the program of the church,' battled her again and again."

Then—12 years after their state charter was granted—the resolution was passed, recognizing the Association and its benevolent ministry as an important part of the Christian Church.

This took 12 years, and "not all who began the journey lived to see its completion. Just days before this Convention resolution passed, Sarah Matilda Hart Younkin died.

A poem in her handwriting found among her papers read:

"I know my hand may never reap its sowing
But yet some others may
And I may never even see it growing
short my little day.
Still, I must sow
Tho' I go forth with weeping
God grant the harvest!
Tho' I may be sleeping
under the shadows gray."
(Inasmuch, p34.)

"The beginning of NBA owed far more to the tenacity of these women who battled considerable odds than it did to enthusiastic recognition from Christian congregations across the country." (Inasmuch, p30, 33.)

For these tenacious Disciples women—one could say '*they were warned; they were given an explanation; nevertheless, they persisted.*'

In 1902, at the suggestion of George L. Snively, the Association's first General Secretary, the organization changed its name to the *National* Benevolent Association of the Christian Church, to better describe its growing mission.



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In 1906, he was replaced as General Secretary by “a man who shaped and symbolized NBA” for the next two decades: James H. Mohorter, the one who often said: ‘Beloved, inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.’”

“Officers of the Association had been overwhelmingly female during the formative years, but once NBA gained official recognition from the church, the place of men in the organization grew noticeably...” After Fannie Shedd Ayars stepped down in 1908, and that executive position went to a man, “Donie Hansbrough reported: ‘It was then...that NBA passed into the control of the men and out of the hands of the women.’” (Inasmuch, p50-51.)

In these early years, the NBA opened several homes for orphans and the aged, beginning with the St. Louis Christian Home for Children, many of us knew as ECHO. “From the of earliest days, they planned to establish a protective network of institutions across the nation. The fact that no national benevolent association existed in any denomination did not deter them” (Inasmuch, p40). (Inasmuch, p40). They fought to create agencies that provided social services, essential medical care to orphans and older adults. They persisted.

Some of the now historic homes that were built in the early years continue in relationship with Disciples today, Cleveland Christian Home, Cleveland, Ohio; Colorado Christian Home, now Tennyson Center for Children, Denver; Juliette Fowler Christian Orphans’ Home and Home for the Aged, now Juliette Fowler Communities, Dallas; Child Saving Institute, Omaha; and Florida Christian Home, now Florida Christian Center, Jacksonville, Florida.

In the 1920s and 30s, our country experienced a decline in church attendance and financial support, which really affected the predominantly rural Disciples of Christ. “The emergency [of the Great Depression] had no precedent in U.S. history: millions stood in bread lines and armies of homeless youth roamed the



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streets. Relief agencies ran out of money and stood helplessly by while thousands suffered..." (Inasmuch, p75-76, 81.)

Just as construction began again on new NBA homes, the U.S. entered World War II, putting all building programs on hold. Home superintendents faced "staff shortages, food rationing, inflation, scarcities of all kinds, and the grief of watching 'children saved' going off to fight and die.." (Inasmuch, p92.)

In spite of these challenging years, the NBA did make time to celebrate its Golden Jubilee— its first 50 years of benevolence at the 1937 International Convention in Columbus, Ohio. "NBA had come a long way through many trials since Mattie Younkin spoke above the catcalls of her ministerial colleagues at earlier conventions. The Central Board knew that the 50th birthday did not belong to them; it belonged to the Homes, to the churches, and to the saints who by grace had brought the work so far." (Inasmuch, p85.)

Donie Hansbrough, still NBA's Corresponding Secretary after 50 years, enjoyed the Jubilee. She passed away the next year, at age 93. Her final memoir said, 'I appeal to you all to continue this work of ministering to the weak and the needy, the young and the aged, to support and keep up these Homes of my beloved National Benevolent Association.'" (Inasmuch, p88.)

And continue the work they did. From humble beginnings, Disciples churches and leaders helped build an expansive network of direct service providers and residential facilities caring for older adults, people with disabilities, and children and families. In the history of NBA, and our Church, we have learned that it does not take large groups of persons to spark a change in the world. It simply takes those who were called, to share the light of Christ, those who were called to envision what could be, those who answered their call and served.

Those six women, in that basement, in that prayer circle, the NBA Founders were called. They saw their neighbors in need, they prayed, and they acted. In



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answering the call, they paved the way for others to serve the “least of these” for years to come.

In just a minute, my friend, NBA Vice President of Mission and Ministry, Rev. Rebecca Hale, is going to share with you - NBA TODAY: creating communities of compassion and care.

I thank you for this opportunity to share just some of our NBA stories—NBA’s early years and how a small group of women, our founders, persisted, and their vision is still alive today.

I pray that today, you heard—through these stories and through names like Mattie, Fannie, and Donie—how we, as people of faith, can make big and impactful change in the lives of others. I need not remind you of the needs and issues around health and social services, today. Our shared histories, call us to respond and care. Our faithful witness, requires us to do justice. My sisters and brothers, the vision, is alive and you are invited to serve in this work.

For those who have already taken up the mantle, we thank you, and we offer our support, and our prayers. May God’s blessings be with each of you.