



KANSAS CITY REGION 2022

A FUTURE STORY

Narrator

It was a balmy summer evening at Tall Oaks. The Junior High Camp was entering its final days, and some adult leaders were taking a break by the campfire as their energetic "charges" were expending their last ounces of energy. The sounds of nature, being punctuated with sounds of youthful enthusiasm, laughter, and what might appear to the untrained eye as chaos.

Philip: (Drinking from his cup) What a great day!

(Sandy, George and May all agreeing) Yes it was!

May: Did you watch Jeremy during the campfire tonight?

Philip: Oh—that young man is really starting to grow up.

May: Yes...I think so...just a year ago he couldn't sit still for a minute, and there he was, spell-bound, listening to every word. You could just tell his faith is starting to make a difference!

George: Yes—once again the camping program is doing its magic. It's times like this that I am so glad that I took a week away from the church to be with these kids. Sandy, you've just come back to the Region after a few years somewhere else. Were you involved in camping before?

Sandy: Yes, I spent a couple of weeks every summer out here—but I have to say things are really different now.

George: Good kind of different?

Sandy: Oh yes—a very good kind of different. I can hardly believe this is the same program—or even the same Region for that matter. I notice just about every program is so much better than from where I came from. There are so many resources for churches and clergy. You all seem to lead differently. I'm really starting to wonder what happened here.

May: That's heartening to hear. We've been working hard these past five years. And it's worth it because you not only see it in the kids at camp and in our colleagues, but in our churches as well. It's like everything we do now has a purpose in it.

George: Have you had your new clergy orientation yet Sandy?

Sandy: No, that comes in September.

George: I'll bet that helps make sense out of this for you. You see, a few years ago we decided that the Region shouldn't be an authoritarian structure...but an interwoven network of Disciples! We looked at WHY we were a Region, instead of WHAT we should do.

May: It became clear to us in about a year that Regional life was all about accountability, and being the resource to congregations when they needed help. What we discovered is that the leaders of congregations had the skills and abilities to make their churches thrive, but our structure had us spending time going to meetings and accomplishing little.

Sandy: Oh, that's still clear in the Region I came from. All we did there was argue about by-laws, and form committees that rarely functioned.

May: That's what we were doing as well. Clergy were being forced through hoops that were not necessarily appropriate for them. Church development was hit or miss. And our Regional staff was shrunk and stretched so many times we thought we would have to include therapy expenses in our budget.

George: That's when we started to think about new ways of being Region. We adopted some values that said (1) we wanted an interwoven-network type structure, (2) that our congregations needed to share what they know with each other, and (3) that we have to be intentional about being in relationship with each other (and that these relationships are life giving) and, most importantly, the "hey—let's work together" attitude.

Philip: I'm just a lay person, but I've even...

George: Come on Philip, there is no such thing as "just" a lay person. I've been to four or five of your workshops—you get this church stuff!

Philip: OK, I was just pretending to be humble. But as I was saying, I've got a lot more confidence in our Region now. I used to think that "we are paying our pastor, he/she needs to give us 100% of their attention." Now I think...."We are paying our pastor, he/she should be working to resource other congregations...as well as learning from them."

May: We tell a story in our Region about trees. How when they put their roots down and intertwine with other trees, they become stronger in the storm than the lone-ranger tree that topples because its roots are not interconnected.

Sandy: So how does all of this work?

Philip: Well, take this camp for example. Jeremy goes to First Christian Church. Five years ago, that church was on the ropes, barely surviving. The congregation was almost all people in their 80's and 90's. It was one of three congregations that year that we concentrated resources on to help that church redevelop. They worked with Hope Partnership and our Regional staff to make an intentional decision about their redevelopment plan, and our staff coached them.

May: The great thing was we didn't try to fix 20 congregations that year. Just those three. The next year we selected three more to work with. Rather than spread our resources out over a wide area, we concentrated on making a difference.

Sandy: That is a great idea.

George: After First Christian Church relaunched, it attracted Jeremy's family. Now, the new people coming in didn't have any experience with Sunday School or anything like that. My church, on the other hand, has a great program for children's spiritual formation. The Region asked my leaders to teach a course on childhood spiritual development, and then invited First Christian Church and a few other congregations to attend our workshop.

May: That's what Sally does on our Regional staff. She connects gifted leaders with congregational needs. This was just one thing out of dozens she did last year.

George: The result was that a couple of years later, First Christian Church now had a great program for spiritual growth for children. They also connected with the camping program (First Christian Church hadn't sent a single kid to camp in the past 10 years). And the results? Well, you saw Jeremy tonight.

Philip: I overheard a couple of other pastors talking at lunch today. They are coming back to Tall Oaks for a weekend retreat for kids considering their decision to follow Christ. Instead of offering a pastor's class, they are offering a retreat. I heard them invite First Christian Church to bring their kids along, and Jeremy will likely be attending.

May: Just think about it. If First Christian Church insisted on doing everything themselves, they would have missed all of these opportunities. And who knows where Jeremy would be today in his spiritual journey?

Sandy: My church could use some help like this. I can't wait to learn more!

George: Well, it has really helped my church too. We are a good sized church, no money problems, and great children's program. But we don't do much for social justice or reconciliation. We know racism is a problem, and that we have so much to learn. The Region gave us some opportunities there that have allowed me to stretch my congregation.

May: Yes, like our relationship to MOKAN. Our church used to be proud of just sending money, or talking about how we stand with our congregations of color. But part of our new structure was to move us from doing mission "TO" people, to engaging in mission "WITH" people. MOKAN was a great resource, but we had to challenge our motivations and think through new ways of working together.

Philip: That's why I'm coming back for Urban camp next week. Instead of bringing kids from the inner city out to Tall Oaks, we're going to their neighborhoods and running a residential camp out of a church. It's going to be a challenge that I'm looking forward to.

Sandy: That sounds pretty challenging.

Philip: I'm scared to death. But, part of my faith journey is stretching myself. I need to learn about the realities that these kids are growing up with. How can we be Christ's hands and feet unless we get to know each other?

Suddenly a door slams and a girl screams. Adult leader voices are heard checking on the kids.

May: Sounds like they got it under control.

Sandy: Good...I still have a lot of questions. What are we expected to do as clergy in this Region? I don't think I could do an Urban camp.

May: Don't worry. You can do that when you're ready.

As clergy, we are expected to report to the Commission on Ministry every year. They are clearly looking for the usual stuff like boundary training, anti-racism training, continuing education and a list of books read. But this Region also asks us to report the number of Disciples Minister's Association meetings we attend and our attendance in a Peer Group.

Sandy: What, we are expected to go to meetings and Peer Groups?

May: It's not as bad as it sounds. The Region spends some resources in developing Peer Groups. Each year, the Peer Group leaders receive training. Lists are available on the website, and you should receive an invitation after your orientation to participate in a group. These groups are usually selected by affinities (age, gender, etc.). These are covenantal groups that meet monthly.

Sandy: That sounds like a pain.

George: It really is very life giving and totally voluntary. It goes along with our value of being in relationship. Studies show that clergy in Peer Groups outperform their peers who are not in groups. It improves your effectiveness, and builds relationships that could be beneficial to your congregation's development.

Sandy: How is that? I'm still skeptical.

May: So, let me give you an example. I have a difficult church member...

Sandy: Don't we all? (Laughter ensues)

May: Yes...but I was having a real hard time thinking about how I could deal with a situation she had created in our church. My gut reaction was to just go off on her—but my Peer Group helped me to see where she had hooked me emotionally, because they knew me. They also helped me to problem solve on my own.

George: That was a great example. It works in other ways too. Barney Dude is in my group. He is totally in love with Biblical Archaeology. Because I knew him, and knew his passion, I invited him to make a presentation to our Builders Sunday School class dinner. It was one of the most exciting events they ever had. I learned a thing or two as well.

Sandy: Wow...that's refreshing. We help each other provide outstanding spiritual growth opportunities for our churches instead of competing. How does the Region keep all this organized?

May: We rely a lot on our social media and webpage. As a pastor, you'll be given a log-on to the resource pages. There are chat boxes, sermon ideas, and some pastors post blogs. It's constantly evolving.

Sally the camp director walks up to the campfire.

Sally: There you guys are. Your kids are running amuck. Do you think I could impose on you to connect with your kids for a while?

George: Ohhhh....You expect us to actually work with the kids? (Sarcastically)

Sandy: Can I just ask a couple more questions?

Sally: Can it wait?

Sandy: Oh...I guess. I'm really looking forward to my orientation. This is going to be so much more fun working in this Region than the one I just left.

Sally: We're glad to have you here Sandy. I really feel like we make a difference in people's lives now.

Narrator: This rest of this Future Story will be written not by playwrights and actors but by each disciple in our Greater Kansas City Region. In the days and months to come, we hope to learn more about how you see God's preferred future for our partnership.

Thanks to our Radio Theater actors: