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What happens when 3 to 4 thousand Disciples from across the U.S. and Canada gather together every two years for General Assembly? We worship, discuss the business of the church and vote on resolutions, visit the exhibit hall filled with vendors promoting all kinds of resources and items for sale, attend workshops on themes from worship to stewardship to justice to leadership, and, of course, we eat together. The best part for me, however, is seeing friends from seminary and members of former congregations I have served. As I walked through the halls or even just stood in one place this past week, I would recognize familiar faces, which led to hugs and conversations.

I encountered one of my former student minister interns, Mandy, who I supervised while serving in a previous congregation. She and her husband and three children greeted me as I walked down the hall of the convention center, with me having to remind the oldest girl, Emma, about how she used to call me “Paffor Duck” since she couldn’t at two years old say “Pastor Doug.” The next day

Mandy said Emma couldn’t wait to see me again, for that evening in an art center during worship she had created a picture for me, complete with the title “Paffor Duck.” Even though Emma didn’t remember much about her time from her younger years, the story about her nickname for me reminded us that we were part of the same family—the family of God formed in the church.

Creating a family is not easy work, and those of you who have young children or grown children intimately know the hard work of forming a family. It involves much more than just having a baby, reading bedtime stories, potty training, preparing meals, and getting them to school. Family involves creating a place where everyone feels welcome, a place where conflicts are confronted and resolved in peace, a place where children are nurtured in love and cherished. I sometimes wonder that if we knew what we were getting ourselves into before having a family, whether any of us would ever have children, for the job involves a lot of time, patience, and money.

*Adopted by God*  
*July 16, 2017*

*Rev. Dr. Douglas Cripe*

*Ephesians 1:1-14*  
*Central Christian Church, Elkhart*

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Creating a family through the birth of a child is amazing, for there's something mystical and magical about holding a newborn infant that came from ourselves. I'll never forget holding my son and daughter for the first time or watching them take their first steps. Parents enjoy a few short years of cuteness before our children begin to tell us "no" and push the buttons of our patience, but somehow that bond of family often remains intact through the most difficult of trials.

Foster care families often discover, however, that integrating older children into families is not so easy, as Staci and I discovered when we welcomed three foster daughters into our family, ages 10, 14, and 16. The sisters had been in the foster care system most of their lives with nowhere else to go, and since we were an emergency foster care home, they were placed with us for an indefinite period of time. As their stay with us turned from weeks into months, we began to develop a sense of family, and soon we began talking about guardianship and

adoption, for we wanted to give them a forever home.

After nine months, as the date approached for guardianship to be finalized, we discovered the paperwork had gotten lost, accidentally transferred to another county. We waited for weeks to hear about what would happen next, but by then the girls began acting out and rebelling, convinced that they would be moved one more time. We saw our family crumbling before our very eyes, feeling helpless and frustrated.

Adoption into a family is hard work, and sometimes the plan falls apart, leaving shattered hopes and dreams scattered along life's path. When the author of the letter to the Ephesians wrote about God's family, he used this imagery of adoption to describe our relationship to Jesus Christ. Rather than a complicated system filled with obstacles and difficulties, however, the author of this letter stated that God adopted us into God's family with no barriers or complications. As the Contemporary English Version translates Ephesians

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1:5: “God was kind and decided that Christ would choose us to be God’s own adopted children.”

This wasn’t a last minute decision or a whim of chance, for as *The Message Bible* translates a portion of this letter to the Ephesians:

Long before [God] laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure [God] took in planning this!) (1:4-5)

God had in mind you and me and the person sitting next to you, the loud neighbors down the street from your house, the ornery relatives who drive you nuts, the people you don’t even know living on the opposite side of the globe, and all of humanity. From the very beginning of creation. No red tape. No paperwork. No case workers and home visits. No creeds to be memorized. God adopted us all into God’s family. Everyone. Period.

Children in foster care often test their possible adoptive parents to see if they’re real, causing as much chaos as possible to see if the family really is serious about adopting them. *Better to get out early, they think, than to get attached and discover that the family doesn’t really care when times get tough.*

In a similar way, each of us makes mistakes, misbehaves, pushes the limits, but we’re still part of God’s family, for God doesn’t get rid of us, as the writer explained in Ephesians: “our sins are now forgiven. Christ did this because God was so kind to us. God has great wisdom and understanding, and by what Christ has done, God has shown us his own mysterious ways (1:8-9, CEV).

This seems a bit hard to believe, doesn’t it, even mysterious, as Ephesians states, for how can we all be part of God’s family when we’re all so different? We don’t act alike, speak alike, believe alike, or even look alike, so how can we be one? That’s a question that came up when a group

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of first graders were discussing a picture of a family. One little boy in the picture had a different color hair than the other family members. One child suggested that he was adopted and a little girl said, “I know all about adoptions because I was adopted.”

“What does it mean to be adopted?” asked another child.

“It means,” said the girl, “that you grew in your mommy’s heart instead of her tummy.”<sup>1</sup>

We are in the midst of God’s heart, here in the church, and this past week thousands of Disciples celebrated at the General Assembly that we are One. As we examined resolutions this week, we didn’t always agree on everything, but

- We were one as we expressed our prayers for immigrants and refugees caught in a system that often fails them, people who seek to find a safe place to call home.
- We were one as we spoke about reducing our carbon output and protecting our environment.

- We were one as we affirmed our commitment to planting 1000 new churches by 2020, a vision that began in 1991 and has already reached 975 new congregations.
- We were one as we advocated for the rights of children living in Palestine.
- We were one as we continued to speak against racism and as we elected Terri Hord Owens as our next General Minister and President, the first African-American woman to lead a mainstream Protestant denomination.<sup>2</sup>

We are one since God has adopted us all into God’s family—a family where we differ in our appearance, our theology, our languages. A family where we make mistakes, sin, experience brokenness. A family where God forgives us, welcomes us. A family where God invites us, sends us into the world, and encourages us to invite others. We are adopted. We are One.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous. Found in various sources on the internet.

<sup>2</sup> “An Indy-based church of diversity elects first black woman to lead a major denomination,” [www.indystar.com/story/news/2017/07/13/indy-based-church-diversity-elects-first-black-woman-lead-mainstream-denomination/472040001/](http://www.indystar.com/story/news/2017/07/13/indy-based-church-diversity-elects-first-black-woman-lead-mainstream-denomination/472040001/)

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