

2019 Conference Minister Report

On August 1st of this year I complete my fifth year as Conference Minister. Our 2020 Vision Plan continues to guide my work and that of Conference Consistory—work that continues to be an eye-opening experience to the exciting possibilities and extraordinary challenges of being church in the 21st Century. I've tried with this report to capture some of the realized possibilities and the challenges, as yet unmet, as well as my sense about the way forward.

Pension Board Campaign

At the 2018 PSEC Annual Spring Meeting, delegates pledged \$50,000 to “The Generations of Service Campaign.” The charitable arm of the UCC Pension Board, the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance (UCBMA), is taking steps to address the needs of current and retired clergy and lay church workers through a twenty-million-dollar campaign to fund three key areas: strengthen direct clergy assistance programs (\$10 million); sustain the Next Generation Leadership Initiative (NGLI) and Credo programs (\$7.5 million); improve the financial wellness of UCC authorized ministers (\$2.5 million).

In addition to our \$50,000 pledge, we agreed to match up to \$30,000 contributions from congregations and individuals using Conference endowment funds. If all 161 PSEC churches contribute \$273, we will far surpass our goal of \$50,000.

To date, over **35** individuals and congregations have contributed. Almost all gifts are above the \$273 suggested amount. With matching funds, we have sent our first payment to the Ministerial Assistance Fund for more than \$14,000. At the posting of this report, contributions and pledges total over \$21,000. Our goal is to have pledges and offerings exceeding the \$50,000 by the 2019 Annual Spring Meeting.

Conference Merger

The Joint Conference Vision Development Team (JDVCT), under the dedicated leadership of Rev. Barbara Pence, labored diligently after our 2017 Annual Spring Meeting when PSEC delegates authorized representatives of our Conference to work with PNEC brothers and sisters to create a plan for a consolidated Conference in eastern Pennsylvania.

The resolution to consolidate, which was thoughtfully discussed and discerned at the PSEC Fall 2018 Meeting, received the majority vote but not the two-thirds approval required for ratification.

Some delegates and JDVCT members expressed frustration that the exciting possibilities of a new Conference were not realized. There were numerous feelings expressed about this decision and all were understandable. I have had many conversations and heard many responses to the vote. What I intuitively sensed then is what I know now--we were not as prepared to move forward as we needed to be.

The Penn Northeast Conference Board and the Penn Southeast Conference Consistory have been in communication with each other about future coming-together conversations. They will happen but have not yet been scheduled. In the meantime, The Ecumenical Relations Team, the Clergy Convocation Team and Disaster Ministries continue to function together as joint ministries of both conferences. Both Conferences share resources and workshops to strengthen each other's ministries. Collaboration will continue and when the moment comes again to consider a formal union, as I believe it will, we will be better positioned to say “yes”.

OCWM

The seventh objective of the 2020 Vision plan calls for increasing OCWM pledges from PSEC congregations by 2% each year. Some churches have risen to the challenge. Others have not. Over the last five years, our OCWM shortfall has been in the \$20,000-\$30,000 range. HOWEVER, during 2018 we cut that shortfall by more than 94 percent. We closed the books on 2018 \$1,000 over our OCWM contribution budget. We were also under budget on the expense side of our financials.

This happened through the generous hearts and souls of brothers and sisters making a difference every Sunday with every offering. It happened by the hard work of the lay and ordained leaders of our Conference who facilitate programs and events with a mindful eye on the faithful stewardship of our resources. And it happened with the support of a dedicated Conference staff who push us every day in a “collaborative direction to effect for God and for good the lives of all people living in Southeast Pennsylvania and beyond.”

To build on this success, this fall we will host, “Cultivating Generous Congregations”, a two-day interactive seminar demonstrating how pastors and ministry leaders can unearth and energize congregational generosity by exploring the significant and necessary steps to create lasting cultural change within a congregation. This opportunity has been created in part by a UCC partnership with the Lake Institute on Faith & Giving.

Additionally, the Conference Budget and Finance Team, with substantial assistance from Tammie Wisniewski, has been working with AKCG Marketing Team to focus our Conference narrative and develop tools to increase awareness of, and participation in, OCWM. To that end, we are currently, working on our thirty-second elevator speech *“PSEC is the link that connects our church’s various and diverse ministries both locally and globally. Together, we provide our local churches, pastors and congregations with the training and inspiration they need to carry out our church’s wider mission. We are stronger together; therefore, we embrace diversity, and above all, we spread God’s love!”*

Ministry Development

The eleventh objective of our 2020 Vision Plan called for creating a Member In Discernment Academy to standardize the training of potential clergy in the essential practices of ministry excellence. Members of the MID Sub-Committee of the Church and Ministry Council conducted the first PSEC MID Academy last summer. Seventeen MIDS and six staff attended the 2018 event at the Kirkridge Retreat Center in the Pocono Mountains. We will build on the success of that event this July with what is anticipated to become an annual event.

We hosted our first successful Conference Men’s Clergy Retreat in October. Sixteen PSEC clergy men and our facilitator Rev. Dr. Jim Antal, retired Conference Minister from the Massachusetts Conference, met around the theme, “Telling the Truth in a Culture of Lies” also hosted at the Kirkridge Center. A follow up one-day event took place in February and a second retreat is scheduled for October 2019. This was one of the personal highlights of my last year.

The Mid-Atlantic Eastern Regional Youth Event took place in July 2018. I was very proud to witness the leadership role that our conference played primarily through the work of Rev. John Folk (St Paul’s, Fleetwood) and Rev. Kim Berenotto (Good Shepherd, Boyertown). I was blessed to be invited to preach the opening worship service of the Post High School Youth Event last month in Philadelphia. In addition to coordinating Fall and Spring Conference Youth Events, Pastors Kim and John (and a legion of other

folks) are helping our youth prepare for General Synod this summer and the UCC National Youth, July 2020, at the University of Perdue.

New Ministries Fund

The objective of our 2020 Vision Plan is to create in our Conference an ethos of expectation, experimentation and transformation AND to develop opportunities for adaptive, creative and entrepreneurial discipleship. To accomplish this, The New Ministries Fund program (established from the change of Conference Centers and the closure of our outdoor ministry center) awards up to \$15,000 in support of new ministry initiatives — particularly those which connect congregations and local communities. The New Ministries Sub-Committee of Conference Consistory has met every January and June for the last three years to review grant applications and to receive reports from recipients. A list of recent recipients can be found on the Conference website. To date, \$58,399.77 remains in the fund. Applications will continue to be received for as long as funds remain available.

Disaster Ministries

The fifth 2020 Vision objective was “to see 5 cities or towns being positively affected by the presence of a UCC congregation as measured by the quality of life standards (i.e. education, housing/homelessness, crime reduction, employment opportunities, health/wellness) of those communities.”

That objective was reached in several towns of the Schuylkill Association. The pastors and lay leaders of local churches there worked together in response to summertime flood damage in and around their communities. The Mayor of Tremont, PA, Mr. Ricky Ney presented a plaque, now in the keeping of St. Peter's UCC, Tremont, in gratitude for all that the United Church of Christ did in support of the people in Tremont, Pine Grove, Hamburg and the surrounding areas.

There are too many people to thank for making this happen and I am always fearful of not including someone's name, but it is important to lift up the work of Rev. Karl Jones, PSEC Disaster Ministries Coordinator, Schuylkill Association Pastors Claude Schach, Jason Stump, Maureen Duffy-Guy, Shawn VanDyke and Craig Zimmerman for the roles they and their congregations played. Add to that a long list of contributors from congregations across our Conference who responded to the call for financial support.

Ecumenical Relations

The Ecumenical Relations Mission Team (ERMT) was recently reorganized under the leadership of Rev. Homer Royer. I was blessed to travel with a group of five representatives from our conference and Penn Northeast to Berlin, Germany last August to participate in the “Berlin Colloquy,” a conversation among ecumenical partners from Germany and the United States about the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and how his civil rights work and the work of the Reformation shaped our past and inform our present. The ERMT will collaborate with friends in Penn Central Conference and the Wisconsin Conference to host our German partners for a colloquy in our region sometime in 2020.

Last summer, the Team facilitated the creation of a new ecumenical partnership with the Medeck Dioceses of the Church of South India the home church of several UCC pastors of Indian decent in PSEC. They are now working in partnership with Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala, our UCC Global Ministries Southern Asia Executive, to plan a joint mission trip to India in the fall of this year.

Phoebe Ministries Board

For the last several years I have served on the Phoebe Board, the Nominating and Governance Committee and the Phoebe Wyncote Advisory Committee. The Staff and Board meet together every other month to enrich the lives of the seniors, their families, and the communities that Phoebe serves. Scott Stevenson is a very effective executive leader and I have learned much from my interactions with him and members of the Phoebe Board and Community. We are blessed to be in ministry together.

Wider Church Participation

PSEC Delegates for General Synod had their first meeting in December. They will have their second and final meeting in May 2019 in preparation for General Synod in Milwaukee Wisconsin this June. Twenty resolutions have been submitted for this General Synod. Delegates will also consider the Re-nomination of General Minister and President John Dorhauer for a second term and vote on a new Executive Minister for Global Ministries, Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, to replace the retiring Rev. Dr. Jim Moos.

For the past two years, I have been a member of the UCC Board of Directors, the UCC Governance Committee and the recently created "Living Together Task Force" a group of Board Representatives charged with helping the various settings of the United Church of Christ work more seamlessly together. In April, I was invited to serve on the UCC Insurance Board, the group that oversees the UCC Insurance Program. I was humbled to be asked and graciously accepted. I look forward to serving.

Professional Development

In addition to Boundary and Diversity Training events, I was blessed to attend two events connected with VA Chaplain Chris Antal's presentations on "Mental Health Services and Referral" and "Pastoral Care with Veterans and Their Families." These two events were made possible with assistance from grants obtained through the New Ministries Fund. I meet regularly with a spiritual director who introduced me to "Inner Engineering" which uses yogic practices to promote inner wellbeing. I also joined a Community of Practice this year with five other Conference Minister colleagues who meet once a month to offer support and guidance to our respective ministries.

Some thoughts about the way forward

The 2020 Vision plan has been a helpful guide through these last five years of ministry. It has gained traction in some places and not as much in others. Conference Consistory will need to discern this year how that plan will continue to operate, if it should or if we need a new strategic vision.

We will continue to help local churches assess the future of their ministries and assist a growing number who have been called to close. Additionally, we will make more connections between congregations who are living into spiritual vitality with those who have a strong desire to do so.

More than strategic planning, we are in need of Spiritual revival. The intention of this year's Annual Spring meeting, and the invitation to guest speaker Brian McLaren, is to cultivate one opportunity for revival to happen that hopefully will have significant aftershocks around the Conference.

Conclusion

There is no way I could have accomplished the meaningful work of the last five years without the friendship and collegial support of a very long list of people. There are more names to share than this space will allow but I must thank Conference Moderator Jennie Strauch who has taken it upon herself to visit a different Conference congregation almost every Sunday since she was elected, to learn about the

needs of local churches and to share news about the wider church. Our staff continues to team tackle and crowd source the pressing needs of communities, congregations, and clergy. Sue Creswell has helped me continue that learning with a joy and an optimism that is absolutely contagious and life changing. Rev. Sharon Morris continues to lead through the challenges of diminished church capacity which collide with the search and call process. She heads off on a much needed, and earned, Sabbatical this June through September. Brea Rarick sews together knowledge of the United Church of Christ, computer skills, and detail tracking that has streamlined our resourcing of pastors and Committees on Ministry. Tammy Wisniewski and Donna Daloisio track every dollar coming into and going out of our Conference as if they were overseeing their own personal financial wellness. They carry the weight of our financial struggles and successes and they do it really well. Finally, Rev. Cean James continues to infuse our Conference with energy, vitality, determination, and a faithfulness to increase the reach of the Gospel that breathes life and light into every corner where Cean is present.

In weekly preaching engagements around the Conference, I have learned new things and confirmed my sense of others. First, a handful of people on fire with the transformative power and presence of the resurrected spirit of Jesus Christ can change the world — and do. Second, it really is possible to welcome all people when the sole agenda is the working of Jesus Christ, as that happens differently in the life of each person. Third, where vitality is happening there is a vitalized, faith-filled visionary leader training and inspiring other leaders. Finally, I am fond of the question, “If your church burned down on Friday would you all show up on Sunday to worship in the ashes?” I know the answer almost as soon as I walk in the front church door. There is an unmistakable atmosphere of connection among people who love being together AND who can’t wait to include new people in that togetherness; born not from a need to save a church or find a committee or contribute to a budget but from a desire to widen the circle of friends and to share the faith.

That is happening all around our Conference and I am blessed beyond measure to witness it, celebrate it and give thanks to God for it.

Rev. William P. Worley,
Conference Minister