

Rev. William Worley
PSEC Conference Minister
Re-Nomination Self Statement
March 10, 2020

The Constitution and Bylaws of the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference stipulate that the Conference Minister shall, “serve a term of six years and be eligible for one or more additional terms” but does not direct how eligibility for additional terms is to be determined. The Conference Personnel Committee created a process whereby I would offer a statement seeking re-nomination to accompany their written determination regarding the same for consideration by Conference Consistory. This is my statement.

The work of ministry is always about the intersection of call where God and God’s people, the church and one’s own heart come together. I did not take for granted that having been elected six years ago, I would still feel called to Conference Ministry or that if I did, it would be affirmed by those with whom I’ve labored. After months of deliberation, many conversations with trusted leaders, meditation and prayer, it is clear that my work in our Conference is not yet finished. I’d like to reflect on my sense of that and what priorities might shape a second term.

It should come as no surprise to those steeped in the UCC that the role of a Conference was never made clear from the UCC’s inception until today. Each Conference has been left to determine for itself how best to meet the needs of the congregations and clergy within its boundaries. As we have recently entered an interim period with regard to the Associate Conference Minister for Search and Call, we have an opportunity to dream theologically and strategically about the near- and long-term evolving forms of ministry and how to support them. No matter what dreams may come, my sense of my primary mission will, I believe, remain unchanged-- support pastors and help grow congregations; or in the words of the scriptures, “equip the saints for the building up of the Body of Christ.”

The Body of Christ, the incarnation of Christ’s resurrected presence, is alive and well in the world. At the same time, declining church membership affects every facet of our ministry. I feel a personal and communal expectation to do something about that. I have suggested, as a start, that we help languishing congregations that have no viable future and no interest in growth merge with, or gift their assets to, churches that are bearing fruit. There is little interest in that. There is an understandable system wide fear about making difficult decision making and exercising authority. The practice of both is generally shunned and with them our capacity to affect—for good or ill—the change we want to see in the world. I am not sure how to help this change or that we want it to change. I do know that, short of an abrupt, system wide crisis, the current trajectory of decline will continue unless interrupted by emboldened leaders or by members of the system working in close consort with each other.

The National Church struggles with this as well. The solution being offered there is for the UCC to become the progressive voice of Christianity in America. On the one hand, this is the natural

evolution of a denomination that is, for many reasons, almost entirely social justice focused. On the other, this change is away from the “United and Uniting” DNA of our theological and historical roots and has taken place without a conscious, concerted or discerned church wide decision to do so. The effect is that, despite our intention to be radically inclusive, we have become exclusive of voices that are not the same. The UCC has taken a side in our cultural divisions when the most difficult and necessary place to be is, as it has always been, in the middle calling for unity—where I believe stands the crucified Christ. This is the place from which my continued sense of call to Conference ministry emanates and it is the place from which I will continue to lead.

I have been thoroughly blessed by that call. Every week I learn new things that make this work a labor of love. I work with people on fire with the transformative power and presence of the resurrected spirit of Jesus Christ. 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. Where vitality is happening there is usually an energetic, faith-filled visionary leader(s) training and inspiring other leaders. 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 ready to rebuild a ministry?” 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 member or contribute to a budget but from a desire to widen the circle of friends and to share the faith.

An insightful Conference Consistory member recently asked, “Now that the Conference is running as well as it can in the context of the very real challenges that exist, what do we do with it? How do we use it to make a difference?” That question keeps me up at night. No one person has the answer but from where I sit there are few important reflections to share:

1. We will continue to close churches over the next several years. This process is painful and necessary as non-working expressions of church either transform or end. My role has been to walk with those going through it, provide resources by which to navigate, and encourage them to contribute to a legacy that lays the foundation for new expressions of the Christian faith where I would like to spend more time and energy.
2. Our churches struggle to find qualified, effective and committed pastoral leadership. The number of potential candidates (particularly part-time candidates) is entirely insufficient to the needs of our churches many of which cannot adequately support their pastors. Our current system of Search and Call has not evolved with the changes to our system and the resulting tension is not sustainable. The Interim ACM period is our opportunity to find adaptive solutions by which we can thrive and not just survive.
3. We must build a system to recruit and prepare qualified candidates for ministry. Those who can afford the time and money for seminary attend, but this in no way guarantees their capacity to lead. Others who cannot afford seminary struggle to find training opportunities that prepare them for the parish. The Conference Ministers of the PCC

and PNE Conferences have proposed forming a joint task force to address this and I will be part of that. My one suggestion—we start a seminary whose sole focus is to meet the mission requirements of our churches.

4. I am not the first to observe that the Reformed theological heritage of our Conference is deep. Clergy have a need for theological discussions, study and reflection. They are also in need of safe spaces for spiritual discussion and truth-telling (which happens in effective Communities of Practices to which every authorized minister should belong). I eagerly anticipate partnering with Penn Central and Penn Northeast Conferences to identify a world changing endeavor to live up the Reformed heritage and claim its power for a new day.
5. Finally, I have spoken with several people who would love to see us open one coffee shop in every Association that would be a gathering place for local communities to hang out together, read together, hear lectures, provide stages for music and art and civic (and civil) conversations about the things that matter. They would also be places of job training and employment opportunities for people who need a second chance at life. I am not yet sure how to make this happen but this only one of several new expressions of the Christian faith I would like to explore.

There seems to be general agreement that our Conference is not in the same place it was six years ago and that a renewed sense of trust in the people, processes and policies that guide our shared lives has taken hold. That trust is evident in increased participation in Conference Teams and Committees, attendance at Conference events, a rising commitment to resource sharing (including, but not limited to, Our Churches Wider Mission) and a growing Spirit of light heartedness. This is the result of groups of people working together with an audacious 2020 Vision plan crafted by the Conference Consistory that stretched our response ability. It is also a result of the leadership I was asked to provide and the commitment I made to uphold the shared values (Transparency, Covenant, Radical Inclusivity, Building Capacity, Celebration) by which we live.

I hope and pray that I might remain part of this work and the exciting possibilities with which God waits for us in the future. And so, I seek a second term as the Conference Minister of the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference—the finest of the 38 Conferences of the United Church of Christ.