

Introduction

This is not the report I expected to deliver back in June when we were to have gathered at the Inn at Reading. Our Spring Annual Meeting weekend is one of the highlights of my year. It is the time when the hard work of our Annual Meeting Planning Team and the Conference staff and countless volunteers bring us together to pray, to praise and to plan the year ahead. As I write this, I find myself missing you all and anticipating our first zoom Conference meeting to be a thoroughly inadequate substitute for our fellowship in the faith. But there is work to do, so we will forge ahead together in the digital world.

The events of the last five months have been unprecedented certainly in our lifetimes and in that of our Conference. The resilience and adaptability of our Conference staff, its Committee and Team leaders, congregations, clergy and lay leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are testimony to our capacities for creativity and endurance.

Southeast Pennsylvania was the epicenter of the pandemic in Pennsylvania. The ongoing uncertainty about the progress of the virus and any potential vaccine, coupled with the haphazard leadership of our political leaders, and the unrelenting and sometimes conflicting sources of information from every agency that communicates electronically, frustrates even the most well discerned decision making process. Despite that, I believe we are accomplishing our own *mission to be the link that connects our church's various and diverse Ministries both locally and globally* and that the state of our Conference is strong.

Ministry in the Time of COVID

On March 16, we closed our Conference office in response to state and local government directions to be in a period of sequestration in response to the presence of COVID-19. Our Conference staff began an unintended experience of the mobile office concept we had discussed just months ago at our Fall Conference meeting. Susan Creswell, our Conference Coordinator and Assistant to the Conference Minister, has done her usual amazing work at making these difficult transitions as seamless and as effective as possible. Since then, Conference life has been an endless flow of Zoom meetings. The Church and Ministry Council, Budget and Finance, Endowment, Men's Retreat and Annual Meeting Planning Teams, Joint MID Assessment Team, just to name a few, continued to meet regularly. Clergy and lay leaders have conferred Mondays via Zoom since March 23. We average 35 attendees and discuss topics ranging from virtual worship, working with children and youth, dealing with grief, what is working well (or not working well), and moving to in person worship. The Conference Ministers of Penn Northeast, Penn Central and PSEC offered a noon day Prayer Pause through May and have spoken recently about reengaging in that practice.

All 160 PSEC Congregations received a \$1,000 support check, authorized by Conference Consistory, during Holy Week from our Conference "rainy fund". In the letter accompanying those funds, we asked recipients to let us know how they decided to use the funds. The responses have been an outpouring of gratitude for the ways that local churches were able to support their staff members, continue their mission projects, and contribute to individuals and families of their local communities whose lives have been deeply impacted by the pandemic.

Additionally, the Consistory set aside another \$20,000 from the “rainy day” fund for the Conference Minister’s Discretionary Fund so that we could respond in a timely manner to requests for assistance from authorized clergy. To date, less than \$1000 has been spent from that fund.

We did apply for, and were granted, a Payroll Protection Program loan in the amount of \$92,000. Tammie Wisniewski, our Conference Finance and Operations Manager has been incredibly effective at sifting through the mountain of ever-changing information and guidance regarding that loan program not only to facilitate the Conference’s participation in this plan but to be an effective advisor for our local churches.

Contributions to OCWM have fallen off precipitously during the pandemic. Fortunately, we were in a strong financial state heading into sequestration. While we have been able to maintain financial support of our conference ministries, prolonged decrease in OCWM will profoundly impact our capacity to meet our financial goals. We have managed to keep faith with our commitment to the National Church which is 10% of our operating budget. Our endowed investments took a sharp drop during the first quarter of this year but rebounded in the second quarter. A full financial report will be presented by Conference Treasurer Ray Edwards at our Annual Meeting.

At the same time, the COVID pandemic is taking the last breath of more than 150,000 Americans, the pandemic of racism in America is choking the breath and life, literally, out of Black people. May 25, George Floyd, a black man, was pinned to the ground by the unyielding knee of a white police officer and was killed. Rev.’s James, Minasian and I led a Zoom meeting, assisting more that eighty pastors, on preaching responses for that week’s events. Growing masses of multicolored, multicultural people are moving to deepen their consciousness about race and to dismantle the systems that have for too long protected the privilege. We have begun a Conference racial justice initiative related to the lynching of a Coatesville native that I will describe further on in this report.

Prior to the Pandemic

The 2020 Vision plan has been a helpful guide through our last five years of ministry. It gained traction in some places and not as much in others. Enough has changed, and is changing, as to require a new strategic vision for our Conference to help us carry out our core mission to equip the saints, to be the link that connects our church's various and diverse Ministries both locally and globally and to build up the Body of Christ. This will be the first priority of the newly elected Conference leadership and, should it be the will of the body, a re-nominated Conference Minister. Some of the elements of that new strategic vision are already in play. At the heart of all of them is the question, “What does it mean to be the church?” – a question profoundly impacted by our pandemic response. Despite the simple clarity offered by our UCC “Be the Church” banners, there is wide divergence about how that is lived out which has significant implications for our covenantal connections.

At the close of last fall's Conference Meeting at Ursinus College, Conference Consistory took for action the formation of working groups to focus on our commitment to the prevalence of opioid addiction and addiction in general as well as a commitment to environmental justice. A third working group was formed around the proposal to move Conference Staff toward a mobile office platform. Little did we know that three months from that meeting we would be operating as a mobile office -- which we continue to do. That experience has not been an entirely accurate measure of working remotely given the shutdown of local churches and, for three months, everything around us. We have, however, discovered a few helpful insights:

- a. Ordained staff chew up enormous time traveling. While we had a sense of that, previous to sequestration, working digitally has thrown that into stark reality.
- b. We have slowly moved to using digital files over the last seven years so access to the paper files stored at the office are not as critical as thought previously.
- c. More can be accomplished via Zoom and in a shorter period of time -- but that will not replace the relationship building on which effective team functioning relies.

On November 18, 2019, Rev. Sharon Morris announced her intention to resign after serving our Conference faithfully for seven years as Associate Conference Minister for Search and Call. We celebrated her ministry and said farewell to her in February and a few weeks later welcomed Rev. Dr. Susan Minasian to the position of Interim Associate Conference Minister for Search and Call. Susan had three weeks of welcome and introduction to her ministry before the office closed and she, like the rest of the staff, was working from home. She learned very quickly our complex conference systems and, with the help of Conference Registrar Brea Rarick, has begun to help us rethink those. The work of the interim period has been slowed by our need to adjust to operating during the pandemic, but Conference Consistory is putting together the team that will begin the first stage of the search process.

Economic forces before and during the pandemic have pushed many of our congregations into difficult conversations about their future ministry. We celebrate those long ministries and grieve their loss all the while remembering that we are people of the resurrection. 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.

At the same time, we have established a fund to begin new Christian communities amassed from the received assets of churches who have concluded their ministries. Rev. Cean James is tasked with working with a Congregational Development Committee to identify and to discern how best to deploy those funds. This is not to be confused with the New Ministries Fund which for the last six years has supported new ministry initiatives which connect our current congregations and their local communities. More information about that, including a list of grant recipients, can be found at our conference website (<https://psec.org/missions-ministries/new-ministries-fund/>).

In addition to the work we do locally, our Conference is engaged with ministry partners around the world. Members of our Joint Conference Ecumenical Team returned from a mission trip to India, just weeks before the pandemic, having forged new ecumenical relationships with the Karnataka and Medak Dioceses of the Church of South India. It is primarily from these two areas that our two CSI affiliated congregations in our conference, Grace Trinity and Emmanuel CSI, immigrate. We were also set to host a German delegation last month, including partners from the Anhalt District, for the Penn Central Conference sponsored UEK Pastoral Colloquy. The theme, "Building a Just Peace in an Unjust World: Learning with and from Our Anabaptist Colleagues" was planned in conjunction with the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies on the campus of Elizabethtown College. Regretfully, that event was canceled. Finally, I would beg prayer for Rev. Nishan Bakalian (recent pastor of Armenian Martyrs Congregation Church, Havertown, PA) and his wife Maria who are serving as UCC Global Ministry partners in Beirut, Lebanon. Their home and office are not far from the blast that destroyed much and killed many at the port in Beirut, Tuesday, August 4. Fortunately, they were traveling outside the city when the blast struck and were not injured. They are deep into the clean-up effort and ministering to the victims and their families.

The Wider United Church of Christ

As with each of our local churches, the National Church has also been adjusting to the presence of the pandemic. Like our Conference staff, the National Church staff has been working remotely and will continue to do so until at least January of the New Year. The National Youth event, which was to have taken place this summer, was postponed. In a special meeting on June 2, the United Church of Christ Board, of which I am a member, met via Zoom to consider options for **General Synod 33** in light of COVID-19 and took the painful and unprecedented step of cancelling an in-person General Synod 33. Instead, General Synod will take place in a digital format. As preparations for this meeting take shape, we will begin preparing our own Conference delegation for their participation.

Leaders of the Financial Ministries of the United Church of Christ created a loan vehicle shepherded by the UCC Cornerstone Fund to make available low interest loans to UCC congregations. The National Church, using \$1.5 million from its "Just World Offering" account, created the seed money. Each Conference that opted into the program received an amount that was equal to \$300 per congregation. \$50,000 was the amount available for our congregations to apply for short-term, low interest loans.

The **Council of Conference Ministers** have met regularly to share news and information and resources related to our pandemic response. We have also had several meetings with our national legal counselor Heather Kimmel who has offered outstanding guidance on a range of legal considerations pertaining to the pandemic. We gathered in Birmingham in December 2019 for what we did not know would be our last in person meeting for the foreseeable future. We went to the Legacy Museum of the Equal Justice Institute in Montgomery, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (better known as the Lynching Museum where I was surprised and disturbed to learn about the lynching of Zachariah Walker in Coatesville, PA.) and then to Selma and across the Edmund Pettis Bridge—the site of "Bloody Sunday" and the beginning of the most famous of Civil Rights Marches. The next day we journeyed to Birmingham to the 16th Street Baptist Church where four girls died in a church bombing. On the adjacent corner was the Birmingham Civil Rights Museum and across from them both was the park where "The Children's March" was met by police dogs and water cannons. Conference Consistory was moved by my profound experiences of this trip and discerned a path to action-- the Zachariah Walker Racial Justice Initiative which will offer ways that churches can stand in support of our Black members, neighbors, and friends and educate ourselves about the terrorism of white power and the violence of systemic racism. We will share with pastors and churches historical information, educational resources, and worship suggestions that follow the liturgical calendar, beginning this Advent 2020.

Conclusion

As we've adapted as individuals, communities and churches to the demands of a public health crisis, we've intimately witnessed what has been a time of enormous death and loss, even while new possibilities have been born. Though we've longed more than ever for the strong and frequent embraces of our families and friends, we've instead been cautioned to refrain from embracing. We've broken down and set aside so many of our beloved practices of being church even as we've built up new ways of being church we might never before have imagined. It is a well-known fact among those of us who both love and intimately know the Church that, when it comes to real change, the Church is usually the last in line to embrace it. In a tone that is half-joke and half-confession we often say that if we've never done it that way BEFORE we can't do it now.

But we have been proving over the last five months that is just not true. We CAN in fact change and change fast! In the last five months, congregations have adapted everything you do for this present season. Pastors, church members, chaplains, Conference committees and Conference staff have all done

a new thing—a lot of new things!!-- to meet the challenges of this unprecedented time. I mean this to the bottom of my heart: You are amazing! Thank you. Thank you.

There is more work to do, as there always will be, for those engaged in the difficult work of transformation and resurrection to which God calls us. I am blessed beyond measure to be joined with you in that and offer continued prayers for your physical safety and spiritual wellbeing.

Blessings,
Rev. Bill Worley