

Interim Associate Conference Minister for Search and Call Pennsylvania Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ Annual Report 2020

It seems a little strange writing an annual report when I feel like I just got here. I want to start by thanking you all for the opportunity to serve you in this capacity. The liminal season of an interim can be scary for some and yet I find it to be a most exciting and creative season in the life of any community. An interim makes intentional space for reflection, assessment, creative engagement and encouragement for the future. I have enjoyed getting to meet you in person for a couple of weeks and then through technology over these past 5 months (as of this writing). I love the church. I love ministry and I love serving as a guide while others are discerning what God is calling them to be and do as their baptismal response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Last year Rev. Sharon Morris mentioned a “new proposal to our Committees on Ministry (COM). A Joint Member in Discernment (MID) Assessment Team.” To refresh your memories she wrote: *“This team would not take away any of the authorizing piece from their Associations. This team would work with MIDs to assess where they are in the discernment of ordained ministry and then create a plan for them so that they meet the MARKS of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministry. This proposal would create a standard of excellence for all going through the Member In Discernment process. This assessment and creation of a growth plan is essential and necessary given the possibility now that people can become ordained through the Multiple Paths of Ministry.”*

I wanted to give you an update on what happened since then. This proposal was approved. Rev. Morris chose a team consisting of a representative from each Association to serve for a three-year term. As this group is in the beginning stages of their work together, they faithfully meet and are in the process of evaluating their role and function and specifics of their responsibilities along the way. There will be more intentionality in establishing best practices moving forward. Associations will be kept informed.

The Pastoral Excellence Programs continue to be a vital gathering opportunity for authorized ministers. Since my arrival we have added a group to support those serving in specialized settings. Since this group serves all over the geographical area of the Conference, they are going to be meeting via zoom.

After shadowing Rev. Morris the last week in February, I then began the interim work March 1, 2020. I know you join me in giving thanks for her service in the Conference and continue to hold her in prayer as she moves into the next season of her journey. She was an integral part of the Conference Staff Team and I know they miss her very much.

If you have been with me in a meeting or read any of the pieces I have written or even listened to a zoom session with me preaching, there is something I think you have heard me say over and over again. Ministry is RELATIONAL not TRANSACTIONAL. I wish I could take credit for the words but I must give credit to Fr. Richard Rohr. In his book *Universal Christ* Fr. Rohr reminds us that as people of faith we are called into relationships. The church that is living out the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a place where we engage in transactions. I almost wondered if he was a member of the United Church of Christ. You see, this emphasis on relationship verses transactions is at the heart of what it means to be a church bound in COVENANT. Everything we do is covenantal. Our celebrations and our critiques grow out of love and covenant. This is far from being about cheap grace. It is also not about avoiding good works. So, in my area of ministry I refer to Search and Call as a Spiritual Practice. We are not an employment agency and we don't place people into positions. We gather, discern, guide and support you in this ministry.

I could give you a list of what I have been doing like attending Committee On Ministry Meetings, Association Meetings, Association Executive Committee Meeting, Church & Ministry Council, co-facilitated a book group with Rev. Worley, leading Waking Up White Book Groups, Zachariah Walker Racial Justice Initiative Team, Racial Ethnic Health Disparity Team/UCC, Trainings, Staff meetings, Conference Consistory meetings, consultations with Church Consistories/Councils/Search Committees, pastoral care and guidance with pastors and lay leaders, discernment with people searching for their next call...you get the picture. You could read these and think they are things on my TO DO List. They are not. All of this is ministry I have the privilege to do with you and on behalf of you. Each of these experiences are relationships with God's people coming together to live out our covenantal call.

Each relationship is a moment of investing in the future of the United Church of Christ as we live that out in the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference. Search and Call is a covenantal process, a spiritual practice where we believe in the presence of God, prayerfully discern with the Holy Spirit where we will serve and who we will call. In the 2020 Vision of the PSEC I read...*"Together, we now shift the narrative of Mainline decline to a story of hope for a generative future."* Search and Call processes are a vital part of our ministry that helps shape this narrative beginning with the way congregations and authorized ministers come together.

I am grateful for the ministry of the Committees On Ministry and the way they faithfully and ethically build on what it means to be in relationship not only with congregations but with pastors and Members In Discernment. Together our covenantal relationship will make us stronger and more equipped for the Body of Christ in our families, our congregations, our communities, and the world.

In this season of the Coronavirus the church has not stopped. The Holy Spirit has continued to move. God is still speaking. The saints are still working for justice with peace. Creation is mourning and rejuvenating at the same time. Our conscience is challenged, our hearts moved, and the actions of our lives are essential now more than ever.

May we continue the journey together so that the essential ministry of Jesus Christ will shine forth from us all. May we continue to engage in training that equips us to be the spiritual first responders that go out into the world and transform it so others can experience the extravagant love of God.

Blessings and Peace,

Rev. Dr. Susan A. Minasian