

2023 Conference Minister Report

On August 1st of this year, I complete my ninth year as Conference Minister. It continues to be an eye-opening experience of the exciting possibilities and daunting challenges of being church in the 21st Century.

Sabbatical

The end of our 2022 Conference Spring meeting was the beginning of my three-month Sabbatical. I traveled some. Read much. Reflected often. And tried to relax—something I discovered I am not very good at. Perhaps the most profound lesson was that living with myself is far more exhausting than ministry. I learned that I am not a monastic- nor will I ever be. I do, however, need to be more intentional about scheduling silent retreat time. I learned again that it's easy to lose sight of God when you're doing God's work. The business of building up the kingdom of God is not the same as sitting in the presence of God. Sabbatical time was time to sit in the presence of God. And finally, God showed up powerfully in the most remarkable ways at unremarkable moments when my heart was open and tuned to that possibility. That happened often--in the Hudson River, during communion at monasteries, in small groups of men on retreat, and in the Pennsylvania Northwoods.

I was and remain deeply grateful for the experience. I owe Rev. Kevin McLemore a debt of gratitude for stepping faithfully and effectively into the role of Acting Conference Minister and to the staff for seamless leadership in my absence. I submitted a full sabbatical report to Conference Consistory which I am happy to share upon request.

Local Church Endings and Beginnings

Since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic three years ago, researchers have wondered how that would impact religious worship. According to a recent comprehensive survey by the Pew Research Center, “the share of U.S. adults who take part in religious services in some way (in person, virtually or both) in a given month has remained remarkably steady since the early days of the pandemic – even though how they participate has shifted dramatically.” (You can read the full report here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/> .)

Some local PSEC churches held steady through the pandemic while others have experienced growing attendance. Many church leaders struggle with declining attendance and its corresponding impact on annual budgets. In several instances, cuts to staff costs helped keep the church open. In a few cases church leaders have decided to bring their ministry to a close.

Of the four congregations that ended their ministries since our last Conference meeting (St. Luke's, North Wales; St. Luke's, Philadelphia; Grace, West Point; Bethany, Philadelphia). Only the friends of Saint Luke's UCC, North Wales gifted a portion of their remaining assets to the Conference. That amount, \$167,161.81 was deposited in our New Church Fund which currently stands at \$623,935. These funds lay the foundation for the future witness of the United Church of Christ in southeast PA. Our most recent new church, Open Table UCC in Pottstown, is the first of hopefully several new faith communities that will build on the legacy of our Christian ancestors.

PA Keystone Study Group

In January 2022, the Conference Ministers of the four Pennsylvania Conferences began discussing the urgency of issues confronting all settings of the UCC. We met with an eye toward confronting the divisions and hostilities of our world, and hearing with a deepened sense of our responsibility to answer Jesus' prayer, 'that they may all be one. We identified the spiritual hunger of our church people and pastors and the call to support and develop the local church. We dreamed about new ways to serve Jesus and our churches by drawing on the strength and giftedness of our clergy, congregations, leaders, and Conference staff.

We are not the church that we were when the denomination was formed in 1957 and that our contexts of ministry are different. The pandemic exacerbated the challenges we face. We acknowledge our responsibility to provide support and nourishment to the local church. We recognize our duty to find and develop the leaderships our congregations need. And we own the very real financial challenges that impact the future of our ministries.

The "Keystone Study Group," a group of representatives from all four PA Conferences, was gathered from these initial conversations to explore the possibilities of responding as one. That group has met monthly since October 2022 and we have reported in eNews the progress of their work. PSEC members are Mr. Charles Kuthuru (Moderator), Rev. Melissa Burkhart (Vice-Moderator), Mrs. Robin Hightower (Consistory Secretary), Rev. Robert Fogal (Consistory Treasurer) and staff members Revs. Bill Worley, Kevin McLemore and Cean James. The Study Group work is being financed by a \$90,000 grant from the Council of Conference Ministers Essential Ministries Fund and works with guidance from Rev. Bill Metzger of Renaissance Consulting. All four Conference Ministers will be present the Saturday of our 2023 Spring Conference meeting to report progress to date and engage delegates in conversation about the process and potential outcomes.

Ecumenical Ministry

Our Joint Conference Ecumenical Relations Mission Team (JCERMT) with representatives from PSEC and PNEC connects our Conferences with ministries around the globe including the Church of South India (CSI) -- the second largest Christian church in India. The JCERMT entered into a formal ecumenical agreement in July with the Karimnagar Diocese and their Bishop The Right Rev. Dr. Reuben Mark. Six JCERMT representatives traveled to the Karimnagar Dioceses at the invitation of Bishop Reuben and with the financial support of UCC Global Ministries to experience life and ministry in the Telangana Province. We now have ecumenical agreements with the CSI dioceses of Medak, Karnataka, and Karimnagar and will host the Bishops from Karnataka, and Karimnagar at this year's General Synod.

We also hosted partners from the Evangelical Church of the Union, Anhalt and the Berlin Mission at Old First, Philadelphia in October 2022.

UCC Manual On Church—

A draft copy of one section of the new UCC Manual on Church has been released which you can find here <https://files.constantcontact.com/81addeef601/7b12db89-718f-4be3-8163-50b90e16aa6c.pdf?rdr=true>. I very much appreciate the accountability structures that the Manual creates for local congregations which has significant transformative implications for the ministry of pastors and lay leaders across the denomination. I encourage everyone who reads this report to read the manual draft. I am anxious for the ecclesiastical and theological grounding section that is still in the works.

2023 UCC General Synod

The 34th General Synod takes place June 30-July 4, 2023, at the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis. Our PSEC delegation has met to begin planning travel and participation. They will convene several more times to become familiar with the sixteen resolutions that will come to the floor as well as other Synod business – including the nomination of the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson to be the next UCC General Minister and President who if elected will succeed retiring General Minister and President Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer. Synod delegates will also entertain a proposal to change the frequency of General Synod meetings from either other year to every three years. You can learn more about General Synod here; <https://generalsynod.org>.

Conclusion

There is no way I could have accomplished the meaningful work of the year 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 Mr. Charles Kuthuru. He has helped forge ecumenical partnerships, visited every Sunday with congregations to strengthen our covenantal connections, and has been a source of personal and pastoral support to me. Our staff continues to team tackle and crowd source the pressing needs of communities, congregations, and clergy. Sue Creswell manages event details that would make most people's heads spin. Rev. Kevin McLemore leads through the decline of congregations and pastors available for ministry which collide in the search and call process. 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. Rev. Tammie Wisniewski and Kim Kulesa helped us have another flawless audit experience that has become our custom over the last seven years. Finally, if you have not yet experienced one of Rev. Cean James' Congregational Development workshops you are depriving yourself and your congregation of an incredible resource and source of inspiration.

The Christian faith is taking shape in new forms that look very much unlike the church we have known. The possibilities are endless and exciting. I do not know where they will lead but I do know that God and the Holy Spirit are in the leading. I cannot tell you how pleased, proud, humbled and blessed I am to be part of it as it takes shape in the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference.

Rev. William P. Worley,
Conference Minister