

2024 Conference Ministers Report

It is with great pleasure and a sense of deep responsibility that I share this Annual Report. As we gather together, bound by our shared commitment to serve our communities and uphold the deepest values of our faith, this report serves as a testament to our collective endeavors, highlighting the progress made in fulfilling our mission, the obstacles encountered along the way, and the opportunities that lie ahead. From the tireless dedication of our clergy and Conference staff to the unwavering support of our lay leaders and congregations, the strength of our collaborative spirit and the resilience of our Christian community endures.

2023 Spring Annual Conference Meeting

Spring Conference Meeting at West Chester University closed Saturday afternoon after thought-provoking conversations about evolving forms of ministry. Mary Etta Mest, Ben Motz, Kevin Fruchtl, Cean James, Steve Ohnsman and Josh Blakesley shared helpful and thought-provoking insights. We met the Conference Ministers of our sibling PA Conferences Bonnie Bates (Penn Northeast), Carrie Call (Penn Central) and David Ackerman (Penn West) and joined in conversation about the possibility of a four Conferences coming together and potential for a four PA Conference Meeting next summer. We celebrated the significant anniversaries of churches and pastor ordinations and we recognized the generosity of our congregations who support the Mission of our Wider Church (OCWM) as well as those congregations who are “5 for 5”.

General Synod 2023

The 34th UCC General Synod in Indianapolis came to a close Tuesday July 4th. Our Conference was blessed by the faithful commitment of thirty-one volunteer delegates who lent their voices to the movement of the Holy Spirit in challenging discussions, debates and decisions. General Synod Highlights Included:

- The recognition of Open Table UCC, Pottstown among the new church starts celebrated from around the denomination.
- The inclusion of PSEC/PNEC Ecumenical Partners from the Church of South India, Bishop Prasana Samuel and his wife Esther, who spoke briefly to the Synod about anti-Christian violence in Manipur, India.
- The Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson was the first black woman elected to the position of General Minister and President. She takes the place of outgoing Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer who was elected in 2017.
- The frequency of General Synod meetings was changed from two to three years due in part to the substantial cost of large national gatherings and the significant reduction in National Staff members over the last twenty years. That change will take effect following General Synod 35 in Kansas City, Missouri, July 11-15, 2025. General Synod 36 will gather in 2028 at a location to be determined.
- Resolutions and pronouncements regarding a number of social justice concerns. Those and other actions taken by the Synod can be found at <https://generalsynod.org/>.

Racial Justice Conference Event

Rev. Traci Blackmon, former Associate General Minister of Justice & Local Church Ministries, spoke meaningfully at an event co-sponsored by Reformed Church of the Ascension and our Conference April 16. In partnership with other social justice agencies in the Norristown area, the day was a “Call

to Action, Reconnecting the Church to a Vocation of God’s Justice” and focused on how to shape the role of the church in community justice work. Eighty-five participants from around the Conference and the Norristown area engaged in conversation based on Rev. Blackmon’s presentation.

New Ministries Grants

The New Ministries Fund program awards up to \$15,000 in support of new ministry initiatives that connect congregations and local communities. Since the beginning of this year, we have received and approved two new ministry grant requests totaling \$5,300. The total of that fund stands at approximately \$22,000. Conference Consistory receives applications every January 1st and July 1st and alerts Conference members to the availability of those funds via eNews with directions at our Conference website <https://psec.org/resources/new-ministries-fund-application/>. We will continue to offer grants until the fund has been depleted.

Church Closures

In July 2023, our Conference received \$65,422.50 from the assets of **St. Marks UCC, Reading** which was deposited in the New Church Start (NCS) fund. This March (2024) we received a final distribution of \$42,282.60 which was also deposited in the NCS fund. As of this report, the balance of that fund is \$683,821.26.

In 2018, Consistory was made aware of, and asked for information about, an open account of the closed **St. Thomas UCC, Reading**. They asked our Conference attorney to look into the matter. After an extensive investigation, our attorney discovered several improprieties regarding the distribution of approximately \$1 million in assets. After several years of legal proceedings, an agreement with the charities that St Thomas named, including Bethany Children’s Home (BCH) was reached. Consistory directed the settlement amount, \$ 201,732.66, to be used to pay legal expenses for both the Conference and BCH (\$118,215.12). The remaining \$83,517.54 was deposited into the Conference’s savings account.

In 1968 PSEC conveyed to a Methodist Church the building of the former **Emanuel UCC** at 3727 Baring Street, Philadelphia. The deed of sale had a clause stating if the church ever sold the property or stopped being a church the Conference could buy it back for the sale price (\$30,000) or its current value, whichever was less. The Trustees of the church did sell the property and the property transferred 2 additional times after that. Each time the transferring Title Company never found or acknowledged our claim. Until 2023. In order to release the Conference’s claim to the property the Conference received \$400,000—the estimated current market value. Conference Consistory directed those funds for the following ministry initiatives:

- a. Digital scanning churches and inactive pastor file – \$13,827
- b. Return money for General Synod ’23 to savings – \$34K
- c. Clergy coaching/mentoring program – \$30K
- d. Donation to Gestalt Pastoral Care in Wanda Craner’s Memory – \$10K
- e. Create 3 events over the next 18 months with Lombard Mennonite Peace Center – \$9K
- f. Host Medak Diocese/Church of South India Delegation to Spring Meeting – \$5K
- g. Support of the Keystone Working Group – \$5K
- h. Mental health (functioning similar to the New Ministries Fund) – \$50K
- i. Funds to discount the cost of attendance at June Conference Meeting - \$50K
- j. Remaining balance into Conference savings account

Conference Data Files

The Conference staff has worked diligently over the last year to move pastor and church files from paper to digital format. This has been a tremendous asset enabling information sharing with lay leaders of local churches, Committees on Ministry, and UCC Conference partners (i.e to facilitate the quick and seamless transfer of ministerial standing). We have paid very close attention to the security of those files particularly in light of the following event.

Our Conference data base was breeched this year for the first time by a random ransomware attack. We do not keep personal information in data base files that would have threaten any Conference member with identity theft. We worked with our tech providers to restore the data base from the files that are regularly backed up in an off-line system and to strengthen the protective measures necessary to prevent a repeat of this occurrence. We also notified our insurance agent and received helpful guidance from his office. There was no ransom request to restore the files. As these attacks have become a common occurrence for organizations of any type (to include periodic spam emails from me to Conference members asking for immediate attention, gift cards, or personal contributions). I encourage all congregations and ministry settings to review their data security procedures to protect sensitive information.

Churches and the Presidential Election -- As we move into a redo of the 2020 election cycle several pastors have shared concerns about increased conflict between/among church members and between the church and community. The staff is planning two events, one with an agent of the UCC Insurance Board on church security (Wednesday, June 26th, 7-8pm via Zoom), and second all day training Saturday, October 5th with the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center called “Fractured Lives, Fractured Churches: Healing the Breach.” <https://lmpeacecenter.org/all-events/>).

Wider Church

I attended a meeting in Cleveland for the Council of Conference Ministers, February 28-March 1, 2024. We received a presentation from our General Minister and President, leaders from the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) team, our General Counsel, the Insurance Board, and the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries (CHHSM). I will not tire you with all the details, but I do want to share a few reflections.

Rev. Dr. **Karen Georgia Thompson**, our **General Minister and President**, spent time answering our questions and sharing reflections on what she sees ahead for the UCC. Karen Georgia holds the idea of a “Broad Tent” closely and affirmed that is a critical UCC identity piece. She wondered what would happen if pastors and/or lay leaders from Open and Affirming and Faithful and Welcoming churches sat at the same table, or people from urban and very rural churches – what would our conversations be? Could talking about our own spiritual lives be a way of hearing one another? She spoke about the General Synod resolution process and how that may not be the best way to get to the unity of mission, purpose, and identity that is critical for our future. Karen Georgia is a poet and she spoke to how creativity has a way of bridging divides and may help us explore how to live together since that is our call. I am thrilled that she will be with us at our Keystone Conference meeting.

Our MESA staff gave a presentation on the new **Manual on Church** that is now live (<https://www.ucc.org/manual-on-church/>) but remains in draft form as the whole church engages with it before a final version is completed. There are parts of this manual that will be very helpful and very challenging to local churches. Our Conference’s Church and Ministry Council, comprised

of representatives from all five Association Committees on Ministry, will begin this June to plan a series of events to introduce the Manual and how to best incorporate that into the life of the church.

Our **UCC Legal Counsel, Heather Kimmel**, discussed legal issues, focusing on the need for robust judicatory checks when a pastor candidate is being considered for a church. Kevin McLemore and Brea Rarick provide great assistance with those checks which is very important for the protection and wellness of our people. Heather also offered helpful guidance about healthy Conference Board functioning particularly for conflicted Boards that operate without clear lines of authority. Heather provides helpful, up-to-date resources for pastors and local church leaders on a variety of legal topics that directly affect our ministry (<https://www.ucc.org/author/kimmelhucc-org/>).

The presentation by our **UC Insurance Board**, of which I am a member, provided sobering insight to the effects climate change has on the insurance industry. The number and size of insurance claims related to natural disasters has risen exponentially. So, too, have claims related to deferred church building maintenance. The CEO of the UCC IB, Tim Harris, has warned that these changes are having a steady, negative impact on the entire insurance industry and that as a result it will soon be difficult for churches to get, or afford, insurance coverage. The Insurance Board was created by the Council of Conference Ministers decades ago to provide reasonable coverage for churches the success of which depends on the participation of our congregations in the program.

Ecumenical Ministry

The Joint Ecumenical Relations Mission Team (JERMT) comprised of members from Penn Northeast and Southeast Conferences maintains active connections with Christian partners in Germany and India. Representatives of the Church of South India (Medak Dioceses) will join us for the June Conference meeting. This September, I will join several UCC Conference Minister colleagues and our partners from the Evangelical Regional Church of Anhalt at a celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the Berlin Mission in Berlin (<https://www.berliner-missionswerk.de/ueber-uns/auf-einen-blick>).

The members of the JERMT created the following tentative plan of work for the next three years:

- a. Engage youth and young adults in mission trips to India and Germany
- b. Use the Internet to connect with global ecumenical partners which could include:
 1. connecting with pastors via a Facebook page
 2. coordinating webinars/zoom meetings with US and India pastors and young people.
- c. Participating in the youth program of the Berlin Mission (Bill will e-mail Christoph Thielmann for information about this).
- d. Sending youth on a mission trip to churches in India
- e. Establishing and India mission project (for instance, adopting a village, adopting a girls hostel, connecting with a particular congregation of one of the diocese with whom we have an ecumenical tie, funding/sending someone(s) 4-3 months of service to train people in India in a particular vocational skill).
- f. Creating a three-way partnership with friends in Germany and India to create a combined mission initiative.
- g. Hosting a joint UCC/Lutheran meeting in eastern Pennsylvania similar to the joint four PA Conference UCC meeting this summer (employing the idea of having delegates stay in people's homes near the host site).

PSE Conference Staff / My 2024 Goals

My annual review was conducted by the Conference Personnel Committee in February. At that time, I shared my goals for 2024. In addition to the daily and annual operation requirements, they include:

- a. Meet the relentless challenges of hosting a 4 Conference meeting at State College in June 2024. Host a helpful conversation to discern the possibility of merger at the November 2024 PSEC Conference meeting.
- b. Create a strategic plan to address 2024 OCWM shortfall which includes drafting a 2025 PSEC budget before the end of March 2024 so that that finance plan can inform our Keystone discernment and our conference members about what might lie ahead for both future paths.
- c. Complete the goal of having worshipped in, if not preached to, all 150 Conference congregations.
- d. Create 4 videos to increase awareness about OCWM, the UCC, and the Keystone Project.
- e. 2025 marks the 300 Anniversary of the German Reformed Church in America (organized in 1725 thanks largely to the efforts of John Philip Boehm). I will form a team of people to plan events to mark the occasion in partnership with other PA Conferences and the National Church.

We look to an uncertain future with the very certain presence of God. 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.

Respectfully Submitted
Rev. William P. Worley,
Conference Minister
May 31, 2024