

Report to Pennsylvania Southeast Conference Annual Meeting Spring 2025

Rev. Kevin J. McLemore, *Associate Conference Minister for Search & Call*

Overview

As I write this report to the PSEC, I am aware that it is my last spring report as the ACM for Search and Call in this conference, though I hope to continue serving our churches in the Keystone Conference. I am also well aware that our current staff will be the last of our historic conference, and it has made me mindful of those that came before me and us, who attempted to support our churches and our witness in the world. I am both saddened to be one of the last ACMs and yet proud to be counted among those who were called to serve our churches in this capacity. I often offer gratitude to the people of the Conference for calling me into this ministry in February 2022 at the end of my annual reports, but this time I offer it to you at the beginning: thank you.

My primary duties have been and will continue to be through 2025 a focus on Search and Call for our churches and supporting our five Association Committees on Ministry. This year, both Brea Rarick and I saw a further slowdown in clergy profiles circulating to positions once considered attractive to many ministers – full-time, meeting conference compensation guidelines, often healthier congregations. From an average of perhaps 9-12 profiles going to these churches in 2022, depending on their location and congregational theological profile to now 5-6 profiles going to these churches, the clergy shortage continues to be a challenging issue. Not surprisingly to anyone, the further west the congregation gets, the fewer number of profiles a church is likely to receive, even for full-time positions. As my colleagues can attest to in the Penn Central Conference, they face an even greater challenge when it comes to search and call matters. There are candidates from outside the Commonwealth and the PSEC still interested in serving in our area, but most positions are usually filled by clergy already serving other congregations within the state. This is not new, of course, but it remains important to be able to find candidates for churches from throughout the country.

Both Brea and I continue to handle any type of interest in our churches with great care and are often reaching out to potential clergy outside the area to see if we can gently persuade them to consider serving one of our churches. Additionally, I am proud to say that we have an especially strong search and call program compared to other conferences. I often advise clergy to have their clergy profiles updated and “ready to go,” though I have not always followed that practice. This year, I updated my clergy profile (with no plans to actually apply for other positions on my part), and Brea and I decided to do an experiment with it: I circulated it 39 different conferences and associations (some of which act informally as a conference) to see how they would respond on receiving notification that my profile was available to be seen in their setting. Only 18 conferences of those 39 responded, with some responding within hours, as we often do in the PSEC, and others waiting a full month to respond, with a general notification that they received it. Perhaps it was my profile in particular (and some of my colleagues did see it, and were wondering if I was contemplating leaving, which I was not), but we were both surprised that more conferences did not respond to this first blush of a pastor possibly seeking a new

ministry setting. With PSEC's initial contact email with a potentially searching pastor, we send an attached description of the conference, all the churches in search with a brief description, and video describing the PSEC. Additionally, Brea and I will do reviews of profiles to see if there are pastors who might be a good fit for a particular congregation and we reach out to them for a discussion and/or an invitation to circulate their profile to a particular church. Brea and I presented our findings from this experiment at a recent denominational gathering, and heard from other colleagues about their strategies around search and call. I am proud of how we do this work in our conference, though I can take little credit for it, beyond simply shepherding a robust program that was already in place when I arrived, thanks to the Rev. Sharon Morris, the Rev. Susan Minasian, and the incredible Brea Rarick. As we move into the new Keystone Conference, there will be changes to how the new Conference will do search and call, but I am certain the emphasis we place on this aspect of conference work will not change – we understand that the primary contact that most churches have with the Conference is through times of transition between pastors. Some of the work will be shared with volunteers, which is probably the way it should be, but there will be leadership from the conference around this important aspect of Conference work, including training and constant consultation.

One final note on search and call: as I've said before, there is less choice for churches in the search and call process, but God seems to guide congregations to the right choices for them in that moment and time. There is a process and best practices to share with congregations, but it is ultimately a divine search unlike anything in the secular world. Congregations are looking for clergy who can do the "tasks" of ministry, but in the end, they are looking for a caretaker, a shepherd, of souls, that part of us which is eternal. God is amid these searches for new pastors, and though we can sometimes mishear God, most of the time churches hear what God is saying to them in a search. I hope we never forget that there is work for churches to do in this process, but God has work to do with congregations and pastors finding each other as well.

Designated-Term and Interim Ministers

A small report back to you about the use of designated-term pastors rather than interim minister in some cases: we continue to use this designation to get some churches into search more quickly, for various reasons. At the end of this three-year experiment, I can generally affirm that it worked well, and this year we had a situation that demonstrated the strength of this model. One church had a pastor leave before the designated-term for another position, and thankfully the church followed our guidance to complete the Long Church profile process during the tenure of the designated term pastor. Completing this Long Church Profile was not only to get a sense of where the church is and its vision for its future, but also because of situations like this, where the designated-term pastor does not become the settled minister and they must re-enter the search and call process again. Thankfully, their Long Church profile was almost completed, and they were ready to go into search within weeks of this pastor.

We are seeing an uptick on pastors seeking bridge pastors (short-term tenures) and interim ministers but finding the latter can be very difficult at this point. Nonetheless, there is a need for interim ministers, especially in churches with conflict, or dealing with the ending of a long-term pastorate. My prayer is that more of them will be available soon.

Committees on Ministry

Brea and I continue to work with our five COMs, with me attending all six meetings (Covenant currently has two separate meetings based on duties). Brea is invaluable in terms of keeping both me and the COMs fully informed in the tasks needed to be done to support our clergy and churches. As we move into the Keystone Conference, my hope is that Association COMs will consider merging with one another to share the load (not necessarily Associations merging), but also to foster a sense of unity that is the root of this new Conference. “The future is shared,” and that goes for all aspects of ministry.

Keystone Conference

My hope is that I will continue to serve our churches in whatever way the leadership believes is best for our new Conference. I’m excited by this chance to try some new things, let go of what is not working, and re-imagining the ways that different settings the UCC can work with each other. I am working on various aspects around policies related to search and call and COM work with my colleagues across our four conferences.

Personal Note

I’ve been blessed to preach at 25 churches from April 2024 to April 2025, not counting other Sundays where I was present at Association meetings, installations and other church related events. I am grateful for the warm welcome I’ve experienced in each of those places. Thank you.

I am also blessed to work with such a great set of colleagues – Bill, Cean, Brea, Sue, Tammie, and Kim – over the past three years. My hope is that we will continue to work with each other in some sort of fashion in 2026, but all I know now is that I am grateful to them for their patience and kindness towards me. Indeed, God is good, all the time...

Much peace,

The Rev. Kevin J. McLemore