

## Report of the Conference Minister

*“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”*  
– Lamentations 3:21-23 NRSV

As I move into year four of service as the Conference Minister here in Penn West Conference, there are many things for which I am thankful. One is that I have the opportunity to serve in this way. Each day that I get to do this work is a blessing to me, and I still at times have to pinch myself that I am doing what I do where I am doing it. I am also thankful for the opportunity that I have been given to learn. Learning at times isn't easy, and over this past year, I have been humbled and reminded of how vast this job is. While on the one hand I don't want to say that it is overwhelming, frankly there are times when I must honestly say that it is. In one sense, I think it is good for me to acknowledge this truth so that I might more quickly turn to God in times when my own strength and capacities are not enough. In another sense, this realization is an invitation – a call, perhaps – for me to find some new ways of doing things and of getting help so that our churches and this office will be served in the best possible ways. I do hope to make changes in the days ahead based on things that I've learned, and I hope that these changes will be borne out of my love for this Conference and for the work that I do here.

As far as the past year is concerned, there are many things that I could highlight. Here are a few things that I think are worth lifting up and noting:

- **Visiting:** I have made Sunday morning visits at least once to all 105 of the churches that were listed in the directory when I began serving in August, 2014.
- **Church and Ministry:** I continue to enjoy my work with Search & Call Committees, Committees on Ministry, Ministeriums, and Associations. I value the deepening of relationships that this kind of work brings. One particular important development from this past year is the beginning of the implementation of our Pastoral Ethics Requirements curriculum. I truly believe that this work will take on increased importance to us as time goes by.
- **Global Missions:** We are excited to begin partnering with Zion's Reformed UCC in Greenville and with Global Ministries to take a mission trip to the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. We are planning for this trip to be held in the spring of 2019, and we are working with Bishop Elorde Sambat on the initial preparations. We are excited to promote this opportunity, along with our ongoing SHEEP (Sustaining Hope for Educational Expenses in the Philippines) Fund. Please look for more details about this trip and ways that you can support it soon!
- **Youth Ministry:** I have been working with Valarie Poole and others on our Regional Youth Event team to help plan for the mission experience of working with the LeMoyné Community Center in Washington PA as our Eastern Regional Youth Event comes to California PA July 19-22. This is a huge opportunity for our Conference, and I am grateful to everyone who has been working so hard to ensure that this event is an inspiring and meaningful time for the youth who attend! Also, while our Partners in Faith Formation group has disbanded and the work of our bookstore remains uncertain, we have established a new team for our Associate for Youth Ministry which will hopefully lead us in new directions in reaching out to our youth.
- **Annual Gathering & Meeting:** Last year's meeting was deeply meaningful, especially as we welcomed the Rev. Tom Johnson as our keynote speaker and celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> ordination

anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Paul Westcoat. This year, we are very much looking forward to “Putting on Our Love Shoes” at California University of Pennsylvania. We are excited to welcome our keynote speaker, the Rev. De Niece Welch from Bidwell Street Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. We are also looking forward to welcoming the Rev. Thad Allen from the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, the Rev. Csaba Krasnai from the Calvin Synod of the United Church of Christ, and the Lemington Gospel Chorale from Pittsburgh. I’m deeply grateful for the planning team for putting together such an amazing event!

- **General Synod 31:** Our delegation represented Penn West Conference well at General Synod 31 in Baltimore from June 30 through July 4. Many resolutions were passed, along with changes to the United Church of Christ Constitution & By-Laws (with Constitutional changes to be ratified by us at this year’s Annual Meeting). General Synod 32 will be held in 2019 in Milwaukee WI, and we are looking forward to it!
- **Justice and Witness:** Our Justice and Witness Team created an inspiring Lenten devotional this year and continues to work on justice and witness initiatives in our Conference.
- **Finances:** I have really enjoyed working with our Financial Stewards, the Mission Grants Committee, and the Endowment Committee as we have made significant strides in fostering the financial health and well-being of our Conference. We hope that our investments, in concert with our Mission Grants program, will continue to strengthen the work of our local churches for years to come. Last year, our Mission Grants Committee gave away over \$29,000 worth of grants to churches, and every church that applied received some money. Also, if you haven’t had a chance to read our brochures, “*Why Give to “Our Church’s Wider Mission?”*” or “*What a Difference ‘Our Church’s Wider Mission’ Makes!*” please do so!
- **Ecumenical Ministries:** I enjoy serving on the Executive Councils of both Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. Ecumenical work is a passion that I have!
- **Council of Conference Ministers:** I continue to serve as the Secretary of the Council of Conference Ministers, and as a result of that, I serve on the Cabinet of Conference Ministers, as well.
- **Transformation and Renewal:** Our Transformation and Renewal Team continues to do great work. We have consulted with consultants, begun helping churches to establish websites, and met with churches who are interested in gaining some new ideas/perspectives from us. I rejoice that this team has been playing such an important role with our churches, and I hope that we can continue to reach out to our congregations in new ways!

I’m sure that there are other highlights that I’ve missed, but this provides a pretty good start to the list of things that have been happening. As always, we are deeply grateful for your prayers, your support, and your gifts to OCWM, which make all of these ministries that we are doing in Christ’s name possible. May God continue to bless you and your congregation as we live together into God’s amazing future!

Respectfully submitted,

David Ackerman