

## Report of the Conference Minister

*“And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” 1 Thessalonians 5:14-22 NRSV*

Soon I'll be beginning my fifth year of service as Conference Minister here in Penn West. The time is going by quickly, probably in large part because my days are so full! I confess to you that last year, for a number of reasons, was a difficult one for me. But this year so far has been better and I hope that things continue to move forward in a positive direction. When I look at my life, I realize that I have so much to be thankful for and so many things over which to rejoice. 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. My love for this Conference runs very deep, and I hope that is reflected in the way that I minister here.

There are a number of things that I could highlight from this past year; here are a few things that I think are worth lifting up and noting:

- **Visiting:** While last year I completed at least one visit to all 105 of the churches that were listed in the directory when I began my service with the Conference, I continue to visit our local churches on a regular basis. If at any point you would like me to pay another visit for whatever reason, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.
- **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. A few highlights that I'd like to mention include the implementation of our Pastoral Ethics Requirements curriculum, the establishment of a Conference-wide Search & Call team, and the movement in our Associations toward a Unified Fitness Review process. I also think it's important to mention the new Manual on Ministry along with the challenge it has offered to our licensed ministers to consider ordination. We have discernment groups in our Conference that are currently working toward this end. The work of Committees on Ministry, I believe, will continue to take on increased importance in the future.
- **Global Missions:** We are excited to be working on 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 2020 (roughly April 26 – May 9). Our team is working hard at making preparations for this trip. If you are interested in possibly attending, please see one of our Global Mission Team members before the end of our Annual Gathering & Meeting. We also rejoice to continue to promote our SHEEP (Sustaining Hope for Educational Expenses in the Philippines) Fund, as well as other local mission efforts of our churches. Please keep our Global Mission partners in your prayers.
- **Youth Ministry:** The Eastern Regional Youth Event that we hosted at California University of Pennsylvania from July 19-22 was a highlight of this past year. So many people reflected so positively on our Conference, including our youth, all our many volunteers, and our Associate for Youth Ministry Valarie Poole. We were saddened toward the end of 2018 to say farewell to Valarie as she embraced some new opportunities in her life. We are currently seeking a new Associate for Youth Ministry. If you or someone you know has an interest in this position, please see the article on the homepage of our website and be encouraged to apply. Our Associate for Youth Ministry team works to provide support and accountability to our Associate for Youth Ministry, and in this transitional time is working to secure youth leadership at this meeting. Please also keep your eyes open for information on the next National Youth Event, scheduled for July 22-25 at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

- ***Annual Gathering & Meeting:*** Last year's meeting was deeply meaningful, especially as we welcomed the Rev. De Niece Welch as our keynote speaker and welcomed the Lemington Gospel Chorale. This year, we are very much looking forward to working toward "A Just World for All" in our time together at California University of Pennsylvania. We are excited to welcome our keynote speaker, the Rev. Traci Blackmon, our United Church of Christ Associate General Minister for Justice & Local Church Ministries. I'm deeply grateful for the planning team for putting together such an amazing event!
- ***General Synod 32:*** Our delegation is working hard to represent Penn West Conference well at General Synod 32 in Milwaukee WI from June 21-25. We have been preparing ourselves for what to expect and have looked at resolutions that may be presented. At this year's Annual Gathering & Meeting, there will be opportunities to meet and speak with our delegates. Please keep all the delegates in your prayers.
- ***Association Presidents:*** Our Association Presidents recently worked together to plan our All Association Spring Meeting at First United Church of Christ in Ebensburg. The Rev. Kim Kendrick was our keynote speaker, and she reminded us to be salt & light in the world. The service was truly an inspiring team, and we are deeply grateful to all who helped to make it so.
- ***Justice and Witness:*** Our Justice and Witness Team continues to work on a variety of important issues, from racial justice to Christ's Extravagant Love And Hospitality to economic justice and creation care. I am grateful for the good work of this team.
- ***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 have also established a campaign team called "Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy" that we hope will benefit both the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance as well as our Mission Grants program. While more will be shared on this at a later time, I think it's really important to note that our Mission Grants program last year gave away over \$46,000 worth of grants to our local churches! This is both unprecedented here and is extremely exciting! And for the second year in a row, every church that applied received some funding. And, of course, we continue to thank our churches for their generosity toward Our Church's Wider Mission, and 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 really enjoy serving with both Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. Ecumenical work is a passion of mine!
- ***Council of Conference Ministers:*** I continue to serve as the Secretary of the Council of Conference Ministers, and the Cabinet of Conference Ministers, as well.
- ***Transformation and Renewal:*** Our Transformation and Renewal Team continues to do great work, and we continue to help our churches discover ways in which they may encounter renewal and new life.
- ***Legacy Team:*** Our Legacy Team continues to work with churches that are considering closure and/or are in the process of closure. This is very important work, and we are blessed to have a team of dedicated people who want to do this critical ministry well.

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