

## Report of the Conference Minister

*“I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Genesis 9:11 NRSV*

I typically begin my reports with a word of gratitude, and I will do so here, as well. 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.

Having shared this, I want to share a number of highlights from 2019-2020.

- **Visiting:** I continued to visit our churches on Sunday mornings until the pandemic struck in mid-March.
- **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 work of our Search & Call team, and the establishment of a Unified Fitness Review Committee among our Associations. I also think it's important to mention the good work that our Penn West Academy's "Discerning God's Call" has done in helping Licensed Ministers discern God's call to ordination, as per the invitation of the Manual on Ministry. The work of Committees on Ministry, I believe, will continue to take on increased importance in the future.
- **Global Missions:** Our team worked very hard on organizing an Ambassadors' Trip to our mission partners in the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. Ryan Lucas and Keith Grimm were set to travel to the Philippines when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. We are hoping to reschedule the trip for 2021. Meanwhile, it came to our team's attention that the needs of our partners during this time were dire. Because our team had raised more than it looks like will be needed for Ryan & Keith's trip next year, we agreed to send \$5,000.00 to our partners for disaster relief amid the COVID-19 crisis. We also continue to promote our SHEEP (Sustaining Hope for Educational Expenses in the Philippines) Fund, as well as other local mission efforts of our churches. We also are hoping to welcome Judy Chan, our partner missionary in Hong Kong, who we hope will be able to visit us in the fall. Please keep the important work of this team in your prayers.
- **Youth Ministry:** We rejoiced to hire Melissa McLean, a member of Emanuel, Warren, and a Member in Discernment in the Clarion Association as our new Associate for Youth Ministry. Melissa had been working hard at plans for youth at our Annual Gathering & Meeting and our National Youth Event before these in-person events were cancelled/postponed, respectfully. We are grateful for the ways in which she has been reaching out to youth in the time since the pandemic began, and we look forward to the ways in which she will minister, in cooperation with our Associate for Youth Ministry Team, in the future.
- **Annual Gathering & Meeting:** Last year's meeting was deeply meaningful, especially as we welcomed the Rev. Traci Blackmon among us. This year, the team's plans were cut short by the COVID-19 crisis, and it looks like our meeting will be a more abbreviated, online gathering. We are hoping that much of the groundwork that we laid for this year's meeting will be able to be implemented for our 2021 event.
- **General Synod:** Our delegation represented our Conference well at General Synod 32 in Milwaukee WI from June 21-25, 2020. General Synod 33 is scheduled to be in Kansas City MO from July 16-20, 2021.
- **Association Presidents:** Our Association Presidents continue to work together collegially and hope to plan an All Association Gathering again in 2022.

- ***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. Recently, we have been discussing reparations for slavery. I am grateful for the good work of this team.
- ***Finances:*** I have really enjoyed working with our Financial Stewards, the Mission Grants Committee, Endowment Committee, and Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy Team as we have made significant strides in fostering the financial health and well-being of our Conference. The Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy Team has laid the groundwork to begin its work, which will benefit both the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance as well as our Mission Grants program. Our Mission Grants program last year gave away over \$40,000 worth of grants to our local churches. This is extremely exciting! 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, the Southcentral PA Judicatory Leaders, and the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. Ecumenical work is a passion of mine.
- ***Council of Conference Ministers:*** While my term as Secretary of the Council came to an end at the end of 2019, I continue to rejoice to serve among this supportive group of colleagues.
- ***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. We are hoping to work with Jill White from Church Building & Loan on promoting repurposing workshops that utilize Mission Insite, among other things.
- ***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 you can see from this report, and as you know even from things beyond the scope of this report, it's difficult to overstate the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our ministry in this first half of 2020. We have done our best to respond faithfully and well to events, but it has been challenging for us, as it has been for our churches. We have tried to move into a new era technologically, and it has not been without its significant learning curves. We have tried to encourage our churches to continue to support their ministries, both in terms of finances and in terms of offering innovative, supportive leadership. Our "Talk, Listen, and Pray" sessions that we have been hosting during this time have been opportunities for us to connect across the miles, noting that the experience of this pandemic, and responses to it, vary significantly from person to person. Still, we are all in this together, and my prayer is that we might look to God in this time of crisis, and that God will deliver and save us from the evils of this pandemic.

As always, we are deeply grateful for your prayers, your support, and your gifts to OCWM, which make all of the 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