

**Penn West Conference
United Church of Christ**

**58th Annual Meeting and Gathering
“Imagining the Future”
June 13, 2020
via Zoom**

Welcome & Opening Devotion

Rev. David Ackerman welcomed everyone to the meeting: the 58th annual meeting of the Penn West Conference and the first one ever held via Zoom technology. Rev. Ackerman and Rev. Deirdre Hainsworth provided technical advice about using the platform.

Members of the Westmoreland Association prepared the opening devotion. Pastor Avis Specht led a call to worship.

Rev. Dave Mears of the Pittsburgh Association offered a reflection: “What I’ve Learned.” While there is no silver lining in an exile, there are things we can learn. In this exile due to COVID-19, we have learned new ways to do and be the church. We have learned about environmental impact and societal inequities. We have learned that the resiliency of God’s people is greater than we ever imagined.

Rev. Meredith Hutchison and Rev. Shirley Musick led a prayer of confession and assurance of pardon. Rev. Hutchison read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Pastor Specht led the UCC statement of faith in the form of a doxology.

A Time of Celebration

Saints Who Have Gone Before Us

Rev. Ackerman invited a time of silence to remember those who have died since the last annual meeting. Authorized clergy who have died since the past annual meeting include John Kautz, Jack Schake, Paul Marsteller, Maria Hartman Snyder, Robert Penner, Gordon Hills, and Robert McKie.

The Penn West Academy

The Rev. Joseph Hedden shared that the Academy has been meeting remotely. There are no graduates this year; its five current students will continue their studies, and new students are strongly encouraged to apply. The Academy is open to all.

Five for Five Churches

The Rev. June Boutwell explained that a “Five for Five” church contributes to Our Church’s Wider Mission and the four special mission offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, Neighbors in Need, Strengthen the Church, and the Christmas Fund. The full list of “Five for Five” churches is available in the meeting materials.

New Ministers to the Conference

Rev. Ackerman recognized ministers new to the conference, who include:

Rev. Don Watkins	Ordained, First Reformed, Greensburg Installed, Denmark Manor, Export
Rev. Robert Kruel	Ordained, St. John's Harrold, Greensburg Installed, St. John's Union, Mt. Pleasant
Rev. John Cofield	Installed, Christ, Latrobe and St. John's, Darlington
Rev. Ryan Lucas	Ordained, Emmanuel Reformed, Export
Rev. Bobbie Hineline	Interim, St. Paul's, Trauger
Ms. Julia DiFiore	Lay Ministerial Standing, Student Pastor, St. Paul's, Erie

Anniversaries of Authorization

Rev. Boutwell recognized clergy celebrating anniversaries of ordination and authorized ministers celebrating anniversaries of licensure.

Our Mission Grants Program

This year, the Conference awarded over \$40,000 in grants to 26 churches.

For 2020-2021 the conference will again offer grants to the churches in our conference. They will be in the following categories: Reaching Out grants are available for projects to strengthen a church's outreach and visibility. Strengthen the Church grants support church growth and development. Operational Support awards help local churches in purchasing, updating, maintaining, replacing or repairing facility and equipment, or any worthwhile ministry project or program that helps the congregation provide continuity of mission to its community. All churches are encouraged to apply for grants by October 1, 2020.

Our SHEEP Fund

This fund supports our Mission Partner, the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ of the Philippines; specifically, it supports school supplies for children and support for seminarians. The Philippines has been affected by natural disasters, COVID-19, and political unrest. The SHEEP Fund is a featured mission offering of this annual meeting; donations can be made on the conference website.

Our Featured Mission Partners: Hoffman Homes for Youth & PA Council of Churches

Rev. June Boutwell introduced video greetings from these mission partners.

Hoffman Homes for Youth is the other featured mission offering of this annual meeting; donations can be made on the conference website.

Rev. Sandy Strauss brought greetings from the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. The PA Council is inviting applications for its next Executive Director. Interim Director Rev. Dai Morgan is working to sustain and stabilize the organization. In March, the Council issued a pastoral statement on the pandemic, recognizing the need to move forward in faith and to stay home. Last week, the Council issued a pastoral call to dismantle racism and end violence. The statement denounces violence and recognizes white privilege and structural racism.

Keynote Presentation

Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson, Associate General Minister for Wider Church Ministries & Operations of the United Church of Christ and Co-Executive for Global Ministries, offered a keynote address.

She began with an original poem, "Broken Sidewalks." The future we have found is far different from what we imagined when she was originally invited to be with us. We are living through historic moments that are changing the world. To name two:

We are in the midst of a global pandemic. Hundreds of thousands have died, cities have closed down, a global economic downturn affects every facet of our societies. What future can we imagine beyond this moment? We are responding with creativity.

Meanwhile, we watched while a black man died in the streets, not for the first time. We are watching protests around the country and around the world standing against this injustice and demanding change. They imagine a future that will be different from that which we are currently seeing.

We can hold on to the possibility of a future with hope, as Jeremiah said, as Martin Luther King dreamed. We are invited to be part of a plan that is greater than we are. We are being invited into a future of wholeness, abundance, equality, and justice: a future where the church will be present to bless the waters of justice rolling down like an everlasting stream as we declare and decree a just world for all.

Business Meeting

Call to Order

Moderator Tom Croner offered thanks for the technology that allows us to gather and called the meeting to order.

Introduction of Visitors

Rev. Ackerman offered thanks to all visitors to the meeting, especially Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson.

Credentials Report

Diane Fox reported that there are 60 authorized ministers, 23 delegates, and 5 visitors in attendance at today's meeting.

Adoption of Agenda

MSP: That the agenda be adopted.

Appointment of Parliamentarian

MSP: That George Kepple be appointed as parliamentarian.

Approval of Minutes from the 57th Annual Meeting and Gathering

MSP: That the minutes be approved.

Acceptance of 2019-2020 Board Decisions

MSP: That the board decisions be approved.

Global Missions Team Presentation

Jodie Enterline reported that the planned trip to the Philippines has been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We sent a monetary donation of \$5000 the Northwest Luzon Conference to help them during this time of need. The rest of the funds raised for the trip will be reserved to send a mission team to the Philippines in 2021.

The team also works with the churches of the Conference to assist where possible with their global missions efforts.

Missionary Judy Chan will be in the United States this fall; we have invited her to the Conference to learn more about the church in Hong Kong.

Financial Stewards Presentation

Mr. Croner thanked the members of Financial Stewards for their efforts. This year in the midst of the pandemic their foresight and courage in making changes in the midst of uncertainty is especially important.

Rev. Ackerman reported that a team from the Conference has been working to prepare a \$500,000 campaign to support the Mission Grants program and the Pension Board's Generations of Service campaign. Plans for the campaign have shifted as the economic consequences of the pandemic have become clear. If you are able, please consider a gift to the campaign, as the goals of the campaign are more important than ever.

Introduction of 2021 Budget

Treasurer Nancy Harclerode reported that the Financial Stewards prepared the budget carefully, considering the Conference's obligations and mission priorities. While OCWM contributions have increased, they may not be sufficient to cover budgeted expenses. \$26,000 were cut from the budget: staff salaries will remain level, General Synod delegate stipends will be reduced, and the contribution to the wider church will be reduced to 10%. Strengthen the Church funds will be used to pay for the youth associate position. Ms. Harclerode hopes that giving will continue to be strong.

Vote on Budget

MSP: That the budget be approved as presented.

Presentation of Nominations Ballot

Mr. Croner called on Rev. Ackerman to present the slate of nominees. Secretary Rev. Liddy Barlow and Treasurer Ms. Harclerode are nominated to fulfill a second term in those offices. Nominated as delegates to General Synod in the class of 2023 are Rev. Judith Tobias, Westmoreland Association and Ms. Tara Thompson, Lake Erie Association. Two delegates, representing the Clarion and Somerset Associates, are yet to be appointed; the Board will do so, paying attention to the UCC's affirmative action recommendations.

Election of Officers/General Synod Delegates

MSP: That the slate be elected as presented.

Pandemic Reflections

Rev. Ackerman reflected on the pandemic. The “Talk, Listen, and Pray” sessions have been a great blessing: a way to connect and share thoughts, feelings, and ideas. An idea of a pastor’s retreat focused on trauma emerged from these sessions.

He is grateful for the ways that congregations have responded to the Conference’s advice, recognizing that it is advice and not directives. He is grateful for all the ways people have reached out and connected.

The virus of racism has brought the struggle for racial justice to fever pitch. He is proud of the Justice & Witness Team’s work on reparations, but he believes we have a long way to go before we are truly an anti-racist conference.

Closing Worship with Holy Communion and Installation of new PWC Officers

The worship service was prepared by the Juniata Association. Rev. Mary Hendricks offered a call to worship. Pastor Wendy Farber led a prayer of confession. Rev. Ackerman led the installation service for new board officers, then read Jeremiah 29:10-11.

We live in a perilous world, Rev. Ackerman said in his message. This famous passage of scripture does not promise that nothing bad will happen to us. Instead, God promises there will be a new normal, but we will have to wait to see it. Christians live in the midst of two realities: unrelenting pain and a joy that nothing can alter. Faith does not evade that pain, and never relents from proclaiming that joy. Let’s not just imagine but live into God’s world of justice and peace.

Rev. Ackerman invited offerings for the SHEEP Fund and Hoffman Homes and led a prayer to dedicate them. Members of the Juniata Association offered an original song, “Hope and a Future,” with lyrics by Pastor Jill Clawson and music by Pastor Betty Royer, sung by Rev. Gerald McCuller with trumpet by Dennis Clawson.

Rev. Hendricks and Pastor Farber led the liturgy of Holy Communion. Meeting participants shared bread and cup from their homes.

Adjournment

Mr. Croner thanked everyone for attending the meeting and encouraged them to complete the evaluation form. He declared the meeting to be adjourned. Participants unmuted themselves to offer greetings and farewells.