

Report of the Conference Minister

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Ecclesiastes 3:1 NRSV

It’s difficult to overstate what a trying and unusual season in our world and in the church this has been. In so many ways, we have been trying to come to grips with all that transpired here in March of 2020, and the adjustment has not been easy. To the amazing credit of our churches, adjustments have been made, and even though the process of change hasn’t been easy and more change will be on the way, God has been with us through these challenges and will continue to be with us through what is yet to come.

I have noted in each of my reports, and I continue to emphasize in this one, how grateful I am for the opportunity to serve as your Conference Minister. When I look at my life, I realize that I have so much to be thankful for and so many reasons for rejoicing. 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 2020-2021.

- **Visiting:** The pandemic has thrown a huge curve-ball into how I’ve been visiting churches. There have been some that I’ve been connected with more than ever because of online services. There are others that I’ve visited in person. There have been others that I haven’t been as connected with because of the challenges of COVID-19. I look forward to seeing how the year unfolds and how my visitation in the Conference progresses.
- **Church and Ministry:** I continue to enjoy my work with Search & Call Committees, Committees on Ministry, Ministeriums, and Associations. This year, the work has been challenging, in large measure because of the pandemic. Our Pastoral Ethics programs have gone virtual and have been helpful, along with our 2020 Pastor’s Events on Trauma. Our Search & Call team continues to work, as does the ministry of our Penn West Academy. Please pray for the work of our Committees on Ministry, which continue to be of great importance during this time.
- **Global Missions:** It looks like our Ambassadors’ Trip to our mission partners in the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines will again be on hold because of the pandemic. We 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 were also blessed to welcome the Rev. Judy Chan, our partner missionary in Hong Kong, who joined us by Zoom in the fall of 2020. Please keep the important work of this team in your prayers.
- **Youth Ministry:** Despite the challenges of the pandemic, our Associate for Youth Ministry, Melissa McLean, continues to work virtually, in concert with our Associate for Youth Ministry Team, to develop connections among youth and youth leaders in our Conference. Please keep her in your prayers.
- **Annual Gathering & Meeting:** Last year’s meeting was our first virtual Conference Annual Meeting. Given the short notice that we had to plan it, the feedback we received from it was very positive. We were blessed to welcome the Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson as our keynote speaker. We were grateful to Westmoreland Association for providing opening devotions and Juniata Association for leading our closing worship. We were glad to support our featured Mission Partners in the Pennsylvania Council of Churches and Hoffman Homes for Youth. We had a workshop day that also received positive feedback. We were thankful for the technical assistance of the Rev. Dr., Deirdre Hainsworth, who helped us navigate the technical challenges of the meeting. And we really appreciated the leadership of our Board officers and Planning Team, as we had to adjust so profoundly and so quickly. Our 2021 Annual Meeting will also be held virtually. Please keep this time in your prayers.

- **General Synod:** Our Thirty-third General Synod will be taking place virtually this year, with Pre-Synod events being held from July 7-10 and with General Synod 33 taking place from July 11-18. Please keep our delegation and everyone participating in General Synod this year in your prayers.
- **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. 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 slowly begun 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 \$38,000 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. I recently served on the Search Committee for the new Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. Ecumenical work is a passion of mine.
- **Council of Conference Ministers:** 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 continue 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. You know that we have tried to move into a new era technologically, and it has not been without its 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 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