

**Penn West Conference  
United Church of Christ**

**61<sup>st</sup> Annual Gathering and Meeting  
“Be Transformed, Part 2”**

**June 9-10, 2023**

**Penn West University-California, and via Zoom**

**Welcome & Opening Worship**

Rev. Ackerman welcomed everyone to the 61<sup>st</sup> annual meeting of the Penn West Conference at the Penn West University (CalU).

Douglas Hearn and Rev. Lisa Griffin led a service of opening worship with music by Rob Stemple and Kathy Fair. Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates offered a sermon based on Romans 12:1-21 to go along with the theme of “being transformed.” She used the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly as a metaphor for how we can be transformed. As people we need to grow, change, and transform as God takes the barriers out of the way for us. She used the discussions in the Keystone study group as an example of how we might be transformed as a conference. An offering was collected for St. Paul’s, Greenville. Jennie Kather spoke about how the senior living community is literally “bridging the gap” between the 2 campuses.

**BUSINESS SESSION ONE:**

**Call to Order**

Moderator George Kepple welcomed attendees and called the meeting to order.

**Introduction of Visitors and Thanking of Sponsors**

Rev. Ackerman welcomed our keynote presenter, Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates, who is the Conference Minister from Pennsylvania’s Northeast Conference. Also introduced were Jennie Kather from St. Paul’s Senior Living Community, Rev. Dr. Diane Bogues from Lancaster Theological Seminary, Don Hamm, an Insurance Board agent, and the office staff of Diane and Andrea.

The annual meeting is sponsored by the Cornerstone Fund, the Church Building & Loan Fund, the Pension Boards, United Church Funds, and the Insurance Board. Rev. Ackerman expressed gratitude for their support and also thanked Cheryl and Joe Ward who will deliver the collected socks to Hoffman Homes.

**Adoption of Agenda**

**MSP: That the agenda be adopted.**

**Appointment of Parliamentarian**

**MSP: That Rev. Stephen Fair be appointed as parliamentarian.**

**Appointment of Tellers**

Assistant Moderator, Rev. David Mears, announced that Jay Shaffer, John Titus, Patti Mears, and Doug Hearn have agreed to serve as tellers.

## **Prayer Chapel**

The prayer chapel has been organized by Rev. John Titus and will be open throughout the Annual Gathering & Meeting.

## **Approval of Minutes from the 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting and Gathering**

**MSP: That the minutes be approved.**

## **Acceptance of 2022-2023 Board Decisions**

**MSP: That the Board decisions be received.**

## **Acceptance of written reports from the Conference Minister, Moderator, and Treasurer**

**MSP: That the Conference Minister, Moderator, and Treasurer's Reports be received.**

## **Presentation of Nominations Ballot**

Rev. Ackerman reviewed the nominations. David Mears has been nominated as Moderator and Rev. Liddy Barlow as Assistant Moderator.

Additionally, the Class of 2025 General Synod Delegates are Kaitlyn Farber, Juniata Association; Rev. John Titus, Westmoreland Association; Tessa Lynn, Somerset Association; Ciera James, Pittsburgh Association; and Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doege, Pittsburgh Association. Associate delegates are Rev. Liddy Barlow and Rev. David Ackerman. UCC Board of Directors Member from PWC is Tom Croner.

## **Introduction of 2024 Budget**

Treasurer Tom Croner drew participants' attention to the proposed budget in the meeting packet. A listening session will take place this evening where any questions can be addressed; the vote will take place tomorrow.

## **Global Missions Team**

Rev. Ackerman noted that a full report from the team is available in the packet, but asked for continued prayers for our partners of the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. The Sheep Fund received \$3,296.00 in donations this past year. He also shared that a relief trip to Florida is in the works to help Hurricane Ian victims with repairs. We continue to support Ukranian refugees, and finally, he thanked all of our local churches' missions for efforts in their said communities.

## **Speak Out One**

Rev. John Miller of the Evangelical & Reformed Historical Society reminded us to give generously to the Christmas Fund which helps care for retired clergy and church workers. "Help care for those who cared for you."

Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz offered a speak-out on the upcoming Violins of Hope, lessons of the Holocaust to educate our community about the importance of "tuning out hate and building bridges that last." This will take place at CMU in October and November. Tickets are free, but must be gotten in advance.

Rev. Dr. Diane Bogues from Lancaster Theological Seminary spoke on educating faithful leaders in our churches. Continuing education credits can be earned and there is a 60 percent scholarship available to UCC members.

Rev. Frank Podolinski from St. Paul's Trauger invited everyone to the Westmoreland Association's Car & Motorcycle Cruise on July 22<sup>nd</sup> at the Community College. Profits will benefit Hoffman Homes for Youth.

### **Session One**

Following a break, the Conference reconvened for the first keynote presentation.

Rev. Ackerman introduced Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doerge as our newly hired Associate for Youth Ministry and then offered an opening prayer.

Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates outlined that she would divide our topic of transformation into three categories: transformation as an individual, transformation as a church or congregation, and transformation of community. Individually, transformation is hard as we like to be comfortable, however the gifts of the spirit can nudge us into change. She used Paul's Road to Damascus experience as an example. Paul was transformed by his vision, his faithfulness, and his missionary work. Next, we listened to a guided meditation on YouTube and shared scriptures that spoke to us. In small table groups, we discussed the following questions:

1. If we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, how do we do that?
2. What renewal practices do you have?
3. How do you encounter God as an agent of your transformation?

In conclusion, transformation can be painful and challenging, but what do we have to lose if we don't seek transformation?

### **Evening Prayer**

After a dinner break, Rev. Lisa Griffin and Rev. Julia DiFiore led a vespers service. The focus was on being transformed. Rev. DiFiore accompanied hymns on her guitar, and participants wrote specific prayer requests on post-its. These were collected and shared in a closing prayer.

### **Evening Celebration**

Rev. Ackerman introduced our evening celebration.

### **Penn West Academy**

Rev. Meredith Hutchison congratulated two graduates of the academy: Wendy Farber who is presently serving 3 churches and Andy Jones who is currently serving 2 churches. She expressed thanks to both for how they've touched our lives in the Penn West Conference.

### **Five for Five Celebration**

Rev. Barry Fillman recognized the "Five for Five" churches who contributed to Our Church's Wider Mission and the four special offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, Neighbors in Need, Strengthen the Church, and the Christmas Fund in 2022. Certificates were distributed and a full list is available in the meeting materials.

### **Introduction of Ministers New to the Conference and General Synod 34 PWC Delegates**

Rev. Ackerman had General Synod delegates stand to be recognized and then introduced the following ministers new to the conference:

- Rev. Frank Sapp, Jr., St. Paul's Community Church, Chicora
- Rev. Julia DiFiore, Bradford Woods Community Church, Bradford Woods
- Rev. Sharon Fox, St. Paul's UCC, Stoystown
- Mr. Paul Sarver, First Trinity UCC, Youngwood

Rev. Will Robbins, The Abbey Reformed UCC, Huntingdon  
Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doege, Community of Reconciliation Church, Pittsburgh

### **Authorization Anniversaries**

Rev. Fillman recognized authorized ministers celebrating milestone anniversaries of their ordinations, licensure, or commissioning, including George Steffey, who was celebrating his birthday with us and Barry Fillman himself at 55 years. The full list is in the meeting materials.

### **Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy**

Mr. Croner and Rev. Barlow reviewed this initiative which helps to provide grants to local churches for operational needs and community outreach along with providing care for the clergy of Penn West Conference through programs of financial assistance and leadership development. It was started in 2020 with a goal of \$500,000. So far it has raised \$181,966. The Mission Grants program is now a beneficiary of this fund.

### **Mission Grants Celebration**

Rev. Ackerman celebrated that the Conference awarded \$44,111 to 26 churches in 2022. Donors who made this possible are: the Strengthen the Church Fund, the Corman Fund, the Neighbors in Need Fund, the Kermit Thomas Bequest, and the Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy Fund.

A list of churches who received funds along with their proposed projects was shared.

The deadline for applying for 2023 mission grants is October 1<sup>st</sup>. Applications can be found at [pennwest.org](http://pennwest.org). Reports for last year's grants are due in September.

### **Listening Session on the 2024 Budget**

Mr. Croner drew participants' attention to the 2024 budget section of the meeting materials, which included both a narrative and the numbers. He shared that the Financial Stewards and the Investment & Endowment Committee have managed our resources in a responsible way. Highlighted in the budget is a 4% increase in the conference minister's salary, but a decrease in the amount needed for the support staff since these responsibilities are no longer completed by one person. In addition, the amount for the Associate for Youth Ministry was increased along with the conference minister's travel reimbursement.

An explanation was also given on the conversion of our financial systems from Quickbooks to Power Church which is more conducive to use for non-profit entities.

### **Ice Cream Social**

Participants enjoyed ice cream sundaes to close the evening while they engaged in a meet & greet with Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates, Rev. David Ackerman, and General Synod Delegates. Music was provided by Rob Stemple and Kathy Fair (including requests).

### **Celebration of Saints**

Rev. Dr. Meredith Hutchison led a morning prayer service in remembrance of those who have died in the past year. Participants, both those in the room and those on Zoom, shared the names of those whom we remember.

### **Session Two**

This session focused on the transformation of congregations. Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates emphasized that we all have missionary work to do as 45% of the population in our country doesn't attend church. She encouraged us to try something new-even if it makes people uncomfortable. She urged us to be

active in our communities and to look at diversity when we are trying to attract and involve new people. Open and affirming congregations are growing. In Rev. Dr. Bates' research, she shared what 18-35 year olds find transforming when asked:

1. A true relational authentic community
2. An opportunity to make a difference, even if only in the life of one person
3. A place where questions can be asked without judgment

In small table groups we discussed the following questions:

1. If we seek to transform the congregations to which we belong, how do we do that?
2. What are the important steps for our congregational transformation?
3. What renewal practices do we need to institute in our congregations to enable transformation?
4. How do we live out our mission as a congregation?
5. What is our ministry to the community?

## **BUSINESS SESSION TWO:**

### **Credentials Report**

Assistant Moderator Rev. David Mears announced that there are 48 pastors, 40 delegates, and 16 visitors present, for a total attendance of 104.

### **Financial Stewards Presentation**

Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz shared the narrative budget that includes the best projection on what will be needed in 2024. She reminded us of God's generosity and how we are given everything we need. She asked us to think of a personal experience when God has been generous to each of us and then wanted us to think about what our response was to this generosity. Finally, we were asked to be good stewards after the budget vote.

### **Vote on Budget**

Mr. Croner asked for a motion in favor of the budget as presented.

**MSP: That the budget be approved as presented.**

### **Election of Officers**

Mr. Kepple asked for any additional nominations for Moderator. There were none. He called for a vote that Rev. David Mears serve as Moderator.

**MSP: That Rev. David Mears serve as Moderator.**

Mr. Kepple asked for any additional nominations for Assistant Moderator. There were none. He called for a vote that Rev. Liddy Barlow serve as Assistant Moderator.

**MSP: That Rev. Liddy Barlow serve as Assistant Moderator.**

### **Unfinished Business**

Rev. Ackerman shared a video from our partners in The Philippines and then thanked the outgoing officers, especially Mr. George Kepple who served as Moderator.

## **Speak-Out Two**

Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz invited participants to an interfaith celebration of PEACE in Pittsburgh on October 1<sup>st</sup>.

Rev. Liddy Barlow spoke on behalf of Christian Associates who work to bring churches to be as one. She invited all to visit them at CASP.org and reminded us that our gifts make their work happen.

Deb Long encouraged participants to become Faithful Stewards and with a donation of \$100 a pin is received. She also invited all to attend the Westmoreland Association's Car Show on July 22nd, the purpose being to build community among our churches. Profits will go to Hoffman Homes.

Rev. Cheryl Ward, who is on the Board of Directors for Hoffman Homes, thanked all for the pile of silly socks and everyone's generosity.

Rev. Meredith Hutchison thanked George Kepple and Rev. Stephen Fair who are retiring from the Penn West Academy. She reminded participants that they can audit courses online. There is a special block on family systems that can be found on our website.

Rev. Jay Shaffer thanked the 21 churches that have supported Camp Living Waters this year. A major renovation to the lodge is taking place, and he invited all to attend the Pennsylvania Lumberjack Competition on Aug. 11-13.

Ron Pederson wished us all Happy Pride Month. He stressed that we can't let right wing Christian pastors have the louder voices when it comes to the LGBTQ community; we shouldn't be silent.

Rev. Dave Mears thanked outgoing moderator, George Kepple for his guidance and leadership.

Rob Stemple, who represents the National Ministries of Disabilities Board, urged us all to do one thing to make the world more accessible for those with disabilities.

## **Session Three**

Our last session dealt with the transformation of community. Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates explained how our churches were once the center of our communities and many lived within walking distances. Today people drive to church and our communities have shifted. We should be reaching out to our communities and utilizing our buildings for more than Sunday morning worship and meetings. Congregations should acknowledge what they can impact and realize what they can't. Partnering with other organizations is another good practice. We were asked to answer 2 questions individually:

1. How do we respond to injustice affecting our communities?
2. How do we respond to judgment and hate in our community?

This session ended with a discussion of the current Keystone conversations that are happening among the 4 conferences in the state. Should we combine as one conference or stay as we are? The thought is that we are stronger together and that each conference has gifts and expertise that can be shared. Tables were asked to generate lists of what we must hold onto (what we can't lose) if this union took place? These will be presented to the Penn West Conference's Board and the Keystone Study Group. Rev. Ackerman posed the question, "Are the conferences that were set up in 1962 serving our churches as well as they could be?" He also wanted us to think about long term sustainability. As a conference, we have the most to gain and the least to lose, but we don't want to lose the voices of our marginal churches. We will be meeting next year with other conferences, and Rev. Ackerman asked us to pray on this matter. Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates reassured the group that decisions wouldn't be made without our individual churches' input and thanked us for allowing her to be with us this weekend.

## **Closing Worship with Holy Communion and Installation of Officers**

A closing worship service was led by Rev. Douglas Hearn, Rev. Lisa Griffin, and Rev. Meredith Hutchison, with music by Rob Stemple and Kathy Fair.

Rev. Ackerman offered a sermon based on Romans 12: 12-21. He spoke of his trip to the Promised Land and placing his hands on the Western Wall. He was moved by the suffering that has taken place, but also was struck by something one of the tour guides shared. "Change comes as a result of pain and sometimes suffering." As we look to the future of our conference, we need to listen to each other's concerns, but also ask ourselves how can I be changed. Unity isn't uniformity, but together we all proclaim Jesus as our Savior. We should continue to search for better ways to be the church in this time and know that God will be with us in the days to come in whatever way our transformation comes to be.

Rev. Ackerman led the installation of newly-elected officers.

Rev. Ackerman and Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates presided at a service of Holy communion.

Rev. Ackerman offered final words of thanks to the AGM planning team, the CalU staff, our sponsors, Keynote speaker Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates, the Penn West staff, Marsha, outgoing Board members, worship leaders, musicians, technology folks, discussion leaders, golf cart drivers, and anyone else who helped to make the 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting & Gathering a success.

**Benediction and Adjournment of the 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting & Gathering  
of the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ**

Respectfully submitted,  
Wendy Bigelow, Secretary