

**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 59th annual meeting of the Penn West Conference. Dr. Deirdre Hainsworth provided technical advice about using the Zoom platform.

As an opening devotion, Rev. Joseph Beer of the Somerset Association offered a first-person sermon from the point of view of the prophet Jeremiah. God is with us, so there is a bright future ahead of us.

A Time of Celebration

Saints Who Have Gone Before Us

Rev. June Boutwell led a time of remembrance for those who have died since the last annual meeting. Authorized clergy who have died since our last annual meeting include Rev. Paul Claycomb, Rev. Carl Schwarm, Rev. Claudia Papenmeier, Rev. Herman Ridley, and Pastor Charles Dunn. Rev. Diane Wiley offered a prayer of thanksgiving for their lives and ministries.

The Penn West Academy

The Rev. Meredith Hutchison recognized the Penn West Academy faculty. This has been a challenging year with all classes via Zoom. They hope to return to in-person classes using a hybrid model with Zoom option this fall. She invited all who are curious about learning more about their faith to sign up for the academy, as a fully-enrolled student or as an auditor.

Five for Five Churches

The Rev. June Boutwell celebrated the “Five for Five” churches, who contributed 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 in 2020. Meeting the January contribution deadline is essential to being recognized as a “Five for Five” church. 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 or new to their positions, including Rev. TJ Lucas, Rev. John Miller, Rev. Robert Krueel, Rev. Ryan Lucas, and Rev. William Porter.

Anniversaries of Authorization

Rev. Ackerman recognized authorized ministers celebrating milestone anniversaries of their ordination, licensure, or commissioning, and encouraged the participants to offer a virtual round of applause for their ministries.

Our Mission Grants Program

Rev. Ackerman celebrated that the Conference awarded \$38,106 to 27 churches in 2020. He shared the list of churches who received funds. The funds for these mission grants come primarily from the Strengthen the Church Fund, the Corman Fund and Neighbors in Need Funds, and the Kermit Thomas Bequest.

The deadline for applying for 2021 mission grants is October 1. All churches should have received packets with mission grant materials. Reports for last year's grants are due September 17.

Caring for Churches, Charing for Churches

This campaign will support the Conference's mission grants program. A tithe of the campaign will also support the Generations of Service Campaign.

Despite the challenges of 2020, the campaign is off to a strong start: \$97,605 has been raised of the \$500,000 goal. Rev. Ackerman would be happy to talk with anyone interested in learning more. He shared a video greetings from Rev. Jonathan Lee, the Philanthropy Officer of the Pension Boards. Rev. Lee offered thanks to those who have already invested in the campaign and emphasized partnership between the Pension Boards and the Penn West Conference.

Our Featured Mission Partners: Christian Associates of Southwest PA and St. Paul's

Rev. June Boutwell introduced these mission partners.

Rev. Liddy Barlow brought greetings from Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania. She shared several recent and upcoming programs, including dialogues on political difference with Braver Angels, clergy-police councils in the City of Pittsburgh, and the Sofa Spirituality online interfaith dialogue project.

St. Paul's Senior Living Community shared greetings via video featuring Rev. Julia Frasier and others, describing its ministries and expressing gratitude for the Conference's support.

Camp Living Waters

Chelsea Neatrou explained that Camp Living Waters is offering two weeks of camp this year for students in grade K-12. There is still space to sign up, and a need for volunteers.

The camp is also adding a stone memory wall to the worship area. Blocks are available for purchase. The hope is to dedicate this on October 3.

Keynote Presentation

The Rev. Dr. John C. Dorhauer, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, offered a keynote address. He thanked Rev. Ackerman for his spirit-filled, widely-respected ministry.

This has been a challenging year. Leaders have shown creativity and endurance, continuing to lead congregations and help them remain whole. This has been especially

challenging for chaplains in the early part of the pandemic, when PPE was scarce and conditions were hard. He told the story of a young chaplain who contracted the virus, who in the midst of her suffering simply stated, “This is what I was called to do.” None of us know what lies ahead of us when we are called; we don’t see what’s ahead, but we show up anyway, because that’s what we are called to do: finding creative ways to meet the pastoral and practical needs of our communities.

At the end of a period of intense ministry, when communities experience collective trauma, clergy often experience pastoral burnout and fatigue, leaving their ministry setting or leaving ministry altogether. Now, as the pandemic abates, what will this mean, since we have experienced this trauma on a global scale? We must attend to the spiritual and emotional health of those who serve the church. We need to treat ourselves carefully going into this next season. We have not seen the end of this.

The intensity wasn’t just about the pandemic: we have also experienced political division and a racial justice reckoning after the murder of George Floyd. This has been a relentless 15 months: now is the time to pause, breathe, and remind ourselves that we would be wise to care for our spiritual, psychic, and physical health.

He shared a photograph from a rural church setting showing a pastor serving Holy Communion using a literal ten-foot-pole. This is an illustration of the adaptability and flexibility of the body of Christ: the church can adapt in real time to make sure the spiritual needs of those who are sustained by our sacraments.

The pandemic helped us move beyond our resistance to the Holy Spirit’s urging to do new things, moving beyond our narratives of decline and diminishment. The Spirit invites us in every generation to adapt to a changing world. This idea is written into our DNA as a church, from its earliest days to its “God is still speaking” campaign. As the pandemic began, our congregations adapted to online worship, and discovered the Holy Spirit could be present even in online spaces.

As this challenging comes to a close, we do face many challenges, but we should also celebrate that even a pandemic could not interrupt the spiritual life of the church, our evangelistic zeal, and our ability to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Already we can see the Holy Spirit bringing new life to the church because of the challenges we have overcome.

As we enter the next phase, here are the four questions that Rev. Mike Denton has invited the Pacific Northwest Conference to consider:

- 1.) What did we have to let go of because of the pandemic that, once it’s over, we can’t wait to return to?
- 2.) What did we have to let go of because of the pandemic that we’re glad we never have to do again?
- 3.) What did we adapt to and learn to do because of the pandemic that we can’t wait to stop doing once it’s over?
- 4.) What did we adapt to or learn during the pandemic that we know we will continue doing because it serves the mission and evangelical call of the church?

Most of the adaptations mentioned so far are related to the Covid-19 pandemic. But there is another pandemic too: the pandemic of racism. We have tried again and again to address this, but we have never fully committed. But now is the time to make permanent

change: the next generation will not accept anything less. The church must divest itself of white privilege and white power. The UCC's national setting will be conducting a racial audit to begin addressing racism within its own systems.

Business Meeting

Call to Order

Moderator Tom Croner called the meeting to order.

Introduction of Visitors

Rev. Ackerman welcomed all visitors and thanked Dr. Dorhauer for his uplifting message.

Credentials Report

Diane Fox reported that there are 51 authorized ministers, 23 delegates, and 7 visitors in attendance at today's meeting. There were several unidentified people in the Zoom meeting as well.

Adoption of Agenda

MSP: That the agenda be adopted.

Approval of Minutes from the 58th Annual Meeting and Gathering

MSP: That the minutes be approved.

Appointment of Parliamentarian

MSP: that George Kepple be appointed as parliamentarian.

Acceptance of 2019-2020 Board Decisions

MSP: That the board decisions be approved.

Global Missions Team Presentation

Rev. Ackerman offered this report. The Global Missions Team had originally planned a trip to visit the Northwest Luzon Conference of the UCCP, but this was not possible due to covid. However, the conference did welcome two missionaries who gave presentations via Zoom: Rev. Judy Chan and Rev. Andrew Larson.

Rev. Ackerman thanked our local churches for their own mission efforts.

Our partnership with the NW Luzon Conference continues to be strong. We support our partners through our prayers, our gifts to disaster relief, and our gifts to the SHEEP Fund. (SHEEP is an acronym for Sustaining Hope for Educational Expenses in the Philippines). On September 19, the Conference will celebrate SHEEP Sunday.

General Synod 33

General Synod, themed “Rooted in Love,” will be an all-virtual Synod. Rev. Ackerman introduced and thanked Penn West’s General Synod delegation. The Synod will include the presentation of proposed changes to the UCC Bylaws and a variety of resolutions, from banning conversion therapy to responding to racism as a public health crisis. All can sign up to attend Synod as a visitor. The Penn West Conference is among the Synod sponsors.

Melissa McLean, Associate for Youth Ministries, shared the opportunities available for youth at General Synod, including small group experiences and special content especially designed for youth and young adults. There is also a need for volunteers to help convene these groups. In other youth-related news, the conference will continue to foster community-building activities among youth, such as an upcoming scavenger hunt. She is happy to assist congregations seeking to work with youth.

Introduction of 2021 Budget

Mr. Croner introduced treasurer Nancy Harclerode and thanked her for leading the budget Q&A session on Friday evening.

Ms. Harclerode introduced the proposed budget for 2022. Income is similar to 2021 budget; thanks to all who make OCWM contributions. We are not able to offer salary increases to staff members, despite our desire to do so, because of budget constraints. Travel expenses will decrease due to the use of Zoom. The budget also eliminates a professional audit review; an internal audit will be performed instead: we have the skills within the conference to do this. Overall, the budget proposes a \$4600 deficit.

Rev. Ackerman noted that the personnel committee did give additional vacation time to Rev. Ackerman and Ms Fox in lieu of a salary increase. He is also planning a sabbatical.

Dr. David Williams said the budget also includes a decrease in funding for the national setting; we will need to start to look at how we can fairly support national at the same time.

Rev. Matt Deal commended the budget committee. He asked if the conference has considered new ways to encourage generosity given the instability of conference funding sources. Rev. Ackerman said the conference is establishing a Long-Range Planning Task Force.

Vote on Budget

MSP: That the budget be approved as presented.

Presentation of Nominations Ballot

Mr. Croner presented the slate of nominees, including Rev. June Boutwell as moderator and George Kepple as assistant moderator.

Election of Officers

MSP: That the slate be elected as presented.

Mr. Croner also introduced new members of the Penn West Conference Board of Directors who were elected by their associations.

Pandemic Reflections

Rev. Ackerman invited participants to share a time of silent prayer to remember all those who have died from COVID-19, both in the United States and across the world.

He shared a video message that he produced, urging people to be vaccinated and to follow the advice of the CDC, as well as state health officials, in ongoing efforts to keep people safe. He commended churches for the steps they have taken over the past year to mitigate the spread of the virus and to connect using technology. Moving forward, he urged common sense and care in our continued struggle against the virus and grace and compassion in our ongoing relationships with each other. As we continue to gather together via diverse means in the days ahead, he noted that parts of our world still suffer greatly, and he prays for healing and health for all.

He led a prayer for a future of health, healing, and hope.

He shared a montage video of his lighthearted midweek pandemic reflection videos, set to the song "Staying Inside."

Closing Worship with Holy Communion and Installation of new PWC Officers

Sam Swick led a call to worship and opening prayer. Jill Marie read Jeremiah 29:1-14. Participants sang "Blessed Assurance."

Rev. Julia Frasier of St. Pauls' Senior Living Community offered the first reflection, inspired by a sign reading "this is one chapter; it is not your whole story." Just as exile was one chapter of ancient Israel's story, the pandemic is just one chapter of our story. We are defined not by our present circumstances but by our relationship with our loving God.

Rev. Liddy Barlow of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania offered the second reflection. We went into exile at the beginning of the pandemic and put down roots in the city of social distancing. How do we return again; how do we imagine the future now that covid is easing? She used two paintings to explore the idea of "the middle distance," which requires a guide. God promises to show us the way home, and gives us one another to journey together.

Rev. Ackerman offered the third reflection. We don't know what the future holds for us, but we are assured that Holy Spirit is still at work. We have seen this in our pandemic innovations, in the outstanding response to the Abolishing Medical Debt campaign, in the work of our Conference's committees and task forces. We are moving out of Babylon and we can see a future: let us embrace the hope God gives us.

Rev. Ackerman led the installation service for new board officers and General Synod delegates. He invited offerings for Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania and St. Paul's Senior Living Community.

Rev. Swick 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 declared the meeting to be adjourned. Following the meeting, Rev. Dorhauer participated in a Q&A session.