

Report of the Conference Minister

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 12:2 NRSV

This past year, we have continued to witness change in our world. Some changes have been for the better and others are for the worse. In the midst of the changes that we face, we as a Conference continue to strive to minister faithfully to our churches in Christ’s name.

One change for which I want to express gratitude for is the opportunity to have had a sabbatical last year. It was the first time in my career that I’ve had an opportunity for something like this, and I found it to be truly a blessing for which I am most thankful.

Another big development in our life as a Conference that I want to emphasize this year is the advent of the Keystone Study Group. This is a group that is committed to a time of study, work, and discernment to see if the Spirit might be leading the four Pennsylvania Conferences to work more closely together and possibly even become a single Keystone Conference. Having the Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates at our Annual Gathering & Meeting this year is a step in this direction, and we should expect to hear more about this as time passes.

And last but not least, there is an important development in our day-to-day office life. Diane Fox has moved from our Office Manager to a part-time Bookkeeper, and we have welcomed a part-time Office Secretary Andrea Kopcak to our staff. If you get to see Andrea at our Annual Gathering & Meeting (or if you see her at the office or anywhere), please be sure to welcome her to the staff at Penn West!

In every report that I have given as your Conference Minister, I have emphasized how grateful I am for the opportunity to serve in this capacity. 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 2022-2023.

- **Visiting:** My in-person visitation, I’d say, has pretty much resumed to the way things were prior to 2020. It is always good to visit with you; please let me know if you’d like me to visit your church for any reason on any Sunday and if I am able to be there, I will.
- **Church and Ministry:** I continue to enjoy my work with Search & Call Committees, Committees on Ministry, Ministeriums (including “Talk, Listen & Pray,”) and Associations. Our Pastoral Ethics programs continue, with a focus this year on “Retirement/Departure/Interim Boundaries.” Our Search & Call team continues to work, as does the ministry of our Penn West Academy. Please pray for all of these groups with their important ministries.
- **Global Missions:** We were glad to have a SHEEP (Sustaining Hope for Educational Expenses in the Philippines) Fund celebration in February this past year. Our ambassador trip remains on hold. Please keep the important work of this team in your prayers.
- **Youth Ministry:** We are hoping by the time of our Annual Gathering & Meeting to announce that we have named a new Associate for Youth Ministry. Wheels are turning in this direction, and we look forward to updating you all on this soon.
- **Annual Gathering & Meeting:** Last year’s meeting was our first hybrid Conference Annual Meeting, and I thought it was a real success. We were blessed to welcome the Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown Daniel as our keynote speaker. 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 in helping us to improve on the pacing and quality of the meeting. We are exploring the possibility of having our 2023 Annual Gathering & Meeting with the Penn Central Conference. Please keep this year's meeting, and future meetings, in your prayers.

- **General Synod:** Our Thirty-fourth General Synod is scheduled to take place this year from June 30 through July 4 in Indianapolis IN. Please look for more information about General Synod, including resolutions and other business matters, at www.generalsynod.org. And please keep our delegates in your prayers as they look forward to representing us there.
- **Association Presidents:** Our Association Presidents continue to work together collegially. We are currently hoping to pass along a proposal on helping to make our Situational/Local Church Consultations more helpful experiences for our pastors and churches. Please keep their work in your prayers.
- **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 deeply 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 works diligently to help benefit both the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance as well as our Mission Grants program. Hopefully, you will hear more about this at our Annual Gathering & Meeting this year. Our Mission Grants program last year gave away \$44,111 worth of grants to 26 of our local churches. This is the most we have ever given! 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?'*", "*What a Difference 'Our Church's Wider Mission' Makes!*" or "*A Mission Grant Is...*" please do so.
- **Ecumenical Ministries:** I really enjoy serving with Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, the Southcentral PA Judicatory Leaders, and (now due to a lesser extent due to new configurations) 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. I am currently on the Board of the Insurance Board (as well as its Finance Committee), as well as the Board of the United Church of Christ. As part of this Board, I also serve on the Executive Committee and the Governance Committee.
- **Discipleship:** Our Transformation and Renewal Team has undergone a transformation! We are now referring to ourselves as the Discipleship Team. We continue to help our churches discover ways in which they may encounter renewal and new life.
- **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 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