

**Penn West Conference
United Church of Christ**

**62nd Annual Gathering and Meeting
(Combined with Penn Central, Penn Northeast, and Penn Southeast Conferences)
June 7-9, 2024
The Penn Stater and via ZOOM**

Welcome and Opening Devotion

Rev. Mears welcomed everyone to the 62nd annual meeting of the Penn West Conference at the Penn Stater and gave the Credentials report to include 40 ministers, 39 delegates, and 9 visitors.

Rev. Meredith Hutchison, Rev. Lisa Griffin, Ms. Theresa Cook, and Rev. Matt Deal led a devotion and scripture reading from Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 followed by a video celebrating the Penn West Conference (pictures of our life together) put together by Rev. Lisa Griffin.

Call to Order

Moderator, the Rev. Dave Mears, called the meeting to order.

Introduction of Visitors and Thanking of Sponsors

Rev. Ackerman introduced and thanked our office staff of Andrea and Diane. He also recognized and expressed gratitude for our annual meeting sponsors: The Cornerstone Fund, The Church Building & Loan Fund, The Pension Boards, United Church Funds, and The Insurance Board.

Appointment of Tellers

Assistant Moderator, Rev. Liddy Barlow, announced that Nancy Harclerode, Bob Newell, Julie Hills, Diane Wiley, Matt Deal, and Jeanette Thomas have agreed to serve as tellers.

Consent Agenda Items

MSP: To adopt the agenda, approve the Minutes from the 61st Annual Gathering and Meeting, appoint Mr. Ryan Cribbs as parliamentarian, and accept the 2023-2024 Board decisions.

Global Missions Team

Rev. Ackerman reported that the four Global Missions teams across our PA Conferences have begun meeting together. He asked that we continue to pray for our partners in the Northwest Luzon Conference in the Philippines. Monetary gifts continue to be welcome through the Sheep Fund. Finally, he thanked all of our local churches' mission efforts in their communities.

Associate for Youth Ministry

Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doege shared that this position has been a challenging ministry for her due to our changing world. She described her position as being a cheerleader and support for all of us in our youth ministries. She serves as a consultant, can provide support resources for us, and provide training for youth leaders. She continues to research best practices and trends-one being intergenerational Sunday School. She hopes to connect congregations with activities including the 2026 Regional Youth Event.

Presentation of Nominations Ballot

Rev. Ackerman reviewed the nominations: Wendy Bigelow, Secretary; Deb Long, Treasurer; and Nancy Harclerode, Assistant Treasurer. He thanked outgoing Treasurer, Tom Croner, for his service. He also listed the General Synod Class of 2028 which includes Chelsea Neatrour, Matthew Fox, Rev. Nicole Pickens, and Rev. Donald Hammonds. (They will join the other five delegates in the Class of 2025 who were previously elected to serve: Kaitlyn Farber, Rev. John Titus, Tessa Lynn, Ciera James, and Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doege)

Introduction of 2024 Budget

Treasurer Deb Long thanked those who participated in the ZOOM budget meeting on May 30th. She reported that there has been a 4% decrease in OCWM giving. This is a trend that is occurring in all conferences across the state. There is a 4% increase in our office support, supplies, and employees. The biggest expense budgeted is an audit. This would need to take place if we move into a Keystone Conference. Presently, we have internal people from our conference do these audits. All of this gives us a deficit of \$34,000. Budget committee members relayed that we're down to the "bare bones" and that there is not much else to cut. In conclusion, all churches need to support OCWM if we vote to pass the budget.

Financial Stewards Presentation

Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz reminded us that our gifts help to teach, equip, and support our holy presence...if you love me, feed my sheep. Mr. Croner asked us to reflect on how God has blessed us; when someone does something nice for us, we want to give back. We need to spend more time recognizing the gifts we have received. He encouraged us to go back to our home churches and challenge everyone to help with our financial frustrations.

Vote on Budget

Rev. Barlow asked for a motion in favor of the budget as presented.

MSP: That the budget be approved as presented.

Election of Officers

Rev. Barlow asked for a motion to adopt the slate of officers.

MSP: To adopt the slate of officers and the General Synod Class of 2028.

Discussion on Keystone Resolution

Attendees were given 10 minutes to discuss and brainstorm questions at their tables. The following results were shared:

- Is the proposed conference so large that the western, less populated areas on our side of the state become lost?
- How would regional ministers be placed to represent less populated areas in the state?
- What would the Search & Call process look like in a Keystone Conference?
- How will Committees on Ministry be set up and how will they function?
- When people need to communicate (ex. social justice), do they go to regional representation or specialization committees?
- How do churches without technology communicate?

- 20 % of our churches do not give to OCWM. What are the percentages of OCWM participation in the other conferences and what will be their commitment?
- What are our options if Keystone doesn't happen?
- People who will be asked to vote in November may have no information on the Keystone Working Group. How do we get this information out to those people?
- The price for travel and to participate in a Keystone Conference will be greater. Do smaller churches have the resources for this in their budgets?
- It might be better for a member rather than a pastor to share information about the proposed Keystone Conference.
- Could there be a process for churches to decide how they want their delegates to vote on Nov. 9th?
- How do we know which churches haven't had any members attend any of the Keystone Working Group meetings?

The vote to approve entering into a Keystone Conference will take place on Nov. 9th. The meeting will begin at 10:00. Voting will take place at 11:30 and an announcement will take place at 12:00.

Speak Outs

Nancy Wiley from Shanksville reported that this will be the 6th year that her church will be a drop off depot for Church World Services. Kits include school, hygiene, and clean up kits along with period packs. Because of the recent tornadoes, warehouses are in need of help for all of these. Drops offs will be October 9, 10, and 11.

Rev. Barlow shared that the Christian Associates are partnering with the Holocaust Center on June 27th presenting "Reckoning with Anti-Semitism as Christians." There is a form to register on casp.org under "What's New?"

Penn West Academy

Rev. Meredith Hutchison congratulated the 2024 Academy's graduate, Nicole Tascarella.

Five for Five Celebration

Rev. Ackerman and Rev. Mears 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 2023. Certificates were distributed and a full list is available in the meeting materials.

Introduction of Ministers New to the Conference and General Synod 35PWC Delegates

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

Rev. Keith Grimm, Mr. Zion Hays UCC, Meyersdale

Pastor Doug Johnson, St. Jacob's UCC, Shelocta

Pastor Chuck Nelson, St. Paul's UCC, Erie

Rev. Paul Sarver, First UCC, Mt. Pleasant/ First Trinity UCC, Youngwood

Rev. Tom Caruso, member at First UCC, Millvale

Pastor Jonathan Mathieu, member at Community of Reconciliation Church, Pittsburgh

Pastor Alex Ruzanic, member at Smithfield UCC, Pittsburgh

Authorization Anniversaries

Rev. Ackerman and Rev. Mears recognized ministers celebrating milestone anniversaries or their ordinations, licensure, or commissioning. The full list is in the meeting materials.

Celebration of Saints

Rev. Hutchison led a 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.

Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy

Rev. Ackerman shared that this is the last year for this program. Penn West folks will share more information about Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy when they deliver OCWM certificates to our local churches. 90% of what is given goes towards Mission Grants and 10% goes to retired ministers' assistance. The goal is \$500,000; we are presently at \$403,163. This is a donor restricted fund that is already making a difference.

Mission Grants Celebration

Rev. Ackerman celebrated that the Conference awarded \$42,236.00 in 2023. This is the second highest amount given out in a year. Donors who made this possible are: the Strengthen the Church Fund, the Corman Fund, the Neighbors in Need Fund, the Kermit Thomas Bequest Fund, and the Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy Fund.

The deadline for applying for 2024 mission grants is October 1st. They include Reaching Out grants up to \$1500, Strengthen the Church grants up to \$1500, and Operational Support grants up to \$1000. Applications can be found at *pennwest.org*. Reports for last year's grants are due by September 14th.

Unfinished Business

There was no unfinished business.

Closing Worship and Installation of Officers

Rev. Hutchison offered an opening prayer.

Rev. Ackerman's reflection was based on Matthew 14:13-21. He shared that as a young minister, he took flyers to the fairgrounds, put them on cars and motorcycles, and invited all to his church. What if 1,000 of them came? They didn't, but what if they did? As was with the fishes and the loaves, God would have provided as he will and does for us. We have no crystal ball to see where our churches and conference will be in the future, but accompanied by faith and trust in God, we need not have fear.

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

An offering to benefit the work of Penn West Conference was taken.

Rev. Ackerman offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

Benediction and Adjournment of the 62nd Annual Meeting & Gathering of the Penn West Conference of the United Church of Christ

Respectfully submitted,
Wendy Bigelow, Secretary

