

**Penn West Conference
United Church of Christ**

**60th Annual Gathering and Meeting
“Be Transformed”**

June 10-11, 2022

Penn West University – California, and via Zoom

Welcome & Opening Worship

Rev. Ackerman welcomed everyone to the 60th annual meeting of the Penn West Conference at the newly renamed Penn West University. He expressed joy at being back together after two years of online annual meetings due to COVID-19.

Dr. Deirdre Hainsworth shared technical tips for this hybrid meeting for those joining by Zoom and for in-person participants.

Douglas Hearn, Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz, and Rev. Donna Jarrell led a service of opening worship, with music by Apostles Creed. Rev. David Ackerman offered a sermon based on Romans 12:1-21, clad in a donkey costume to illustrate the theme “be transformed.” Currently we face significant change, some with effects we can see and some that still lie unknown before us. What new things will Penn West Conference try in order to grow into the fullness of what God wills for us to be? Rev. Ackerman told the story of a sailing trip: the wind carried the boat quickly out to sea, but returning required tacking, sailing at an angle to catch the wind. Pentecost reminds us: when we feel as if there is no wind, there is always wind. We may have to wait, we may have to adjust course, but the Spirit is always there. An offering was collected for Lancaster Theological Seminary, which provided video greetings from Associate Dean Rev. Dr. Vanessa Lovelace.

Call to Order

Moderator George Kepple called the meeting to order.

Introduction of Visitors and Thanking of Sponsors

Rev. Ackerman welcomed our keynote presenter, Rev. Ginny Brown Daniel, who has come from Houston to be with us, and our Sabbatical Coverage Conference Minister, the Rev. Rich Pleva, who joined via Zoom. He welcomed Heather Rohrbaugh from Hoffman Homes and Michael Arrington from the Neighborhood Academy, as well as other display table hosts.

This 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.

Welcome to Sabbatical Coverage Conference Minister

Rev. Pleva will be serving in Rev. Ackerman’s stead from July 4 to September 25. Most of his work will be done remotely.

Rev. Pleva offered greetings to the Conference. He is looking forward to working with Penn West. He retired in 2018 from full-time ministry as Conference Minister in Iowa and chairperson of the UCC’s Council of Conference Ministers. Previously, he served as an associate

conference minister, and earlier, as pastor of local congregations in the UCC, entering with privilege of call from the Evangelical Free Church in 1990.

He believes sabbatical is good not only for clergy but also for ministry settings: this is a gift to the conference and to David. During his time with Penn West, he hopes to “keep the wheels on the bus” and care for clergy health and wellbeing. He is not an “interim” pastor, doing transitional tasks, but rather will attend to emergencies and represent the conference on committees and task forces. His position is intended to be about 10 hours a week: this is not much, but it is enough to be present to situations that require his attention. He encouraged the conference to call on him as needed; he is committed to returning calls and communicating well. The pandemic has taught us that remote ministry is possible, and so he will be working from his home in Wisconsin.

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 Rev. Joseph Hedden, Rev. Barry Fillman, and Rev. Jay Shaffer have agreed to serve as tellers.

Prayer Chapel

The prayer chapel is located in room 333, and was organized by Rev. John Titus. It is open throughout the Annual Gathering & Meeting.

Approval of Minutes from the 59th Annual Meeting and Gathering

Moderator Kepple noted that although the printed minutes read “58th” at the top of the page, they are in fact the minutes from the 59th Annual Gathering & Meeting in June 2021.

MSP: That the minutes be approved.

Acceptance of 2021-2022 Board Decisions

MSP: That the board decisions be approved.

Presentation of Nominations Ballot

Rev. Ackerman reviewed the nominations. Wendy Bigelow has been nominated as secretary and Deborah Long as assistant treasurer. The original nominee as treasurer has withdrawn, and a new nominee was not confirmed by the time meeting materials were printed. A nomination for Tom Croner is expected.

Additionally, there is a need for four General Synod delegates, preferably from the Clarion, Pittsburgh, Somerset, and Westmoreland Associations, in addition to Chelsea

Neatrou's nomination from the Juniata Association. The hope is not only to have this geographic diversity, but also to comply with UCC Bylaw 195, which requires diversity in age, race, and gender identity/expression. If we are unable to fill the slate during this meeting, the Board will work with Association presidents to select delegates.

The Conference will contribute toward the costs incurred by delegates, and the Associations have also contributed. Local churches may also be able to assist. The hope is that delegates will not have to bear much of the expense of attending General Synod, if any.

Introduction of 2023 Budget

Treasurer Nancy Harclerode drew participants' attention to the proposed budget in the meeting packet. A listening session will take place this evening where any questions can be raised and 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 he focused his comments on our relationship with the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. He shared that he has received reports from the Conference about the use of the SHEEP Fund and is satisfied that the funds have been spent appropriately. He hopes that another SHEEP Fund Sunday will be scheduled soon.

Speak Out One

Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz offered a speak-out on the ministry of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, where she is serving as Sabbatical Supply Acting Executive Minister this summer.

Rev. Lisa Griffin offered a speak-out about the Eastwick neighborhood of Philadelphia, where UCC Disaster Ministries is working to finish repairs to flooded homes. St. John's UCC Evans City has openings on its mission trip team to visit Eastwick this summer to complete this work; people age 16+ with experience in construction are welcome to participate.

Session One

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

Rev. Ackerman introduced the Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown Daniel, who served as conference minister of the Missouri Mid-South Conference from 2015-2021.

Dr. Brown Daniel shared her own story, from her upbringing as a progressive Southern Baptist to her current candidacy for the Texas House of Representatives. She identified her gift as helping people and churches muster the courage to listen to the Holy Spirit during seasons of doubt and change. In these presentations we will use where we've been (recently, the pandemic) and where we are right now (a fractured society) to look toward how God is calling us to be and serve as Christ followers in our communities. We should not leap to problem-solving, but to openness. We should not leap to conclusions, but be curious. And we should shout WOOHOO! when we feel excited.¹

¹ Meeting participants enthusiastically followed this advice for the remainder of the Annual Gathering and Meeting.

The Letter to the Romans is interesting to consider at this time. Paul did not form this church; Paul had never even visited Rome at the time of its composition. Romans is the most theological and ethical of Paul's letters; it is not in response to a specific problem or concern. Rome has experienced Jewish displacement and reintegration: all Jews (including Christian Jews) had been ejected from Rome in 49 to 54 CE. All Christ followers there during this period were Gentiles. But in 54, when Jews were allowed to return, there had to be reintegration of the community. Paul is writing in the midst of this moment about who we can be now that we're back together: who can we be in a fractured society?

Dr. Brown Daniel quoted from the works of Dr. Elsa Tamez, author of *The Amnesty of Grace*. Rome at this time was a place of stratification between rich and poor with an inequitable legal system. How do people of faith live with integrity in a fractured society—not only a global and national society, but in individual fractured towns and neighborhoods? Paul's letter is important to us because we too are very fractured, divisive, society. Sylvia C Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh, authors of *Romans Disarmed*, define a "tragic gap": the space between what creation can and will be and the place where we find ourselves now. Living in the tragic gap is not solved by a list of rules. It needs, instead, a transformed imagination.

Romans, writes Beverly Roberts Gaventa in *When In Romans*, is about the intersection of ethics and worship. We have to live out the way that we should be. In this tragic gap, we have to present our whole selves: there has to be a unity between what we preach and what we practice.

In the midst of this, we have to attend to the grief and trauma that we are experiencing because of the pandemic experiences: rapid change, and so much missed (being together, singing). We have not only had to pivot, but how to grieve inwardly, recreating church, avoiding burnout, and avoiding covid. The book *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief* by Michelle Cassandra Johnson is helpful here. We have to name our trauma before we can effectively move forward. What is breaking your heart? Your church's heart?

Dr. Brown Daniel introduced questions to guide workshop discussions:

- How would you describe the "tragic gap" right now?
- What do you think about the premise that Romans 12:1-2 is Paul's invitation to hold ethics and worship together in the midst of their (and our) Tragic Gap?
- Does this premise help you reframe Paul's words to present your bodies as a living sacrifice with more possibility?
- What has broken the heart of you, your church, your community?
- Where does pandemic grief and trauma reside for you? For your town? For your church?

Evening Prayer

After a dinner break, Rev. Lisa Griffin led a vespers service inspired by summer camp experiences. Julia DiFiore accompanied hymns on guitar. Participants worked together at their tables to write prayers.

Evening Celebration

Rev. Ackerman introduced our evening celebration.

Penn West Academy Graduation

Rev. Joseph Hedden, dean of the Penn West Academy, recognized and thanked the Academy faculty. He said that young people are experiencing loneliness and disconnection. Having an adult who cares about them is a significant indicator of success. This kind of caring adult is exemplified by Douglas Hearn, who graduates tonight.

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 mission offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, Neighbors in Need, Strengthen the Church, and the Christmas Fund in 2020. Rev. Ackerman distributed certificates. The full list is available in the meeting materials.

Introducing Ministers New to Penn West

Rev. Ackerman introduced Rev. Don Hammonds, who was ordained by the Pittsburgh Association this year; Rev. Frank Podolinski, a pastor in the ELCA, was installed as pastor of St. Paul’s UCC in Trauger; Rev. Donna Jarrell, serving as interim minister of the Paradise/Troutville Charge; and Rev. Nicole Pickens, pastor of the Pymatuning Charge. Additionally, Doug Johnson is pastor of St. Jacob’s UCC in Shelocta.

Authorization Anniversaries

Rev. Fillman recognized authorized ministers celebrating milestone anniversaries of their ordination, licensure, or commissioning, including Rev. Richard Siegfried, who was present to celebrate today’s 60th anniversary of his ordination! The full list is in the meeting materials.

Mission Grants Celebration

Rev. Ackerman celebrated that the Conference awarded \$35,277 to 16 churches in 2021. He thanked the donors who made this possible: the Strengthen the Church Fund, the Corman Fund and Neighbors in Need Funds, and the Kermit Thomas Bequest.

He shared the list of churches who received funds and their proposed projects.

Rev. Ackerman also spoke about the Caring for Churches, Caring for Clergy campaign, which is working to raise funds to sustain the mission grants for years to come. The campaign has raised over \$166,000 of its \$500,000 goal. Everyone is welcome to attend a Mission Grants celebration at 11 a.m. on November 12 at First Reformed UCC in Greensburg, with a meal to follow.

The deadline for applying for 2022 mission grants is October 3. For application, visit pennwest.org, select Resources, and then select Mission Grants. Reports for last year’s grants are due in September.

Listening Session on the 2023 Budget

Ms. Harclerode drew participants’ attention to the 2023 budget section of the meeting materials, which include both a narrative and the numbers. The 2023 budget forecasts a surplus of \$5600, compared to the 2022 budget which planned a \$4600 deficit. The 2023 budget does include a small increase for staff, but not as much as they deserve; churches can respond to this need by increasing their giving to the Conference.

The budget was prepared in a conservative fashion, estimating income more realistically than in past years.

Julia DiFiore asked about life/disability insurance for staff, which is not part of the budget; this seems like a justice issue for our hard-working staff. While this is not included in the budget as presented, it can be considered by the personnel and finance committees in the future.

Rev. Linda Miller-Pretz made a presentation from the Faithful Stewards. The UCC's stewardship theme this year is "Bread and Cup." Participants reflected on the meaning of this theme in relationship to stewardship. (Notably, this included Marsha Ackerman saying that Rev. Ackerman has been correct in their marital disputes over stewardship.) We have drunk such rich blessings from the cup of blessing. Rev. Miller-Pretz offered her own stewardship story: God has always provided enough to share, even in the hardest times.

Ice Cream Social

Participants enjoyed ice cream sundaes to close the evening.

Celebration of Saints

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

Credentials Report

Assistant Moderator Rev. David Mears announced that there are 62 pastors, 33 delegates, and 13 visitors present, for a total attendance of 108.

Vote on Budget

Ms. DiFiore moved that the budget be amended to add \$350 to cover life and disability insurance for Diane Fox. The motion was seconded.

MSP: That this amendment be approved.

The amended budget was then moved and seconded.

MSP: That the budget be approved as amended.

Election of Officers

Mr. Kepple asked for any additional nominations for the office of secretary. There were none.

MSP: That nominations for secretary be closed.

Mr. Kepple asked for nominees for the office of treasurer. Rev. Matt Deal nominated Tom Croner, which was seconded.

MSP: That nominations for treasurer be closed.

Mr. Kepple asked for any additional nominations for assistant treasurer. There were none.

MSP: That nominations for assistant treasurer be closed.

Rev. Ackerman clarified process for electing General Synod delegates. Mr. Kepple asked for any nominees from Clarion, Pittsburgh, Somerset, or Westmoreland Associations.

MSP: That Chelsea Neatroun be nominated as General Synod delegate.

Rev. Deal nominated Tessa Lynn, a member of St. John's UCC in Salisbury in the Somerset Association, who will be a sophomore at Penn State University.

Rev. Steve Craft nominated Matthew Fox, a member of First Reformed UCC in Greensburg in the Westmoreland Association, who is under 30 years old.

MSP: That Tessa Lynn and Matthew Fox be nominated as General Synod delegates.

MSP: That the secretary cast a unanimous ballot in favor of the nominees.

Unfinished Business

Rev. Mears asked for any unfinished business. Hearing none, he declared the business of this meeting to be complete.

Speak-Outs

Ms. Rohrbaugh offered a speak-out from Hoffman Homes, thanking the Conference for its support. The past two years have been a challenge for everyone. Hoffman Homes, which serves children with mental health and behavioral challenges, has opened two new programs recently: an emergency shelter program and a transitional living program. They are willing to come visit congregations to share about Hoffman's ministries, or to arrange for congregations to tour the facility.

Rob Stemple shared that on this day in 1989 he was involved in a head-on collision and he is grateful to be alive. During the pandemic he has recorded seven CDs of hymns played on piano; they are available on the Living Waters display table for a donation to Living Waters.

Dr. Hutchison reminded authorized ministers and MIDs of the Penn West Pastors Retreat October 24-25 at Antiochian Village near Ligonier. The retreat is sponsored in part by the Brown Grant. Leaders will be Dr. Hutchison and Rev. Hedden.

Rev. Deal offered a thank you from St. Paul's Somerset for the mission grants the congregation received. Because of the conference's generosity, the congregation has provided thousands of books to preschool-aged children through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program. He encouraged others interested in this ministry to become involved in their own communities.

Mr. Kepple shared a few favorite jokes, then suggested a break until our scheduled time for the next keynote.

Session Two

Dr. Brown Daniel said that yesterday we focused on our experiences of the past two years; today's session will focus on where we are now, with the focus verse: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The Greek word for "conformed" connotes patterning the self after others, in this case "the world;" Marcus Borg suggests that this refers to the system of Roman imperial domination. We must resist the ways that we might pattern ourselves after systems that oppress. The Greek word for "transformed," related to the word "metamorphosis," is the same word used for Jesus in the transfiguration story. We can be transformed by resisting the conventional wisdom of the world's oppressive structures and pursuing the unconventional wisdom of Christ which lifts up the oppressed.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on this theme in his installation sermon, "The Transformed Nonconformist." We see this in the story of Viola Liuzzo, a white woman who was killed in Selma during the Civil Rights movement. We see this in the people of Ukraine, standing up against Russian invasion. We see this in those who turned in their AR-15 rifles after the massacre in Uvalde. We see this in rural churches that may not think of themselves as outspoken progressives, but who can still offer a way of being church that is not condemning people to hell.

Typically a presentation like this would focus on what the church should do. But instead, let's focus on our communities. We don't need to have the church in order before we go out. This has been Dr. Brown Daniel's experience as a political candidate. She has gone out and attended meetings and put herself in contexts that she had never previously encountered.

Dr. Brown Daniel asked participants to google 2020 census results, TripAdvisor comments, and news results from our communities. After a time for research, she asked participants to share what they discovered that was surprising. The goal is not necessarily to believe everything we read online, but rather to see our own communities from a new perspective, paired with our conversations with others in the community.

Dr. Brown Daniel shared these questions for discussion at tables during the workshop:

- How do you hear and interpret Paul's words: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"?
- What does Dr. Martin Luther King's description of a Transformed Nonconformist mean to you?
- Can you share an example of a transformed nonconformist today?
- Who in your community has been severely impacted by the pandemic?

Workshop Conversations

Participants discussed the questions in small groups. Afterward, Rev. Brown Daniel invited reflections from each group leader, which included:

- You have to get out of your lane! You have to move beyond your place of comfort and familiarity to meet new people and try new things.
- Everyone has the potential to be a transformed nonconformist: for example, we can stay at the table and connect with those who are different from us politically.
- Dr. King's speech tells us not to be thermometers but to be thermostats: to change the temperature, not just take the temperature.

- During the pandemic, some people were put in the position to become transformed nonconformists who had not sought out that role, such as health care workers.
- The world's values are so ubiquitous: to be a transformed nonconformist we have to be intentional about what we do. We can help discern this in community.
- Howard Thurman's book *Jesus and the Dispossessed* speaks of how Jesus lived in the occupation of the Roman empire. We sometimes talk about how Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, but we fail to note how white Protestant Christianity is the de facto official religion of American empire, which has supported slavery and Native American genocide. We need to confess who we have been and who we are.
- It takes a significant amount of courage to act. It's easy to talk about this, but much harder to take the step forward and take action that might be controversial.

Rev. Brown Daniel said her experience of the United Church of Christ is that we are a group of transformed nonconformists. Often we hear about the very vocal public displays of transformed nonconformity. But what she has experienced of the reformed and evangelical traditions is that we are powerful, kickass transformed nonconformists! We may not be out and firey on the front lines, but we are seeing problems in our communities and stepping up to offer solutions. For example, in Missouri during the Spanish Flu epidemic, German churches started Deaconess Hospital to serve ill people not welcome in other hospitals. For centuries we have been doing this work, and we are called to continue this work in the twenty-first century. We have that spirit that brought us here, developed our churches, and now God is calling us to be that today.

Session Three

To close our sessions with Rev. Brown Daniel, she will explore what comes next: specifically, how to discern the will of God, or we might say the call of God, in the midst of this tragic gap. We rely on the Holy Spirit—not on any keynote speaker or church leader!—to help us know what comes next: there is no easy manual to follow.

For Paul, the particular rules were not as important as the ethical tools needed to face his moment in history. It's important to remember that the Roman empire did fall! The spirit of transformed nonconformity did continue in the churches. But even those churches did not survive in their previous form. The legacy is not the survival of a particular church in its existing physical form. The legacy is about how they stood up to the powers of that time and eventually caused them to fall. This might cause us some discomfort as we think about our own churches and what God might be calling them to do. Just as Christianity has continued for the past 2000 years, it's going to continue. But what is each of our churches, and the United Church of Christ, going to look like? Even for those who made plans prior to the pandemic, the world has changed. We need to ask: who is God calling us to be now?

Buechner writes that our vocation is where our deep gladness and the world's deep need meet. What is our community's deepest need? And what gives us deepest joy? She shared the

story of a rural Missouri church that offered an annual chicken dinner that became a destination for thousands of their neighbors.

Rev. Brown Daniel shared four points for living beyond the pandemic from Rev. Bruce Epperly's book *Hope Beyond Pandemic*: 1.) The church needs to live out the Sermon the Mount: to be a blessing to those who struggle financially, those who mourn, and those who live with insecurity; 2.) The church is called to be a place of community, on the move, making it up as it goes along when it comes to worship and ministry; 3.) The sanctuary should be a springboard for service; and 4.) Mission must come first, building second. She shared several stories of ways that churches and other organizations have pursued these ideas, including The Good Table UCC in California, First Congregational Church in Memphis, and Sesh Coworking in Houston. Are we courageous enough to listen to the call of God that may be calling us to do something completely different?

In conclusion, Rev. Brown Daniel offered five tools: 1.) Get out of the building. 2.) Take risks and think outside the box. 3.) Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate! 4.) Be curious, especially in the chaos of transformation. 5.) It's ok to die, because that's where God creates new life. God is not through with us yet. Woohoo!

Closing Worship with Holy Communion and Installation of Officers

A closing worship service was led by Rev. Lisa Griffin, Rev. George Steffey, and Dr. Hutchison, with music by Rob Stemple and Kathy Fair.

Rev. Brown Daniel offered a sermon inspired by Romans 12:9-21. These words make us feel relieved, because we have known people who have embodied these traits, and overwhelmed, because fulfilling even one of these directives is hard to do. This 60th anniversary reminds us of the first meeting of the Penn West Conference in 1962: the culmination of transformation as the United Church of Christ was established in western Pennsylvania. That was surely a time of celebration, but also just as surely a time of grumbling and uncertainty. When our descendants gather in 2082, who will they be as the church? We don't know, but we know it won't look like who we are today. The Holy Spirit has the ability to transform the church in the midst of the tragic gap.

Rev. Brown has been experiencing the first year of her life without being enmeshed in the church and church leadership. There are moments of joy (riding her bike and walking her dogs), but also moments of longing. Experiences of listening to community members help her realize that she is in the right place. This is how the Holy Spirit works: when we are open to the Spirit, God moves us in unexpected ways so we can serve, love, and create, living to our holy potential. The same is happening in every church. And it has been happening since the time of Paul's churches. This is not God's first rodeo: God has been working transformation in the church since the beginning. We will venture forth and do meaningful ministry. And some churches will die. We will celebrate their integrity, and celebrate their legacy as we do the Roman, Philippian, Corinthian churches before us. We are Easter people, and God is doing a new thing.

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

An offering was received for The Neighborhood Academy. Michael Arrington expressed gratitude from the Academy, where he serves as director of counseling service, golf coach, and chaplain.

Dr. Brown Daniel and Rev. Ackerman presided at a service of Holy Communion.

Rev. Ackerman offered final words of thanks to AGM planning team, outgoing Board members, Diane Fox, our musicians, tech gurus, table facilitators, staff at Penn West University, his longsuffering wife Marsha, Rev. Rich Pleva, Vanessa Lovelace, Michael Arrington, St. Pauls', Living Waters, Hoffman Homes, and our financial ministries sponsors, and keynote presented Dr. Brown Daniel. He also expressed gratitude for the vacation and sabbatical time that commences following the meeting.

Dr. Brown Daniel presented Rev. Ackerman with the book *Finding Refuge* and led a commissioning prayer for his sabbatical.