

Report of the Conference Minister, 2023-2024

“But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” 1 Timothy 6:11-12 NRSV

This past year has been filled with highs and lows. I have to start with what for me is the main high, and that has been the opportunity to work with the Keystone Working Group. We have been working for some time now on the possibility of the four Pennsylvania UCC Conferences becoming a single Keystone Conference. We have been making amazing progress and have done an enormous amount of work toward this end. I know that not everyone in the Conference is fully aware of all the developments that have taken place on this, but we are doing our best to communicate our progress on it. We hope that after last fall’s engagement sessions at our Association Meetings and at our All Association Spring Meeting this year, more insights will be gleaned and more questions will be answered. We are anticipating a historic vote on Saturday, November 9, at a meeting we are hosting at First Reformed UCC in Greensburg at 10 AM. We hope you will come to this special meeting and consider this proposal which we are making in the hopes that it will help our churches to better and more faithfully serve Jesus Christ in the context of the United Church of Christ in this part of God’s creation.

I also want to note the developments that have taken place on our staff this year. We have been truly blessed to have the Rev. Shannon Garrett-Doege on our staff as our Associate for Youth Ministry and to have Andrea Kopcak on our staff as our Office Secretary. Combined with Diane Fox as our Bookkeeper, our staff has been working hard to serve you. We have come up with a flier, “*What Does the Penn West Conference Do?*” that uses the Keystone Working Group’s “Key Functions of a Conference” to show how much time our office spends on critical Conference functions. Please look for this flier, which is being shared with our churches.

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. 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 2023-2024.

- **Visiting:** I continue to visit churches, sometimes to lead worship; sometimes to visit and/or bring greetings. 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, and Associations. Our Pastoral Ethics programs continue, with a continuing education focus this year on “Child Sexual & Elder Abuse.” We have recently established a Situational/Local Church Support Consultation Committee. Our Penn West Academy for Ministry continues to help prepare people for service in our churches. Please pray for all of these groups with their important ministries.
- **Global Missions:** We are planning to have a Zoom meeting in April with our partners in the Northwest Luzon Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. We are also planning a meeting with mission team representatives for the four Pennsylvania UCC Conferences in April. Please continue to keep the important work of this team in your prayers.
- **Annual Gathering & Meeting:** At last year’s meeting, we welcomed one of the Pennsylvania UCC Conference Ministers, the Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates, as our Keynote speaker at California University of Pennsylvania. The theme was again “Be Transformed.” Our transformation continues as we look forward to a historic celebration at this year’s meeting at the Penn Stater from June 7-9. All four Pennsylvania UCC Conferences will come together for worship and programming. We will meet in

separate spaces on Saturday, June 8, from 9:00-11:45 AM. On Sunday, our preacher at our closing service will be the General Minister & President of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia-Thompson. Please keep this important meeting in your prayers, and we hope to see you there!

- **General Synod:** Our Thirty-fourth General Synod took place from June 30 through July 4, 2023, in Indianapolis IN. The Thirty-fifth General Synod is scheduled to take place in Kansas City MO from July 11-15, 2025. 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 planned our All Association Spring Meeting this year and are taking a look at what kind of an Association structure might best serve our Local Churches moving into the future. 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 continue to work for 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. We have raised over \$400,000 toward this effort, and we hope, in what we expect will be the final year of the program, to be able to reach our \$500,000 goal. Our Mission Grants program last year gave away \$42,236 worth of grants to 26 of our local churches. 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 other 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, and I serve on its Executive Committee. Ecumenical work is a passion of mine. I also serve on the Board of St. Paul's Senior Living Community in Greenville, as well as its Development Committee. I have been blessed over the past year to serve on its search committee for a new Director of Spiritual Services.
- **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 & Audit Committees), 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 Discipleship Team continues to help our churches discover ways in which they may encounter renewal and new life. We are hosting a book discussion on Dr. Laurene Bowers' book "The Future of American Christianity" in May.
- **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