

## **Acting Conference Minister Report for Annual Meeting Reports**

This has been an unusual and challenging year for Penn Central Conference. We began last July without an Associate Conference Minister for Congregational Discernment, with the departure of the Rev. Betsy Bruaw. The Conference Minister, Rev. Monica Dawkins-Smith made the decision that she would do the work of this position, in addition to her work as Conference Minister. As Moderator of the Board of Directors, with the Board's approval, I appointed a search committee to work toward filling the Congregational Discernment position as soon as possible. The Conference Profile was updated and several applications for this position were received. As the process proceeded, two final candidates were identified and then one person withdrew when a higher salary than we could afford was needed, since it was less than the person was receiving in their current position. An interview with the remaining candidate was set up, but things fell apart and the search committee requested that the search be suspended until further notice.

At its meeting last June, the Board of Directors approved asking the Samaritan Center to work with the Conference Office staff and ministers to help resolve some issues that arisen during the previous year. These sessions took place last summer, but did not bear fruit.

The Personnel Committee of the Board undertook an evaluation of the Conference Minister, as is supposed to be done each year. In this process, it became clear that things were not working well with the Conference Minister. As concerns added up, the Board met in two executive sessions to discuss the evaluation, and in February, the Board unanimously voted to end our relationship with the Rev. Monica Dawkins-Smith at the end of February. Until we had a chance to decide how we would approach finding a replacement, I was asked, and agreed to serve as the Acting Conference Minister, with the Rev. William LaSalle, former Moderator, agreeing to come back to be the Acting Moderator. Our vice-moderator, Shirley Keith-Knox was new to the Board and felt she wanted more experience first, but has been involved in all our decisions.

In consultation with the Office of the President and General Minister in Cleveland, a search process was begun with the Board Officers and committee chairpersons serving as the search committee. As of the writing of this report, we were in the midst of this process, with two candidates coming for interviews.

As the Acting Conference Minister, after consulting with Rev. Nora Foust, we developed a plan for Interim Ministers for Search and Call. I talked with several folk, and the Rev. John Fureman agreed to take this on for Lancaster, Lebanon and Harrisburg Associations, Rev. Richard Gordon for York, Gettysburg and Mercersburg, and Rev. Sally Dries for Northern and Central Associations. I am very grateful to them for agreeing to do this. They are now at work with churches in transition in the assigned Associations. They are also meeting with me monthly to coordinate and support one another.

This spring we also experienced the death of two former Area Conference Ministers - the Rev. Norman Bucher and the Rev. Vernon Baum - as well as the Rev. William Rader, all of whom had significant impact on Penn Central Conference over the course of their ministries. They were dedicated servants of God and their lives were well celebrated.

I have tried to meet with several ministeriums and Associations and am working closely with the Board of Directors and committees as they continue their work. I am deeply grateful to the Board for the hours of hard work and extra meetings over this past year. There are many gifted people who care deeply about Penn Central Conference and their dedication has gone above and beyond what is normally required of them. I commend them for their diligence and care for the tasks they have taken on.

Many years ago, a process for preparing lay people who felt a call to serve our churches, but who didn't have a seminary education, was identified. A program originally titled Lay Ministry for the 21st Century was developed in cooperation with Penn Northeast Conference and Penn Southeast Conference that served to educate many folks who have served many of our smaller churches over the years. Eventually its name was changed to the Pennsylvania Academy of Ministry. That innovative program has now been taken over by Lancaster Theological Seminary where it will continue to train people for ministry as the Pennsylvania Academy of Ministry at Lancaster Seminary. I am excited about this alternative path to ministry that will prepare people for authorized ministry who do not want to pursue a full seminary education.

During these past two difficult years, we are all deeply grateful to everyone that works in our Conference Office. Their efforts and perseverance with all of the changes they have experienced is truly phenomenal. Wendy Hepler, our Office Manager, Stephanie Rader-Titzel our Communications Director, Laura Dalton our Receptionist and Search and Call Assistant are truly dedicated and very special folk. Thank you! Our Associate Conference Minister, the Rev. Nora Foust, has been immeasurable support for me, and a gifted leader who has made a significant impact on the Conference with all her work in developing programs and educational opportunities as well as her work with our Committees on Ministry. I also thank Scott Watts and Rev. Patty Dodds for their ministries and support they are providing. It has been a joy to work with them all.

With deep gratitude for her work over the years, Wendy Hepler will be retiring at the end of June. She has been a loyal and faithful servant of the Conference and I have been so appreciative of her organizational skills and attention to the many details of her position, as well as her pleasant smile and dedication. We will be celebrating her work on behalf of all of us at our Annual Meeting this year, and wish her many happy years of retirement.

--Ann Graves  
Acting Conference Minister