

## **Annual Report: Associate Conference Minister for Congregational Transitions**

By the time of the Annual Meeting on August 29 I will be just shy of 3 months tenure as Associate Conference Minister for Congregational Transitions. My writing here is not so much an “annual report”, as it is a reflection on my first three months, and hopes and plans for the future.

Since my title is new to Penn Central Conference, let me begin by describing what the title ACM for Congregational Transitions means. In a holistic sense, it refers to the gamut of transitions any of our churches may find themselves. Specifically, here are the areas of my portfolio thus far:

1. **Churches in Search and Call:** I provide support, consultation, and guidance for churches that are seeking an interim, designated, or settled pastor. For churches whose settled pastor is leaving or retiring, I help congregations in their process of grieving the loss of their pastor and seeking a new pastor; and in developing their profile. I encourage them to begin to ask the questions: “Who are we right now, who is our neighbor, and who is God calling us to be for the future?” I also help churches to decide if they wish to call an interim pastor to help them with their transition, or if they wish to seek a designated or settled pastor (this decision varies according to the size and the unique nature of each church). I receive profiles of all pastoral candidates interested in serving our churches, and invite them to choose churches from the profile page on the UCC web site. All along the journey, church leaders can call on me for in person or zoom support, consultation, and guidance. I am grateful to have three search and call associates working alongside: Richard Gordon, Carolyn Herman, and Rick Luciotti.
2. **Church empowerment and vitality:** This includes oversight of the Church Empowerment Team (please see the description on our web page) and supervision of the Empowerment Coordinators. Pastors and lay persons volunteer to receive training and supervision as coaches, Coaches provide guidance for churches who seek help with their financial or administrative functions, churches who wish to revitalize their ministry, and churches who wish to expand their mission into their greater communities. I am also available to meet with churches who want help with clarifying and revitalizing their view of mission, as God’s still speaking churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I also provide mentoring for pastors whose churches are seeking guidance from our coaches. Many thanks to Empowerment Coordinators Bruce Bouchard, Bruce Conrad, and Mike Gibbs, for their vision long before I arrived, and their continuing commitment to empowering our churches to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of central Pennsylvania.

For the past 3 months my ministry has been helping churches through the search and call process, especially with guidance around developing profiles, consultation to leadership teams, meeting with congregations, supporting interim pastors, and supporting candidates in search. As of this writing, we have 16 churches in the search and call process. Profiles of pastoral candidates interested in our churches have trickled. Pastors who would like to move on from a church feel they need to stay to support the church through the COVID period. Potential candidates are also skittish about moving to a new area or new state with travel restrictions as they are right now. Also, the number of pastors in our denominations, as well as in other denominations in the country, is decreasing. However, I believe that God will provide for the pastoring needs of our churches as we all work together with creative ideas and planning.

These past months I have also provided mentoring for pastors and guidance for churches as they contemplate how to reach out to members and friends in this age of COVID, and how to continue to grow despite the pandemic. Some of the conversations have been around visioning in this new age and the opportunities God has for us as we find novel ways to revitalize our congregations beyond the four walls of our church buildings—something that is happening already with many of our churches. I have worked with 10 churches and pastors across the conference and hope more will seek me out. Our Congregational Empowerment Supervisory Group has been meeting regularly to discuss how to offer to our churches guidance for being church in the age of COVID, as well as novel ideas for being church even when we are not in our buildings. Just recently we invited churches to consult with us as they look to re-open their doors.

In the coming year, as we look to the unknown and uncertain future for all of us, I envision that search and call will continue with the development of innovative methods for interviewing candidates, introducing a candidate to the congregation, and having call sermons and voting. In the coming year, I hope to engage with more and more churches around new and innovative ways to be church, reaching beyond the four walls of the church's buildings, continuing to reach out through streaming and other electronic means to engage more folks who are not necessarily interested in being physically in a sanctuary Sunday morning—and retaining those folks for involvement in the church on the other days of the week. Alongside the Congregational Empowerment Team, we will together offer guidance and support for all churches who wish to grow in membership or in ministry, seeking empowerment with the guidance of the Holy Spirit for how God wants us to be church in 21<sup>st</sup> century Penn Central.

I am available for conversation and reflection; workshops for pastors, consistories, and congregations; mentoring for pastors; preaching and worship leadership. If you have any questions about my position and my vision for the coming year, do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to getting to know all the pastors and churches of our conference. I end by offering my favorite scripture, verses that have sustained, nurtured, and inspired my ministry over the years.

*<sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> Finally, beloved,<sup>[a]</sup> whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about<sup>[b]</sup> these things. Philippians 4:5-8*

Blessings and peace,

*Marisa*

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