

To the members of the Penn Central Conference,

It has been a difficult year, to say the least! Back in November, I was humbled by the opportunity to accept the position of Coordinator of Camps & Retreats for the Penn Central Conference. After beginning in December, I participated in a Hartman Center Vision Retreat focused on planning to meet the established performance benchmarks; and supported initiatives by various volunteers to provide new retreat opportunities for members of all ages within our conference. Most notably, these included our Men's Retreat designed and led by Dave Bushnell and an LGBTQ+ retreat spearheaded by Darcy Decker, which unfortunately was unable to come to fruition due to this strange season of Covid. Moving forward, I would like to see the following retreats offered annually:

Youth Retreat  
Women's Retreat  
Men's Retreat  
LGBTQ+ Retreat

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in the planning or leadership of any of these events moving forward!

Alongside initiatives to support meeting the benchmarks and retreat planning I also made numerous plans for our 2020 Hartman Center camping season. This included interviewing and offering jobs to a summer staff and communicating with the Hartman Center Action Committee and the staff at UCCR about ways to improve our camping season and its promotion. Alongside this work, I visited many of our churches to share a message of the importance of Outdoor Ministry in the Penn Central Conference.

I want to state without hesitation that all of this work has been important. Whether we are discussing my own or someone else's involvement and effort in the Ministry of Hartman Center, I cannot repeat it loudly or often enough: The work we have done matters. **The ministry is and has been real and it matters.**

That said, our Outdoor Ministry has faced some exceptionally hard truths this year. Some of them, such as the situation with Covid, have been sudden. Others unfolded over many years. All of them have been extraordinarily painful. For many in our conference, Hartman Center has been a keystone of our ministry and worth any amount of money to preserve it. For others, perhaps most notably churches who are struggling with decisions to close their doors, downsize their staff, or otherwise limit their ministry due to financial concerns, Hartman Center has been a puzzlingly large piece of the pie chart which represents the budget of our conference.

We have been having this conversation for as long as I have been paying attention to such conversations. Although it has been tense, it has also been a testimony to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Throughout these conversations I have seen passion and pragmatism at their best: at times each holding their ground in disagreement, and at others recognizing similarity of vision. Wherever we have been in this conversation, I have stood witness to the dedicated care of all voices within the Penn Central Conference to our ministry, our youth, and the work we do as the United Church of Christ.

After long conversations and facing these painful realities, the decision was made to begin the process of putting the land of Hartman Center on the market. This has, quite obviously, been a heartbreaking decision for many individuals, families, and churches in our Conference. It was also a decision that defined my position in ways I had not previously imagined.

Since June, I have been functioning in a variety of capacities. My first priority has been to communicate decisions and to provide avenues of processing for those individuals, families, and churches most affected. This has been done through pastoral care in a variety of forms. The Hartman Center Celebration taking place on September 12th is one such offering, and I am proud of the collaborative planning taking place and culminating in this event. The day is a chance for us to be together at Hartman Center, enriched by gifts of worship, activities, and campfires, planned by some awesome people!

I have also been working to provide ways for our young people to stay connected. As I engaged these efforts, I learned a lot! After taking these lessons to heart, I networked with some of the voices of our young adults, along with Rev. Betsy Bruaw, and formed a Vision Team. We are very excited to share our Mission and Vision Statement with you all at this annual meeting.

I have also been laying the foundations for a number of other resources for this ministry such as a Strategy Team of more experienced adults that can be called upon to strategize and empower the Vision Team. I look forward to what the future of this ministry holds and cannot wait to see what new gifts we are sure to find in this season of rebirth.

Your sister in Christ,  
Zoe A. D'heedene