

Transitional Minister's Report

Penn Central Conference Annual Meeting

August 29, 2020

Dear Members and friends of Penn Central Conference -

Greetings to you all in the peace of Christ. I am honored to provide you with a report of my work since you hired me as your Transitional Conference Minister last year. The Board of Directors provided me with a clear demarcation of duties prior to my starting date of August 1, 2019. The job of Transitional Conference Minister was divided into four distinct areas:

1. **Management and Organization of Staff** (to include support; structuring work responsibilities/processes/routines; finalize job descriptions with Staffing Task Force);
2. **Pastoral Leadership for Conference** (to include spending designated time for relationships with associations; oversee search and call process and work with Search and Call Associates);
3. **Pastoral Leadership for the Conference** (BOD/Strategic Planning) including strategic planning; current financial needs; establish collaborative relationships with stakeholders to manage conflict and promote healing;
4. **Pastoral Leadership for the Wider Church** (relations with greater UCC; relations with PA Council of Churches and other institutions).

These items provided a clear roadmap for my work in the year ahead. Then in March 2020 Covid-19 arrived and my duties shifted. The job categories remained the same, but the workflow within them changed dramatically. I will make reference to pre- and post-Covid to clarify how my job duties have evolved.

My primary task beginning August 1, 2019 was the management and care of our PCC staff.

As most of you know, there had been steady staff turnover for the three years prior to my hiring. By the end of 2019, all positions except one (ACM for Congregational and Ministerial Excellence) had turned over since 2016. An immediate task was clarification of job descriptions, boosting the search process for a new ACM for Congregational Transitions, rectifying pay discrepancies, and starting a team-building process. By January of 2020 all positions except the new ACM were filled and the team was working smoothly together. Once Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola joined us as the ACM for Congregational Transitions, we were a settled team. This extraordinary group works together extremely well. We meet weekly (currently via Zoom), keep in contact daily, pray for and hold one another through personal struggles, and provide each other with spiritual as well as job-related support. The team confers on all major decisions and all voices are part of the discussion. I cannot imagine a better group of people with whom to work.

My second task was Conference Leadership through building relationships specifically with associations and search committees. I began by working with the Search and Call Associates to make sure that we were responding to churches in transition in the most effective ways possible. The Search and Call Associates (Rev. Richard Gordon, Rev. Sally Dries and Rev.

John Fureman (with assistance from Zoe D'heedene after Laura Dalton resigned)) were exceptionally talented at their work. I met with churches that needed in-person guidance and initiated or continued contact with those in discussion regarding bringing their ministry to a close. Once Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola was hired, the search and call work shifted to her portfolio. (I continue to work with those considering or preparing for closure.) Marisa is making excellent connections and now works with three Search and Call Associates: Rev. Richard Gordon (Gettysburg, York, Mercersburg), Ms. Carolyn Herman (Central and Northern), and Rev. Rick Luciotti (Lancaster, Lebanon, Harrisburg).

The second way I established and strengthened relationships during our pre-Covid days was through my presence at critical gatherings. I started by holding a series of Town Halls held in each association covering progress on my assigned tasks as well as financial updates. I was also engaging in weekly preaching across the Conference; attending and speaking at Association Meetings; presenting at ministerium meetings; leading educational events; attending Association Executive Committee meetings; assisting with congregational meetings; and sharing lunch and coffee dates with leaders from around the Conference.

Once Covid took center stage the focus of relationship building moved on-line. The staff worked together to plan and carry out a wide range of Conference-sponsored gatherings via Zoom. These included weekly Conference check-ins, prayer gatherings (daily with PNE and PSEC), and worship planning/discussion. We also ran two book groups (Susan Beaumont's *How to Lead when You Don't Know where You are Going* and *Faith in a Time of Pandemic* by Bruce Epperly (done with PSEC and PNE)), and I facilitated a *Poetry as Prayer* group for 4 weeks in June. Rev. Nora Foust and Rev. Betsy Bruaw assisted me with the annual UCC History and Polity class through Lancaster Seminary that began in-person in February and ended on-line in April.

Following the death of George Floyd we gathered clergy for discussion and reflection, resulting in the creation of a clergy study group for the fall using the text *How to Be an Anti-Racist* (Kendi, 2019). In a similar vein, the staff is reading *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation* (Morrison, 2019), which will be the focus of our discussion on our staff retreat in October.

During this time, the frequency of communication with members of the Conference increased dramatically via email and social media. Regular updates and information on the PPP loans (awarded to 33 churches) and other financial resources were shared, along with Conference recommendations on in-person church gatherings, best practices for communion and funerals, and more. As Covid restrictions evolved and changed we held a series of highly-attended Zoom meetings on re-opening church buildings. Important information from the national setting of the UCC was also passed on via email. The sheer volume of information processed through the Conference office from March 15th to July 1st was remarkable. I commend the staff for their attention to detail and their patience with me and one another as we navigated through a very challenging time of heightened emotion, mixed messaging from national and state leaders, wide-ranging responses from churches, and the over-politicization of the pandemic. A survey was

shared recently with clergy and lay leaders to determine what was most valuable during this time – the staff will set our planning for the fall and winter in response to the answers from the survey.

My third task involved aspects of Conference leadership related to strategic planning, financial stability, and engaging stakeholders. The Strategic Plan Task Force began their work in fall 2019 and made excellent progress until March and the onset of Covid. After March, we continued to meet via Zoom. The Task Force has taken their work very seriously and after much discussion we have drafted a new mission statement, vision, and goals. The task force is currently fleshing out the goals via determining objectives, responsibility for the objectives, and how we will assess the plan. This is exciting work. The reality of Covid has clarified our work in surprising ways, sharpening our focus about what is critical for the future of Penn Central Conference.

Financial oversight also shifted during the year and presented one specific challenge. During the Town Halls prior to Covid-19 I presented detailed information regarding the complex factors involved in bringing **Hartman Center** up to financial sustainability. The elements involved the content, condition and capacity of the site; occupancy rates; tuition & fees; marketing; programming; church support (financial and otherwise); and marketshare/competition. These elements are exacerbated by declining societal trends related to camping in general (e.g. birthrate, usage/ recruitment). Close and intensive work with the Hartman Center Committee of the Board resulted in a set of performance benchmarks for Hartman Center in key areas during 2020.

When Covid-19 continued to spread, Conference staff and the PCC Board quickly became aware that the pandemic would impact all areas of our ministry. The first PCC Board decision regarding Hartman Center was made in April: Suspend all PCC programming through Labor Day (September 7th). Our hope was that the pandemic would somehow be contained by the fall of 2020 and we could resume programming including retreats and outside rentals. By June we were faced with a stark reality: Covid-19 was not dissipating anytime soon and would have a deep and lasting effect on the economy, political structures, religious life, social gatherings, schools & universities, youth programming, civic organizations, and more. The pandemic was larger and more transformative than expected – and it was clear that we would not be “going back” to the church and Conference life we knew previously.

Looking to the financial sustainability of Penn Central Conference, the Board convened in June and made the difficult decision to close Hartman Center and move toward sale of the property. This decision was made after a great deal of reflective and intensive conversation. A deciding factor was the financial cost to the Conference (approximately \$100K a year) for keeping Hartman Center open with no programming, occupancy or income streams for the remainder of 2020 and likely through 2021. In response the Board voted to terminate our contract with UCCR on December 31, 2020. (UCCR has been managing the property since 2017 and is an organization headquartered in California.)

The loss of Hartman Center is a grievous one for many and I am fully aware of the depth of anger, frustration, and sadness, since many of you have shared your feelings with me about this decision. I am deeply grateful to Zoe D'heedene as she works to envision how PCC can be engaged in outdoor ministry into the future. I am also thankful to her and the planning team who will set the stage for us to gather on Saturday, September 12th at Hartman Center to celebrate the ministry of this very special place.

The long-term economic impact of Covid-19 on the Conference's financial stability remains to be seen. The short-term effect has been manageable, but we do expect challenging times ahead. As we move into our budget for 2021 we will keep the Conference apprised of the OCWM contributions – which are our primary source of income - as well as any changes or adaptations that we might need to consider.

My fourth task involved pastoral leadership for the wider church. This includes engagement in national UCC bodies/projects; collegial relationships with our neighboring conferences; and ecumenical relationships. My service on the Council of Conference Ministers began in June 2019 at Synod. As a group we traveled to Birmingham, Alabama in December for a visit to a variety of key civil rights venues – this event was deeply moving, painful, and inspiring. The death of George Floyd in May has led to a number of new conversations among the Conference Ministers which also have been painful as well as inspiring. These conversations are moving to include the UCC Board, and the Board recently approved the exploration of a racial equity audit for the national setting. Churches will hear more about this in the future.

In response to Covid-19 in March of this year, I convened and facilitated a weekly **Situation Room** gathering via Zoom that included the General Minister and President (Rev. John Dorhauer), Associate General Ministers (Revs. Traci Blackmon and Karen Georgia Thompson), five Conference Ministers, representatives from our Financial Ministries (Pension Boards, United Church Funds, and Cornerstone Fund), and a representative from the UCC Board. The Situation Room became the primary tool for sharing information related to Covid-19 among stakeholders at the National Setting, Conference Ministers, and the UCC Board. This work has been fast-paced and comprehensive and includes new programming/webinar opportunities, grant opportunities, low-interest loans, national surveys, worship resources, legal updates, and more. The focus of the Situation Room moving into autumn 2020 will be in three areas: the possibility of an economic cliff faced by conferences and local churches; the growing national concern regarding clergy mental health and well-being; and the emergence of a new, changed church as a result of the pandemic (especially in the area of digital ministry). We are now meeting bi-weekly.

I continue to serve on the **UCC Historical Council**; am the Co-convenor of the **UCC History and Polity Teachers' Network**; and serve as a Planning Team member for **Authorizing Ministry for the 21st Century (AM21)**, a biannual meeting for all Conference Ministers, Associate Conference Ministers, and COM chairs from across the denomination. The on-line gathering is scheduled for early December.

My collegial relationship with the staff of the Penn Southeast and Penn Northeast Conferences continues to grow and develop, resulting in new programming and resource-sharing. I joined with Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates and Rev. Bill Worley during March-June for daily and then weekly prayer pauses; discussion groups; and continuing education. On a wider scale I met with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference Ministers last September from Penn SE, Penn NE, Penn West, New York, and Central Atlantic conferences. The group seeks greater collaboration on projects while also offering important vocational support. We are scheduled to meet again after Labor Day at Hartman Center (Michaux Lodge) for 3 days of fellowship and reflection.

Working from the Church Center in Harrisburg has allowed for easy ecumenical collaboration. This spring I met with ELCA Bishop Jim Dunlop (Lower Susquehanna Synod). We have moved forward with discussions regarding clergy supply as well as future camping and retreat opportunities. (I have toured two of their camping/retreat sites.) Our next step will be to meet with Bishop Barbara Collins (Upper Susquehanna Synod) in September to further our conversations regarding the possibility of shared ministries. I was also honored to participate with colleagues in an ecumenical service of prayer in State College in February.

On a final note, I am very proud of the theological heritage of the German Reformed Church. I recognize this heritage as the keystone in the historical arch of Penn Central Conference. We have a unique history and voice within the United Church of Christ and I brought that voice to the national setting in all the various ways in which I served this past year. I believe that our theological tradition and perspective are critical to the wider church in these days.

Conclusion and Looking Ahead

The past year has been challenging and rewarding – I think we would all agree to the challenging part, at least! In my heart I feel called to this work, without exception. I have hopes and expectations for the future that I hope we can build on together. If I am called as your Settled Conference Minister we will continue walking together no matter what lies ahead – for while we do not know what the future holds, we do know who holds the future.

“...let us lay aside everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

(Hebrews 12:1b-2, NIV)