

Conference Staff Report to the Conference for 2020-2021 Penn Central Annual Meeting 2021

The April 2020-April 2021 year was a challenging one for all of us. We navigated a global pandemic alongside significant political and racial disruption at home. Penn Central Conference staff responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and domestic concerns in a variety of ways. We engineered our adaptations to keep the communication, programming, and worship elements of the Conference intact and functional. This report shares basic information on the variety and content of our work in the past year.

Staff Changes: In 2020 Penn Central hired an Outdoor Ministry Program Coordinator (Zoe D'heedene) and an ordained Facilitator for Clergy Care and Care to Clergy Families (Rev. Dr. Ronnette Comfort-Butler). We called a second Associate Conference Minister, Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola. In spring 2021 we hired Ms. Anne Rankin as a liaison for Outdoor Ministries.

Administrative Priorities: Strategic Plan development, Bylaws revisions, and Financial strategizing. See Conference Minister's individual report for greater detail.

Ministries of Connection and Communication

- Office Manager Paul Keller kept the Conference organized and functioning during the upheaval of the pandemic.
- The **Weekly E-news** is an important touchstone for all the conference news. This was especially true during the pandemic. A single-page PDF version has returned (easy to include in bulletins). Additionally, Mr. Keller sends out a **This Week in PCC** email on Mondays to provide information links for that week's meetings in easy reach. Additional special emails were sent out as needed by Rev. Call with Covid-19-related information including legal updates, PPP loan information, CDC guidelines, and more.
- Internal staff communication increased dramatically once we had a complete staff. Our communication continues to be through regular staff meetings, text and email.
- Connections across the Conference were sustained and strengthened through regular virtual pulpit supply and meeting attendance. Outdoor worship services last summer also allowed for the physical presence of ministerial staff.
- Mr. Keller worked on cleaning up our active pastor list so that worship and local church-specific information could be shared quickly, such as recorded services, special Christmas, Lent and Easter music, as well as coronavirus information.
- The staff worked on and successfully carried out the first virtual **Penn Central Annual Meeting** in late August 2020. This was done with the help of Association presidents, Board members, and the technology staff of Mt. Zion UCC in York.

- Staff hosted (and continues to host) a monthly zoom **Coffee with Conference Staff** check-in session to provide Conference updates and reflect on questions arising from the pandemic experience.

Clergy Care and Worship

- Rev. Dr. Ronnette Comfort-Butler was hired as the Facilitator of Clergy Care and Care for Clergy Families position in March. She worked to recruit and train clergy chaplains across all associations to serve the pastoral care needs of our clergy families. She also attended a number of ministeriums to promote the program and recruit more clergy chaplains.
- Rev. Comfort Butler also planned zoom retreats for clergy to offer some life balance in the midst of the turmoil of 2020.
- All staff noticed that there was a significant increase in clergy need for pastoral care due in large part to the impact of Covid-19. All four staff members provided clergy care as appropriate.
- Penn Central staff joined with Penn Northeast and Pennsylvania Southeast Conferences for **Daily Prayer** at noon for the first few months of the pandemic. Gathering for prayer continued into early fall 2020 with shared leadership before tapering off in the autumn.
- Conference Staff also led **Monthly Zoom Communion** for clergy in autumn 2020.
- Staff joined with national staff to host a two-afternoon retreats for institutional chaplains who have served on the frontlines of the pandemic.
- Staff gathered to create several **Digital Worship Services** for churches to use during the pandemic. This was followed by the creation of a **Sermon Bank** that holds digital recordings of sermons for clergy to access and use as needed. Revs. Call and Laviola also created liturgies for use by congregations during Lent 2021.

Continuing Education for Clergy

- Like everything else, Continuing Education went online and clergy gathered in zoom rooms for educational opportunities. By and large this was an effective shift.
- Rev. Foust facilitated a variety of **Boundary Awareness Training** sessions regularly including specialized training for retired clergy. She also coordinated presenters for the monthly **Ministerial Excellence Forums** (MEFs) which have seen an increase in participation with the evening option. Revs. Call and Laviola led two MEFs that qualified as Boundary Training.
- Rev. Call launched a book group using author Susan Beaumont's book *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*. Penn Central, Northeast and Southeast clergy also joined together to read and respond to Bruce Epperly's book *Faith in a Time of Pandemic*.

- Revs. Foust and Laviola facilitated clergy book discussions on Ibram X. Kendi's *How to be an Anti-Racist* in 2021 and Revs. Call and Laviola led discussions on Robert P. Jones' *White Too Long* in April 2021.
- Rev. Call facilitated **Poetry as Prayer** sessions in June 2020 and the attendees formed a regular group that continues to meet monthly.
- Rev. Call launched a new program of **Theology Roundtables** in early 2021 to deepen theological discussions among clergy. We completed one six-week session successfully and have 6 more sessions planned throughout 2021. Topics include Theology of Liturgy, Salvation/atonement, Doctrine of the Trinity, and more.
- Finally, Rev. Call and staff offered zoom gatherings to discuss pandemic concerns such as gathering in-person for worship, when/how to reopen buildings, and how to have legal electronic meetings. We also gathered for facilitated discussions regarding the death of George Floyd and the role of the pastor in political discourse in light of the 2020 election.

Clergy Authorization and Search and Call

- Rev. Foust helped **Committees on Ministry** adapt to virtual meetings and special association worship services including installations and ordinations on zoom. Ecclesiastical Councils with discussions and votes were also held via zoom. These gatherings posed a logistical and psychological adjustments for all involved. Adaptation was easier than expected and the transition to zoom events was largely successful.
- In June, Rev. Dr. Marisa Laviola began her call as our new Associate Conference Minister with a portfolio focused on transitions and empowerment. Initially she worked with the **Search and Call Associates** as she became better acquainted with the churches and Penn Central Conference. The Search and Call Associates program was brought to a close at the end of 2020.
- Rev. Laviola met regularly with **Search Committees** and assisted lay leaders and committee members via phone and email when churches in transition need guidance and help. This included work on Ministerial and Local Church profiles, which are all online now and managed electronically. While search processes slowed (and halted in some cases) during the pandemic, Rev. Laviola continued as an encouraging presence.
- Rev. Laviola helped guide congregations through the learning curve associated with interviewing and calling candidates via zoom. This was a significant shift for congregations. She also counseled with clergy considering new calls in the Conference and with those wishing to move from one church to another within the Penn Central Conference.

Church Discernment and Empowerment

- Rev. Call worked with the congregations of **Zions in Ephrata** (Lancaster Association), **St. John's in New Columbia** (Central Association), **Zion Reformed in Strasburg** (Lancaster Association), and **St. John's in Lebanon** (Lebanon Association) as they made the painful decision to bring their ministries to a close. Buildings were sold or are currently on the market. Rev. Laviola worked with **Grace in Lancaster** (Lancaster Association) on the sale of their building and their discernment of new avenues of ministry. The congregation is small, yet viable. **Salem Jacobus** (York Association) made the decision to withdraw from the UCC in May. The decision was rooted in issues regarding pastoral authorization. Both the COM of the York Association and Rev. Call expressed sorrow to the church upon their departure.
- Rev. Foust re-introduced the **Morsels of Excellence Vlog** from 2019 on the PCC YouTube page in 2021 with new topics about how to be a healthy congregation.
- Rev. Laviola's portfolio includes facilitation of the **Church Empowerment Team**, which includes a number of coaches available to churches to assist with decision-making and change. Most coaches are working with the 14 congregations participating in the Church Empowerment Academy Workshops with Paul Nickerson. This has included weekend workshops, work with MissionInsite, and regular coaching sessions for vitality.
- Rev. Laviola also consulted with churches on a number of topics as they discerned by-law updates, behavioral contracts, and strategic plans. Several conflictual situations arose within the past year within congregations (e.g. clergy and lay leadership tensions/struggles) and she facilitated discussion and resolution when possible.

Retreats and Outdoor Ministries

- Ms. Zoe D'heedene was hired to lead summer programming and retreats at Hartman Center while the PCC Board studied the feasibility of continued ownership. Following the Board's decision about the site, Ms. D'heedene assisted with closing worship services and opportunities for gathering to say farewell.
- The pandemic necessitated the closure of the camp and cancellation of many retreats, which hastened the need to list the property for sale. The Board of Directors is working on investment and spending plans of projected income from the sale of the property. These funds will allow the Conference to develop and support a variety of ministries with a primary focus on outdoor ministries.
- The closure of Hartman Center opened a partnership with the well-established Lutheran Camping Corporation. With multiple sites available, we are excited about the opportunities for summer camping. The conference has offered camperships of 50% to all PCC participants for summer 2021 to encourage campers (and parents) to explore the Lutheran camps. A Hartman Center Reunion Camp is also planned at Mt. Luther in

Mifflinburg in August. Ms. Anne Rankin was hired to be our Outdoor Ministry staff member following the departure of Ms. D'heedene, who left the position to serve a local church.

- Conference Staff are willing to work with Associations or with individual pastors in planning retreats. We hope to see this ministry expand.

Wider Church Ministries

- Rev. Call coordinated a **Coronavirus Situation Room** at the national setting from April 2020 until January 2021 to discuss immediate needs across the denomination regarding the pandemic, including emergency loans and grants to local churches.
- Rev. Foust continued to coordinate the national **Associate Conference Minister Communities of Practice** program and served as a consultant to Conferences and Associations considering starting groups.
- Rev. Call was on the planning team for the national UCC **Authorizing Ministry in the 21st Century Conference** and coordinated the slate of workshops. The event was held for 3 days in December 2020 via the Whova digital platform. Revs. Call, Foust, and Comfort-Butler were workshop presenters.
- Rev. Call also continued to meet regularly with the **Phoebe Board of Directors**, the **Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society (ERHS)** Board and officers, and Interim President David Rowe of **Lancaster Theological Seminary** in efforts to strengthen our connections to those partner agencies. She also continued engagement on the **UCC Historical Council**.
- The **German Church Partnership** remained active despite the pandemic and carried out a successful virtual gathering in February that included clergy from PCC, PSEC and PNE in dialog with German local pastors. Ms. Cameron Trimble of Convergence provided the keynote. Discussion focused on the church after the pandemic.
- Revs. Call and Foust taught the **2021 UCC History and Polity** class in partnership with **Lancaster Seminary**. The class went for 7 weeks (with three extra, optional sessions) and had almost 50 participants from across the denomination/country. Special guests included Rev. Dr. Laviola (search and call); Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates (authorization); Revs. Jes Kast, Cean James and Tony Fields (worship and church life); Rev. K. Ray Hill (Afro-Christian perspective); and Rev. John Dorhauer (UCC General Minister and President).

The onset of the pandemic brought anxiety and fear. It also brought us opportunities for new forms of gathering, worship, connection and engagement. The PCC Staff look forward to emergence from the pandemic 'cave' while also holding onto the blessings we have come to know during this time! Thank you all for your support of Penn Central Conference.