

Penn Central Conference
Conference Minister's Annual Report
June 2022

The new Penn Central Strategic Plan names numerous items for my leadership/oversight. These are in addition to the already-expected aspects of the Conference Minister job description. I'll name a few here and information about each for the year 2021-2022.

Relationship building. When I was hired in 2019 and called in 2020 there was an expectation that I would work on rebuilding strained relationships within the Conference. We have made progress on this goal, but there is more work to be done. The Pandemic offered surprising opportunities for connection via zoom and we now have numerous opportunities for gathering, including the Poetry as Prayer clergy group, Theological Roundtables, Coffee with Conference Staff, Lenten and Advent Prayer gatherings and more, up and running using zoom. Several ministeriums are using zoom to great effect, as is Nora with the MEFs and Boundary Training. The clergy survey done earlier in 2022 indicated that a large majority of our clergy feel connected to the Conference. That is positive. We also make connections by preaching and attending celebrations. This past year the staff and I preached in many of our congregations, attended fall and spring association meetings, and celebrated ordinations, installations, and anniversaries. Nora, Marisa, Rick, and I are strategic about which events/invitations we can attend and how to make sure we are all engaged throughout the Conference on almost every Sunday (post-surgery and vacation exempted). In fall of 2022 into spring of 2023, I will be working on connecting with some of our more removed/less engaged congregations.

While connections within the Conference are strong, connections with the national setting of the UCC are held more lightly by our clergy and churches. I am aware of the sense of some of our churches of being "forgotten" or "unheard" by the national setting. I regularly bring this forward for discussion at national setting events – as well as during my one-on-one conversations with GMP John Dorhauer and the other officers.

My work also includes mediating difficult relationships and conversations, such as those between clergy and their congregations or between clergy and their COMs. As your Conference Minister I never have the authority to tell church leadership what they should or should not do. I can suggest options, offer strategies, and offer affirmation when appropriate. With COMs, there can be a more directive approach since we have agreed, as associations, to follow procedures from the Manual on Ministry. Sometimes the processes of our church (COMs, search and call, etc.) do not work perfectly. When that happens, I know it is important for all involved to confront the issues in love, find effective solutions, and seek reconciliation and healing.

Regional and National Relationships. I highlighted the distinctiveness of the PCC with the national setting in the past year through my participation in the Council of Conference Ministers (I now serve on the CCM cabinet), the UCC Historical Council (which is an advisory body to the GMP), the Review Team for the Pension Board's Next Generation Leadership Initiative program

(NGLI), the Eden Seminary MID Assessment Project, and - most recently – on the General Synod Form, Frequency, and Function Committee.

PCC is gaining visibility across the denomination via the UCC History and Polity Class taught each spring by me and Nora which brought in 38 students this past spring. The class has been effective in demonstrating how our PCC clergy from different theological worlds can communicate and walk together in Christ. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this in a divided society.

I also serve as an officer on the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society (voice w/o vote) and have worked diligently with the Board and Moravian Seminary this past year as ERHS navigates internal and external conflict regarding the future destination of the collection currently housed at Lancaster Seminary.

Finally, I am currently teaching a class for the Pennsylvania Academy of Ministry (PAM) and half of the students are from PCC, with the others from PSEC and Tri-Conference. PAM exists for both and clergy and lay members and offers robust and accessible classes in 6-week chunks. PAM is one of our most valuable assets and is directed by Rev. Darryl Stephens (of Lancaster Seminary), who has dual standing in the PCC. It is a program valuable for those seeking authorization and for those who have an interest in expanding their own learning.

Keystone Gathering. Beginning in the fall of 2021 I joined the other three PA Conference Ministers on a regular basis for discussion regarding our combined future. These conversations have sprung from two places: First, our GMP John Dorhauer has encouraged all Conferences to look toward models of consolidation in response to the changing demographics of the denomination. Second, we are acutely aware that the theological heritage of the Pennsylvania Conferences (largely German Reformed) is an important voice within the UCC and we seek ways to strengthen and claim it more fully.

In early June we (myself, David Ackerman (Penn West), Bonnie Bates (Penn Northeast), and Bill Worley (Penn Southeast)) applied to the Essential Ministries Fund of the CCM for a grant (2022-2025) to expedite the exploration of shared ministries through strategic conversations and experimentation. We have contracted with Rev. Bill Metzger (PNE clergy, professional consultant, and member of Phoebe Board) to guide us in this process. The initial meeting of a working group consisting of officers and others from the Boards of the four Conferences will happen in October. We do not yet know where this process will lead. We will be fully transparent through the process and will provide regular updates, making sure that clergy and lay members have ample opportunity for conversation and feedback.

The work of the Keystone Group will also include the work of the Futures Task Force of the PCC in that we will be examining our Conference OCWM intake/outflow, the question of financial sustainability moving into the future, and what a development plan would look like for us. I anticipate this being some of the most significant work I will do in the next few years.

This is a snapshot of some of the work I am doing on behalf of the Penn Central Conference. Every day brings gratitude that you have entrusted me with this position and this ministry. I am blessed to work with an exceptional staff, which means we can function as a team. As we live into late 2022 and early 2023 I trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide us as we work for the gospel of Jesus Christ.