

Report of the Conference Minister for Annual Meeting 2023

The past year was hectic and full of moving parts. Overall, the Conference is in an excellent position, and I sense good morale in general. Coming out of Covid has been a relief! Here are just a few of the priority topics that have been on my desk this year.

Keystone Project: The Keystone project is my primary work project. The working group meets monthly, and the Conference Ministers meet with our consultant regularly. The work of the Keystone project is set to expand starting at the end of summer 2023 as we begin to implement association town halls, zoom gatherings, focus groups, and the recruitment of experts from within our own ranks. The working group remains highly optimistic and energetic. We have moved through determining our “Why Statement” and have been busily engaged in the “What” aspect of the work – naming the primary functions that a merged conference would have to do. The work of “How” we might do this work remains open and we will begin exploring it this year.

Church Consulting: Nora, Rick, and I continue to do a great deal of church consultation. Not only with search and call, but I deal with church conflicts, some of which have been highly contentious. This is not surprising as churches face declines in membership, the costs of building repair, and the like. The poor outlook for search and call and our ability to find pastors for our churches is highly stressful, both to the staff and to churches in search. My consulting work also extends to those discerning whether to close their church, which brings in another level of grief and emotional stress. Closing a church is a sacred act, I believe, and one that deserves our best engagement.

Service to the National and Regional Setting of the UCC: This past year I was engaged in several projects with implications at the national setting. They include serving on the *General Synod Form, Frequency, and Function Committee* called by the UCC Board of Directors. This group worked on the by-laws proposal to change Synod to every three years instead of two. The vote will be taken later this month. I also served as part of the evaluation group for the *Next Generation Leadership Initiative (NGLI) of the Pension Boards*. This involved analysis of qualitative data collected from all participants. The *Historical Council* has accomplished significant work around lifting up Afro-Christian heritage and outcomes of the work will come to Synod in a few weeks. Nora and I are part of a pilot project coming from *Eden Seminary* to benefit those in discernment for ministry. I created and facilitated the December retreat of the *Council of Conference Ministers* and a spring retreat for the *Florida Conference*. Finally, we held our first post-pandemic *Mid-Atlantic Regional Conferences (MARC)* gathering for all judicatory members of the 6 conferences in April. Nora worked closely with me on that project.

Preaching: My preaching schedule remains full, and I have been able to preach at numerous churches for the first time. This remains one of the best ways to show a commitment to connection with our local churches. Nora and Rick have also helped in this regard. We are also sure to divide up attendance at anniversaries, ordinations, special events, and funerals.

The work of the Conference is daunting, but never boring. I have the very best staff possible in Nora, Rick, Paul, Fenton, and Ronnette. I remain thankful every day to be a part of the Penn Central Conference and to serve as the Conference Minister. Thank you for your prayers!