

**Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ
Annual Meeting 2020
State of the Conference Address – Conference Minister**

I want to begin my remarks by reading a lesson from our scriptures. It will be familiar to many of us, and is profoundly relevant for these times we are living in. Listen now with open hearts to these words from the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, verses 1-8.

3 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

We are living in an extraordinary season of God's time, are we not? Normally, my State of the Conference address to you would offer reflections on the previous year in our life together, but this morning it seems the last 3 months, or even just the last 3 weeks, provides sufficient enough cause for reflection.

In the last months, during this COVID-19 pandemic, we have all been living fully into the deep and painful contradictions of this tumultuous season.

As we've adapted as individuals, communities and churches to the demands of this public health crisis, we've intimately witnessed what has been a time of enormous death and loss, even while new possibilities have been born.

Though we've longed more than ever for the strong and frequent embraces of our families and friends, we've instead been cautioned to refrain from embracing. We've broken down and set aside so many of our beloved practices of being church even as we've built up new ways of being church we might never before have imagined.

And then came May 25, at that corner of Chicago and 38th in Minneapolis. George Floyd, a black man, was pinned to the ground by the unyielding knee of a white police officer, denied the mercy of simple breath, and was killed. Our stunned silence quickly gave way to passionate protest. Too many years that many of us in our privilege had mistaken as peace have now been revealed for what they have always been for communities of color, and now we see an entire nation moved to wage war on racial injustice. A moment of horrifying death on a Minneapolis street may now be the moment when a more committed movement toward justice for all just might be born.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

In the midst of all of this, and so much more that could be said had we the time, what is this season for us as Church? What shall we say as Church? And most importantly, what shall we DO in faithfulness to the Gospel we preach?

It is a well-known fact among those of us who both love and intimately know the Church that, when it comes to real change, the Church is usually the last in line to embrace it. In a tone that is half-joke and half-confession we often say that if we've never done it that way BEFORE we can't do it now.

But we've been proving the last three months that that's just not true. We CAN in fact change, and change fast! In the last three months, congregations have adapted everything you do for this present season. Pastors, church members, chaplains, Conference committees and Conference staff have all done a new thing—a lot of new things!-- to meet the challenges of this unprecedented time. I mean this to the bottom of my heart: you are amazing! Thank you. Thank you.

You have shown that we can meet completely unanticipated moments with courage, innovation, tenacity, humor, and abiding faithfulness. You have proven that when it matters most, when that love of neighbor we profess is truly at stake, we can act swiftly for the collective good. You have newly discovered in the process that these relationships we have inside our own churches and more widely within the Conference actually do matter deeply.

Our community of churches, the colleagues within it, make each of us stronger, richer in spirit and in faith, better together than alone.

We have discovered within ourselves so many precious gifts in this season: the ability and courage to change, strength in community, commitment to common purpose, a willingness to show vulnerability & reach out to others for help, and a true dedication to love of neighbor. These gifts have never shown more brightly. And we have never needed them more. Today I beg of you: do not let these gifts, these newly discovered capacities, fade once this pandemic finally ends. Prepare to use them for the work of the Church that is before us, the work God is so unmistakably calling us to in this time.

Today I am issuing a call to all of us to use these gifts we've proven we have in such abundance for the cause of racial justice. George Floyd's murder inaugurated a moment in our state, our nation, and our church that we must seize. And while the MN Conference has engaged in the work of racial justice in a multitude of meaningful ways over the years, we can do better and we will.

That work has already begun. In these brief 3 weeks since George Floyd's death we have spoken up & shown up across the Conference and in a ways too many to recount to witness to a faith that demands that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. This week, the

Executive Committee of the Board of Directors approved the establishment of the Amos Task Force, and 11 diverse, amazing clergy from across the Conference said “yes” when asked to serve on it. The Task Force, supported by staff member Anita Bradshaw, will work with the Board and staff to build strategies that will help us do this work of racial justice more effectively and sustainably. It will offer accessible ways for every church in every location of the Conference to do its part. It will move us to build relationships inside & outside of the Conference to advance the work, to create spaces for listening carefully and learning deeply, and help us stay accountable to what we say we’re going to do and who we say we are. All of it will be rooted in the scriptural vision of the prophet Amos (hence the “Amos Task Force): “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Why does any of this matter, you might ask? How is this relevant to our little church far from the cities, or our church that’s struggling just to survive? I’m going to let someone else’s words answer that for me. Back on May 29, just four days of George Floyd was killed, I got an email from a stranger, whose name I still don’t know. The subject heading simply said “A Note from a Mom”, and this is what she wrote:

“Reverend Sharon: I am a black mother in Missouri who just had the hardest conversation of my life with my 14-year-old daughter. Through great tears, she

said to me it's hard being black in America. She cried because she said she doesn't feel safe with police. She wept because she said people were mad about a Target store but not mad about a life. She asked me what were the churches doing. Why were the churches silent? Then, she asked where are the white churches? We are a family of faith. And we worship with all races. However, I found myself struggling for words. I went online and saw your message on George Floyd. We sat and read it together. And it healed us. It healed my young teenager. It restored her faith. I just wanted you to know, that your words made a difference. That your words helped to heal the hatred that I saw growing in my precious daughter's eyes. I write to say thank you. And that you are in my prayers. In love, a Christian mom."

That's why what we do and what we say as church matters. It matters to that mother and that daughter we will never meet, and to the countless other lives in communities of color who are searching for a glimpse of hope and healing, some proof that the Church is in the fight. That mother's voice is in my head every day now, a reminder of why the work of racial justice is a calling that as church we cannot ignore, a summons to step fully into this moment in God's time.

Back in early March, when all that has transpired in the last 3 months was still unimaginable, the Board of Directors approved a new strategic plan

for the Conference. Time does not allow for me to talk about that plan in depth now, but let me read the Calling Statement that anchors everything else in the plan:

“God calls the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ to equip a courageous Church alive with Christ’s transforming love.”

Crafted before any pandemic closed our buildings, before George Floyd’s name was ever known, that calling makes all the sense in the world for us now. To be courageous. To be newly alive. To be fueled by the transforming love of Jesus Christ so that we can be agents of that transforming love in all the world. This is that season. Now is the time. So let us be about the ministry to which we are called.