

2022 Annual Report from the Conference Minister, Reverend Shari Prestemon

In a year when we all hoped the pandemic would lift, we instead experienced a continuing rollercoaster of experience in our personal lives, our communities, and in our congregations and ministries. Though this past year has yet again been marked by challenge, ongoing lessons, and a range of emotions, our ministry as local churches, specialized settings, and as a Conference has remained faithful and inspiring. I provide here some highlights for your information.

Pandemic Shifts –As vaccination rates spread, congregations increasingly experienced the joy of re-gathering in person for worship and various other church activities, while many continued to practice various protocols to ensure the safety and health of their members. The Omicron surge caused many congregations to ‘roll back’ to remote-only activities for awhile, and dealt a blow to the spirits of many of our authorized ministers around the Conference, who were already exhausted from leading and serving in a pandemic over too many long months. As of this writing, every congregation has returned to in-person worship and congregational life, with varying degrees of safety protocols still in place. Pastors widely report that worship attendance has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and we are also noting a reticence about participation in most of our Conference-sponsored programming.

Grant-Making of Conference: Since May of 2020, the Conference has offered a variety of grants to congregations and pastors as a sign of our support during these tumultuous times. Through early May, the Conference distributed \$61,380 in such grants. Most recently, in recognition of the fact that many authorized ministers were fully feeling the weight of these last two years’ extraordinary stressors, we rewarded \$19,600 in “Clergy Care grants”, which benefitted 51 authorized ministers in 33 of our churches (either pastors serving in those churches or specialized ministers who are members of those churches). The grants over the last two years were paid for through the generosity of individuals who contributed to a campaign for this purpose in 2020, and through contributions to our Disaster Relief and Discretionary Funds. This grant-making program ended in late May 2022.

Strategic Plan- The plan adopted by the Board of Directors in March 2020 continued to be a relevant and timely document even during the unexpected pandemic that followed. Five priorities are integral to that plan: 1) Deepening Connections; 2) Developing Leaders; 3) Doing Justice & Mercy; 4) Communicating Our Story; and 5) Stewarding Our Resources. The staff also developed a detailed, 3-year work plan aligning with the strategic plan & has been diligently attending to that work, modifying our goals and strategies as unfolding circumstances have warranted.

Conference staff: The last year was one in which we saw lots of transition in Conference staff. We said fond farewells to Rev. Sheresa Simpson-Rice (Interim Associate Conference Minister), Catherine Cejda (Administrative Assistant to ACMs), Renae Shields (Director of Finance), and Rev. Abby Henderson (Director of Leadership Development). We give thanks for Rev. Sandy Johnson, who served as a Bridge Associate Conference Minister during a critical period during August-December 2021. We were delighted to welcome our newest settled Associate Conference Minister, Rev. Kelly Gallagher, who began in January. We’ve also welcomed See Chang as Administrative Assistant to ACMs and Carita Zimmerman to the finance office, both on a contracted basis at present.

The Conference staff returned to the Conference office on a hybrid basis in Fall 2021, though the Omicron surge forced us back to working only remotely again for several weeks again later. Moving forward, the staff team will continue to work remotely some days and in the office other days.

I remain deeply grateful for the gifts, good humor, and dedication of the Conference staff, a team that has shown resilience and adaptation during this difficult period, while always keeping our mission to the leaders and congregations of our Conference front and center.

Wider Church – A significant portion of my responsibility lies with nurturing connections to the wider UCC and ecumenical church through service on various Boards of Directors and steady participation in meetings of the Council of Conference Ministers and other national setting discussions.

I was elected as Chair of the UCC's Council of Conference Ministers in late 2021 and began serving in that significant role in January 2022. I continue to serve on the national United Church of Christ Board as well, and on its Budget & Finance Committee. I also serve on the Executive Committee of the Minnesota Council of Churches' Board of Directors.

GRATITUDE –It is a privilege to serve as your Conference Minister in every season and circumstance. Thank you for being such amazing partners on this journey.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sharon K. Prestemon". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Reverend Sharon Prestemon, Conference Minister