

Annual Meeting Report – June 2023

Rev. Cindy Mueller, *Minister for Congregations in Transition*

I began in this part-time 25 hrs. a week position in April 2021. My portfolio covers two areas: supporting and resourcing churches in the search process as well as those facing possible transition or uncertain futures. I will speak to each area here.

Search and Call; those congregations searching for their next pastoral leader.

This aspect of my portfolio involves work with congregational leadership in locating either a Bridge, Interim, Designated or Settled pastors. I also work with congregations & their pastors in seeking sabbatical supply while maintaining the pulpit supply list for the conference. I provide the resourcing required to complete this task in partnership with local church search committees and their leadership.

Since our last annual meeting – June 2022 - the MN Conference has supported and resourced 23 completed searches for either interim/transitional pastor or settled pastor positions. Currently, there are 19 congregations at various stages in the search process that are seeking either an interim/transitional pastor or a settled pastor.

Other Churches Experiencing Transition – for congregations facing uncertainty and/or have decided to complete their ministry and close.

All churches face times when they need to consider their next most faithful steps. Ministry in these threshold moments calls for faithful and honest conversation. These conversations include examining the faith community's capabilities, their core values, their community relationships, their facilities and their finances. These conversations, if not begun too late (when the congregation is already exhausted), can birth new opportunities for their future – re-visioning/re-missioning/re-purposing, sharing their building with another church, merging/yoking/consolidating, re-location/selling their building and renting space, part-time clergy/lay licensed pastor, or closure. But no matter which option is chosen, all require a depth of organizational strength, leadership assets and willpower.

Experience shows that those who face their future well, no matter *what* the outcome, do so when congregational leaders, pastors and congregational members are all involved in discussing their church's future and making the necessary decisions. Which is why it so important for all congregations to be doing this sort of work *now*, rather than waiting until the decision is made for them and they have no alternative other than to close.

If a church, after having done an honest assessment of its own human capacity and financial assets, determines it is at a point that it can no longer continue forward, it begins a process of “completing” its ministry; doing the legacy work necessary to ensure the mission of their church continues in a new way.

Communication is critical at threshold moments. Now is the time for all people who are invested in their church's future to get involved in the important conversations that

need to take place. The result of such significant conversations can help birth something new as the church's mission continues or lives on through its legacy. Such work is critically important and should be done whether a congregation concludes its ministry this year or 100 years from now.

Congregational planning in times of transition seeks to address an uncertain future that MAY result in the closure of a congregation. Critical assessment of a congregation's vitality and sustainability can lead to a time of discernment about the various paths a congregation may choose to take. We have had one congregations that has faithfully chosen to merge with another congregation - Mpls., **Linden Hills UCC** w/Edina Morningside UCC. One *other* congregation is considering this as a possibility for *their* congregation. The conference supports our congregations in these challenging times as they seek to discern what God is calling them too be in the next 3-5 years. As of my writing of this report, the conference is working with 6 *other* congregations each at various stages of their discernment.

Since our last Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting, we have mourned the closure of six congregations. And yet, we also celebrate these congregations' faithful service in the communities of Hopkins, Lester Prairie, Mendota Heights, Montevideo, Sandstone & Staples.

Hopkins, Mizpah UCC (organized 1964) held their final worship service on September 25, 2022. Their last pastor was the Rev. Nancy Swanson. They sold their building and chose to leave two significant legacy gifts to the MN Conference UCC.

Lester Prairie, Prairie Community Church (organized February 5, 1899) held their final worship on January 15, 2023. They donated their building to another church that was renting their facility. Their last pastor was the Rev. Al Fiene. They chose to leave a living legacy gift that is meant to further our UCC covenantal ministry.

Mendota Heights, Mendota Heights UCC (organized 1957) closed December 30, 2022. Years earlier they gifted their building to the daycare center housed in their building with an understanding they could continue worshipping there as a faith community. Their last pastor was the Rev. Lanny Kuester.

Montevideo, First Congregational UCC (organized February 26, 1872) held their final worship service on October 30, 2022, after celebrating their 150th anniversary earlier that month. Their last pastor was the Rev. Okogyeamon (Herb Perkins). They gifted their building to the ELCA church one block away in order for it to be remodel into transitional housing for the homeless in their community.

Sandstone, Sandstone UCC (voted to become UCC in 1961 though originally organized in 1890 as a Presbyterian church that later became a congregational church in 1917). They held their last worship on August 13, 2022. Their last pastor was Sharon Bismark (licensed). They generously gifted the MN Conference UCC with a living legacy

donation to our 21st Century Church Fund. Such a legacy will support our ongoing ministry of the conference.

Staples, First Congregational Church (organized 1889) held its last service on May 28th of this year. Their last pastors were the Rev. Lilja Behr & Cindy Lemke (licensed). They are still in the midst of the closure process as of this annual meeting.

Upon invitation from the leadership of these churches, conference staff have participated in these churches' final worship services and celebrated the living legacy that seeds & gives birth to new ministry because of these faith servants. Let us celebrate and honor their faithfulness and their ministry that has spanned generations.

With the Greatest of Hope,

Rev. Cindy Mueller