

2023 Annual Report from the Conference Minister, Reverend Shari Prestemon

The year since our 2022 Annual Meeting was one where our world and our churches began to fully emerge from the isolation and hardest impacts of the pandemic. Yet this was also a year when all of us began to understand what some of the long-term effects of the pandemic really were, many of them challenging. It has been a time of tremendous learning and of shifting sands beneath our feet; this is true for our member congregations, for the Conference and wider church, and for the communities where we reside. I provide here some highlights for your information.

Strategic Plan- The plan adopted by the Board of Directors in March 2020 continued to largely guide our ministry in the Conference in the year just past. Five priorities named in that plan gave our work further shape and direction: 1) Deepening Connections; 2) Developing Leaders; 3) Doing Justice & Mercy; 4) Communicating Our Story; and 5) Stewarding Our Resources. A detailed work plan created by the Conference staff aligned with those priorities and set ambitious goals. As we reach the end now of the initial 3-year plan, we celebrate that many significant goals were fully met and exceeded, even as new goals and programs emerged. While this written report cannot begin to capture everything, some particular items of note:

- **Covenant Days:** we organized three regional events designed to bring clergy and lay persons together from multiple churches to deepen our connections and equip a courageous and faithful church. These days, marked by worship and workshops and engaging panel discussions, were tremendous successes, reminding us of the **covenant** at the heart of our identity in the UCC and the attention and mutual accountability it requires. Covenant Days took place in Alexandria, Robbinsdale, and Rochester.
- **Small Church Collective:** In March we launched a Zoom-based, monthly gathering for pastors and lay leaders of congregations with 50 or less in worship on average. These gatherings have been very well attended and participants have been deeply grateful for the opportunity to hear from speakers and share questions, challenges, ideas, and celebrations in small group conversations. According to 2022 data, 71% of our congregations in the Minnesota Conference have 50 or fewer in worship and fit this definition of “small church”.
- **Anti-racism Commitment:** In the Fall, we entered into a contractual partnership with Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training and began a multi-year process to identify obstacles in our Conference life to more fully living into our anti-racist commitments and implement strategies to remove those obstacles. The Board of Directors, staff, and committee leadership of the Conference engaged in anti-racism training with Crossroads, and an ad hoc group was recruited which will serve as a catalyst for change in the Conference moving forward.
- **Stewardship of our resources:** Following extensive research of a Board-appointed committee to explore options for the Conference’s future officing, the decision was made to move into a smaller office suite in the Minnesota Council of Churches. This decision was made in part because the staff now does much of its work remotely, and does not regularly utilize the office space we’ve had at MCC. Renovation on the new office space began in early 2023; the staff will move into that new space in June 2023. This move will help us realize tens of thousands of

dollars in savings annually. In addition, I was asked to bring a recommendation to the Board for a sustainable, long-term staffing model for the Conference, which I did in March. That recommendation was approved. That staffing model includes: 1 full-time (FT) Conference Minister, 2 FT Associate Conference Ministers, 1 part-time (PT) Minister for Congregational Transitions, 1 PT Director for Outdoor Ministries, 1 PT Development Officer, 1 .75FTE Director of Damascus Project shared with the Wisconsin Conference UCC, outsourced financial management, and outsourced communications work.

Church Closures – A sobering number of our congregations voted to conclude their ministries over the last year. The details of those closures are shared in Rev. Cindy Mueller’s report elsewhere, but I note this fact of our Conference life here as well because it is so important. I grieve the deep loss of these beautiful ministries among us, and also honor their faithful discernment leading to these difficult decisions.

Conference staff: There have been no personnel changes over the last twelve months –alleluia! Our staff team is a dedicated, gifted bunch that deserves immense gratitude of the Conference at large. They have shown themselves to also be tremendously flexible in times that have been anything but ‘normal’. Of particular note in the last year has been the extra load placed on all staff in preparation for our move to a smaller office, which entailed countless hours of culling hard files, cleaning out storage areas, packing boxes and learning new systems. Kevin Brown and Sandy Kellen led an effort to research, select, and implement a new cloud-based electronic content management systems and did an exemplary job of that. We are also indebted to several volunteers who assisted in the onerous task of going through church and clergy files and winnowing them down to a reasonable volume of paper for ongoing storage: Diann Anders, Sandy Johnson, Jeff Palmer, and Rick Wagner.

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 have chaired the Council of Conference Ministers for the last year-and-a-half, a role that is both gratifying and overwhelming. I will finish my 2-year term of service on the national United Church of Christ Board in July this year, where I have also been a member of the Budget & Finance Committee. I also serve on the Executive Committee of the Minnesota Council of Churches Board of Directors. Throughout this year I also enjoyed the opportunity to represent the Council of Conference Ministers and Minnesota Conference in a number of wider church events.

GRATITUDE – I am sincerely grateful for the faithfulness, prophetic commitment, & authentic relationships present in our life together as the Minnesota Conference UCC. It is a privilege to serve as your Conference Minister and be present with you amid celebrations and challenges. Thank you for being witnesses to God’s love and purpose in the world.

Sincerely,

Sharon K Prestemon

Reverend Sharon Prestemon, Conference Minister