

Annual Meeting Report – June 2024

Rev. Cindy Mueller, Minister for Congregations in Transition

I have served in this role for three years now. I have so appreciated the opportunity to work with so many of our congregations. My portfolio includes work w/congregations in the search process as well as with those facing other significant transitions who are seeking to discern their futures in this chaotic and ever-changing time. I will speak to each area here.

Search and Call; working with 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 these requests for assistance in partnership with local church search committees and their leadership. Since our last annual meeting – June 2023 - the MN Conference has supported and resourced 24 completed searches for either interim/transitional pastor or settled pastor positions. Currently, there are 14 congregations at various stages in the search process that are seeking either an interim/transitional pastor or a settled pastor.

Other Churches Experiencing Transition – working with 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 a variety of new opportunities for their future. But no matter which path 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 is 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. I am the staff person who walks with these congregations in this challenging process that is potentially filled with both grief and resurrection.

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 next year or 100 years from now.*** Critical assessment of a congregation's vitality and sustainability can lead to a time of discernment about the various paths from which a congregation may choose to take. We have had one congregation that as a result of their discernment has faithfully chosen to merge with another of our congregations – **Stillwater, St. Peter's UCC w/Bayport, Bayport Congregational** (they have changed their name to St. Croix United Church). **Mpls., Linden Hills UCC** is still in the process of officially merging w/**Edina, Edina Morningside Community Church.**

Other congregations are considering this as a possibility for their congregation. As the conference supports our congregations during these challenging times, they each seek to discern what God is calling them too be in the next 3-5 years. As of my writing of this report, I am working with 3 other congregations each at various stages of their discernment.

Since our last Minnesota Conference Annual Meeting, we have mourned the closure of two congregations. And yet, we also celebrate these congregations' faithful service in the communities of **Pelican Rapids & Hopkins. Pelican Rapids, First Congregational UCC** (organized in 1882) held their last service 12/31/23. They gave their building to a Lutheran church in town, who will be working with the city to turn it into a community center. They also gave the MN Conference a significant financial gift. **Hopkins, Mizpah UCC** (organized in 1888) held their last service 9/25/22. They sold their building and 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. They also gave generous gifts to the National setting of the UCC & UTS.

Staples, First Congregational Church (organized 1889) held its last service on 5/28/23 and continues to work through its closure process.

Zumbrota, First Congregational Church, (organized in 1857) held its final worship on 1/17/24 and continues to go about their work of closure.

Chaska, Zoar & Waldorf, Zoar continue to do the work required before closing.

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