

2016 Annual Report

Reverend Shari Prestemon, Conference Minister

I begin this Annual Report with a word of sincere thanks. As the three-year mark of my service with you as Conference Minister nears, I find myself increasingly aware of how blessed I am to minister in this capacity and in this particular place.

Thanksgiving for our Conference staff: I serve alongside a staff that works diligently to do its best for the whole of the Conference and the ministry of Christ's Church, and does so always with sensitivity to good stewardship, faithful witness, and shared purpose. Each member of our staff team is deserving of our collective gratitude. I am blessed to lead this team of amazing individuals.

Thanksgiving for our Board leadership: Our Board of Directors continually surprises me with its willingness to act boldly, share generously, and lead with vision. I am grateful for the strong partnership in leadership we enjoy together and for the ability to keep our eyes fixed on a future filled with possibility. It is truly a delight to work with this Board of Directors.

Thanksgiving for ALL of YOU! I give abundant thanks for each congregation, authorized minister, lay leader, and non-parish ministry setting that comprises our Minnesota Conference. While these are often challenging days of discernment for all of us in Christ's Church, I am heartened by the earnest efforts I see across the life of the Conference to faithfully follow God's still-speaking voice.

Personnel

We experienced several transitions in our Conference staffing during the year. **Sandy Kellen** joined our staff as my Administrative Assistant just prior to Annual Meeting 2015. **Reverend Garth Schumacher** came on board as Interim Associate Conference Minister for Faith Formation with Children & Youth in July. We made a decision to bring financial management tasks of the Conference back in-house after several years of outsourcing, and delighted in receiving **Eric Stoebner** as our new Director of Finance and Operations in January 2016. Finally, we were sad to receive the resignation of **Jennifer Buskey** from our Pilgrim Point Camp staff in early 2016, as she departed to take on less seasonal work.

A search process for a new settled ACM for Faith Formation with Children and Youth has just begun. Four persons have been appointed to serve with me on the Search Committee: Nathan Holst (Peace UCC – Duluth), Sheri Nelson – First Congregational, Wadena), Kim Shaffer (First Congregational – Mankato), and Abigail Henderson (First UCC – Northfield). We invite your prayers for this group as its important work moves forward.

Congregational Departures

Our Conference grieved the loss of two congregations in the last year. **First Community Church in Campbell** officially closed its doors in November. **First UCC in Fergus Falls** voted to leave the United Church of Christ in February; they continue to serve as a church in Fergus Falls but are not affiliated with any denomination at this time.

We give thanks for decades of devoted service and ministry each of these congregations had as members of the Minnesota Conference, and offer up our prayers that ministry might find new ways of unfolding in both communities.

Wider Church Celebrations

In July, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ met in Cleveland, Ohio. Our Minnesota Conference delegates served faithfully through long hours of plenary debate and discussion and enjoyed moving worship services and the opportunity to grow in community as a delegation and across the wider UCC. One highlight was the election of the UCC's new General Minister & President, the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer. This marked the joyful culmination for me and other GMP Search Committee members of many months of hard work.

We were privileged to have John with us in the Minnesota Conference just a few months after his election, speaking at a donor gathering, key-noting our Church on the Move event, and preaching in one of our local congregations. It was inspiring to hear John's assertion that "the Holy Spirit envisions a future in which the United Church of Christ matters."

The national setting of the UCC has continued to experience financial cuts, which has meant continued downsizing of staff, placing the UCC-owned hotel in Cleveland on the market, and consolidating office space. The Collegium, UCC Board, and Council of Conference Ministers have been working in increasingly collaborative ways to provide mutual support and counsel as we navigate challenging times. I commend the whole of the United Church of Christ to your prayers as we strive to embody the covenant we claim in our life and ministry together.

Our covenant with the wider church is partly expressed in partnerships, including our health and human service ministry partners. In the Minnesota Conference, we enjoy three such partnerships with members of the Council for Health and Human Service Ministries (CHHSM) in the UCC: Oak Meadows (Oakdale, MN), Samaritan Bethany (Rochester, MN), and Back Bay Mission (Biloxi, MS). We celebrate the ways that these three extraordinary organizations multiply our ministry.

Nurturing our covenantal relationship with the wider UCC is central to my ministry as Conference Minister and an aspect of my work I greatly value. In that regard, I serve on a number of Boards of Directors in the life of the wider UCC, striving to connect the national setting and our local United Theological Seminary to the concerns of local congregations and Conferences and also working to bring the good news of our wider ministries back to the Minnesota Conference. I celebrate all the ways we are connected in the wider United Church of Christ and the multiplicity of our ministries together.

We have much to be grateful for in the Minnesota Conference. We are a stable, healthy, and vital Conference blessed with prophetic commitment, strong lay and clergy leadership, faithful congregations, and a willingness to follow the call of God into new, uncharted territory. I am indeed thankful to share in this work with you as your Conference Minister.