

Thinking about 2017 and the year ahead brings Psalm 47:5 to my mind.

You, Sovereign God, have done many wonderful things,  
and you have planned marvelous things for us. (CEV)

God indeed called us together to accomplish wonderful things in 2017.

We've welcomed several new staff members to our SWC team. The Rev. Dr. Barbara Doerrer-Peacock is now our settled Associate Conference Minister. Barbara brings judicatory experience, wisdom, creativity and balance to our staff. "She's just really solid," one of our clergy said upon hearing the news of Barb's call. I am glad to be working with Barb because we compliment each other's leadership styles and we just have fun working together. You will hear more about Barb's vision for her work during the annual meeting.

Rev. Liana Rowe resigned as conference moderator to become our part-time administrative assistant for finance and facilities. Liana brings an MBA, judicatory experience, a passion for social justice, deep understanding of the SWC and the requisite attention to detail required in our finance work. In just the few weeks she has been part of our staff, Liana she has proven she can get the job done. With Eli Johnson serving as assistant to the Conference Minister and Wende Gonzales serving as relational communications coordinator our employed staff is complete. We are grateful to be working with a number of contractors including Ernie Gregg (Web site and special events), Kristen Wetzel (housekeeping), Carmelo Rivas (maintenance).

Shifting to a part-time finance staff position opened the door to a partnership with Financial Services at Church House (national setting). Financial Services provides bookkeeping and reporting services, check writing, and payroll processing. Their team, including CFO Stephen Jones, is available for consultation and guidance on all things financial. This partnership has proven beneficial and efficient in the four months since its inception.

At our 2017 annual meeting a vision to establish a SWC Endowment was cast. Since then our Endowment Fund Management Committee has developed an endowment policy, a major gifts policy, and an investment strategy. Those documents are available in your annual meeting book or upon request from the conference office. The committee recommended and the executive board approved Bernstein Private Wealth Management, a unit of AllianceBernstein L.P, as our Endowment Fund investment manager. This month the SWC Endowment Fund was established with an initial balance of \$3,556,772.27. That amount includes legacy gifts received from South Mountain Community Church, the First Congregational Church of Tempe UCC, and interest earned prior to permanent investment.

My work with our interreligious and ecumenical partners has been a joy. Arizona Faith Network continues to evolve and has announced a new organizational structure that will accommodate its numerical growth and its understanding of interreligious partnership. With this project nearly

completed my time working with AFN's think tank will diminish. Other wider church efforts are waiting in the wings including a project for the Council of Conference Ministers, AM21 planning committee, and a joint project among the Western Region UCC conferences that has denominational implications. I can hardly wait until I can share those details with you!

Our SWC trip to March for Our Lives (MFOL) in Washington, D.C. was a highlight for me, for the conference, and for the teens and sponsors who made the pilgrimage. I am so proud of our youth, their home churches, and our congregations and individuals who supported this witness for the value of human life and for gun safety. SWC members donated money, SkyMiles, and even metro cards to support our teens. The cost of the trip not covered by these generous donations will be paid from the SWC Youth Reserve account, a fund generously support by a designated legacy gift from South Mountain Community Church. You will hear from our teens about their experiences during Friday night's banquet.

Rev. Dr. Gloria Smith welcomed MFOL teens who could go to Washington into her building during a local empowerment rally she and Encanto Community UCC sponsored in collaboration with our Unitarian Universalists friends. Emerys Staton, Director of Pastoral Care and Justice Ministries told me how grateful he was for that gathering and how energizing it was to see and hear from our delegation in Washington D.C. as people in Phoenix prepared for the Phoenix MFOL. And how exciting it was for our Washington delegation to receive messages from people all over the conference marching in their towns – Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Tucson, and more. We can truly accomplish great things when we plan and organize together!

Not all of my goals for last year were accomplished. It was an ambitious agenda. Maybe too ambitious. Heart surgery last June also had an impact. My endurance and stamina aren't quite 100% yet, but they are better each week. And lingering memory issues are frustrating but also improving. Your prayers and encouragement in the recovery journey have made all the difference. Thank you!

Through the next year the conference leadership team will engage in strategic conversations and work toward several goals.

New generation church is filled with possibilities. Outdoor Ministry for children and youth has long been a passion for the Southwest Conference. While we celebrate everything that camp has meant to us in past decades, we wonder if a new, yet unimagined paradigm for youth and outdoor ministry awaits the future church. Could it be interfaith peace camps in the heart of our cities? Could it be intergenerational mission camps in rural and underserved communities? Why not lend your imagination and energy to our youth and outdoor ministry? We will also be working toward new partnerships with our ecumenical partners to improve the experience and efficiency of our camp ministry.

I continue to envision progressive Christian ministry on the campuses of Arizona State University, New Mexico State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of New Mexico. This year a conference think tank for university ministry will be convened to begin making our vision real. And another opportunity has presented itself. There are part-time pastoral positions available in our university communities. We will be working with these congregations, who are all currently in search and call, to imagine ways the SWC can partner with them to meet the needs and vision of both their congregations and the conference.

Taos UCC under the leadership of Rev. Pamela Shepherd is off to a terrific start. What a joy it was to worship with them during their first weekly Sunday gathering. A ministry plan benchmarks evaluation will take place soon and as a result we anticipate Taos UCC will continue to receive new church start funding. The 2018-19 budget includes funding for an additional new church start if a viable proposal is received.

Three of our progressive congregations need bi-lingual, bi-vocational pastors. Two of them are in Spanish-as-a-first-language, borderlands communities. One of them is in a university town. The budget includes draws from our designated reserve accounts to support these projects as pastors are identified who can fill the positions. Trips to two more UCC seminaries are planned to look for possible candidates and plant seeds for new ministries in the SWC.

My travel in and on behalf of the SWC covers a wide variety of purposes. In June Rebecca Glenn and I will travel with another delegation of SWC teens to the Western Region Youth Event in Honolulu. I will be a guest of the Montana/Northern Wyoming Conference for their annual meeting. Workshop and preaching dates at several of our conference churches are on my calendar. Search and Call, leadership training, and generosity workshops took me to several of our churches to work with the many gifted and visionary leaders we have among us. There are dates available yet this year for me to visit your congregation!

Community organizing is presenting itself as a critical ministry tool in the Church of the twenty-first century. And the Southwest Conference is now positioned to take full advantage of faith rooted organizing as a ministry strategy. Increased military engagement in our borderlands means the conference will focus more attention on awareness and action there. The work of our sanctuary churches and other local church projects will receive conference support financially and through the ministry of presence. And our vision for a new way of doing youth ministry will intersect our justice and witness work.

This past year has demonstrated that when the work of the conference aligns with values of our member churches and individuals, generosity results. The Executive Board and I are committed to implementing donor-centered strategies in the conference's philanthropy ministry. A Friends of the Conference initiative will launch at this annual meeting to grow the SWC endowment so

that we can develop financial capacity to assist local churches with innovations in their ministries and fund congregational revitalization efforts.

What tells me the SWC is on the right track are the stories I hear wherever I visit. Not long ago a support staff member pulled me aside and said of their new pastor, "He's the best thing to hit this place in years!" validating the extra effort that search and call journey required. Last Sunday I heard David's story. Before he and his wife became members of First Congregational UCC in Albuquerque he went to a church where he learned about Jesus. David now tells people he goes to a church where people live the values of Jesus. He tells that story with conviction and tears that betray a transformed life. His is just one of the many stories of how our congregations and our clergy are changing people's lives. I hope you will take a moment at this year's annual meeting to ask someone to tell you a story about the best time they have had in their church in the last year. Maybe you will hear about the Unity Rally Against Hate and Bigotry at First Church/Phoenix, or Shadow Rock's Safe Sanctuary Zone outside the Trump Rally, or the evening with Tess Julianna at Church of the Palms, or what offering hospitality has meant to Rincon Congregational UCC, or how United Church of Sun City became our newest O&A congregation, or what happened at Church of the Good Shepherd after their generosity workshop, or Los Alamos's 70th anniversary story, or... What's your story?

A year from now we will convene again for the 2019 SWC annual meeting. That gathering will focus on local church, and in particular on strategies for growing local churches. Since 2016 many of our congregations have experienced significant growth. We will convene in Phoenix and will be hosted by First Congregational UCC. God continues to have great plans for our conference and for your local church. May we be a community of empowerment, courage, and collaboration as we seek to live into our mission of being extravagantly welcoming and affirming followers of Christ called to embody God's unconditional justice and love. Please keep the staff and leadership team of the conference in your prayers as we work together to equip congregations and clergy for excellent ministry.