

Last year we had planned an Annual Meeting with the theme “Stories That Transform.” Little did we know we would be living one of the most transformational stories of our lifetimes in 2020. The dual pandemics of COVID19 and Racial Injustice almost broke us. We are not the same, not the same people, not the same churches, not the same Conference, not the same denomination, not the same world.

Words fail me when I reflect on the learning curves and accomplishments our clergy and lay leaders navigated with courage, energy, and innovation. I don't need to tell you that you have worked harder in your calls and in your congregational leadership than you ever have before. I see how you learned new skills, platforms, and ministry methods at lightspeed. Almost every church was online for worship within two weeks of the pandemic declaration. The innovations have not stopped. You found what worked for your faith communities and ran with it. Sometimes my coach invites me to pause and says, “Now install that.” She means I need to consider what I've been through, how I have grown, what I've learned so that I can appreciate the good, the blessings, and the achievements, so that I can intentionally choose what to take with me into the future and what to leave behind. As we heal, we do well to tell our stories to one another, listen with wonder, grace, and gratitude, and install all of the ways God has worked these transforming months for good among us.

Never have I traveled so much without leaving my house! Zoom made it possible to gather with clergy, moderators, and treasurers like the SWC had never done before. We learned about one another, deepened our relationships, forged bonds of trust, and benefited by the connections personally and in our congregational lives. I am looking forward to traveling in person again, probably in May on a limited basis and at a pre-pandemic level by the end of the year. I am committed to continuing our virtual gatherings that allow leaders across our congregations and communities to support one another, build relationships, crowd-source resources, and nurture trust.

We had no idea what impacts suspending in-person gathering would have on our worshipping communities. The SWC Executive Board prepared for possible financial impacts on the SWC operation and on local congregations. Reserve money was tagged for an emergency grant program so that churches didn't lose their buildings or their pastors. Those contingency plans were never implemented. We are deeply grateful for the faithful and regular OCWM support from each of our congregations and communities. We are grateful to Rincon Congregational UCC and from The Vernon and Elsa Higginbotham Charitable Remainder Trust for their major gifts. The generosity of our Friends of the Southwest Conference continues to grow our Endowment. Your generosity provided abundantly more than any of us could have asked or imagined for your congregations and for the SWC's ministry of support in these days. Thank you!

Because of your generosity the SWC is offering grants to local churches for hybrid worship and technology. The challenges for the coming year include integrating our virtual congregations with our in-person congregations. Moderators, treasurers, and pastors told me how they are discerning what to carry forward, what to leave behind, how to restructure to meet new needs, and how to best use resources to accomplish the ministry to which God is calling churches in this new day. You have a strong partner in the SWC, our leadership team and our staff for that work.

The Conference is itself engaged in similar work regarding operations. The Executive Board has been discerning how best to use our resources – cash, investments, property, personnel – to accomplish our mission. “The Southwest Conference is extravagantly welcoming and affirming followers of Jesus called to embody God’s unconditional justice and love in the world.” The year ahead promises clarity and possible new ways in which the SWC will use resources to support our congregations and communities in accomplishing that shared mission and ministry. SWC properties in El Paso and Phoenix have been or are being converted into cash for that purpose. The discernment process for the SWC office building will conclude sometime later this year. Again, our goal is the best use of our resources to accomplish our shared mission and ministry.

Living into our commitment to decenter whiteness has begun. The Racial Justice Ministry Team has done excellent work developing *A Path to Restorative Racial Justice*. The conversation will expand in coming months and a document outlining the Path called for by the resolution we adopted in October will be in your hands soon. There is no need to wait for the document to begin working toward Restorative Racial Justice. Many of our congregations are already well on their way in that journey. While the basic guidelines called for by the resolution will be included in the process document, the resources will likely include a crowd-sourcing component. Racial justice work is difficult and challenging work. Thank you, Rev. Dr. Alberta Wallace, Rev. Dr. Patricia StandTal Clark, Jill Pawlowski, Ruth Randall, Rev. Dr. Thomas Lewis, Martha Philips, Kathryn Winscher, and Christopher Schouten for your commitment to the task! We need our combined wisdom and one another’s support.

Previously begun initiatives in the SWC continue. Several congregations are growing into being WISE; and a second of our churches – First Church/Phoenix – adopted a WISE declaration. Other congregations are becoming Immigrant Welcoming. Still other congregations are discerning Open & Affirming decisions. From my vantage point I bear witness to a Conference that continues to challenge and encourage themselves and one another to spiritual health, growth, and vitality.

Our relationships with our ministry partners remain strong. While I am blessed by my relationships with our UCC, ecumenical, and interfaith partners I am also blessed to share that work with a number of SWC members. Rev. Tom Martinez is the SWC voice on the UCC Council for Climate Justice; thank you, Tom! Rev. Derrick Elliott carries our voices to the United Church of Christ Board; thank you, Derrick! I am grateful to Gail Joraleman for her

dedication representing the SWC on the New Mexico Conference of Churches board. Thank you, Gail. Rev. Rock Fremont is the SWC voice on the UCC Manual on Church working group and serves on several ecumenical and interfaith boards locally and nationally; thank you, Rock! I am deeply grateful to Gail Bird for her two years of faithful service representing the SWC on the Arizona Faith Network board. Thank you, Gail. Marilyn Riggs, a long-time volunteer with AFN will represent us on their board in the coming year; thank you for accepting this new role, Marilyn! Rev. Randy Mayer and Jerry Kennell represent the SWC on the steering committee for Cruzando Fronteras. Cruzando Fronteras supports La Casa, a collaborative ministry of shelter and hospitality shared by the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, Grand Canyon Synod (ELCA), and the Anglican Church of Western Mexico. Thank you, Jerry and Randy! Our newest ministry partner began at The Good Shepherd UCC and has grown into its own nonprofit. Late last year the Executive Board approved a \$25,000 gift to the Sahuarita Food Pantry.

The relationships I share with judicatory colleagues have been invaluable for my learning and support doing the work of a Conference Minister. This year that was especially true. In addition to my colleagues in the Western Region of the UCC and my community of practice Conference Minister colleagues, I want to say thank you to Arizona colleagues Bishop Jennifer Reddall (EDA), Bishop Deborah Hutterer (GCS/ELCA), Regional Minister Jay Hartley (CC/DOC), Executive Presbyter Brad Monroe (PCUSA), Bishop Bob Hoshibata (UMC), and my New Mexico colleagues Synod Stated Clerk & Presiding Elder Conrad Rocha (PCUSA), Archbishop John Wester (RC), Bishop Michael Hunn (EDRG), Rev. Kim Fields (CCDOC), and Bishop Jim Gonia (RMS/ELCA).

Continuing education this year came by way of Winter Talk sponsored by the New Mexico Conference of Churches, The Doctrine of Discovery & the Legacy of Colonialism sponsored by the [AntiRacism Study Dialogue Circles](#), and [Best Skills Best Churches](#) (BSBC), a collaborative program offered by the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona and the ASU Lodestar Center for Philanthropic and Nonprofit Innovation. How wonderful it was to share the BSBC experience with Kelly Kahlstrom and Andrew Ponder Williams, two SWC members in discernment! In the coming year, the SWC is leading the effort to bring BSBC to the Western Region of the UCC. Six Western Region Conferences are partnering with us to offer Best Skills Best Churches to our members in discernment, local pastors, and lay leaders. An announcement is coming soon!

Ministry in the public square took on a new form with virtual press conferences. We joined ecumenical and interfaith partners across the country in several Federal appellate and SCOTUS *amici* briefs. Those cases involved issues related to faith communities and public health orders. I am grateful to our conference attorney, Frank Fox, and other members of the legal profession within our conference, including Brendan Mahoney and Scott Greenwood, for guiding me in this ministry of advocacy.

Responsibilities in the wider United Church of Christ found me serving as the secretary of the Council of Conference Ministers. I was blessed to lead workshops for the Hawaii Conference staff and clergy about the roles of ministers as employees and as spiritual leaders.

Much of what you just read sounds pretty 'routine.' There were also not-so-routine ministry tasks that grew out of the needs COVID created. Critical incident management training from my prison ministry days really came in handy. Creating excellent channels for communication with and between clergy and local church leaders was a first priority. Daily tasks included monitoring COVID19 statistics, finding and sharing tools local churches could use to make informed decisions for their contexts, drafting health advisories, and writing policies related to working from home, responding to incidents of exposure to COVID19, both for the SWC and as templates for congregations. I did lots of listening. I heard traumatic stress taking a huge toll on our pastors and chaplains. So I wrote and the SWC received two grants for traumatic stress debriefing and mental health support for our clergy. While many of our congregations maintained or grew their attendance and finances, a few struggled. COCAM B and I watched COVID exacerbate and accelerate the decline of several of our beloved congregations. Those challenges brought pain and stress, losses, and griefs. We will be healing from 2020 as individuals, families, congregations, a Conference, and a Church for a long time. And together we *will* heal. Thank you, Brenden Mahoney, Rev. Deris Rice, Lay Minister Jane Jones, Joyce Schneider, Rev. Julie Parmenter, Rev. Michael Bush, Nora Roberts, and Stu Kraft for tirelessly supporting our congregations, advocating for programs that support them in their ministry and our clergy in their relationships with their churches, and for being terrific conversation partners in this work.

Rev. Liana Rowe has served the SWC in many ways for a long time as staff, on our Executive Board, and rejoining staff in a new way. Most recently Liana served as our Administrative Assistant for Finance. Liana is retiring at the end of our annual meeting. The transition for that day began six months ago. The SWC has contracted with Your Part Time Controller LLC to provide bookkeeping and other financial services. This change in our staff structure raises questions about building management and use tasks previously included in that job description. We haven't found those answers yet, so the conversation about what is next is continuing. What we have figured out is how grateful we are for Liana, for who she is, for her skills and gifts, for the ways she has challenged us, led us, and served us. Liana, thank you for your courage, your faithfulness, your convictions, and for all the ways you've walked with us. We are grateful for you!

In some ways it's hard to believe I am in my sixth year as your Conference Minister. In other ways its not. I am tired. I was planning a sabbatical for autumn this year. Because I anticipate many congregations coming back into their sanctuaries this fall, I want very much to be with you in those days. So I am taking sabbatical July 1 through September 30. The plan is simply to rest,

renew relationships with family, and renew in spirit. During May and June, and again when I return, I will be giving attention to:

- living into the finance office transition,
- finishing *A Path to Restorative Racial Justice* and putting into the hands of local church leaders,
- restarting the Appreciative Inquiry work and return to vision/mission clarification for the SWC with standing committees,
- reimagining and launching the SWC Inclusion Team,
- determining staff needs re: space and place for doing our work as we,
- chart a course for the best use of the 917 as a SWC resource, and
- returning to visiting our congregations in person after return from sabbatical.

During my sabbatical, the Rev. Dr. Barbara Doerrer-Peacock will be our acting Conference Minister. A plan to support the work Barb has been doing as our Associate Conference Minister is being developed so she has the time and bandwidth necessary to serve and lead you as Conference Minister for three months. I am grateful to you, Barb, for her wisdom, talents, gifts, and leadership.

Genevieve, thank you for being you, for the ways you manage me, 😊 and for all the ways you contribute so positively and genuinely to my work, to our team, and to the life of the SWC.

Wende, thank you for being you, for your creativity and attention to detail, and for the fun and energy you bring to our team and to this work.

Phil, thank you for sharing knowledge about and contacts with the FEMA and disaster management world with us. You kept the food ministries in several of our congregation's open by connecting them to troops who could stand in the gap when the health risks to more senior church members required them to step back.

Gordon, thank you for your daily Messenger reminders that God loves us and is with us, for showing up online to lead workshops and to preach, and for sharing who you are and your journey with us courageously and gently.

Michael, thank you for your tenacity and energy to move us into being WISE congregations, for finding creative ways to show up when you'd rather be there in person, and for holding me to my commitment to revision the Conference Inclusion Team. It's going to happen.

Nancy, you always say yes when a congregation asks for your wisdom about money, everything from creating cultures of generosity to first steps in putting a capital campaign together. Thanks too for being a partner and confidant in the SWC's ministry of philanthropy.

Every evening I review the day, its accomplishments, and challenges, and ask myself a series of questions. One of those questions is always: Am I doing what God is calling me to do in this world? I continue to be grateful to God and to you for the privilege of fulfilling this call as your Conference Minister. Thank you for all the ways our partnership in ministry blesses my life.