

Southwest Conference United Church of Christ Annual Meeting 2023 Moderator Report 2022-2023

Book Study

This year the Executive Board (EB) of the Southwest Conference (SWC) committed to engage in discussion of the book *Wait – Is This Racist?* by Kerry Connelly, at our monthly meetings. This book is a practical guide for becoming an anti-racist church, meant to assist us in examining many aspects of church life, including *leadership, preaching and liturgy, music, small groups, buildings and grounds, communication, missions and service, children and youth, and pastoral care*. The book also included chapters on *modeling interracial dialogue and developing a plan of action*.

As the book reminds us: *If your church is primarily White, it's important to remember that you can be a predominantly White church and be awesome and radically anti-racist.*

As we examine different aspects of church life, we may be shocked to recognize the depth at which *whiteness* is baked into the way that we make decisions. As Connelly writes, *“Key indicators that Whiteness is at play in your decision making might include aspects of individualism (rather than the collective), productivity and perfectionism (versus rest), peacekeeping and the status quo (instead of holy disruption for the sake of justice), and the prioritization of resources (especially financial) for the sake of the organization rather than the uplift of the marginalized. Another key indicator is an insistence on hierarchy and the hoarding of power. Shared power is a decidedly non-White form of leadership, and we tell ourselves a lot of myths about how it just can't work.”* (*Wait – Is This Racist?*, pp. 17-18)

We recommend the book to you and your Local Churches to discuss and create a *plan of action*.

Moving Office Location

The SWC offices moved from the Sheridan property after it was sold to the Methodist Center on Meadowbrook (the Methodist Center was sold creating the need to find another location). The SWC Office then moved to 4020 N 20th Street in Phoenix and the Conference Minister's office was relocated to Desert Garden UCC in Sun City until the Rev. Dr. Bill Lyons resigned. Beginning January 2023, the Conference Minister's office relocated to the Conference Office. Thank you to the Staff who patiently moved multiple times and worked faithfully in the midst of the disruptions the moves caused.

Resourcing Local Churches and Partner Communities

One of the joys of serving on the EB is supporting the ministry of Local Churches and Communities through authorizing grant funds designated for specific Local Church ministries; approving recommendations from Standing Committees, like COCAM-B for the new church start in south Phoenix, New Hope UCC, that opened on April 2, 2023; and supporting the work of *La Casa de la Misericordia* shelter in Nogales, Mexico.

Restructuring

The EB appointed a Restructure Team (RT) to present an amended and restated set of bylaws to the Conference at its Annual Meeting in April 2023. The intent of this restructuring effort was to revise the bylaws so that they would more accurately reflect what we are doing, remove what belongs in policies and job descriptions, represent the reality of our smaller church membership sizes and geographic realities, and name inclusion as a priority and value. The RT was a representative group of the Standing Committees of the Conference: Rita Bourgeois, Deb Church, Rich Doerrer-Peacock, Scott Greenwood,

Hubert Hirwa, Mary Martin, Deris Rice, Ed Street, and Susan Valiquette. Each representative gathered comments, edits, and suggestions from their respective committees to create the final amended and restated version. Thank you to Brendan Mahoney for gathering all this data and completing the final draft.

Board Orientation and Good Governance Training

The Rev. Dr. Bill Lyons and Brendan Mahoney offered good governance training to the EB and all Conference Standing Committees. The Kansas Leadership Center defines leadership as *mobilizing people to make progress on complex adaptive challenges*.

Board/Committee member duties consist of:

1. Care: active, engaged, and prepared
2. Loyalty: organization above self, act on behalf of the organization
3. Obedience: act within the interest of mission, vision, and constituents

According to *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, board conversations consist of:

1. Strategic: mission, strengths, unique voice.
2. Generative: do we want to engage? Create ideas? Ask where do we want to go?
3. Fiduciary: do we have the resources?

Through *Leadership on the Line*, as leaders we invite people to the balcony: This is what we see. This is why we are doing this. This is the intended outcome. This is what it will look like when we get there. When there is differing opinions or even one person who isn't in agreement, we can ask: What is it that you need that could get you to a place of supporting this decision?

Conference Minister

The Rev. Dr. Bill Lyons tendered his resignation, with his term as Conference Minister concluding November 30, 2022. We received this news with grief and gratitude. We grieve Bill's departure and are grateful for his servant leadership.

Bill's leadership created a solid foundation to continue the ministry and mission of the Conference. We have exemplary Staff, financial stability, and vibrant congregations. The Conference is operating with best practices as a nonprofit organization. Thank you to Bill for his leadership and ministry in the SWC. May God be with him as he returns to chaplaincy and is reunited with family in Ohio.

Thank you to the Rev. Dr. Barb Doerrer-Peacock for serving as the Acting Conference Minister until the Rev. Dr. Toni Hawkins arrived.

Transitional Conference Minister

The EB appointed a Transition Team to search for a Conference Minister. The Team was composed of the Officers of the EB, the Rev. Dr. Marvin Morgan, and the Rev. Dean Hokel. As the Transition Team began its work, they were guided by the denomination through the national UCC Conference Minister Search Coordinator, the Rev. Lee Albertson. Through Rev. Albertson, a national search was conducted, yielding an initial pool of eight candidates. After listening for the Holy Spirit's guidance through prayer and discernment, this pool was narrowed to four final candidates and then two, who were then interviewed in depth by the Transition Team, with reference calls and vetting completed.

The Rev. Dr. Altonnette Hawkins (Dr. Toni), Associate Conference Minister in the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, was unanimously selected by the Transition Team and approved unanimously by the EB, who entered into a covenant/contract with Dr. Toni as our Transitional Conference Minister (TCM) beginning January 1, 2023, for a period of 12-18 months with the option to continue as mutually agreed upon by the TCM and the EB. At the end of the specified time, or at a time mutually agreed upon between the TCM and EB, the TCM may be brought forward by the EB to the delegates at an Annual or Special Meeting of the Conference to be voted upon as the Settled Conference Minister.

In their discernment process, the Transition Team considered the following questions: Who could lead us in continuing the work of restructuring, assisting churches in revitalization, furthering the effort of decentering whiteness, supporting Members in Discernment, possessing a genuine love for administration, and having an enthusiastic spirit and faith? The Rev. Dr. Toni Hawkins matched these needs for us as a Conference. Calling a TCM in a short period of time was unexpected; however, having someone in place sooner rather than later would provide stability and enable us to continue our growth and development as a Conference. Additionally, given the current climate of search and call, it was vital that we secure a candidate in a timely manner before they sought a position elsewhere.

See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you them. Isaiah 42:9

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:18-19

We welcome the 'new thing' that God is doing in the SWC. Thank you to the Rev. Dr. Toni Hawkins for accepting the calling. We are looking forward to this journey with you.

Thank You

Thank you, Rev. Dr. Bill Lyons.

Thank you, Rev. Dr. Barb Doerrler-Peacock.

Thank you, Southwest Conference Staff: Genevieve Benham, Wende Gonzales, Karen Richter.

Thank you, Transition Team.

Thank you, Restructure Team.

Thank you, Brendan Mahoney.

Thank you, Rev. Dr. Toni Hawkins.

Thank you, SWC Executive Board: George Ault, Deb Church (Clerk), A.O. Ferguson, Hubert Hirwa (Moderator-Elect), Scott Greenwood (Treasurer), Rebecca McElfresh (4/22-10/22), Rebecca Morgan, Sarah TevisTownes (former Moderator), Connor White.

Thank you, Standing Committees.

Thank you, First Church UCC, Phoenix.

Thank you, SWC for the opportunity and honor to lead.

In Service,



Reverend Susan M Valiquette
Moderator