

Conference Moderator Annual Report

“Won’t you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.” (*New Century Hymnal*, #539) These words speak to me as I contemplate this past year in the life of our Southwest Conference. My first thought is: Thank you for letting me serve you as the moderator of our Conference; there is no greater gift that I can receive. And my second thought is: Thank you for **your** service to the Church and to this Conference; thank you for our common service to God and to the ministry of Jesus Christ in this place, and our service to one another! Thanks be to God for the amazing grace that sustains us in this community, this life, and draws us together in this mutual commitment and service!

As to be expected, we faced challenges this year. The most difficult decision that the Executive Board had to make this year is in regard to what was introduced to you in last year’s conference moderator’s report as “an exciting prototype technology that [holds promise to] bring our churches closer together in the digital world.” Regrettably, by the end of 2019, the Executive Board had to vote to discontinue the SWC’s financial support for the project, cut our losses and end the Conference’s involvement with a company that had produced barely a minimum of the deliverables promised, and, especially, had not yet begun to develop the connectivity application piece that was *sine qua non* to our purpose of supporting the enterprise in the first place. (About this, and other things that I am mentioning in this report, you will learn more detail and specifics from our Conference Minister’s report.)

At the same time, there are important highlights of what was accomplished in the Conference, and what the Executive Board did on our collective behalf. Key examples are:

- We had a successful collaboration with the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ in “doing” camp in the summer, and in the Fall, thanks to the faithful work of our Associate Conference Minister Rev. Barbara Doerrer-Peacock, we adopted a carefully thought-out, comprehensive set of rules and procedures for camp that we hope will render the camp experience even better in the years ahead;
- We launched a program for helping new, first-call local church pastors in the SWC with mentoring and coaching;
- In addition to continuing to support financially our still-new church start in Taos, NM, and our revitalizing congregation in Flagstaff, AZ (Note of full disclosure: This is my home congregation), we have established a new, entirely unconventional UCC campus ministry at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, the “NAU-Justice and Witness Connection”, as an integral part of the mission, ministry and the revitalizing of the Flagstaff congregation;
- We have brought the book-keeping function of our Conference’s finances back into the Conference office. This is an arduous and time-consuming process, but thanks to the diligence of our Treasurer, Cynthia VerDuin, and our staff, especially Rev. Liana Rowe, this has been accomplished.

Most notably, in the midst of the swirling, fast-paced policy shifts of our nation's government and evolving and deepening crises, the Southwest Conference's compassionate ministry of faithful witness on – and across – the border for justice and for the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers with decency and dignity has intensified. This ministry has engaged the United Church of Christ broadly, as well as people of faith across denominations, and has become a beacon for the justice witness of the entire UCC. And yet, at the same time, every day and on the ground, it is so many of our churches and our members in the SWC that put themselves on the line. We – our clergy, our Conference and the members of our congregations – have engaged in, and still engage in, innovative and creative approaches doing the multifaceted work of this ministry, galvanizing not only our own congregations but working with so many communities and faith partners. My prayers and my thanks go out to every single person who is engaged in this work.

A second focus of the Conference's work this year has been to build and strengthen our "external" relationships. In general we have intensified our ecumenical AND our interfaith relations. In more specific terms, with Rev. Lyons as our ambassador, we have pursued a formal ecumenical partnership with the Consejo Ecumenico Cristiano de Guatemala, whose co-directors, Senor Brayan Alvarado and Senor Hector Midence, we have invited to be with us at our 2020 Annual Meeting. We also sent a conference delegation, along with Conference Minister Rev. Bill Lyons, to visit the Consejo in Guatemala in March 2020 to deepen this relationship. In addition, Rev. Bill has been invited to attend, and do daily Bible Study leadership, at the Micronesian Council of Churches /UCC General Assembly this July 2020, and he will do so on our behalf. Bill's presence, as well as his learning experience there, will not only open up the opportunity for a deeper formal relationship between ourselves and the MCCUCC, but will also have a constructive and positive effect on our Conference's covenantal relationship with the Marshallese and Samoan congregations in our conference.

Finally, another major focus of the work of the Executive Board this year is planning and devising a process for the Conference as a whole to engage in Conference-future visioning and strategic planning. In the Fall, a task group within the Board was formed to study, along with Rev. Lyons, alternate models of the process, and to make recommendations to the Board. This resulted in our devoting the Board's end-of-January retreat to a day and a half of learning the recommended process and modeling the articulation of aspirations and designing of strategic initiatives. We also implemented a briefer but similar process on March 7 that engaged a much broader range of "Conference stake holders" (or, as I prefer, members of the conference family, or, those who share the identity of the SWC.) It is important to keep in mind that visioning and strategic planning for the future of the SWC cannot be – and was not – accomplished in a day, but I believe we have sown the seed this year for a fruitful ongoing process to take place regularly for many years to come. Above all, it is my deepest hope that what we have implemented this year would result in the energizing and vitalizing of the Mission and Church Vitality Committee (MCVC) of the Conference, enabling it to serve, according to our by-laws, its best function as a "pseudo-Congress" for the good of the Conference.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to my colleagues who served you this year on the Executive Board. I give thanks for their wisdom in deliberation and decision, their enthusiasm in action, their faithfulness in all their work, and their selflessness in giving of their time and energy to the work of the Conference, despite the health and personal or family problems that many of them faced. I wish to also thank Frank Fox for providing the Conference with sound and wise legal counsel, and Karen Richter for giving her remarkable organizational talents to coordinating our Annual Meeting. Thank you also to all who served on, and especially those who chaired, our standing committees and *ad hoc* committees.

Our Conference staff is amazing. We said farewell to Eli Johnson, and welcomed Genevieve Brenham, and we thank her for bringing not just efficiency but also grace to the work of being the Conference Minister's Executive Assistant. We are grateful to Rev. Liana Rowe for, among so many things, working diligently with our Treasurer to bring our "financials" back to the Conference office and keeping our accounts in order. And I give thanks to God every week, when I get to read *In the Loop*, for Wende Gonzalez's dedicated work that links us together in effective communication. I am profoundly thankful for the spiritual leadership as well as the practical and even "business" acumen of our Conference Minister, Rev. Dr. Bill Lyons, and our Associate Conference Minister, Rev. Dr. Barbara Doerrer-Peacock, for their wisdom in guiding us, their passion for justice, their caring so deeply for our congregations, and above all, for their immense sense of good humor. In Bill's case, I have experienced these gifts of his not only throughout the year, but especially in the time before, during and after General Synod in the summer.

In our thirty years in AZ, few things have given Janet and me more joy, and more hope, than serving in various capacities in the SWC, so once again thank you. At the same time, I would like to make this expression of gratitude also an appeal to all our members in the SWC to contribute your gifts to the life of the Conference, to take a turn at this service.

We are a servant church of a servant Christ who committed, devoted, and ultimately gave his life to do the will of God who sends us into the world. "We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travelers on the road; We are here to help each other go the mile and bear the load." (*NCH*, #539, second verse.) May the wondrous grace of God be with all of us on this journey of service, and may we always be there for one another.

John K. Leung

Moderator, SWCUCC, 2019-2020