

March 11, 2020 changed everything for the Church, including the Southwest Conference (SWC). In the following 365 days, together we mounted a crisis response, learned to live in liminal space, and began grieving when we realized that life was never going to be the same. Change is the moment everything became visibly different. Transition includes all the tasks and time required to physically, intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, relationally, technologically, programmatically, financially, and spiritually catch up to what is different. At some point in 2021 crisis response and liminal living (the waiting for 'normal' to return) shifted to transition management. All of the reorganization that's expected in what [William Bridges](#) calls transition's 'wilderness zone' began unfolding among us. This is the story of the SWC's transitional work in 2021.

**Trends accelerated.** Local churches that had been trending stronger before the pandemic either increased in strength or stemmed their decline. Church leaders welcomed this surprise. We had anticipated downturns in financial support, attendance, and belonging among *all* congregations. In reality most local churches rallied. Local churches that had been trending weaker before the pandemic quickly lost ground. The \$200K emergency financial safety net created by the SWC Executive Board did not prove a sustainable way to stop what had been the long-declining trajectory of two SWC local churches. West Congregational Church and Iglesia Congregacional Unida ended institutional life and became legacy congregations. We are grateful for their many years of mission and ministry with us and to their local communities. And we are grateful that as legacy churches, their ministry continues beyond what was their institutional life.

**Discernment began.** The SWC Executive Board began discernment in late 2020 that continued through 2021. The question? How do we best use the resources of the SWC to accomplish our mission? The shared mission of the SWC is to be *extravagantly welcoming and affirming followers of Jesus called to embody the unconditional justice and love of God*. The mission of the standing committees and staff of the SWC is *to equip and empower SWC congregations and clergy for excellent ministry* as we together live into our shared mission. This discernment question arose when the staff and Executive Board realized the work of the SWC office could be accomplished apart from owning the property located at 917 East Sheridan. When purchased the property helped the SWC accomplish a particular strategy for mission. Over the intervening decade that strategy's context changed, and its effectiveness began to wane. The last two years accelerated the timeline for discerning a new strategy to meet different needs.

Since it was formed in 1965 the SWC held title to real estate that served the Conference's mission as well as the missions of a many of our local churches. The practice of judicatories or

national instrumentalities acquiring land and subsidizing church buildings began in the UCC's predecessor's denominations. In the 1990s the SWC established a policy for transferring title of property to the local churches who met the criteria for sustaining ministry.

**Resources were converted.** The properties called home by last year's legacy congregations were both owned by the SWC. When those congregations no longer needed them, the Executive Board needed to answer the question: what roles do real estate holdings and church building subsidies play in fulfilling our mission now?

The Board realized that in these days [liquid assets](#) rather than [real assets](#) can better serve our shared mission as well as that of local churches. Proceeds from the sale of those properties along with the 917 (office building) are now held in a moderate growth fund through which a variety of ministry, imagined and yet unimagined, can take place. Projects funded in 2021 included establishing a Clergy Mental Health Fund, a Racial Justice Fund for conference-wide justice/decentering whiteness work, and grants to nonprofits that began as ministries of local churches; [Hope House](#) (Church of the Red Rocks), [Sahuarita Food Bank](#) (The Good Shepherd), and [ABQ FaithWorks Collaborative](#) (First Church/Albuquerque) were invited, applied for, and received grants.

**Leadership support morphed.** A transitioning Church needs a different kind of leadership. Regular **calls with local church moderators and treasurers** continued in 2021. Crowdsourcing conversations were the most popular and engaging. "What is your church doing about...?" "Who is...?" While these calls began to facilitate COVID19 response, conversation topics evolved to include best practices for many aspects of church life, resource sharing, and relationship building. The SWC somehow feels smaller to me in a good way. We are more connected than we have ever been as a community of local church leaders. These opportunities are a way of being the SWC together for the foreseeable future.

The SWC invited the Nonprofit Management Center at Arizona State University's [Lodestar Center](#) for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation to offer [Best Skills, Best Churches \(BSBC\)](#) to a UCC cohort drawn from the Western Region Conferences. This certificate program provides best practice-oriented learning experiences in volunteer management, effective communication and handling conflict, marketing and community presence, financial management, and fundraising and applies them to the world of religious nonprofits aka churches. It's a third option diffusing the binary debate about churches being or not being businesses. I am grateful to the [United Church Fund Brown Endowment](#) for generously underwriting clergy participant tuition for BSBC with a \$10K grant. My role in the effort involved the invitation, Western Region collaboration, contracting, and grant funding. Rev. Dr.

Barbara Doerrer-Peacock, along with and Rev. Rock Fremont<sup>1</sup> and Kelly Kahlstrom (both BSBC alums) collaborated with ASU/Lodestar for curriculum design, supervision, and logistics.

Among the 23 graduates<sup>2</sup> representing 7 Conferences in this first UCC cohort were new church start, revitalization, first call, and seasoned pastors, lay leaders, and members in discernment. Their reviews of the program were extremely positive. Two participants, including SWC's Rev. Seth Wispelwey, shared their [experiences from BSBC in the ASU News](#).

**Decentering Whiteness progressed.** Creating a process whereby our local churches and communities can be designated Restorative Racial Justice ministry settings has been a slow and painful journey. Doing the right thing does not mean I always go about it the right way. I learned much from my early efforts move our resolution to decenter Whiteness into sustainable actions. What I did and how I did it brought me face to face with my own Whiteness and racism. Working to dismantle one's own racism is painful. Doing it publicly as a leader trying to move an organization toward a culture that is more Whiteness-decentered has at times been excruciating, embarrassing, and fulfilling. I need and appreciate the patience, accountability, grace, and forgiveness people have afforded me both during the institutional work and apart from it.

The Racial Justice team has worked hard, gone through much individually and as a team. They've engaged an action/reflection model along the way. I am grateful for each person who has been part of the team: Rev. Dr. Alberta Wallace, Rev. Dr. Patricia StandTal Clark, Rev. Dr. Thomas Lewis, Kathryn Winscher, Ruth Randall, Martha Phillips, Christopher Schouten, and Karen Richter.

The process of adopting a resolution after studying a topic is very UCC. It is also very White. In fact, the team showed me just how much almost everything about the way we were approaching our task – *“to create a process, approved by the Executive Board, by which local congregations can be designated as Restorative Racial Justice ministry settings of the Southwest Conference United Church of Christ,”*<sup>3</sup> – was rooted in Whiteness. BIPOC cultures use different processes for organizational transformation. Decentering Whiteness and pursuing restorative racial justice must be grounded in relationships. We will make mistakes in our pursuit of becoming restorative racial justice ministry settings. And that is no reason to avoid or abandon the work. It is a call to be intentional about how we do this work together. The hard lessons and the team's perseverance the last 18 months led to what the SWC Racial Justice Team calls a 9

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Fremont teaches regular in the Best Skills Best Churches program.

<sup>2</sup> 9 of the participants were from the SWC including 5 clergy, 2 MIDs, 2 lay leaders

<sup>3</sup> A Southwest Conference Resolution on Restorative Racial Justice: Decentering Whiteness in Our Churches and Society. Adopted Oct 4, 2020

*Steps* document. It's modeled on the UCC steps for becoming a Just-Peace Church. These 9 *Steps* are dynamic, adaptable, and nonlinear despite the numbered sequence. They are not oriented toward productivity or timeliness. It's not the end of the Team's work or our work as a Conference to become a racial justice ministry setting. Taking these 9 *Steps* begins a pilgrimage and engages the work together that we resolved to do.

**New ministries imagined and emerged.** Throughout the pandemic local churches and pastors have done nothing less than reinvent how we do church by imagining and implementing a host of new ways to engage in community and mission. **Virtual life** is here to stay and not just for pandemic reasons. SWC gave \$110,000 in grants to local churches in 2021 to underwrite costs for audiovisual equipment, air purifying contraptions, and a host of other technology upgrades that made online gathering and return to safe space possible. I am grateful to our standing committees, particularly COCAM B and the Executive Board, for finding meaningful ways to support our local churches. 2021 reminded us that the basic unit of the United Church of Christ *is* the local church. As go our local churches, so goes the SWC and the denomination.

In early 2021 an email arrived from a local church pastor in Chicagoland. Rev. Myra Taylor articulated a call to plant **New Hope UCC** in the Phoenix area. So we began to correspond. Then we met virtually. Then Rev. Taylor, David, her husband and a deacon, and I met in person. What joy our conversations and growing relationship has been for me! *"With an Afro-Centric foundation, our vision is to be a church that is:*

- *passionate about reaching the unchurched for Jesus,*
- *passionate about the power and centrality of the gospel,*
- *passionate about discipleship and inside-out transformation,*
- *passionate about loving one another in community, and*
- *passionate about serving and transforming the city, and through it, transform the world,"*

*in which "all kinds of families are valued, and ALL lives matter, with respect to Black and Brown lives. New Hope will be an 'open and affirming' church and will celebrate God's gifts and grace through LGBTQ+ people of faith. We will also commit to include all people regardless of ability or disability."*

Rev. Taylor sent her new church start ministry plan to COCAM B and they are in conversation together. She already has garnered support from key Black Church leaders in Phoenix, and begun conversations with African American LGBTQ+ Affairs and Black Women of Arizona about community partnerships. As a bi-vocational pastor she enjoys her career as a public education executive and will continue that here. The 2023 SWC budget includes new church start funds

for New Hope UCC in faith that sometime next year, New Hope will launch as a SWC new church start.

In spring 2021 Rev. Tula Maga, pastor for **First Samoan Congregational Christian Church Toafao le Talalelei of Wittmann** (First Samoan CCCTOLT), approached me about their desire to be received as a covenanted local church in the SWC. Last fall I visited at the congregation's invitation to worship with them. What a delight to renew my relationship with members there I had not seen for quite some time including Elder Fiume. Following the current UCC Manual on Church protocol, First Samoan CCCTOLT and Desert Garden UCC have enjoyed an accompaniment relationship together, and Desert Garden recommended to COCAM B that First Samoan CCCTOLT be received into the SWC/UCC.

**Bill rested.** On June 30, 2021 Ron and I left on sabbatical. It was time, more than time. Those three months were rejuvenating, instructive, and transformational personally as well as professionally. Our first stop was Hawaii with 2 of my grandkids and their parents. What joy to bob around ocean bays with 5- and 7-year-olds in their snorkel gear, climb jungle trails, lounge on various beaches, and simply be with them.

Upon our return we packed the car and tent-camped our way from here to Ohio. I was destination-anxious, and Ron was journey-oriented. We compromised by agreeing that if he would show me a buffalo, I would enjoy the trip and not hurry to our destination. He, of course, knew that I needed the trip to decompress.

I need to tell you at this point my sabbatical splurge was the purchase of a Nikon P1000 camera with 125x optical zoom. I have always wanted to photograph wildlife, birds particularly. Sabbatical was a perfect time to learn how to use the camera and document our experiences.

One morning we ascended a rise on [the Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Preserve](#) near Pawhuska, Oklahoma, and off to the left was a bison bull resting in the grass. Assuming this would be my one and only buffalo sighting, we stopped, and I took an embarrassing number of pictures from every conceivable zoom setting. When we crested the rise, suddenly we were in the middle of the 2500 member herd! The experience defies words. That day and the next we found ourselves at times within 15 feet of the majestic creatures, listening to their vocalizations and the swish of their tails. Mothers nursed calves. Bulls competed. And the prairie hosted it all, nurtured it all, in windswept waves of limitless hospitality.

In Ohio we spent 6 weeks with our families. I met my fifth grandchild for the very first time; he was born 11 days before the pandemic was declared. He and his older sister are just over a year apart in age. Getting to know them and watching how my son had grown into an amazing father was profound blessing. We took my seven-year-old granddaughter on her first camping

trip. I took her fishing for the first time and she caught her first fish. And then it was time to camp our way home on a racial justice tour of sorts through Tulsa's [Greenwood](#) neighborhood ([Black Wall Street](#)), several sites of indigenous massacres named "battlefields" by the National Park Service, and Osage country ([Killers of the Flower Moon](#)).

Sabbatical taught me I will be fine in retirement. I have a life beyond my profession and call to ministry. In fact, re-entering ministry was a profound and totally unexpected and a challenge. I do this work very differently now.

The camera taught me there is beauty in everything. Seeing it is about finding the best angle or seeing something in a different light. Often cropping what is unnecessary is the only way to really see something. I learned the value of focus and how sometimes the automatic settings mean we miss what's there in the background. There is satisfaction in capturing a moment, there is joy in sharing it, and the two are not the same.

I came back from Sabbatical feeling profound gratitude for Barb, Genevieve, Wende, and Karen. Barb provided stellar leadership during my sabbatical. I knew I didn't need to think about work while she was leading and that was a true gift. When I came back they were different and so was I so we needed to talk through the things that we wanted to be different moving forward, the aspects of Barb's leadership that they wanted to preserve, the parts of mine that we could place on permanent leave. Our staff members are all amazing people. And they are each a terrific colleague. 😊

I feel deep gratitude for the 40 people who serve in leadership with me on the SWC standing committees. They are bold and gentle, attentive and faithful, courageous people of integrity. Through all the hard decisions and difficult conversations, they always hold the health and vitality of our local churches and our authorized ministers foremost in their hearts and minds, and the mission of the SWC guides every decision. We trust and are accountable to one another.

A conversation partner in the proofing of this report noticed that I hadn't mention God. I was grateful for the observation. It made conscious what I my unconscious mind assumed. I feel joy and affirmation and peace naming that God is in it all. Nothing we have experienced in our Conference life through 2021 would have been possible without God always with us, guiding, affirming, calling us forward. God, you are the one with, in, and through whom our transition story is being authored. All glory and honor is Yours now and always!