

**56TH ANNUAL MEETING
CENTRAL ATLANTIC CONFERENCE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
CONFERENCE MINISTER REPORT**

Before writing this year's annual report, I reviewed what I wrote last September as we prepared for our 55th Annual Meeting last October. I wrote of several items that I would focus on in 2020. Yet suffice it to say that 2020 has turned out to be far different than expected. These are among the many adjectives used to describe this year: unprecedented, extraordinary, challenging, difficult, tumultuous, existential, awful, unreal, surreal. No one, within or outside our Central Atlantic Conference, anticipated what this year would bring.

Yet, now almost three quarters into rather this indescribable year, I attempted in my reflections to settle on one adjective to describe the ministry of the Central Atlantic Conference ("Conference"). After possibilities such as faithful - grace-filled - dedicated - remarkable, all viable candidates, my spirit settled on this word: wonderful. I don't mean wonderful here in the sense of the more popular synonyms of the word that mean excellent, marvelous, or the oft over-used adjectives of fabulous and awesome. I mean here that the ministry of the Conference has been full of wonder, and, reflecting over the past year has produced several characteristics of the Conference's ministry that has been 'wonder-full' to me.

First, it is the compassion of the Conference I experienced very personally during and just after last year's Annual meeting in the passing of my father. My family and I were overwhelmingly embraced by the many expressions of sympathy - cards, prayers - donations - the presence of a substantial number of pastors and members at my father's homegoing service. If I have not thanked you, please allow me to offer my deepest gratitude for your kindness and sympathy in our loss. It is still hard for my family, but we know that we are encompassed about, surrounded, and strengthened by an army of angels around us, including the Conference. For this wonder-full ministry compassion, thank you, and I thank God for you.

The second wonder-full feature of the Conference's ministry over the past year is its' adaptability. I recall flying home on a fourteen-hour flight in early February as part of a delegation from the UCC, the Christian Church Disciples of Christ, and the United Church of Canada for an unforgettable 'Pilgrimage of Hope' to Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh and India. While there we heard of something called the Coronavirus that appeared at the time to be confined to China. I thought at the time that this virus would not find its' way to our shores. We were far away. We had been relatively unaffected by viruses such as Ebola, MERS-V, and SARS in part because of a rapid and coordinated response by our government. Whatever this Coronavirus was, surely it would not pose a threat to the United States. Or so I thought. That was an incredibly incorrect assumption. What was then a virus has become a global pandemic with the highest number of

infections and fatalities in this country. We have experienced mindboggling losses; losses of life, losses of employment, losses, in practically all aspects, of the way we lived before COVID-19, including the way we lived together as Church. And yet, stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and even sanctuary shutdowns did not close this Conference. In a remarkably short time our ministers, whether they were before or not, became 'tech savvy.' Members who heretofore had never been on a video conference 'Zoomed' in for worship and meetings. Our pastors become virtual shepherds, helping our members navigate this strange, uncertain, and scary terrain posed by COVID-19. And I could not be more proud and grateful for the pastors and lay leaders for the extraordinary faith, wisdom, and guidance with which they have led our members during this pandemic. For this wonder-full adaptability, and 'stepping up to the plate' in this incredibly challenging time of COVID-19, thank you, and I thank God for you.

Third, the prophetic ministry of the Conference has filled me with wonder this past year. With the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, we experienced again the pandemic of body, mind and spirit caused by centuries of systemic racism. But this time there have been more glimpses of a possible sea change, as thousands in and beyond the streets have spoken and acted in the name of justice. Our churches have raised their voices individually and collectively, and I have been both inspired and strengthened by their witness. I have heard sermons from all over the Conference condemning the evil of racism and calling for repentance of this country's original sin once and for all. I have seen pastors and members of our churches participating in rallies and protests calling for an end to police brutality on young men and women of color and proclaiming that Black Lives Matter. I have seen many congregations participate in our Faith and Democracy 2020 initiative getting out the vote in this critical election year, doing their part to dismantle voter suppression and to foster the presence of justice in the voting process. For this prophetic ministry, which is not predicting our future, but speaking to our *present* in light of our call as the people of God gathered in this Conference 'at such as time as this (Esther 4:14b),' thank you greatly, and I thank God for you.

Lastly, the faithfulness of the ministry of this Conference has inspired my spirit with wonder. It is not only the faithfulness of our pastors and congregations as described above. It is also the stalwartness of our Associate Conference Ministers Audrey Price, Marvin Silver, and Nelson Murphy in their ministry to our Associations and well beyond. It is also the essential administrative support of our Professional staff, Tristan Battle, Angela Megna, and Ginger Glasser. It is also the energetic ministries of Darryl Moch, the dean of our Communities of Practice and Terry Yasuko Ogawa, our campaign organizer for Faith and Democracy 2020. It is also the graceful and focused leadership of the President of our Board of Directors Janese Murray. It is also the deeply thoughtful and dedicated work of our Board of Directors who came together throughout the year to develop a New Mission Statement, Vision Statement, Core Values and working Strategic Plan that can positively impact the ministry of our Conference for years to come. It is also the commitment of our Treasurer Enrique Cobham, the Chair of our Board's Finance Working Group Robert Ziegler, and working group member Sue

Myers in helping us meet several challenges in our financial and administrative processes. It is also the creativity and loving labor of the planning team of Ann Holmes, Lucy Brady, Katie Pennick, Darryl Moch, Doug White, Tristan Battle, who with very honorable mentions Debra Duke and George Rizor, are creating an Annual meeting unlike none other. It is also the steadfast spiritual and financial support of your churches. For the faithfulness of these and many who support the ministry of this Conference in a myriad of ways, thank you, and I thank God for you.

Last year I stated that my goals would be the following: 1) equipping the ministry of existing and new congregations; 2) seeking ways to sustain and increase pastoral excellence; 3) continuing to put in place an administrative and organizational structure that will best serve our churches and other settings; 4) continue to develop plans for longer term financial stability, and; 5) nurturing the CAC's covenantal relationship with Local Churches, Associations, and the national setting of the United Church of Christ. These goals remain, and I will also continue to represent our Conference in the wider church as a member of the Council of Conference Ministers Nominating Committee, of its Audit Task Force, and a member of the UCC Situation Room Team consisting of our UCC Officers, heads of Financial Ministries and several Conference Minister colleagues coordinating our denomination's responses to COVID-19. I will also continue to serve as a member of the Board of Directors of the Church Building and Loan Fund and a member of the Board of Trustees of Lancaster Theological Seminary.

Yet one thing I have learned in this year that there is much truth to the Yiddish saying echoed by Public Enemy: "Man (Humans) Plans, and God Laughs." I remain committed to the above and the goals included in the Strategic Planning Process that will be introduced in this Annual Meeting. And I will be attentive to the calling of God for this Conference and to adjust plans as necessary in accordance with God's plan.

An unofficial 'mantra' for our Ministry Team in these days is having been called to serve the Conference in ministry 'at such a time as this (Esther 4:14b)' And what a time it is. Nonetheless, God has not only called us to be the Church at such a time as this, God is equipping us with what we need to so do. Thank you, Central Atlantic Conference, for the privilege to serve you, and I thank God for you.

Blessings and Shalom,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Freeman", with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Freeman

The Reverend Freeman L. Palmer
Conference Minister