

## Report to the Annual Meeting

Central Atlantic Conference, United Church of Christ

September 21-26, 2020

It has been an interesting journey to come out of retirement after 50 years of active ministry and begin serving the Conference as an Interim ACM during this strange COVID-19 pandemic. My first day on the job (Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup>), was also the first day social distancing orders went into effect. Although we have since come to accept “Zooming” around everywhere as the new normal, it still feels weird to be engaged in the work of the church and not be able to meet together in person for worship, fellowship, committee meetings or mission activity. My first face-to-face meeting with my supervisor, Conference Minister Rev. Freeman Palmer, was during a Black Lives Matter public demonstration in front of First and St. Stephen’s UCC in Towson fully three months after I started – and, of course, we dutifully kept ourselves six-feet or more apart!

In order to get to know the clergy in the New Jersey Association, and to help overcome the sense of loneliness that has resulted from being physically isolated, I have initiated twice weekly “Clergy Check-In” gatherings on Zoom that have been appreciated by those who have chosen to participate in them. These gatherings have provided a good opportunity for developing new friendships, sharing joys and concerns, and praying for each other. While everyone’s experience has been unique, some of us are suffering more than others, we all share in a deep longing for things to return to normal.

But one of the upsides of this pandemic has been the realization that the “commuting time” expended attending various church events across this vast Conference has been reduced to virtually nothing. Although Zoom gatherings leave a lot to be desired in terms of reading body language, catching non-verbal cues, and other interpersonal dynamics, they certainly make more efficient use of our time. The carbon footprints each of us place on this planet has been greatly reduced. For example, when I accepted this position, I expected to be travelling extensively each week between Baltimore, where I live, and the UCC church locations in northern Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey I am assigned to support. In fact, I have only made two such trips in the last six months.

Nevertheless, some exciting new ministries have begun since the last annual meeting.

- Warren United Church in NJ has called a dynamic part-time pastor, the Rev. Roberto Fois, and has started a community food distribution program under his leadership that has generated substantial ecumenical and interfaith support throughout the community.
- Verona First Congregational UCC in Verona, NJ has defined a bold 2-3 year Outreach Ministry intending to reinvent its ministry, use its legacy resources to gather Millennials, Gen-X, and Gen-Y individuals alienated from traditional churches into a new worshipping community, and has identified and called a talented and well-qualified individual to lead that adventure.
- United Church Homes of NJ has liquidated its assets, transferring them to the Reformed Church (UCC) of Highland Park to enable the redevelopment of a vacant church into housing and support services for differently-abled homeless adults.

- Rev. David “Bo” Bocock has begun serving as the new settled pastor of the Holmdel (NJ) Community Church.
- Rev. Ron Verblauw will transition soon from Rutherford (NJ) Congregational Church to become the new Intentional Interim Pastor at Cresskill (NJ) Congregational Church.
- Rev. Joel Biggers has become the new Intentional Interim Pastor at First Congregational Church of Westfield, NJ after leading Holmdel through its interim period.
- Rev. James Sterner has begun a part-time ministry at Webster Congregational UCC in Harve de Grace, MD, commuting (virtually, now) from his residence in New York City.
- Rev. Derrick Hodge began a designated ministry with People’s Church of Dover, DE.
- Rev. David B. G. Flaherty has begun a part-time ministry with Messiah UCC in Baltimore, MD.
- Antoinette Yvonne Gatewood-Sykes has begun as an Associate Pastor at New Covenant Community UCC in Baltimore, MD.

While several congregations in this part of our Conference continue to struggle with membership, financial and organizational issues, others have found more people attending worship virtually than they had in the pews before the shutdown began. Some have partially reopened experimenting with a hybrid mix of in-person and virtual or on-line worship offerings.

Culturally, this is not an easy time to be the church, even without the pandemic complicating the witness and viability of our churches. We pray for all those that have been adversely affected during this difficult period, and trust that God will lead God’s people through this difficulty. But one of the learnings this experience has made clear is that we are at a turning point in the way the church does things. The need for finding new ways to proclaim the love and justice of Jesus was never more necessary than now.

Considering all we have suffered and lost due to COVID-19, I am nevertheless emboldened to hope by two things. First, the words of the Apostle that remind us in Roman 8:18, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” And second, by the amazing resilience and creativity of our pastors and churches as they have zigged and zagged, searching for the best ways to gather virtually, partially, and safely in order to retain the vibrant fellowship and witness that characterizes their blessed communities. As Paul goes on to say, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (v.37)



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