

Report to the Annual Meeting

Central Atlantic Conference, United Church of Christ

October 12-16, 2021

Many of you reading here know that I began serving the Central Atlantic Conference as an Interim Associate Conference Ministry (ACM) on Sunday, March 15, 2020, the first day social distancing orders went into effect. Until June of this year (2021), “Zoom-ing” to online meetings and worship services was the only way to meet with and get to know these new colleagues.

Those limitations changed dramatically early this past summer when vaccine adoption became widespread and social isolation restrictions were substantially relaxed. Since then, I have travelled extensively in the Conference, finding my way to many places in New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware where the presence of the UCC is a progressive spiritual beacon that matters in those communities. Visiting with pastors in person, touring their churches, listening to their stories, and offering to pray with them and for them (and for their people) has been very rewarding capstone to 50 years of ordained ministry. Thank you Freeman, for this opportunity to continue fulfilling my ordination vows as an Interim Associate Conference Minister post-retirement.

These visits confirm that most of our churches are not coming out of the pandemic with the return to normal that we all covet. In-person church attendance is way down from pre-Covid levels in every setting visited. On-line attendees compensate for part of the attendance decline but not all of it. Many pastors report that some people have simply fallen out of their Sunday morning routines, preferring to attending worship in their PJs, or doing something else altogether, knowing that they can “tune-in” the video recording of the service later, whenever they want to, if ever. One pastor described a parishioner who candidly admitted the pandemic has allowed her to discover many other “wonderful things” to do on Sunday morning instead “going to church” and that she has no intention of returning to worship in person going forward.

On the other hand, some churches report seeing new folks in church, visitors who have come because they liked what they saw on those time-shifted YouTube or Facetime recordings of the services. Continuing to offer worship both in person and online (hybrid worship) is enabling churches to extend the reach of their pulpits beyond the four walls of the church building. This new capability necessitated by the pandemic has attracted some new members. One congregation recently received six (6) new members entirely through an on-line virtual reception.

But the fear of continued membership losses and consequent reductions in financial support is widespread and outweighs the few instances where membership gains have been reported. And that fear, rooted as it is in institutional survival, is not going to go away soon. A recent article in the NY Times about the secularization of America reported that “over [40 percent](#) of the youngest Americans claim no religious affiliation, and [just a quarter](#) say they attend religious services weekly or more.” (<https://nyti.ms/2Wf3HZO>) Consequently, many congregations will never again be able to fill all the pews with the young families they seek.

In the gospels, Jesus asks, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And then answering his own question, points to his disciples (his followers), and instructs, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matt. 12:48b-50)

These words about doing the will of God give us all the insight we need to face the post-pandemic challenges confronting faithful churches in today's new secular reality. They urge us to refocus our ecclesiastical energy, not on institutional survival, but on doing the will of our Father, that God's will might be done on earth as it is in heaven. And nothing could better describe the will of the Father than the basic command to love God with heart, soul and mind, and then to do so by loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

When the focus becomes seeking to do the will of God by loving others -- even those we disagree with or those whose poor choices have gotten them into the hardship circumstances they are in, especially loving those who are the most unlike us -- then institutional support issues take care of themselves. But when preserving our lovely churches becomes an end in itself, divorced from the compelling challenge of finding creative ways to love the least, the last and the lost among us, we have missed the mark, and the church starts circling the drain.

It was never easy to live into the love and justice of Jesus -- and it was never more necessary than now in this new secular world where we live. Every UCC church in every Association and every Conference has multiple opportunities to go beyond being the lovely church on the corner, and needs to find new ways to do the will of the Father, to follow Jesus, to give itself away in the service of other.

In spite of all the members lost due to COVID-19, I am nonetheless convinced that we can remain thankful since our hope is rooted in "the things unseen." Perhaps this pandemic will cause us to rediscover what it means to be faithful disciples again, people whose worship of God is rooted in doing the will of God in new and creative ways, loving all of God's dearly loved children in the same unconditional way that God loves us. If we can do that, we will come out of this difficult time just fine.

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Interim Associate Conference Minister