

## A Time To Replenish



I will satisfy the weary, and all who are faint I will replenish. Jeremiah 31:25

## 2021 CONFERENCE MINISTER'S REPORT

From the time our oldest daughter was three months old, she was in the water. She was our little fish. By the time she was a toddler and as soon as warm weather arrived, we knew it was likely that no matter where we were going, we would find a swimsuit in our traveling bag.

As she got older, she took to just wearing a swimsuit under her clothes. Sometimes this required a little explaining to her teachers at school, Sunday School teachers at church, or babysitters who came to the home. She figured in case

there was a pool or any body of water to which she would be permitted to get in, she wanted to be ready. Swimming as a sport of choice was a natural fit.

Abby swam in grade school, middle school, high school, and college. By the time she was in high school she and her coaches knew the races for which she was best suited. She swam the middle-distance race in individual events. On relay teams, she held the anchor position, swimming the last leg of the race. It wasn't until college, that a coach pushed her outside of her comfort zone in putting her in long-distance individual events.

Long-distance swimming events have a different rhythm and reception from the crowd than all the other races. For spectators and teammates, sprints are exciting to watch and easy to follow. For the swimmer, there is a simplicity about sprints. There is an assurance in knowing there is only one focused expectation to swim as hard and fast as you can for a short period of time. But long-distance races are a whole other thing.

For spectators and teammates, long-distance races can be hard to get excited about and even more difficult to follow. I have been at meets when people groan when these events are announced. I have watched people leave the pool deck or the stands at the beginning of the race only to return with a disgusting remark such as, *"This race isn't over yet?!"*

For the swimmer, there is a complexity with long-distance racing. You must know how to pace yourself, slow down your breathing, and not allow panic or fear to set in. You must also trust that when the time comes you will be able to tap into that last bit of reserved energy to finish the race. I have watched swimmers in the middle of the race look up to the lap number flip chart with defeat when they realize they are not as far along as they thought. I have also watched swimmers even stop in the water for a moment taking stock of how far they have gone and ready themselves for continuing in the race.

The first time Abby swam and finished the first long-distance race she emerged from the pool, legs shaking, lungs burning, with a breathless pronouncement she wouldn't swim that kind of race again. She did, but she never liked those races as much as others. The truth is very few

people are suited for the long races because they required just as much mental preparedness as physical conditioning.

Friends, you, and I have been swimming in the waters of the unknown for quite a while. Even though we told ourselves this was not a sprint, we thought the new learnings, the new ways of being might be doable, tolerable because we convinced ourselves the finish line was in sight. There was a moment this year when we thought we had crossed the finished line. COVID cases were going down, people were getting vaccinated, and mask mandates were lifted. We emerged into public spaces a bit shaky, maybe a bit fearful still, with hearts burning and aching for connection, breathlessly proclaiming we did not want to do this again.

But then...

Well, we know the rest of the story. For many people, with new variants of this virus emerging, it feels like being pushed back into the pool for another long-distance race.

Except this time, we don't have a sense of the lap count. We don't have a sense of when the race will end, and we can't move on to other events. There is a deep weariness that has set in for many pastors, church leaders, and churches. Some continue to push on again, and some have even stopped for moments wondering if they can go on. Yet, if we lean in and tune our hearts to the presence of God in our midst, we can hear the message given by God to the prophet Jeremiah. *"I will satisfy the weary and all who are faint I will replenish."*—Jeremiah 31:25

I cannot think of better news we all need to hear and believe in right now.

As I think back on this past year, I am in awe of what we have done together as a Conference.

We offered Conference-wide worship services and countless webinars and workshops.

We invested deeply in DuBois Center by calling an Acting Director of Outdoor Ministry, holding a successful summer camp season, and addressed deferred maintenance issues by tackling a whole host of projects.

Our new Acting Director of Outdoor Ministry, our Outdoor Ministry Team, and numerous dedicated volunteers and staff took up the momentous challenge of creating deeply meaningful programs and services for our children and youth, all while being attentive to good safety policies and procedures.

We celebrated a good number of installations and ordinations that had been postponed during 2020.

We sought to support our exhausted and often overwhelmed pastors with paid facilitated Communities of Practice as well as helping offset the costs of spiritual direction and counseling.

Our Conference staff went above and beyond, not only to carry out the mission and vision of the Illinois South Conference, but also to offer support and resources to our most important component of our Conference—local churches.

Our committees and teams generously shared their time, energy, creativity, and passion to create meaningful programs and experiences for pastors and church leaders.

Our Conference Council and Executive Committee deliberated, discerned, and made visionary decisions about how to ensure a viable future for our Conference.

Together we have been able to do so much in the name of and to the glory of Jesus Christ, the one we seek to serve.

In 2020, we felt pushed into the race of trying to figure out things we had never done before and trying to make sense of so much that did not make sense. We thought 2021 would give us a reprieve, but then more unexpected challenges arose. And the truth is we are all a bit weary. We have grown faint.

This is the moment to take a collective breath.

To remember we need to pace ourselves.

We may even need to simply stop.

We may need to forget about the lap count.

We may need to rest, recover, and allow for a renewal of our collective mind and spirit.

We may need to take stock of where we have been, what we have done, allowing ourselves to soak in the wonder and gratitude of what we have been able to do with the help of God.

We may need to redirect our time and focus our attention on the one who promises, *“I will satisfy the weary and all who are faint I will replenish.”*

As we gather for our 2021 Annual Meeting, we are invited into a Time of Replenishment. A time to wonder, a time to pause, a time to reclaim what is life giving, sustainable, and renewing.

If you are weary, if you are faint, you are in the right place.

Come, join us in seeking the presence of the One who will replenish us all.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rev. Shana Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. Shana Johnson

Conference Minister of the Illinois South Conference  
of the United Church of Christ

