



In 2018, after dialogue and discernment with the Executive Committee and Conference Council of our Conference, I set several five-year goals to shape my ministry as a Conference Minister and for which I wanted the leadership of the conference to hold me accountable.

I must confess, when I first thought about my work and ministry since the pandemic, I wondered how well we stayed the course in our focus on these shared goals. We, like you, have had to pivot dramatically as what we envisioned, imagined, dreamed for 2020 did not even come close to what has emerged.

However, what was stunning to me was how our goals of:

- 1) *Reconnecting our Conference and our local churches with what it means to be the United Church of Christ.*
- 2) *Developing programs and resources that support the wholeness and wellbeing of our pastors.*
- 3) *Encouraging the development of new models of ministry and ways congregations can partner in ministry.*
- 4) *Supporting the ongoing creation of a more culturally aware and welcoming Conference.*

were still so much a part of what we accomplished despite the seven months we have been in a pandemic.

Reconnecting our Conference and our local churches with what it means to be the United Church of Christ.

In this past year, we did some intentional work around introducing our churches to the resources and ministries of the Wider Church. Often churches will ask, “What value is it for us as a church or a Conference to be connected to the UCC?” In short, the biggest answer is the connections and resources available when we are in relationship and covenant with one another. Together we are stronger when we work together and share our gifts. When you are a part of the UCC, you are part of something bigger than our local church, which can be of great comfort to be reminded you are not alone and you do not have to do it alone. Our churches, through the conference, benefit from educational, mission and ministry, spiritual, and even legal resources of our denomination.

This year, we offered webinars with UCC National staff members. We passed along educational resources as well as grant resources of which our pastors and churches could benefit. We helped churches navigate the often-confusing world of insurance and legal matters thanks to our partnerships with the Insurance Board of the United Church of Christ, the Pension Boards of the United Church of Christ, and our UCC legal counsel, Heather Kimmel.

We helped churches in times of pastoral transitions. Even when the search and call process looks very different in a pandemic, we not only quickly adapted by creating new models and resources. We also connected our churches to other churches in other UCC conference that graciously shared what worked for them. In the midst of this pandemic, I think one of the reminders we have all had is how much we need each other.

As part of my responsibility and service to the wider United Church of Christ, I serve on the Insurance Board of the UCC (Church Property and Liability), I serve as a Board member on the Deaconess Foundation, and I am the vice moderator of the Council of Conference Ministers. In all these roles, I have learned valuable, practical information, which I was able to pass on to our churches and has enhanced the ways I can serve our churches.

My deepest hope in helping our churches reconnect to the wider United Church of Christ and to the Illinois South Conference is they will know no matter what happens, they do not have to go it alone, we are here for you.

Developing programs and resources that support the wholeness and wellbeing of our pastors. Each day I am realizing the importance of supporting the wholeness and wellbeing of our pastors. I have encouraged many of our ministry teams to consider how they might be able to provide pastors in our Conference with programs and resources with this goal in mind.

In January, our Local Church Ministry team offered a two-day retreat at Todd's Hall in Columbia, Illinois for pastors. The retreat was called the Pastor's Sabbath and explored how pastors could incorporate new spiritual practices in their lives for rest and renewal. This was the second retreat the team offered and it was again so well received, the team plans to make a retreat for pastors an annual event.

At the end of February, the Gatherings Team sponsored a Day of Discipleship event centered on Whole and Healthy Congregations. The keynote speaker of the day was Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund who is the current UCC Minister of Disabilities and Mental Health. Her workshops, along with the many others that were offered on that day promoted the wholeness and wellbeing of our pastors and congregations.

By mid-March, our Conference, much like the rest of world began to realize how quickly our daily lives and our corporate lives together as communities of faith were changing. Upon my request the Executive Committee of the Conference began to meet weekly to determine how we could best support our churches and pastors in the ever-changing information, guidelines and strategies we were receiving from our national, state and local leaders. The Executive Committee met weekly for four months and wrote 18 COVID-19 update letters that went out to the entire Conference with advice, resources, and guidelines.

Since March, I created a set of guidelines (Faithfully Phasing Forward) for the conference that was shared widely with our churches in order to offer our pastors and church leaders practical ideas and solutions. In the first weeks of shelter in place orders, I offered Zoom trainings for pastors and church leaders.

For the first couple of months, I also met weekly with our pastors. In realizing I needed to explore other ways to support our clergy, I wrote and applied for a Brown Grant through the United Church Funds for monies to create paid resilience-training opportunities and paid facilitation for clergy communities of practice. Recently, our Conference was awarded a \$10,000 grant to be used for such programs, which will be rolled out after our Annual Meeting.

Also, in coordination with the Local Church Ministries team and the invaluable help of Nick Luer (our resident video guru) we were able to create an Easter worship video and a mid-Summer video. With the Council of Conference Ministers, I participated in creating another worship video. These were resources churches without a settled pastor, and churches that just wanted to make sure their pastors were able to take a day off, used.

The Council of Conference Ministers will be producing another worship video, which will be available mid-November. Currently, I am also in collaboration with IKC and Heartland Conference to create worship videos for December 27 and January 3. I will support and develop programs and resources that support the wellbeing and wholeness of our ISC pastors.

Encouraging the development of new models of ministry and ways congregations can partner in ministry.
Out of necessity, COVID 19 forced us all to create new models of ministry. Many days my work in this time of ministry, in this moment, feels a bit like trying to fly a plane while I am still building it. Yet, this is true for all of us in ministry these days. One of the most heartening things I have witnessed is the way pastors and church leaders, at every level, have freely shared ideas and collaborated with one another.

As a whole, the pandemic has taught us as a people of God how intricately our lives are interwoven. I believe the future of the Church of Jesus Christ, the future of our local churches will depend upon our ability and willingness to break out of our silos and work together as creative, collaborative, and covenantal partners.

Mid-March, Rev. Chad Abbott, the Conference Minister of the Indiana Kentucky Conference, and Rev. David Long-Higgins, the Conference Minister of the Heartland Conference and I wanted to model a new partnership which would lift up and emphasize new models of ministry. We began by offering weekly Facebook Live sessions with special guests who reflected on unique aspects of pastoring in a pandemic. As the weeks went on, we expanded our reach and our guest list.

Out of this collaborative effort the three of us have begun to imagine more ways we can work together to strengthen all three conferences. Some of the more immediate projects to come will be joint clergy conversations and working with Rev. Andrew Warner, the UCC Generosity Officer, to train pastors and church leaders about new giving and generosity strategies for the local church setting.

In September, the Conference Council voted to cover the entire registration costs of any ISC pastor, worship leader, church musician, or worship committee member who would like to participate in Dr. Marcia McFee's series ReBooting Your Worship. Dr. McFee, a well-known worship professor and trainer, specializes in multi-sensory, innovative worship. Over 100 leaders in our conference signed up to participate in this offering. When the series is complete, we will be inviting all participants to gather online to talk about not only what they learned, but also how they might partner with one another to do "a new thing" in this season of our shared lives together.

Supporting the ongoing creation of a more culturally aware and welcoming Conference.

As I think about being more culturally aware and welcoming, I see three major ways we have focused our efforts on this ongoing work. The first was through our Inclusivity Task Force, which raised the importance of naming the values we envision as we gather for events in the conference and at DuBois Center. Then seeking to live into those named values.

The Task Force, with the full affirmation of Conference Council, created a Conference inclusivity statement that proudly states: *Because we affirm the value of all of God's people, the Illinois South Conference of the United Church of Christ does not discriminate on the basis of age, race, ability, national origin, religious background, sexual orientation, or gender identity. To the extent possible, we endeavor to accommodate those with a variety of physical, mental, emotional, medical, or dietary needs.* Initial work was done to consider ways we can offer more accessible and welcoming spaces we gather in and how we can train and equip leaders in the conference by offering welcoming spaces at conference wide and DuBois Center events. This is what we are called by God to do.

At Day of Discipleship, Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund, shared her passion and information about how churches becoming W.I.S.E. (Welcoming Inclusive Supportive Engaged) congregations. Within this year, three ISC churches, Grantfork UCC, Grantfork, St. John's UCC of Midway, Moro, and Church of the Good Shepherd, Carbondale, went through the W.I.S.E. process and have officially been recognized as W.I.S.E. certified churches in the United Church of Christ. Their modeling has inspired other congregations to educate themselves about persons with disabilities and mental health struggles and how they might support such persons so they know they are God's beloved, loved and accepted by the Church.

Finally, in addition to dealing with a viral pandemic in this country, recent events have caused many to acknowledge the racial pandemic we face and have become impassioned about how they might be involved in seeking racial healing. Our Justice and Mission Team sponsored a Peace Rally at the Peace Pole on the grounds of the Conference office. This event brought together religious leaders from different communities and different traditions for a time of confession, prayer, and commitments to action.

With the support of the Justice and Mission Team, I offered the first all-conference book study online. I created a four series book study on Robin D'Angelo's book *White Fragility*. Not having done a book study like this in the conference, and certainly not online, the Justice and Mission team and I did not know how many to expect. We were pleasantly surprised that over 70 registered to participate (some were entire families) in the book study. The group entered into conversations about a topic we often avoid—race and racism in America. Although we used the book as a spring board, the idea was not to gather simply for an academic exercise, but rather to be open to engage in hard conversation, self-reflection, questioning, making personal commitments, in order to bring some hope and healing in our corner of the world.

As I reflect upon my ministry, and upon all the ways, that together we have walked faithfully in these moments of unfamiliarity and uncertainty; these insights have become more abundantly clear to me. The work of the Church continues. The Spirit of God moves in powerful and mysterious ways. When we center our lives, our conversations, our steps, and our next best decisions on how we will serve Christ, wondrous things emerge.

Joy transcends circumstances and is grounded in who and whose we are, what we are called to be and to do in this world, the relationships we share along the way, and in the God who creates and sustains us. Let us continue to walk faithfully in covenant together as extravagantly welcoming and affirming followers of Christ called to embody God's unconditional justice and love. Thank you for the honor and joy of serving as your Conference Minister.

Together in Christ's service with you,

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

Rev. Shana Johnson