

A Journey of Hope and Becoming - TCM Annual Report for 2022-2023

“Hope is a stance of radical openness to the God of newness and possibility. When we hope, we acknowledge that God has an imagination far more expansive than ours.” - Dr. Christine Valters Paintner

We have come this far by faith! This is our first in-person Annual Meeting to be held with our siblings in El Paso, Texas since the pandemic. This is a journey to Becoming, as we share stories, conduct business, and create greater connections to fulfill our mission. What does becoming look like? It is having the audacity to hope when we feel like we cannot cope. It is a boldness that sparks curiosity, courage, and care as we journey together in covenant bound by God’s unfailing love. It is seeing each other through the eyes of God and placing the emphasis on love, humility, and social justice.

We have traversed through a season of brokenness and transition and come out on the other side renewed, revitalized, recommitted, and reconnected. We were gracefully broken for such a time as this to authentically serve in places and spaces that we never dreamed were possible before COVID. As we look back on the past year, we are like the Sankofa bird with its feet firmly planted forward and its head facing backwards with an egg in its mouth. It symbolizes not losing sight of its history but assessing how far it has come in preparation for new birth and the future.

THE JOURNEY

2022 was a journey of hope that has manifested in stories of our experiences. Faith is the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not yet seen (Hebrew 11:1). We are becoming more communal, collaborative, and creative within our communities of faith and beyond. Last year, we were thrust into transition from the residual of the pandemic causing us to pause, pivot, pray, and reflect on how we got here and discern where God is calling us.

Coming out of the pandemic, we are stronger in our faith, open to embracing change, and more committed to serving the needs of our communities. Scripture says they will know you are my disciples by your love. We demonstrate the love of Christ in many ways but some of the more impactful ways has been support of our Native American siblings whose plight has been devastating and painful; we have walked along side immigrants seeking refuge or asylum from danger and persecution, and our love is seen in the offering of food pantries, and other relevant services for the homeless and the marginalized. We have volunteered at the welcome center and other community organizations. This list is not all-inclusive, but the point is that we are extending our ministries beyond brick and mortar or social media to meet people where they are. This is good news! We are actively engaging the community through mission and ministry. The oneness of Christ is reflected through our extravagant welcome of all people, regardless of who they are or where they are on life’s journey.

YOUTH and MIDs (Members in Discernment)

In pre-COVID years, we offered camp as an immersing experience of faith development for our youth. However, the pandemic affected how we serve the needs of our youth and keep them safe. It has not prevented us from serving the youth because we are doing youth ministry in innovative ways. The development of our members-in-discernment (MID) is a priority as they become faith leaders in our conference and denomination.

CONNECTION/COLLABORATION

Our ministries have worked collaboratively because we are stronger together than apart. Ecclesiastes 4:12 reminds us that a cord of three strands is not easily broken. We can stand, walk, and soar together by creating opportunities for collaboration within the conference and across the conferences in the Western Region to explore ways to resource and support each other.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Over the past year, we have ramped up our commitment to de-centering whiteness through training and sacred conversations on race which included further exploration, education, and evolution through book studies, dialogue circles, and workshops. In addition, we have started the new cycle of planning for boundary training for all authorized ministers. My hope is that we can offer similar training to congregations so that we are on the same page in the hope to reduce conflict and avoid boundary violations that sometimes result in situational support consultations and fitness reviews.

FINANCIAL HEALTH

As a conference, we have endured challenges as we shifted from what we knew to be normal (pre-COVID) to the unknown (COVID), to our new reality of uncertainty in a post-COVID era. Just like other organizations, inflation has impacted our finances, but we are on a trajectory of growth and recovery.

YEAR IN REVIEW

This is our time for reflection, evaluation, celebration, and connection as we worship together, share our journey and stories to get to know each other in ways that allows us to see each other through the eyes of God; and expand our reach beyond walls and the border.

In the past year, we have been intentional about becoming an anti-racist church with a greater awareness of creating justice through de-centering whiteness and focusing on humility, love, and respect for all of humanity and a deeper connection to God through prayer and other spiritual practices.

We experienced loss through attrition and transition. First, some of the losses were gut-wrenching, heart-palpating, and unsettling, but God! God provided when we did not see any

way out of chaos, uncertainty, the aftermath of the pandemic and now inflation, yet we remain spiritually and financially strong.

We have mourned the death of friends, family, and members of the Southwest Conference. We grieve the loss of some of our congregations and members. In addition, every Wednesday at 12 noon we enter a time of prayer and discernment during ***Power of the Pause Wednesday***. Also, we also experience grief when members move away to be closer to family, or clergy transfer their standing to accept a new call, or an unexpected or planned resignation or retirement occurs because we miss their presence and contribution to our faith community.

One of the more challenging losses was the resignation of conference minister, Rev. Dr. William Lyons, who felt a greater call to be close to family and serve in a different ministry setting. We celebrate him and pray for God's continue blessings on his ministry. His leadership brought us through COVID 19, helped us navigate post pandemic challenges like gun violence, racial unrest, and enabled greater support of existing congregations, new ministries, churches in formation, and clergy through grants, scholarships, training, and property and fiscal management. His resignation as well as other unexpected retirements reminds us of the strain and stress of ministry when there is a lack of recovery time or inadequate time to recharge; build resiliency, create balance, and receive support. It behooves us to set healthy boundaries and implement spiritual and physical practices that promote greater well-being for our leaders, congregations, and the entire conference.

SOME NEXT STEPS

1. We are creating new processes and procedures where none exist or are outdated; and, streamlining our processes so that we can be more responsive to the needs of congregations and clergy.
2. We will evaluate processes and procedures to ensure they align with our mission and vision.
3. We will continue to support new congregations and ministries and help strengthen existing ones.
4. We will support MIDs in completing the process for ordination or lay ministry. Develop consistency in authorization and treatment of commissioned and lay ministers.
5. We will align our values with social justice as part of our conference's DNA.

Through one of the most challenging times for the church, the pandemic, God has kept us. We have been challenged to become tech savvy and do ministry in hybrid settings and/or work remotely. In the words of Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise." We rise with a hope that comes from having a spiritual connection to God and each other. Southwest Conference, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us!

Guided by the Holy Spirit and the commitment of the former Conference Minister, the Executive Board, the committees, and our congregations, we are gradually moving from survival to

thriving. Thank you to many of you who sacrificed by giving of your time, talent, and treasure to assist in moving our conference from good to great.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The conference office moved to a new location in June.
- MIDs are progressing through the authorization process, creating covenants, getting approved for ordination pending a call, and filling vacancies in the conference and the wider church.
- The effects of inflation and COVID has not decreased our faith; our resolve is stronger, and we continue to honor our covenant to each other and God.
- Through it all, God has been faithful despite unexpected losses both in our churches, families, and conference staff.

This is only a glimpse of the past year. We have begun strengthening the bonds of connection. We have been given more responsibility and our capacity to serve in innovative ways has increased. To whom much is given, much is required. So, let us shake off the dust of the past and walk into this new season in a oneness of spirit.

WHAT'S NEXT

Well, we are looking both ways before we cross any streets or new avenues. Yes, we will do some new things and somethings differently which will present us new challenges. However, there is nothing we cannot do together.

As we reflect on the past year, let us move forward, trust the movement of the Spirit to lead us in the right direction for growth and more importantly, sustainability.

May we find strength and joy on the journey as we live out our mission statement, *"extravagantly welcoming and affirming followers of Christ called to embody God's unconditional justice and love."*

I invite us to listen to each other's stories and have a willingness to see through the eyes of faith. Our focus for the future is nurturing congregations regardless of their size to serve in creative ways that allow them the freedom to truly 'be.'

God is doing a new thing! Eyes have not seen, nor have ears heard all that God has in store for us as the Southwest Conference of the United Church of Christ. Truly, the best is yet to come!

Respectfully and joyfully submitted,



Rev. Dr. Altonette Hawkins

Transitional Conference Minister