

ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER'S REPORT

January – December 2022

YEAR OF PILGRIMAGE

PILGRIMAGE was our ongoing theme in the Southwest Conference during 2022. As with all pilgrimages, we started out with ideas and plan-making, but the various journeys through the year took unexpected twists and turns, stall-outs and surprising new directions! We knew as 2022 closed, that we definitely had been through a year of great transitions!

We all dared to feel an emergence from our previous years of pandemic confines. We began venturing out more and more boldly, tentatively unmasking more frequently, returning to in-person gatherings in our congregations...discovering COVID is certainly still present and lurking...but with increased vaccinations and boosters, perhaps had lost a bit of potency and threat to our gatherings. Other realities began to make themselves more known: church members seemingly not returning to in-person worship in the numbers hoped for, financial support becoming more challenging in churches, clergy burn-out and exhaustion entering new stages that needed care and support, and candidates for pastoral transitions becoming less and less prevalent making search and call efforts more anxious.

The most significant and unexpected pilgrimage we experienced happened **at the END of 2022 with the departure of Conference Minister Rev. Dr. Bill Lyons**. When Bill discerned his own journey making a turn back toward his family in Ohio, and his vocational call returning to his first-love of chaplaincy, and many details of moving, house buying and selling, and new job falling into place quickly, the transition happened more quickly than is usual. Fortunately, as the Spirit worked quickly in Bill's life...the Spirit was working for the Southwest Conference as well! THANK YOU to the Executive Board, under the leadership of moderator Rev. Susan Valiquette, that got a transition team together, and worked well to identify and interview candidates for our Transitional Conference Minister position. The Rev. Dr. Toni Hawkins was on site (in a new home, though still in boxes!) by January 1! That was probably some kind of record! But, definitely Spirit-led!

In November and December, I served as acting Conference Minister while that search process was going on, trying to keep all the Conference balls in the air. A TREMENDOUS thank you to my wonderful staff companions: Genevieve Benham and Wende Gonzales, who were absolutely rock solid in their gifts, skills, and support! Also, thank you to the wonderful members of our Executive Board and standing committees that do such competent work! AND for many clergy and lay people that supported me during a stressful few months as I tried to do the conference work in the midst of my own grief over Bill's departure. Pilgrimage is not easy...but it is a Spirit-led adventure!

We introduced the theme of **PILGRIMAGE** at our virtual Annual Meeting last year. It seemed to plant a resonating seed in people's minds. I heard many allusions to it as people "walked" through various experiences as individuals or churches, using pilgrimage as a paradigm. We planned for a summer multigenerational pilgrimage to Northern New Mexico, but due to ongoing COVID fears and restrictions, spring wildfires, and high costs, that got cancelled. We continued the theme with youth events sponsored by Scottsdale Congregational and Casas Adobes Congregational UCCs in Phoenix and Tucson taking short pilgrimages into the world of *bats* locally to learn about their value to our environment and using bats as a metaphor for our understanding (or misunderstanding) of "the other" in our lives. We also had workshops (one at annual meeting, and one in July) with Wes Granberg-Michaelson, plus a follow-up book study on his book about pilgrimage, "Without Oars."

The **ANTIRACISM STUDY DIALOGUE CIRCLE** organization was contracted to take us through two years or so of antiracism study as a conference, which also kicked off at the Annual Meeting in 2022. Unfortunately, the offerings of workshops and a 10-week Dialogue Circle were sparsely attended, leading to some cancellations, revisions and new push for church and conference members to take part in offerings this winter/spring of 2023. What is clear to me is that we have made some key efforts to decenter Whiteness in our conference, a number of

folks have been learning and growing in skill and awareness, but there is still a long way to go to share the vision and create and live-into informed and reparative change.

The CLERGY RETREAT felt particularly significant this year embracing the pilgrimage theme. We spent the first 12 hours or so saying goodbye to Bill Lyons in sharing, in fellowship, and in a departure worship of gratitude and blessing of his ministry among us and transition to chaplaincy. The next day was spent with half the group making a pilgrimage to La Casa de Misericordia in Nogales, Sonora, and others staying onsite at the Redemptorist Retreat Center doing their own forms of pilgrimage in place. The closing worship had our new TCM, Dr. Toni, zooming in to be announced and introduced. It was a full circle of celebrated sacred time!

FAITH FORMATION at the conference level continues to be in transition. I continue to meet with wonderful faith formation leaders from our churches on a monthly zoom call. The group is a deeply supportive and creative place where we share ideas, and try to think in new ways and new paradigms. Various adaptations to widen the scope of the Sow the Seed fund have grown out of conversations with this group.

RETIRED CLERGY also have a monthly Zoom gathering that is providing connection, support and educational conversations to ministers navigating retirement and growing into their full “elderhood.”

The group has continued to explore the spiritual practice of elderhood, and has deeply meaningful conversations about such things as changes in theology they’ve experienced, human sexuality in later years, meaningful hymns, navigating UCC clergy accountability and local church involvement as a retired clergy.

ANOTHER OFFICE MOVE put us (Phoenix SWC staff members) into transition of our space once again in a year. Due to the possible selling of the United Methodist Center, we opted to find a space that was more permanent, plus would allow for Bill to have his office at Desert Garden UCC, closer to home, and let go of the storage unit that housed all our long-term & historic files. We continue to face the challenge of how to digitize all the files, which first need sorting. I’ve been working on digitizing the clergy files, but it's difficult to find time for it.

MY SABBATICAL PILGRIMAGE was taken during August and September (saving one additional month for another year, due to Bill’s resignation). It was time spent in renewal, an overdue family trip to Oregon in August, and then a true pilgrimage of sorts, to explore ancestral Celtic lands and heritage in Britain and Ireland in September.

STAFFING COCAM-A and staff administration for authorizing and authorized ministers has continued to be a major part of my job that I love and find continually challenging as our world, churches and ministry continue to be in the throes of great change! THANK YOU to all those that serve in local church and conference ministry in these eminently challenging times!! And a special thank you to the members of COCAM-A who are tasked to navigate the delicate balances between covenant and accountability, grace, empowerment, and healthy boundaries. I’m continually amazed at their faith, their grace, their truth, and their wisdom! Thanks especially to this year’s chair, the Rev. Dean Hokel, who generously encouraged me to allow him to take administrative tasks off my plate and put them on his!

We have now stepped across the threshold into a new era of our life together as the Southwest Conference, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Toni Hawkins. She is already blessing us with her gifts of strengthening and deepening our connections with each other, her gentle listening, her passion for education, her caring presence, and her encouragements to take our next best steps towards manifesting God’s beloved community in our world. I am so grateful for all my pilgrimage companions here in the Southwest Conference!

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. Barb Doerrer-Peacock
Associate Conference Minister