

In April of 2019 we called ourselves to be Growing Churches. The plan was to gather in April of this year to tell the stories of transformation that unfolded from our shared vision for growth. Well, grow we did!

Six SWC congregations are now growing in their commitment toward becoming Welcoming Inclusive Supportive and Engage for mental health. Growing WISE churches today is the fruit of a decade of work among us by the Rev. Robert Koth. When he retired to the SWC he began organizing interested clergy and laypeople for the ministry of inclusion. That effort grew into the SWC Widen the Welcome Team which focused primarily on equipping congregations to welcome people of different mental and physical abilities into the full life of the Church. Last November the SWC Widen the Welcome Team cohosted our first WISE and Mental Health First Aid trainings for local churches in partnership with the UCC Mental Health Network. And in January this year, Desert Palm UCC in Tempe became the first SWC WISE congregation. Last year the SWC authorized Michael Curry as our first Lay Minister for Disability Education, Awareness and Advocacy. His ministry in our local churches has been a transforming presence. Rev. Koth is retiring again, this time from formal leadership of the Widen the Welcome Team. The SWC Executive Board adopted a plan to reshape that ministry into the SWC Inclusion Team. There will be more about that in the coming year. Thank you, Robert, for your vision and for the good fruit we are harvesting through your faithfulness.

In 2019 three of our Arizona ecumenical partners welcomed new judicatory leaders. The Rt. Rev. Deborah Hutterer was elected bishop of the Grand Canyon Synod of the ELCA. The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Reddall was consecrated bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona. And the Rev. Jay Hartley was chosen to be the Regional Minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arizona. As I grew to know these spirit-filled leaders common interests between us and between our churches became clear. Following a border summit last October which strengthened our relationships the SWC, the Grand Canyon Synod (ELCA), and the Anglican Church of Western Mexico have become partners with Cruzando Fronteras, the border ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona. This relationship formalized what had been a years-long collaboration among the border churches in southern Arizona. The project supported jointly by these partners is La Casa, a shelter for migrants in Nogales, Sonora. The SWC Executive Board has pledged \$25K for La Casa in the coming year.

Last summer I made good on my promise when I arrived in the SWC – to learn Spanish. The immersion experience through the Academia de Español de Probigua gave me language skills and led to a new relationship between the SWC and the Concejo Ecueménico Cristiano de Guatemala. Brayan Alvarado, one of the co-executive directors of the Concejo, has received scholarship support for his education as he pursues ordination thanks to your generosity. I'll admit my Spanish was better living in-country, yet those new skills are still in play as I correspond with our partners in both Mexico and Guatemala. The oppressive policies of the

current administration and then the pandemic moved our relationship with the Concejo into a liminal space with a pledge by all of us to re-engage in the future.

My ministry in the public square on your behalf took me to Washington D.C. with my Conference Ministry colleagues. We lobbied senators for a just immigration and refugee budget. A pilgrimage to Birmingham, AL, with Western Region Conference ministers began a transformation within me regarding my own white fragility and perspectives on race and racism that helped me more effectively lead our conference in awakening to racial justice that is unfolding in the nation. While ministry in the public square sometimes means marching with SWC members in the streets as we did several times last year, it also means lending our voice to efforts like the push for inclusive sex education curriculum in the Tucson Unified School District; my op ed in the Tucson Daily Star caught the attention of the United Church News team who reprinted it. We also joined ecumenical and interfaith partners across the country joining several *amici* briefs in the Federal appellate courts. Those cases involved immigration and religious freedom issues. I am grateful to our conference attorney, Frank Fox, and other members of the legal profession within our conference, including Brendan Mahoney and Scott Greenwood, for guiding me in this ministry of advocacy.

Responsibilities in the wider United Church of Christ found me serving on a search committee for two new national staff members in the Ministerial Excellence Support and Authorization (MESA) office. I serve as the secretary for the Council of Conference Ministers (CCM) which includes a role in the CCM Cabinet as well as in the wider CCM. The Council of Conference Ministers and the United Church Board meet together twice each year, usually in Cleveland, which also affords me a few days off to reconnect with my family.

2019 was a General Synod year. Sharing in the Synod experience is always meaningful. The resolution the SWC cosponsored with the Southern California Nevada Conference was adopted. Rev. Rock Fremont, SWC moderator, now serves on the working group drafting the Manual on Church for which the resolution called. Cydne Bolton, Pamela Shepherd, Scott Rowe, Carson Hawks and Nathan Watts represented us well. The time we spent together as a delegation on the plenary floor was exhausting. And getting to know our SWC delegates and guest over meals, late night conversation, and the Brewers game proved a particular joy. It was also a time to reconnect with our 2019 annual meeting speakers, an unexpected blessing.

The Rev. Gordon Rankin was installed as the Conference Minister for New Hampshire. Gordon spent a few years growing up at St. Paul's UCC in Rio Rancho. While I was there for his installation service, I reconnected with Rev. Dr. Alberta Wallace who was serving in an interim ministry in the NHC. I was honored to co-keynote the 197th 'Aha Pae'āina, the annual meeting of the Hawai'i Conference Hawaii Conference, with the Rev. Dr. Don Remick. The Rev. Dr. David Popham was elected as their Conference Minister during our time together.

When I began ministry in 1985 the norm for church growth centered on people coming to church. Today church growth centers on being the Church in the world. That shift makes our commitment to ministry to university communities vitally important. First Congregational Church of Flagstaff adopted a community engagement ministry plan and began serving their neighbors, including Northern Arizona University, in new ways. The SWC took that leap of faith with them by providing a \$25K grant for each of two years so they could call a full-time pastor with congregation-based campus ministry in mind. A second university ministry project began at Desert Palm UCC in Tempe. The Executive Board approved a one year \$25K grant as seed money for their youth minister and a SWC member in discernment, Andrew Ponder-Williams, to develop UCC@ASU. Funding for these projects is possible because of your generous financial support, including the legacy gift from First Congregational Church of Tempe. Thank you!

Your generosity along with our financial stability also grew in 2019. Conference churches as a whole increased their contributions for OCWM and surpassed the 2019 budget goal. Thank you! The SWC benefitted from your generosity and so did the UCC National Setting which receives 20% of our OCWM income. A legacy gift from the Faith United Community Church in Dewey was used in part to fund COCAM B projects like our clergy coaching initiative. Any local church and their pastor may receive a \$2 for \$1 matching grant for professional clergy coaching, up to \$1000. The Endowment Committee has done an exemplary job managing our resources. Our socially responsible investment strategy continues to yield results that exceed traditional strategies. Thank you, Scott Greenwood, Gloria Smith, Holly Herman, George Ault, and Cynthia VerDuin for a job well done.

We did a lot of celebrating together...

- at the installations of Rev. Susan Valiquette (First/Phoenix), Rev. Mike Lonergan (Church of the Painted Hills), Rev. Derrick Elliott (Desert Heritage Church UCC/DOC), Rev. Deborah Worley (White Rock Presbyterian), and the ordination and installation of Rev. Nathan Watts.
- during the anniversary festivities for Encanto Community church (75<sup>th</sup>), Desert Palm (40<sup>th</sup>) Scottsdale Congregational UCC (60<sup>th</sup>), Church of the Palms (50<sup>th</sup>).

We celebrated generosity together in weekend workshops for Oro Valley and First Congregational/Albuquerque. We celebrated in worship when I visited Rincon Congregational, Shadow Rock, West Congregational, First Christian/Las Cruces, Church of the Painted Hills, Sierra Vista Community Church, and Iglesia Congregacional La Trinidad. And I was honored to remember and celebrate the ministries of Rev. Dr. Bill Nelson, Rev. Dr. Ken Buckwald, and Rev. Jim Rabb.

Even though 2020 is three fourths gone, what we've been up to this year will need to wait for the next Conference Minister's report. In my last report to you I wrote that this year we would

“welcome one another to Good Shepherd UCC in Sahuarita, AZ for the 2020 SWC annual meeting,” and that “our time together will celebrate the “Stories That Transform” among us.” Good Shepherd UCC is still our host for this year’s annual meeting. But we’ve saved that theme – Stories That Transform – for the next annual meeting when we can be together in person. No date for the next annual meeting has been set yet because of the pandemic’s variables. While we are always here for each other it may be some time before we can safely be there with each other. 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 joy that serving you as your Conference Minister brings to my life.