**Report to the Conference Council from the Acting Conference Minister**

**August 22, 2015**

**Areas of Missouri Mid-South Conference Accomplishment:**

It appears to me that we are moving very positively at this time in several areas that have been prioritized in Conference conversations:

Church Vitality: We have initiated a strong Covenanted Ministry for Church Vitality, sent 8 persons to the Church Leadership Institute sponsored by the Center for Progressive Renewal in Boston this summer, had preliminary internet-based meetings with our vitality coach from CPR, Sara Willcox, and brought a CPR workshop leader to this year’s CAG – Doug Pagitt, from Solomon’s Porch. St Louis Association is bringing Molly Baskette in as a speaker for the fall meeting, and we will be inviting Eden Seminary students to attend that meeting as guests of the Conference. New Beginnings “Come and See” events will be taking place at 3 locations on September 19 and 20. New Beginnings is a local church assessment provided by a trained team of evaluators who assess the congregation’s assets and needs, property concerns, and community need and potential. Cost of the assessment is $2700 under Conference sponsorship.

OCWM: the Covenanted Ministry has been revitalized under the leadership of our Finance and Administration Standing Committee, and has begun working on the “Friends of the Conference” project, as well as studying ways to spread the message of OCWM.

Social Justice: We endorsed the mass incarceration resolution that passed at General Synod, and we now have a renewed Social Justice Covenanted Ministry beginning to work on advocacy issues and Conference-wide education on public issues. Currently, the team is working on ways to implement the Conference resolution on capital punishment, passed at this year’s CAG.

Clergy support: This is an area that has been identified by many people within our Conference that needs emphasis. Currently, we are hosting a gathering of clergy in new positions within the Conference at Eden Seminary on September 2, and a group of 6 pastors will be going to Techny, Illinois on October 20-23 to attend a retreat sponsored by the Pastoral Excellence Network on facilitating clergy peer learning communities. Our intention will be for these 6 pastors and several others doing similar work in the Conference to gather for a planning conversation on developing supportive clergy groups throughout the Conference.

The Persons in Ministry event continues with participation from both UCC and DOC pastors.

Training was provided this year for Committee on Ministry members and others who are willing to be response team members for fitness reviews.

Sacred Conversations on Race: The CAG had a variety of workshops and presentations on race on one full day of the meeting this year. We sent a young adult who was engaged in the protests in Ferguson to Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington in the spring. Associations have each had their own events, which included two association meetings focused on topics related to racial understanding. Several congregations are involved in Witnessing Whiteness groups. John Dorhauer has presented lectures on White Privilege in two associations this summer. We have not yet developed a Conference-wide initiative that can keep us focused on the issue of racism in our communities and in our churches.

Communications: Replacing a part-time person in the Conference office with a new full-time person has greatly improved office functioning and our capacity to welcome people. The new Communications Covenanted Ministry has appointed several members and is presenting the description of its structure and function for approval at this month’s Conference Council.

Visioning: The vision team completed its basic vision statement and a video drama to begin readying the Conference for the evolution of a networking structure to get our work done. We are beginning to live into that structure, as is evidenced most of all in the work of the covenanted ministries. The new Vision Implementation Team has been created and held one meeting this summer in preparation for the fall planning session on implementing the vision.

Conference Boundaries: The General Synod meeting in 2013 called for consideration throughout the UCC of potential cost saving and efficiency through the adjustment of Conference boundaries. At this time, Missouri Mid-South has not formally considered merger with any other Conference. However, we have welcomed conversation with our neighbors about shared programming and also met to consider shared ministries with the Mid America Region of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. This fall the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference will hold their meeting jointly with the Western Association of Missouri Mid-South. Our General Synod delegation met for orientation with the delegation from Illinois South Conference.

MMS – Eden Seminary conversations: Representatives of the Conference have been meeting approximately 3 times a year with representatives of Eden Seminary to discuss matters of common interest. We have discussed working together on church vitality training, student placement concerns, and the seminary’s UCC House of Studies. The Conference office was pleased to have an Eden student intern during the last school year. Josh Gibson’s work with us was quite productive. We regret that no student is available to serve in that capacity this fall. This year, Eden students will be welcomed as guests of the Conference at the St Louis Association Fall Meeting for dinner and to hear the lecture on church vitality by Molly Baskette.

**Plans for the Fall:**

The following events are being planned for Fall 2015:

September 2 – Meeting of pastors less than two years in their present congregations.

September 8 – Eden Convocation

September 14-16 – Persons in Ministry Retreat

September 19 & 20 – New Beginnings Come and See Events with David Schoen.

September 26 – St Louis Fall Meeting at Church of the Master – Molly Baskette, guest speaker

September 27 – Eastern Association Fall Meeting

October 3 – Western Association Fall Meeting and Kansas-Oklahoma Conference Meeting at Doubletree in Kansas City

October 12-14 – Council of Conference Ministers Meeting in Cleveland

October 20-23 – Six pastors will attend retreat in Techny, Illinois, on Clergy Peer Learning, Communities of Practice

October 30-31 – Conference Council Fall Planning Retreat at Camp Mo Val

November 9-11 – West Central Regional Conference Staff Meeting (Possibly in St Louis)

November 14 – Vision Implementation Planning Event

**Hopes for the Future:**

As we move into the networking orientation of Conference structure, we will be seeking innovations in the ways we get things done, primarily in the form of generating programs and resources for mutual support and mission at the local levels of associations, clergy and church clusters and affinity groups. We have already taken some steps in this direction by re-igniting some dormant covenanted ministries of the Conference and beginning the training of clergy and laity to carry out a variety of functions in the Conference. We hope to continue this practice and broaden it in the future. Our treasurer and the Finance and Administration Committee have been working, not only to balance our budget, but also to make transparent those financial resources of the Conference that are available for use in carrying out our mission. We hope that the combined effect of these efforts is to democratize Conference ministry, so that local churches and people not only feel that they have knowledge and a voice in Conference matters but also to actually participate in the work of the Conference as a community of mutuality. Among the areas we still need to develop in this regard are our Conference Deacons program, which needs some revision and more effective recruitment of persons able to represent the Conference to clusters of congregations through personal contact. We have also considered the use of trained volunteers to assist Conference staff in the work of search and call, but have delayed implementation of such volunteer roles in deference to the need for the new Conference Minister to review and shape such ministries.

Although the Conference, the associations and many congregations and clergy have taken a variety of actions to encourage sacred conversations on race, or to promote educational ministries on race, or to engage in direct advocacy/resistance against injustice, we still have not developed a coherent Conference voice to affirm racial justice and ethnic inclusiveness throughout our communities of faith. I believe that this needs to become a central priority of the Conference in days to come. An evening gathering of interested persons following Yvette Flunder’s sermon at the Conference Annual Gathering produced some feedback that I have attached as a stimulus to our thinking about these things.

I believe that the Missouri Mid-South Conference has a particular calling within the next few years to intentionally develop and support new churches that are culturally relevant to people of color throughout our Conference. We have several members in discernment who will soon be ready to assume leadership in such congregations, and at least one opportunity to share in a new ecumenical Afrocentric congregation in the St Louis area.

Although several congregations within our Conference are engaged in global partnership ministries of various sorts, we have a need to re-develop our Conference-wide mission partnerships, so that resources might be generated to support the partnership activities we engage in and bring our partners into stronger relationship with supportive congregations.

**Work of the Conference Staff:**

It has been our practice through the past two years that Dale Parson and I have divided the search and call work, congregational strategy work, and pastoral care ministries essentially on a geographic basis. It has been practical for Dale to work primarily in the west and I in the east. There are occasions, of course, when we cross those geographic lines, as Dale’s gifts or mine seem more relevant to the situation. In more programmatic and administrative matters, we have operated largely by engaging wherever our particular gifts are needed. Dale, for example, is really good at organizing meetings and events, seeing to hospitality, and making sure that technical details are not forgotten. This collegial form of shared staffing seems appropriate within our Conference setting, where there are multiple demographic centers with large gaps in between. It is also a form of staffing that requires substantial trust, since it would often be inconvenient for us to check with one another when a decision needs to be made.

The office staff located in St Louis is currently made up of our bookkeeper, Lorraine Brooks, our Office Administrator and Communications Director, Renee Cordes, and our Administrative Assistant and Receptionist, Kris Scott. Earlier this year, Kris was brought on staff as a full-time employee, replacing a former part-time employee. This change has opened up the opportunity for Renee to complete a broader range of responsibilities and also has provided a better feeling of welcome, as Kris has been able to be present for those visiting or calling the office on a full time basis.

The work of the outdoors ministry staff is, of course, somewhat autonomous, and is largely known and supervised through the covenanted ministry teams that relate to each of them. With Camp Mo Val, the operations are highly structured under a ministry team that almost functions as a board. The Shannondale covenanted ministry is less engaged in formal administration, but is highly knowledgeable about the functioning of the ministry.

My personal evaluation at this time is that we have a highly efficient and effective staff team that is adequate to accomplish the ministry of the Missouri Mid-South Conference as long as the voluntary structure of the Conference (Executive Committee, Conference Council, Standing Committees, and Covenanted Ministries) are working consistently to maintain a commitment to Conference mission.

Allen M. Fluent, Acting Conference Minister