

Nebraska Conference United Church of Christ State of the Conference 2017

Dear Friends,

This will be my last State of the Conference as Conference Minister of the Nebraska Conference United Church of Christ. I make it in a spirit of thanksgiving and of hope.

The Board of Directors will almost certainly call a Special Meeting of the Conference for October 7, 2017 at 2:00pm to elect the new Executive Conference Minister for the Tri-Conference venture we have entered into for our future. The person called will be the Conference Minister of each of the three Conferences and will be the Executive of the combined Tri-Conference Board. We anticipate that an Interim Associate Conference Minister will be selected to serve in Nebraska before my retirement on December 31st.

Naturally, this change which we adopted last year will impact our structure into the future. Structure is meant to support life and activity. I believe that we have set ourselves on a path that will allow more vital ministry in the Conference.

Our efforts are connected to a much broader pattern of change that is moving across the United Church of Christ. The changes in demographics and the changes in generational engagement have deeply impacted our shared life over the last twenty years and it appears that the rate of change is escalating.

The National Setting has worked to become more lean and adaptive. We have been on the same path and we have made a huge step forward by setting our Tri-Conference initiative into an embodied form that will be visibly active with the calling of the new Executive Conference Minister.

We in Nebraska have been deeply impacted by demographic shifts. The state of Nebraska has experienced small population growth over the last decade. However, that growth has not been spread evenly over the state. The eastern edge of Nebraska has been growing and most of the rest of Nebraska has been de-populating. Vibrant small towns in 2000 have often become shadows of their past glory in 2017.

Technology has also transformed our ability to be connected over large distances. People from all over the globe pay attention to the business views of a person who lives in Omaha. They travel to hear him, but, they can find many other ways to try to grasp his model for doing business. People from all over the United Church of Christ are also aware of the ministries of our two largest congregations and they can track much of their activity without ever coming to Nebraska.

Our Tri-Conference activities are being watched by many who face similar issues of providing leadership and support to congregations that are not closely clustered. Further, the need to provide support for congregations in new ways by new staffing models will continue to be very important to all of the folk who engage in middle judicatory ministry like the Nebraska Conference.

Naturally, our willingness to be pioneers means that we may have some well watched toe-stubbing incidents. Our deep commitments and our resilience will be gifts that help us adjust and try again.

Some of the ministries that we share will be impacted by our change in organizational structure. It will be the task of our leadership and of us all to be mindful of helping these ministries thrive.

First, we must remain committed to Kamp Kaleo.

Over the last ten years, very important work has been done to help the camp become much more self sufficient. This important work must continue. While it is tempting to imagine that there is a “they” out there in the universe that will take care of the things we can’t get around to, it isn’t true. We are “they” and we must make choices. If camping is important to our shared life, then we must make commitments that insure the future of camping. That will certainly mean allowing Kamp Kaleo to evolve in the services it offers and recognizing that Kaleo will never be the only camping ministry that our congregations participate in for their ministry.

Our Ghana Partnership has also been enriching of our shared life for a quarter of a century. In the Tri-Conference partnership, our Iowa partners are partners with the German folk who are partners with the EP Church. That grand circle comes out of long stories of shared history. We inherited many gifts from the past and some of those come from folk who are no longer a focus of our daily life. But, the ministry that they did long ago supports the ministry we do today. In some ways our Ghana partnership is no deeper than the most recent group of Ghana travelers. In other ways our shared life is forever formed by the impact of Ghana travelers. We have drums and drummers across Nebraska because Wilson “Willy” Akortia came into our lives and was willing to teach us from his depths. The Ghana Partnership is a gift we give to the future and our continued shared life will depend on the life we bring to it. The echoes of this partnership fan out from lives changed in Ghana and lives changed in Nebraska.

As demographics change the life of our Conference, the Prairie Association is the front line of that change. The ministry of our ELM program has been a blessing across the state, but, in the Prairie Association it has made ministry richer and helped our congregations remain vital forces in their communities.

I believe that the work of authorizing ministry and providing educational opportunities for folk willing to serve our churches in rural settings will be vital for the well being of the Conference. I suspect that we will see new models developing as time, resources and leadership change. As long as we stay focused on ministry, we can be vital.

The journey to the end of my time of serving in your midst now has an ending date. My heart will always give thanks for the life we have shared.

I want to express my deep gratitude for the opportunity to serve in your midst. While taking the call to serve the Nebraska Conference had a “going home” quality to it, there were many teachers, spiritual guides and prophets who helped me take on the mantel of this ministry. We live in community and it is the cooperative effort of many saints who have made the Nebraska Conference the welcoming, serving, justice-seeking community that we all long for it to be, living out the grace that gives us breath.