

Go quickly and tell...

Conference Minister Report 2018

A good Conference Annual Meeting theme captures moves with the spirit that is exciting our members, churches, and conference. So, I will “go quickly and tell”:

There is so much spirit of transformation happening with Mimanagish. This has been a year of tripling up energies for Mimanagish so that more lives may be transformed in its ministries. Continued generous support builds up Mimanagish, such as the addition of new mattresses, rebuilt decks, and planning for some cabin bathrooms. Scholarship assistance is making a huge difference, such as assisting eight children from one small town’s mobile home park to attend this summer. The dreamers and visionaries among us have submitted our 20-year plan required by the United States Forest Service, which included conference-wide ideas for how we can best steward this land.

We have a spirited staff. Two years ago, the Board of Directors committed to staffing the Conference for excellence, as so we added a full-time conference administrator, Jennifer Penfield, and a camp director, Josie Caton. Look at our Conference and Mimanagish web sites for the wonderful attention to spirit and detail Jennifer brings. Spend a few hours, or a few days at Mimanagish, and you will be glad for the passion and optimistic drive Josie brings to the Mimanagish experience. Call the office when Patty Martinson is in doing our record-keeping and you will get the warmest greeting.

Our Board of Directors is spirit-led. This year, the Board of Directors committed to three mission priorities. Two of the priorities are suggested above, i.e. focus on transformative ministries, adequately staff the conference and justly compensate staff. Our number one priority, though, is that the conference assures vital and viable congregations. So, we continue to recruit the finest ministers to fill our pulpits, such as Rev. Dr. Jennifer Yokum, starting at University UCC in Missoula on June 10, Rev. Dr. Sheila Naismith recently installed at Sheridan UCC, Rev. David Bartz just called to Big Timber UCC. We work with members-in-discernment, who bring fresh enthusiasm for considering authorized ministry, such as Rev. Tim Seery ordained in Great Falls last September, and Larry Meidinger, Laura Keating, and Lisa Harmon. The conference also welcomes Rev. Courtney Stange-Tregear back to help us name the vitality in our churches.

There is so much movement among us, it is hard to know where to begin. Between all our churches, we can tell of hundreds of activities happening in each of our conference mission priorities. We will hear many speak by video of their church vitality during our business meeting on Saturday. Whenever and wherever the spirit moves there are stories to tell. Our stories cannot but be told. As we find in our CAM theme, the Bible tells us so, to “go quickly and tell.”

Just a brief word study of what it means to “go quickly and tell”:

1. “GO” in its Greek form may mean “to head out into” and “to become engaged in” and “go for it.”

2. "QUICKLY" is exactly what it means, in a sense of "do not tarry" but "get on with it."
3. "TELL" means to "put to words" and "to bear witness."

So, this year's CAM theme is the Biblical appeal for us to "Go for it; and really get on with sharing what it is going on among us."

Our conference Stewardship Ministry Team will be pleased with this appeal, because they are concerned about how shy we have been in telling all the good that is happening among us. So, joining the dozens of people who are sharing some of their own faith stories by video during our CAM business meeting, I offer some stories of being your Conference Minister:

Coaching is changing the way we view ourselves and our ministry.

We struggled as a Conference to simply tell what we do. Our mission had been "staring us in the face" but the Board of Directors needed some coaching to name it. We called on some outside leadership, Rev. Dr. Felix Villanueva, Conference Minister with the South California - Nevada Conference, to coach our September Board meeting. Ever so quickly, we were able to tell our three mission priorities.

Dr. Villanueva is also a trainer of coaches. Through a UCC Insurance Board grant, I was able to enroll in his certified coach training and complete six courses. I now have over 35 hours of coaching experience applying this skill with pastors, churches, and lay leaders within our conference. Coaching is about asking the right questions so that a person can access within themselves the guidance they seek. This approach is changing the way I do ministry, from a consult-expert model, to an appreciative-inquiry model that draws out the best of who we are.

Our first mission priority, assuring churches are vital and viable, reorients my ministry.

I latch onto opportunities to strengthen our conference churches. For example, when Great Falls UCC wanted to do some leadership development, I recruited Josie Caton because of her board coaching and leadership experience. Together, we provided a fulfilling day of training. We focused on the necessity of covenant building, asset building. Everyone discovered their "inner hero."

While it is difficult to close congregations, as we have with Glasgow UCC and Medicine Lake UCC this year, I have been able to coach these congregations on their legacy. Even with closing congregations there is continued ministry through their resources, such as Glasgow UCC selling its building to a community youth ministry and providing significant gifts to Mimanagish and conference related missions. We are truly blessed to have a guide provided to us by the national United Church of Christ, "Living Legacy: A Church Legacy and Closure Resource" that leads us through the right questions and processes for meaningful closure.

Our Conference eNews is a monthly communication keeping on what is happening among us. The opening article is a pastoral reflection piece I call "God-seeds." This is followed by news updates on each of our three mission priorities. Other local church news and a Conference calendar is also included. One of the fine features of our eNews are the numerous hyperlinks to

relevant web sites. Approximately 15% of our 3000 conference church members receive the eNews, so I hope that more people and churches will sign up to receive it.

Our second mission priority, appropriately staff the conference and justly compensate staff, is about setting an example for excellent staffing and more.

I advocate for just compensation for clergy. Even adjusting for the 20 part-time pastorates in the MT-NWy Conference UCC, we have the lowest average salary basis of any UCC conference. Each time a search committee does its work in seeking new leadership I share the need for adequate compensation. The clergy compensation guidelines brought to this year's CAM by the Church and Ministry Commission seek to support conversation about just compensation.

The challenge recruiting clergy to serve our churches is not only about compensation, but also culture and demographics. My job in telling the joys of ministering in our MT-NWy Conference churches focuses on explaining the benefits of civic accessibility and big sky beauty found across our geography. I also work closely with our seminaries, particularly Eden Theological Seminary, to find student interns or recent grads who might serve here. For example, Nicholas Knoblauch, at Powder River UCC in Broadus started out as their intern.

We mentor and advise members-in-discernment who are on the path to authorized ministry. There are some traditional ways this is working well, where some local church members are moving towards becoming licensed pastors in their home church. I am also working with First Church Billings around a mentorship model of ministerial formation for their Minister of Healing and Community Transformation, Lisa Harmon. A mentorship model recognizes that a person's educational and life experience can prepare a them for authorized ministry. The ministry to which Lisa has been called includes some non-traditional understandings of sacramental life. In my paper delivered to the Conference, when I was voted as your Conference Minister in March 2012, I spoke of the non-traditional sacramental theology lived out by William Stringfellow in the 1950's-90's. The ministry happening with First UCC Billings has this potential of enabling us to live into the sacramental theology of service that Lisa practices.

Our third mission priority, encouraging transformational experiences particularly in places where we are not present, engages our energy with Mimanagish and beyond.

When I heard that there were 8 – 10 children in a small-town mobile home park that wanted to come to camp, I called a few churches to help with scholarship assistance. Imagine the impact on a town of 346 residents, when their otherwise "unchurched" children spend a week at camp. The same can be told of Columbus, where the Columbus Community UCC was able to receive a UCC grant to send 12 children from the wider community to Mimanagish. Not only are children and youth being transformed through Mimanagish, camp/retreat leaders are getting excellent Christian leadership training and mentorship from Camp Director, Josie Caton.

An exciting transformational project I am working on with my West Region UCC colleagues involves the development of a smart phone app to connect church members around common faith interests. Software developer, John Eisenhower (who grew up here when his father

ministered in Great Falls), is working with us to develop this app. Our goal is for people with common church, faith, social justice concerns can find each other across this vast geography.

Our three priorities merge for me in a question I keep in front of the Board of Directors: “what are the marks of a vital and viable Conference?” Certainly, our high mark is helping churches transform lives for the sake of the Gospel. I constantly assess what we do towards this goal and work with our excellent staff to assure the effectiveness of our ministries. I also converse with our neighboring conference ministers in asking the question of whether there are conference functions that are good to be share. For example, we do not have a clergy fitness review team in the MT – NWy Conference UCC. We would contract with another conference for review team assistance, if needed. In house, I am also exploring the mission value of owning versus renting office space. Most of our mission resources are in the form of staff. The Human Resources Commission will be conducting a 360 evaluation of conference ministries this year, which includes an assessment of all that we do as a conference. I look for us to continually assess our staff matrix so that we meet marks of vitality and viability.

As I am into my sixth year as your Conference Minister I have some statistics that tell of our viability: Twenty-one of our twenty-nine churches have been in searches for ministers during my tenure. Eight of our churches have full-time pastors, while seven churches have Sunday-only supply ministers. Conference OCWM and dues support from local churches fell from \$179,100 to \$162,400, although total local church income has remained steady at approximately \$3,125,000. Local church membership has decreased from 4,416 to 3,000. We used to have 33 churches, and another 3 churches are in conversation about closing (Kalispell, Power, Froid).

As much as our statistics motive me to greater effectiveness through our mission priorities, I can point to the stories told among us of churches being vital, of excellent staff and ministers, and of transformation happening everywhere in and around our church and faith lives. I am sustained in what I hear is happening among us, and I even have story or two to share from my ministries:

Did you hear the story about the Columbus Community UCC challenge grant?

Or, about 14 youth going to National Youth Event in Hawaii in late June?

Or, about the pastors who stood on the street and shared ashes on Ash Wednesday?

Or, about Larry Meidinger, from Butte UCC, who conducts a worship service for Acadia Children’s Hospital and who has given out 75 Bibles to the children?

Or, about Rev. Dr. Sheila Naismith’s grant from Buffalo Union UCC and Sheridan UCC to take a group to Hart Mountain Internment Center for an interpretive event?

Or, about Ballantine UCC’s afterschool and meal program that serves the neighborhood every week day?

Or, about the “Another Voice” Billings Community 7 television program featuring many UCC clergy panelists twice a month?

Or, about the election day meal always served up to the community by Big Timber UCC?

Or, about the white privilege curriculum used in many of our churches this year?

There are hundreds of more stories, so “go quickly and tell.