

Interim Conference Minister Report
to Ohio Conference Annual Gathering
September 15-16, 2017
John M Gantt

When Annual Gathering ends it will still be 16 days before the end of the first year of this interim period. The first meeting I attended on behalf of Ohio Conference occurred 33 days before I started!

In between there have been meetings as usual which you might expect and more we may not have expected. There have been pleasant opportunities to renew acquaintance with colleagues from previous years as a pastor in Ohio Conference or as a representative of Crossroad (Ft Wayne Children's Home), or as host for Ohio mission crews in Kentucky and West Virginia.

The interim position description was unremarkable in a few matters. "Serve as chief executive officer;" represent the Conference in wider church and ecumenical matters; be responsive to the Board of Directors; serve as a resource for Associations, congregations, clergy, and provide administrative oversight for all things Conference.

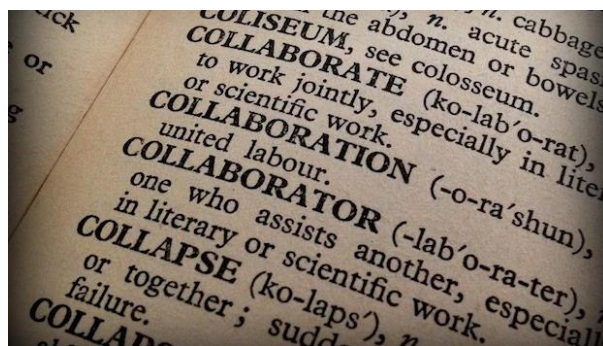
It was the other not-so-subtle lines in the position description which caused six weeks of consultation and discernment before candidating for the interim position.

Those entries included terms such as "re-invent, articulate and implement a vision for the Conference;" "manage and resolve conflict, facilitate healing, and maintain covenant between Conference staff, the Conference and Associations;" "improve administrative and financial accountability;" "administrative camp related responsibilities;" "position and prepare the Conference for its next settled executive."

Members of the Conference and the Board of Directors will determine how well those assignments have been met. But it was the less formal remarks which better outlined the expectations for the first year of interim ministry:

Briefly, the interim Conference Minister was to make peace between Associations and Conference, figure out where we are headed in a time of dramatic changes in staffing and funding, and do something about our camp situation.

Within the first three weeks, we learned of unexpected and unannounced decreases in Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) funding from and within Associations in addition to decreases which were already expected.



Rising deficits in the operation of two campsites led to various and sometimes conflicting decisions about selling parcels of land, selling both campsites, selling one, putting both properties under management by United Camps, Conferences and Retreats (UCCR), and

balancing the long standing and perhaps inevitable tensions created by indecision, reversed decisions, and unpopularity of any suggestion that outdoor ministry needs to change.

Association and Conference leadership changes were emerging; retirements and replacements were in the works. In this year, six Association staff members have left office and one more retirement is in the offing; three new persons have come aboard along with a corps of part time persons who assume parts of jobs formerly held by full time staff persons. Our long tenured Conference Administrator retires at the end of this calendar year, and the role of our staff member for Networking, Creativity and Faith Formation has been revisited regularly. Pam Brown, Nicole Havelka, and I share office space with Central Southeast Association and the Ohio Council of Churches. Carolyn Willis, accountant and business manager, works from home.

Six proposals for how to redefine Ohio Conference have been entertained since the dismissal of the Mission First proposal which was advanced during the previous dedicated interim period.

If there are two driving forces which inspire continued efforts to rethink the ministry of the Ohio Conference in all its parts, they could be stated this way:

1) How to better resource congregations and clergy who struggle with aging memberships, demographic changes, competition for declining dollars in the face of rising costs, and waning interest in the “institution of the church.”

2) Consequently, the quest is to consider ways to streamline or eliminate judicatory levels which are perceived to absorb too much of the resources congregations are able and willing to offer.

It all boils down to Visioning, Camping, and Staffing.

Current status of each:

VISIONING

A Vision Team composed of Association Ministers, representatives of Association councils or cabinets, representatives of Conference Board of Directors, and the interim Conference Minister, has come as close as such teams have ever been over the past forty years to agreement on a general design for the Ohio Conference which will be affordable, and attentive toward local congregations and their clergy. Previous plans to accomplish such goals have stalled at the Association levels. A concept being fashioned at this moment is intended to be considered by the Conference as a whole. When a destination has been determined, work will continue to define the details for how to get there!

I learned at early meetings of this team that the goal was to have such a concept ready for the 2017 Annual Gathering. I made it a personal mission to meet that goal. We did not hit the target. But an entire session of this 2017 Annual Gathering will be devoted to consideration of a “well formed outcome” to the challenge of “re-inventing the Ohio Conference.”

CAMPING

This interim period began with the need to defend a decision to sell parcels of camp property and to address complaints that there was no long term vision for outdoor ministry, no strategy for what to do with proceeds from sales, and too little transparency in most everything. I thought the

complaint about transparency was remarkable in that the Board of Directors is formed by representative of each Association, a few at large representatives, and Association Ministers who sit as ex officio participants. I supposed that deliberations and decisions by such a Board made their way back to Association councils and committees, and from there to the membership of the Associations. That expectation has not worked out so well, but that's a story for another time!

As support by congregations and Associations – both in dollars and usage - continued to deteriorate over the year, the Board of Directors concluded in February, 2017 that only one camp site could be sustained. The Board vowed to make the broader concept of faith formation a core value of the Conference, with outdoor ministry being one major component. The decision was made to sell Pilgrim Hills, and prepare Templd Hills to be the sole camp property in 2018.

A Business Plan Team, a Camp Operations Team, and a Sales Team were established. The wisdom and validity of the Board's decision to sell Pilgrim Hills was challenged, reviewed, and reaffirmed by the Board. At the time of this writing, the Business Plan is to be shared at the Annual Gathering, the Camp Operations Team is deep into the repairs and remodeling of Templd Hills, and the Sales Team has selected an auctioneer for the sale of Pilgrim Hills with details to be announced after a contract is signed. A farewell event is planned at Pilgrim Hills on October 7 to acknowledge the significant role this sacred space has played in the faith development of countless "alumni/ae" and to give voice to the sadness so many feel at the loss of their favorite camp site.

STAFFING

What, how, when and who to call a settled Conference Minister if there is to be one, depends entirely upon the outcome of visioning efforts. Some pending proposals call for the duties and responsibilities of a Conference Minister to be assigned to newly-configured and expanded roles of Association Ministers.

Staff support for outdoor ministry and faith development depends upon the outcome of visioning efforts.

Shaping of Association staff leadership depends on changing circumstances within each Association and the outcome of visioning efforts.

So there are at this moment too many question marks to venture a "report" about the challenges of staffing.

OTHER MATTERS OF CONCERN

In nearly all discussions about restructuring the ministry within the Ohio Conference there is little conversation about "the wider church" and our role and responsibility toward the national and global work of our denomination.

There is frequent mention of how desirable are collaboration and collegiality but the practice of partnership among congregations, between Associations, and between Associations and Conference needs work.

Covenant is considered by many to be a threatening term used to coerce cooperation or to criticize when there is a perception that covenant is not honored.

Autonomy and accountability are uncomfortable companions. Autonomy dominates. Accountability suffers.

The excellent ministry of so many congregations is veiled by a prevailing sense of frustration and weariness over the uncertainties of funding, costs of leadership, inefficient structures, and slow decision-making.

The Ohio Conference which is spread throughout the state of Ohio and into Northern Kentucky and western portions of West Virginia, still claims more members than any other of the 37 Conferences, but now ranks second in number of congregations. I have had the joy of worshipping in 31 of those congregations so far this year.

There is a host of determined and dedicated members to do the work of the church, and in many places a commitment to be vital and faithful witnesses to the mighty acts of God. Together, in prayer and service, we can address whatever impedes our progress in achieving a just world for all as we live into and up to the three great loves of neighbor, children and creation.

I am grateful for the honor of being part of a re-imagined Ohio Conference as a community which serves God by walking together in the ways of Jesus Christ.

Shalom

John M Gantt, interim

