UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

MISSOURI MID-SOUTH CONFERENCE

Associate Conference Minister's Report

Committed to Connecting, Sustaining, and Encouraging the work of God in The Missouri Mid-South Conference

The year marks my sixth with the Missouri Mid-South Conference as your Called Associate Conference Minister. I am honored to do the work you have asked me to do and how you all continue to support me in this very important ministry. This past year I have been eternally grateful to worship with many of our churches, not only for worship on Sundays, but also for special occasions like installations of new pastors, ordinations of new pastors, celebrations of church anniversaries, and many other opportunities in the life of our congregations. In addition, I have been honored to spend time with many of our gifted pastors as they serve our churches throughout Missouri, Memphis, and Arkansas; whether that was via Zoom conversations or over a meal, or just simply on the phone, each of these opportunities provided me with sacred moments to reflect and learn what is taking place in the lives of our local church pastors. The work I do here is very rewarding and I hope to continue this exciting ministry for another year.

New Beginnings of Many Kinds

Rev. James Oleson...New Pastor at St. Paul UCC in Old Monroe, MO
Rev. Sara Andler-Dahlhieimer...New Pastor at Zion UCC in Troy, MO
Rev. Matthew Hellis…New Pastor at St. Jordan's UCC & Pilgrim UCC
Hunter Zyriek-Rhodes…New Pastor at Kirkwood UCC in Kirkwood, MO
Rev. Tracey Harris…New Pastor at Frieden's UCC in St. Charles, MO
Rev. Max Bade…Newly ordained by the Eastern Association
Rev. Dr. Sonya Vann…Newly ordained by the St. Louis Association
Rev. Melinda Love…Newly ordained by the St. Louis Association
Rev. Gabriel Requadt…Newly ordained by the St. Louis Association
Rev. Brian Pendleton…Transfer of Ordination to the UCC by the Western Association
Rev. Joshua Rau…Newly ordained by the Eastern Association

Giving Thanks for Those Who Served for a Season Such as This

Rev. John Chaplin…Served as the Interim Minister at Zion UCC in Mayview, MO
Rev. Gary Schulte…Served as the Interim Minister at St. Peter's UCC in New Haven, MO

Preparing to Say Goodbye (Church Closures)

Calvary UCC in St. Louis has officially voted to close and their last service will be held on December 27th of 2026 at 2:00 pm.
Carondelet UCC in St. Louis has officially voted to close and their last service will be held on Pentecost, May 27th of 2027.

Working with The Holy Spirit (Search & Call)

Over the last year and a half the climate of Search & Call has continued to change. While some churches have received a tremendous outpouring of interest, others have gotten little to none. There isn't necessarily any real reason for this outside of the reality that a person has to feel the call to a church and the church has to feel the nudge towards a candidate. The real work is that of the Holy Spirit who is always doing a New Thing within Our Conference. We do have many of our smaller, more rural churches that are part-time that have struggled over the years that do continue to do so. I believe that is partially due to the demands of the world to "make a living." A part-time call to serve a church comes with a financial challenge and therefore combining two together to make it a "full-time" call may seem logical, but in reality it is not always an option. For many of our churches seeking a part-time clergy they are left in many cases to utilize nearby pulpit supply to cover them week by week. This is encouraging us to keep thinking "outside the pew" when it comes to finding people to serve. Therefore we have made stronger connections with our ecumenical partners and lay people have even stepped in to fill pulpits. I do believe that God is at work within each of us doing this work and encouraging us to continue to be the church. It is taking us back to the days of the gospels.

Dedication to Serve (Committee on Ministry (CoM))

Our CoMs continue to meet each month to build deeper connections with our clergy and churches, to install new pastors in churches, to ordain new clergy and walk with churches and pastors during challenging moments. The work our CoMs do is challenging and requires extra commitments beyond the monthly meetings. They handle transfers of standing, following up to make sure clergy have their Boundary Awareness Training and Racial Justice and Equity Training completed every three years and reviewing clergy Informational Review forms. They also spend a lot of time talking with the Members In Discernment and working on the MID process to make sure that each one is getting handled with the best care. Each committee takes their work seriously and has serious conversations about what is going on in the local church, paying attention to what is being shared in different spaces outside of the committee and also encouraging our clergy to remember their UCC Ordained Ministers Code.

In addition to this work, they attend an annual gathering/retreat each year. This retreat is meant to help them to focus on one or two areas of the Manual On Ministry (M.O.M.). These retreats are led by one of the team members of MESA, which is part of the National Setting. This gives our committee members a chance to engage on a deeper level with M.O.M. and to have an expert from the National Setting answer those questions and lead them properly in understanding their roles while they serve on CoM.

Doing Ministry for The People

We held a Conference Clergy Retreat at Camp MoVal this year that was led by Rev. Nicole Havelka. This was an opportunity for clergy to come, to rest, relax, and hopefully find some restoration. Our clergy continue to work diligently, putting in long hours each week and don't get too many opportunities to unplug and relax. This retreat was designed to open them up to some new ways to do that in their day to day life. We plan to continue these annual Conference Clergy Retreats.

A shift in ministry over the last year has required me to be nimble. At the beginning of 2026 when we didn't have a Conference Minister I was asked by the Board of Directors to pick up a few extra oversight items. One was to sit in on the monthly Finance Committee Meetings. This small but mighty group has seen some shake up and was in the process of trying to keep the finances on track during this gap in leadership. They did a great job during the six months, including welcoming one of the board members, Julia Hicks to the position of Board Treasurer. This helps to stabilize the work of oversight and combine it with the necessary correspondence with the Board of Directors. The second piece of work that I was asked to join was the monthly OCWM committee meetings. This was another great opportunity for me to take a deeper look at the local churches on a given level and to help identify more closely what may be going on since I am in those places and having more conversations with those pastors and church members on a regular basis than others on the committee. I continue to participate in these monthly meetings and now that Phil is here we are working closely together to envision where things go from here. Finally, the departure of our Director of Outdoor Ministries Phil and I have taken over oversight of both MoVal and Shannondale. What this has really meant is to be more attentive to the needs at both facilities, to be in regular contact with the site directors, and to make sure all is going well. This has been a huge blessing for me personally, as I love to spend time visiting with our staff and the people in both of those places. I look forward to this ongoing work.

Ongoing Work to stay Prepared

I completed a two year program for leaders called A Soul for Leadership which took place outside of Bath in the United Kingdom. This was an amazing opportunity to meet with other leaders from different parts of the world and learn about creating good leadership skills and habits for the future. We studied different leadership styles provided to us from many different reading resources throughout the course. Again, I am grateful to have been accepted for the course and the chance to grow my leadership skills.

Rev. Damien Lake
Associate Conference Minister