

Report of the Conference Minister

Kansas-Oklahoma Conference of the United Church of Christ

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2021: The Year of Letting Go

Over the last couple of years, I have been thinking a lot about local churches that I have watched “come back” after being very close to dying. They have been revitalized after calling a pastor that re-energizes them and the church has revolved around that pastor. Then the pastor leaves and it isn’t long before the church is on the edge again and not too long after that the church closes its doors. When I look closely at those situations, it appears that the pastor really DID revitalize the church all by his or herself. The pastor did it all, and the members let that happen. The pastor never let or insisted that others assume responsibility for anything and when the pastor left, the lay leaders didn’t know how to do anything to continue what the pastor started. It just never took root well enough to grow on its own.

I have been thinking about that as it relates to KO. There are a lot of new people here; many don’t know that KO was in a very fragile place when I first arrived in 2013. They don’t know that there were questions about whether the Conference was viable for even three more years.

What they hear is talk about “what Edith has done for the Conference”. That will be my legacy: but don’t be fooled. What I was able to do here was **only** because the Conference Council was willing to let me do it; as were pastors and members of our churches. I know Conferences *right now* that are embroiled in fights about camps, or who would never consider a virtual office until COVID **forced** them. *We made those changes years ago, saving the Conference significant dollars, and we made them without acrimony. Ministry in KO has been a partnership.*

BUT because the Conference really was very fragile in 2013 when I arrived, the day-to-day operation of the entire Conference DID revolve around me, everything that happened was because I made it happen. *That was the way I wanted it to be so I could understand it and untangle it.* And it remained that way so

things would remain were under control financially. It took time to imagine how things might work differently; longer than I imagined. I thought it might take five years, it took seven. But once I had a handle on things, what everything required, and had the Conference as a whole operating well, I knew it was time for me to move on. And in doing so, it was time to begin planning for how to move responsibilities beyond the Conference Minister to other people in the Conference.

Some of what we have in place now was intentional, some was a serendipitous gift. All were efforts to assure that the gains the Conference has worked so hard for continue and don't fall apart because I refuse to let go of responsibilities and trust others to carry them forward.

And so, my primary work in 2021 has been the work of letting go. And for someone like me who likes to work, who likes to be in control, believe me, letting go is work! I encourage you to read the full reports of the KO Staff in the Staff Sections, but I have a short paragraph on each below. Each of these persons are gifts to the Conference, some serve in voluntary capacities, others for a very small stipend. But all offer a ministry that is invaluable to the life and ministry of the Conference. I know you join me in thanking them for their willingness to be partners in ministry.

At this time last year, we were awaiting the approval of a grant that would give the Conference dollars for a *Communications Specialist* for 3 years; two years fully funded, and a third year partially funded. That has happened and you have witnessed the result. The website has been updated, you are "hearing" more voices in eNEWS as *Rev. Michael Vollbrecht* has brought his skills and love the UCC to the role. You can read Michael's report on his work in the Staff Reports section.

One of my concerns over the years has been the inability to adequately connect and serve retired pastors and pastors that may feel isolated in rural areas. I tried several different ways to approach these concerns, but time was limited, and nothing seemed to work. Until now. *Rev. Fred Kandeler* in his role as *Ministry Assistant for Pastoral and Congregational Relations* has addressed both of these needs. While Search and Call has always been for me a primary way to get to work closely with a congregation, it's always good to have a backup and I appreciate Fred's willingness to learn the UCC process. Fred is serving as staff for the search at Community Church in Carbondale.

The staff person you probably know least about is **Erin Frasier**. Erin is the **Development Specialist** who lives in Columbia, MO and we thought she would help lead a development emphasis building up to Synod in Kansas City. That didn't happen as Synod was virtual. But what DID happen was the creation of the infrastructure of the development system that was sorely needed and that is now ready for the Development Committee and your new Conference Minister to build on.

The role of **Registrar** in KO was limited to maintaining the records of Authorized Ministers and Committee on Ministry Minutes. There was never any conversation about who was responsible for maintaining the other electronic records of the Conference. That role has now been assigned to **Jan Lange**. Jan is the BOX Administrator, so with the Conference Minister, she can add and also maintain the official records of the Conference Council. (BOX is the electronic platform that the Conference uses to maintain records.)

Consultant for Equity and Inclusion: Programming for a Conference like KO has been challenging. In 2018 the Conference changed the bylaws that eliminating the model of Commissions that was no longer effective way of programming in the Conference. The expectation was that those interested in an area would step forward to offer their gifts. **Julia Gaughan** stepped forward in 2021 to serve as the Consultant for Equity and Inclusion. Julia is a gifted voice and resource, and KO is just beginning to experience her potential as seen in her leadership in the Celebrate PRIDE KO and other leadership she has provided this year.

Following the announcement of Don Miller's resignation as *Disaster Ministries* coordinator, volunteers were solicited to fill the role. Immediately, *Rev. Kelly Hansen* from Colonial Church in Prairie Village and *Rev. Laura Woods*, a member of Mayflower Church in Oklahoma City, stepped forward. Both Chaplains, Kelly and Laura are clearly in the helping business; read a bit about them staff reports section as well.

Committee on Ministry: Committee on Ministry (COM) work is important; it is ongoing and almost always in the background. As important as it is, COM work is pretty much unknown to lay people unless they serve on the COM; authorized ministers know it well (or should) as it is the COM that pastors are responsible to for their standing, not the local church. But lay leaders know virtually nothing about the work of the COM. Some effort was made to address this in a virtual educational offering. Also, specific work has been done to assure that records are

current COM Chairs are not staff, but as I have moved away from being the person that drives the agenda, this has shifted the responsibility more to the team of the COM Chairs, hopefully in a way that is not inappropriate but more balanced.

As President Bobbie Henderson mentioned in her report, we applied for and the Conference was awarded 50 spots in the Transformational Grant Program from the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) I first experienced KLC back in July 2019 and the impact of that experience is reflected in my 2019 Report to the Conference when words like *technical and adaptative changes* began to show up in my reports and in my language. KLC did the Leadership Retreat for the Conference Council in November of 2019 as I began to slowly introduce the concepts of adaptive change into the lexicon of the Conference. I hope that many of you take advantage of future opportunities to participate in the training at the Kansas Leadership Center so you can have a shared language for leadership in the Conference. I think that will be helpful as you move into the future.

I have appreciated the support and opportunity to continue to freely participate in the wider church. It has been a source of support for me personally and I hope it has given the Conference additional resources and insight. I am delighted that as I leave my role as Conference Minister KO has three persons serving on national boards; each of them can continue to be resources for you if you have any questions about these agencies:

Julia Gaughan, Plymouth Church; Vice Chair: UCC Board of Directors
Howard Sewell, Mayflower Church, UCC Insurance Board
Doni Mooberry Slough, Plymouth Church, United Church Funds.

Bobbie Henderson has been absolutely amazing as the President of the Conference. I could not have asked for a more committed person to lead during this critical time in the life of the Conference. Juggling grandchildren, her husband Don, her local church Fellowship, work as a retired consultant at Camp Fire Girls Bobbie has taken every task, chartered a timeline for completion responded to every email, corralled those needed to do and complete the work and managed to be gracious and caring throughout her tenure as President. Words cannot express my deepest appreciation for all you have given and how very much I have loved working with you.

And now friends, it is with deepest gratitude that I deliver this final written report to you. I am sad only in the way that one is sad at the end of a good movie or a great vacation. I believe that we did good things together. We didn't do everything. No one does. I am as sure as one can possibly be that the decision for me to leave is the right one for me and the right one for the Conference. I look forward to seeing you virtually at Annual Meeting to explore what it means to live UNAFRIAD and where I will have one last opportunity to thank you for the opportunity to serve as the Conference Minister of the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference.