

Nominations for Conference Leadership

Conference Officers

President of the Conference: Caela Simmons Wood



Caela is the pastor of First Congregational Church in Manhattan where she has served since 2014. Originally from Kansas and a graduate of K-State, Caela completed a Master of Theological Studies at Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, and a Master of Divinity at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Caela was ordained in 2010 and served as an associate pastor in Bloomington, Indiana before accepting the call to Manhattan and returning to Kansas. Caela is in the NGLI Program (Next Generation Leadership Initiative) of the Pension Board, a leadership program for younger pastors who demonstrate significant potential to build vibrant United Church of Christ congregations. Increasing her leadership capacity with head and heart, Caela is also in a three-year training program called Souljourners to become a Spiritual Director through the Sophia Center in Atchison, Kansas. She has served as Chair of Committee on Ministry D, and noted that she loved serving in that role and stepped down to serve as Vice President of the Conference. Caela served on the Conference Minister Search Committee and has agreed that, if elected, she is ready to become President of the Conference. Caela is married to David and has two sons.

Vice President of the Conference: Jim French



Jim French is a 5th generation farmer and rancher in Reno County, Kansas. He and his wife, Lisa, attend Partridge Community Church-UCC where he has directed the choir since 1980. Before that he received degrees in English Language and Literature and taught at the University of Nebraska. After farming full-time and teaching part time for 25 years, French worked as a Communication Specialist for the Kansas Rural Center, and then as the Senior Advocacy Adviser for Oxfam AmErika. He retired from Oxfam in 2017, and continues to farm and ranch. Most recently, French completed two years of study at the Center for Action and Contemplation Living School.

French grew up attending Partridge Community Church where he currently serves as Moderator and was just starting elementary school when the members voted to merge with the newly established United Church of Christ. He attended camp at White Memorial Camp in the sixties. Having served on the Conference Minister Search Committee, if elected, Jim brings both history and a vision for the future to the role of Vice President.

Conference Treasurer: Rich Bireta



Rich Bireta and his wife Jane live in Lawrence, Kansas where Rich is recently retired after a 40+ year career in the information technology industry. The Biretas have been members of Plymouth Congregational Church in Lawrence for over 20 years. Jane and Rich raised six children and currently enjoy visiting their four grandchildren. Rich has served as Plymouth's Treasurer for six years and as a member of the Board of Stewardship for three years. He is currently Plymouth's Deputy Treasurer. Rich was elected by the Conference Council to complete the term of Treasurer when Mark Van Dorn resigned and is now nominated

to serve a full term. *(This is Rich's first term as Conference Treasurer; it is a two-year term, Class of 2023)*

Conference Council Member

At Large Member: Steven Christofferson



Steven Christofferson grew up in the United Church of Christ in the Missouri Mid-South Conference where he was confirmed in 1994 in the church he grew up in with his parents, St. John's UCC in Mehlville, MO. Steven has an undergraduate degree from Indiana State University and a MA from Webster University in International Relations and Affairs. He left Missouri and re-located to Oklahoma City to care for a family member and that's how he found Mayflower Congregational Church where he has been a member since 2014. Steven serves as the Director of Youth Ministry at Mayflower and was excited about taking a group of Mayflower youth to the National Youth Event (NYE) until COVID-19 resulted in cancelling the event. When not serving with the youth of

Mayflower, Steven works as a Human Resources Manager for Target. He is married to Nichole and has a 15-year-old son named Ryan.

Member, Finance Stewardship Committee: Joe Pruitt

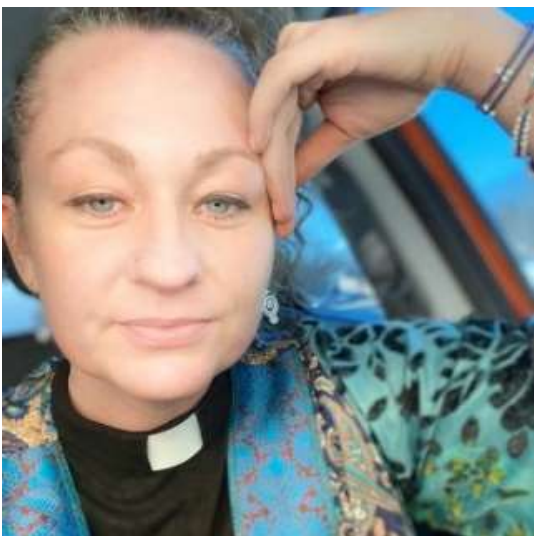


Joe Pruitt graduated from Johnson County Community College with a culinary degree and has been a Chef in the Lawrence area for 15+ years. Members of St. Paul's UCC in Eudora since 2008, Joe and his wife Morning, were in the K-O Lay Leadership Program in 2015, they attended General Synod and became engaged in the wider church. During his time at St. Paul's Joe has served as head of the parish life committee and on the church council as Financial Secretary and Moderator. Joe and Morning have lived in Eudora since 2004, they have two children, Quinn, and Althea ages, 10 and 4. *(Joe previously filled an unexpired term; this is his first full term, Class of 2024.)*

Committee on Ministry (COM)

Member of COM: Kayla Bonewell

(Also represents the COM on Conference Council)



Kayla Bonewell was born in Oklahoma City and has a Master of Divinity from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California (2008). Ordained in the United Church of Christ (2010), Kayla served as an associate pastor in Rochester, Minnesota before returning to Oklahoma in 2016 as pastor of Church of the Open Arms and Cathedral of Hope. Kayla has ministry experience as a hospital chaplain, campus minister, social justice activist, youth minister, and associate pastor.

Kayla expressed an initial interest in serving on COM because she believes that supporting the

discernment of those who feel called to ministry is crucial to the future of the church. She agreed to serve another term saying it takes at least two terms to learn the complexity of the COM. Kayla also serves on the Conference Council as the representative of the Committee on Ministry and this year was a General Synod delegate. Kayla serves on COM D. If elected this would be Kayla's 2nd term. (Class of 2024)

Committee on Ministry Chairs

K-O bylaws state that persons serving as Chairs of the Committee on Ministry are to be elected to the position at Annual Meeting

Gage Church and Erik Graefe, Co-Chairs of Committee A (Authorization and Oversight)



Gage Church is the pastor at Central Congregational Church in Topeka. Gage transferred to K-O from the Rocky Mountain Conference where he served as a member of the Committee on Ministry. With a background in journalism, Gage has the experience of an authorized minister that came to ministry as a second career and found a home in the United Church of Christ. Serving at Central has also given Gage the experience of leading a committed UCC congregation in redefining their ministry after taking a risk in selling a large building that no longer fit the congregation and renting space in Topeka. Gage's experience represents some of the ongoing challenges that many authorized ministers are facing in leading congregations today which makes him an excellent partner to serve as part of the COM leadership team. Gage has also served as a General Synod delegate. (This is Gage's 2nd

Term, Class of 2024)



Erik Graefe: Erik is a licensed minister serving Zion UCC in Junction City. Initially licensed in 2003, Erik was part of the original licensed ministry program in K-O and he served for several years at New Basel UCC before resigning in 2013. Erik worked at K-State with Ecumenical Christian Ministries (ECM) in a number of roles including teaching classes on the Enneagram and taking groups to Standing Rock. Erik also coaches high school basketball at Abilene High School. In 2017, Erik returned to pastoral ministry first as supply pastor and then as a called settled pastor at Zion UCC in Junction City. Erik began serving as Co-Chair of COM A in October 2020 immediately after Annual Meeting following the resignation of the previous Chair. Erik just attended his first General Synod and has also taken the UCC Sacred Conversations to End Racism

(SC2ER) Summer Institute Training. Erik has done a great job and brings the perspective of both a licensed and bi-vocational authorized minister to the COM leadership team. Erik also notes the complexity of COM work and appreciates the team approach. *(Erik is serving his first term on COM A, Class of 2022)*

COM-D (Discernment and Preparation): Rachael Pryor



Rachael Pryor is currently serving as Transitional Minister at Wichita UCC. She also chairs Committee on Ministry D and is eligible to be elected to serve a second term. **Rachael** is likely a name and face many recognize as she has served in various roles in the Conference, most recently as Chair of the Conference Minister Search Committee. Rachael is well suited for the Chair of COM D as she has deep roots in the UCC, experience on the Committee on Ministry and the ongoing evolution of the discernment process in the UCC. Ordained in 2011, Rachael lives in Lindsborg with her family - children Henry, Greta and Linus, and husband Adam who is on the on the faculty at Bethany College. *(This is Rachael's second term on the COM; Class of 2024)*