

December 2019



NEW BEGINNINGS E-BLAST



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Message from the Acting Conference Minister

Rev. Michelle Hughes

"As we struggle with shopping lists and invitations, compounded by December's bad weather, it is good to be reminded that there are people in our lives who are worth this aggravation, and people to whom we are worth the same." – Donald E. Westlake

I can't believe we are now in the Holiday season and 2019 is coming to a close. On behalf of the entire staff of the Conference I want to convey our thanks for the gift of your support during this past year. I thank you for the work and ministry of our local churches. I thank you for the gift of your prayers for healing for our Conference Minister while he recovers from surgery. I thank you for the gifts of your time, your ideas, and your commitment. I must add I am very thankful for the gift of being part of an amazing team of people who are a blessing to work with.

As we enter this time of celebration, let the church keep this sacred time; patiently waiting during Advent, honoring the hope and possibility that can appear in the most gritty, unremarkable circumstances. Let us be wise in who we choose to honor. Let us be generous in giving of ourselves. Let us look in the face of each child with the expectation that he or she could be the manifestation of the Holy One wrapped in flesh.

From my heart to yours... A Very Merry Christmas!



A Reflection, a Thank You, and a Farewell

Rev. Kathy Lawes

Associate Conference Minister Serving Prairie and Western Associations

The Rev. Vertie Powers rolled into Chicago in a red Chrysler 300 with Maryland plates and an impressive list of credentials – ordination in the Disciples of Christ, years of local church ministry, experience with the national setting of the United Church of Christ, and on her way to earning her Doctor of Ministry. Soon the Rev. Dr. Vertie Powers rolls out of

Chicago in her shiny black Jeep with “REV DR P” on her Illinois plates. She takes with her eight years of experience as the Associate Conference Minister serving the Chicago Metropolitan Association and our appreciation for her ministry in and on behalf of the Illinois Conference.

Vertie has shared her gifts and talents generously and effectively in assisting local churches with all manner of support in search and call processes, decision-making, visioning, and worship. She has supported “her” pastors with a listening ear, time, and presence; and she has brought wisdom to situations of conflict and crisis. Unique to her office being housed at the Chicago Theological Seminary, she has mentored Members in Discernment and found time for those students on campus who needed a wise elder. In a variety of settings – Conference meetings, worship, Clergy Days Away, and more, Vertie has shared her beautiful singing voice to great effect: she nails those high notes with grace, with her eyes directed to the heavens, praising God with passionate music. I will long remember our Gospel-singing sister Vertie performing a rousing duet with former ACM Jonathan Knight at an Annual Celebration of the Conference; who knew we could be called to worship by a Bruce Springsteen song?

In Vertie’s time in Illinois, our congregations and pastors, our leaders and our wider church settings have been blessed by Vertie’s prophetic and engaging preaching. In all these settings, Vertie has courageously spoken the truth, brought light to injustice and offered tangible means of addressing divisions; and, she has cared for her colleagues with her spirited, frank, no-nonsense style. I will miss her wonderful sense of humor, her quips, and that joyful laughter that makes her eyes sparkle. Along with countless others in our Conference, I have learned from Vertie, my spirit has been nurtured by Vertie, and I am going to miss truly my colleague and friend. Vertie, with deep thanksgiving and grateful hearts, we wish you Godspeed as you finish your ministry here in Illinois and find those places in retirement where God will still use your gifts and skills. Go with peace and our love as you pack up that shiny black Jeep, and don’t drive faster than your guardian angels can fly.

Advent Reflection

Rev. Kim Wood, Acting Associate Conference Minister

There is a gentle snow falling outside as I write this article, and I am grateful for the sense of quiet it offers. I’ve been touching base with some of our clergy and visiting several of our congregations’ social media pages, and I know that life is anything but quiet as folks move through this season of Advent and prepare for Christmas.



When I started planning what I would write I decided I would focus on the mission and outreach projects that are taking place in churches across the Eastern and Fox Valley Associations. And there are several – special collections for local food pantries, drives to gather coats, hats, gloves, and toys for children, mitten and sock trees for people who are homeless, musical ensembles headed to senior care and nursing facilities bringing holiday joy and good cheer just to name a few. But what has struck me most is collaboration that seems to sweep the season.

As I have researched what is going on this Advent at our local church settings, there is a lot of “coming together.” In some cases, there are events that require internal cooperation: cantatas that involve the children and people who may not regularly participate in congregations’ music programs, Hanging of the Greens that has several committees or teams working together to facilitate an all-hands-on-deck event, a Cookie Walk that brings the bakers out of the woodwork while the community lines up in anticipation. A couple of our congregations are in a time of pastoral transition, and so, together, the laity are planning and leading worship.

There are also a lot of activities that connect congregations within communities – community Christmas concerts and sing-a-longs, joint family fun activities, community study groups and meals. Sometimes our congregations reach out across several miles to churches in nearby towns to work and worship together, sharing in the joy of the season and the work that is needed to care for people.

It is easy to get “too busy” to connect during Advent-often in the name of “connecting” once Christmas arrives. But when we come together, work together, serve together, our preparation is enriched, our energy is shared and fed by the energy of others, and the results of our efforts grow exponentially. Even in times of great stress and strife, the weight seems to give a bit, even if for just a moment.

Christ’s birth was a collaborative effort – God and Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds and magi, families and communities and the whole of God’s Creation all shifting and moving for Jesus to come into the world and change it...change us. I thank God for all the ways you, the Illinois Conference, are collaborating this Advent and Christmas, as we continue to share the love of God through Jesus Christ.

Report from the Illinois Conference President

Rev. Charles Maney

There is a lot going on in the Illinois Conference. We continue to pray for a full recovery for Rev. Justo González II, now expected to return to us the first week of January. We also pray for Rev. Michelle Hughes, who is doing double-duty until his return, and the rest of our dedicated staff. We give thanks for the love and care we have each shared through the Rev. Vertie Power’s hands, and pray for her continuing health and happiness, as she begins her long-anticipated retirement.



We pray for the Conference Minister Search Committee as they move into the next phase of the search process. (Mr. David Holston, Conference Vice President, chairs that committee.) We pray that all who are able will share generously to Our Church’s Wider Mission (OCWM) which is the lifeblood of what we are able to do with and for each other.

As we are working on the detailed plans for our Annual Celebration this coming June at Augustana College in Rock Island, bits of the planning and deadlines are rapidly becoming milestones. One of the key components of the Business Sessions are the work we do together considering Resolutions. The final day for submitting Resolutions for our June Business Meeting is March 5, 2020. It takes serious work to get a resolution properly prepared and submitted, so if it is on your heart to present at the Annual Celebration, it is time to get started.

I hold all of you in my prayers. Each local congregation faces a host of challenges in these contentious times, and it is easy to lose our focus on being a distribution hub for God’s great love for all of Creation. May the blessings of the holiday season



Tower Hill Camp and Retreat Center welcomes new on-site

Manager

Outdoor Ministries, Tower Hill Camp and Retreat Center and the Illinois Conference UCC is excited to announce and welcome Rev. Tracy Heilman to Tower Hill Camp and Retreat Center as its new on-site manager.

Tracy is a native of Illinois, and has served churches in Oklahoma, New Hampshire, Illinois and most recently in Columbus, Montana. She grew up attending church camp and has been involved in outdoor ministries throughout her adult life. Tracy and her family spent many summer vacations at Tower Hill, and came to love the paths, the beach, and the deep sense of peace that is part of Tower Hill. Tracy is grateful to be part of the strong tradition of Tower Hill and its exciting future.



Outdoor Ministries announces online giving site

We are very excited to announce that the Outdoor Ministries (Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill) online giving site is up and running. Thank you for the support you have given to our Outdoor Ministries sites over the last year. 2019 was successful due to our volunteers, donors and site users. Our UCC Sponsored Events served more campers this year than in 2018. With the increased numbers, we also saw an increase in scholarship requests which we were able to approve over \$10,000 due to donations made throughout the years.

In order to continue to offer life changing experience, we are in need of your financial support. Whether you are able to contribute to the Scholarship Fund, General Fund, Special Projects or Century Club Fund; or if your donation is \$20 or \$2,000, all gifts are greatly appreciated. HUGE thank you for your support!

[Outdoor Ministries Online Giving](#)

Prevent Burnout Through Self Advocacy

Rev. Brandyn Simmons

As a caregiver, one way to prevent burnout is to advocate for yourself and the loved one you care for. You should do this like we vote in Chicago - early and often.

Too much of caregiving is reactionary. We find ourselves in situations where we are scrambling in unfamiliar situations which lead to stress and burnout. When we are burned out, we no longer have the cognitive ability to deal with the situation and when we are stressed, we don't have the physical health or energy to cope. This merely leads to a self-exacerbating cycle.

The healthy option to avoid this unfortunate, but oft-occurring cycle is to be prepared and to self-advocate. The difficult part about this option, however, is that the old adage is true: we don't know, what we don't know. That is, we often don't know what to plan for until it is too late and we have already been faced with it. So, I want to give a few examples here that I teach in my workshops and that I have encountered. It is my hope that seeing these options may jog some ideas for you to plan for in your own context.

1. Advance Directives - If you or your loved one don't have them in place already, take the time to sit down and complete your will, living will, health care power of attorney, durable power of attorney, and, if applicable, DNR (Do Not Resuscitate), POLST (Physician Order for Life Sustaining Treatment), and any Living Trusts for accounts and property that you may need. If you wait to do these until you need them, it will

be too late. Complete them when everyone has the cognitive faculties to do so.

[Read More](#)

Solar Power Makes Sense

Rev. Jim Fisher

Chair, Fox Valley Association Committee on the Church

First Congregational UCC in Elgin is on track to become the second solar-powered church in the Illinois Conference, following the lead of St. John UCC in Freeport. When talking to First Congregational's interim pastor Michael Montgomery about the nuts and bolts of the planning process, he explained that going solar, for all of its missional value and environmental benefits, has the added benefit of establishing a more sustainable financial footing for the church's future.

Going solar has missional value. Pastor Michael explained how the solar power project must begin with a scripturally supported argument to justify the investment. Members must clearly understand the "why" for going solar. They have also since adopted the theme "Live Love for God's Environment" in which First Congregational seeks to be recognized as Elgin's environmental church, to reduce their carbon footprint by 40%, and demonstrate a stronger Christian-environmental connection with a greater theological focus on the care of the earth.

Going solar benefits the environment. Solar energy is a readily available source of clean energy that creates no byproducts beyond the solar panels themselves. It takes a bite out of fossil fuels that must be extracted from the earth, transported great distances and, when burned, contribute to greenhouse gases, nitrous oxides, sulfur dioxide, and other airborne byproducts that cause health problems. First Congregational's solar project promises to eliminate more than 100,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually.

For all of its missional and environmental benefits, solar power also contributes to the long-term financial health of the church. Pastor Michael says the solar installation will pay for itself in five to seven years, after which the church will enjoy roughly no-cost electricity. Because the costs and planning involved, he recommends starting the planning process early. To find out more, visit the [Commonwealth Edison Solar Calculator](#) .

Happenings Around the Conference



Clery, family and friends gathered in Chicago on Dec. 1, for the pastoral installation of Rev. Dr. Marilyn Pagán Banks as she was installed as senior pastor of San Lucas UCC.

Picture credit: San Lucas UCC (Facebook page)



Youth and Sunday School kids from Christ Tamil Church Chicago in Wheaton participated in the “Prison Pack Ministry” last week and packed 81 care packs for prisoners in 2 facilities: Duquoin with 27 inmates and Clayton Work Camp with 54 inmates. “Prison Pack Ministry” provides care and support for incarcerated people—both during their time and upon release. This initiative is an opportunity to extend compassion to those who deserve to feel God’s love.

Illinois Conference announces the close of 2019 Our Church's Wider Mission contributions...

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation to all our churches that have been able to meet or exceed their OCWM goals for the year 2019.

We would also like to take this time to let all our churches know that the deadline for churches to mail in contributions to the drop box is Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2020.

If you wish to bring your OCWM contribution to the Illinois Conference office the deadline is noon on Monday, Jan. 27, 2020.

**DONATE NOW! Support the Ministries of the
Illinois Conference**

THE ILLINOIS CONFERENCE OFFICE
ANNOUNCES THE CLOSE OF OUR FINANCIAL
BOOKS FOR 2019 CONTRIBUTIONS

- 1) PLEASE MAIL YOUR FINAL 2019 OCWM CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR BANK LOCKBOX (REFER TO THE ATTACHED REMITTANCE FORM) BY **TUESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2020**
- OR
- 2) BRING YOUR FINAL 2019 OCWM CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR OFFICE, 1840 WESTCHESTER BOULEVARD, WESTCHESTER, IL BY NOON ON **MONDAY, JANUARY 27, 2020.**
- 3) WE WILL BEGIN POSTING YOUR OCWM CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE YEAR 2020 ON FEBRUARY 7, 2020

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

REV. JUSTO GONZÁLEZ II, INTERIM CONFERENCE MINISTER
REV. MICHELLE HUGHES, ACTING CONFERENCE MINISTER
ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTERS: VITALITY, TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

2021 Back Bay Mission Trip Calendar Opens on January 1

It's time to start thinking about your church's or organization's 2021 mission trip. Mission trips to Back Bay Mission are great opportunities for learning, service, and fellowship. These week-long immersive mission experiences teach participants about poverty on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and prepare groups to serve in their own communities.

2021 mission trip calendar opens at midnight, central time, on January 1, 2020. That's less than a month away. Popular dates, especially during the summer and spring break season, fill up fast.

[Click here to learn more about mission trips at Back Bay Mission, including how to register to begin on January 1, 2020!](#)

An invitation from Rev. Scott Matheney at Elmhurst College (soon to be Elmhurst University)

This is an open invite to all churches, pastors and lay people who would like to be a part of the planning team of the United Church of Christ with the 150th Elmhurst College, soon to be Elmhurst University. This historical moment will be in 2021, and we are working to build and strengthen the relationships with Elmhurst and the United Church of Christ.

Please contact the Chaplain of the College, H. Scott Matheney at hscottm@elmhurst.edu or (630) 617-3025, to be a part of this team, and bring your creative thoughts to our common life as we lift up our UCC and higher education relations with Elmhurst College—soon to be Elmhurst University.

General Synod Resolution Process Survey

The UCCB Governance Committee subcommittee on the Standing Rules of General Synod is reviewing the Standing Rules for updating and possible revision. We are looking at several aspects of the Standing Rules and, in particular, the Resolution process from drafting through presentation and, to that end, we are looking for information and feedback to assist in this process.

Your participation is voluntary and you may leave the survey at any time. All responses will be kept confidential and responses will only be reported in aggregate form. This survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. Please respond to the survey by January 10 and 11:59 p.m. EST. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Erica Dollhopf at dollhopfe@ucc.org.

Share Your Thoughts TAKE THE SURVEY

Churches in the Media

[Christmas Cookie Bake Sale Planned At St. John's in Mokena](#)

[First Congregational United Church restores 80-year-old stained glass window](#)

[Bethel UCC and Bethel Learning Center Present Free Kinder Concert](#)

[Bethel United Church of Christ Invites Community to Advent Events](#)

[PBUCC Receives \\$1 Million Lilly Grant to Expand MFVI](#)

[Diverse churches worship together for Thanksgiving unity](#)

Employment Opportunities

Click links to view [Ministerial opportunities](#) and [lay employment opportunities](#) within the Illinois Conference.

Conference Calendar for December

December 12: [Understanding Sudden Death Grief in a Faith Based Setting](#) by NAMI Metro Suburban, 11:30 a.m. at First Congregational Church of Western Springs.

December 12: [Grief After Sudden Loss: Finding Hope and Healing](#) by National Alliance on Mental Illness Metro Suburban Affiliate, 7:00 p.m. at First Congregational Church of Western Springs.

December 15: [A Festival of Lessons and Carols by Hal H. Hopson](#) , 3:00 p.m. at St. Paul UCC, Pekin.

December 21: [Longest Night Gathering](#) hosted by Pilgrim Congregational Church UCC and River Forest United Methodist Church, 6:30 p.m. at Pilgrim Congregational Church UCC, Oak Park.

December 22: [Service of Farewell and Release for Rev. Dr. Vertie Powers](#) , 4:00 p.m. at Westchester Community Church, Westchester. Reception to follow.

December 27-28: [University Church's 8th Annual Youth Lock-In](#) space is limited to 50 youth [RSVP here](#) .

Upcoming Events

March 3-5, 2020: [CHHSM 82nd Annual Gathering](#) in Memphis, TN. The Guest House at Graceland will serve as the conference site. Together We Create a Just, Caring and Compassionate World.

March 12-14, 2020: [Illinois Conference Clergy Wellness Retreat](#) , in Techny, Ill.

April 24-27, 2020: [Ecumenical Advocacy Days](#) gathering "Imagine! God's Earth and People Restore" in Washington, D.C.

June 4-6, 2020: [Illinois Conference 56th Annual Celebration](#) , at Augustana College, Rock Island, Ill. "Bridge Building - Rise Up & Build," the theme of the 2020 Annual Celebration.

July 22-25, 2020: [United Church of Christ's National Youth Event](#) at Purdue University in West Lafayette Indiana.

Visit our website



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THE ILLINOIS CONFERENCE UCC E-BLAST is published by the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ, 1840 Westchester Blvd., Suite 200, Westchester, IL 60154. The Rev. Justo González II, Interim Conference Minister; Carmen Torres, Editorial Assistant. Copy may be sent to: ilconfcarmen@gmail.com.

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Our Church's Wider Mission

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