Report from the Interim Conference Minister

One People, One Sovereign, One Familia: The Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ

We did it! Our 2019 Annual Celebration was truly a celebration of who we are and where God is calling us as the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ. We danced in the aisles at Hammerschmidt Memorial Chapel. Any time you can dance in church and in the struggles of life it is ALWAYS a good day.

Friends:

God has always most vividly spoken to me in dreams. I had this experience again in 2016. I woke up and I knew that my next call would be in Conference Ministry. I shared this with James. I knew he would be totally opposed to moving as once he settles --- he settles and is good for the rest of his life.

Since “CHANGE” in our lives was only “theoretical” at that point he wasn’t thrilled but said he would support “us” and go wherever God was leading. His willingness to live into God’s will, discern and listen with me to the Whippers of the Spirit was a gift. It was SCARY.

About seven (7) months later, I received an e-mail out of the blue from Campbell Lovett, Conference Minister of the Michigan Conference, inviting me to join his staff. I did not apply for nor know there was an opening. God continues to be GOD and do what God is going to do. As is my pattern, I resisted. My congregation was thriving and we had just been named that Social Prophet Congregation of the year for Synod 2017. I resisted change in spite of God already telling me what was going to happen in my journey. How human of me.
It was James, at our kitchen table who looked me in the eye stating, “Why are you resisting? Wasn’t it you who told me that God told you that your next call would be in Conference Ministry? What I heard was, “Smack, Smack, Smack, are you going to follow where God is leading or continue to resist God’s plan which includes DRAMATIC CHANGE for your lives. Smack. Smack.”

“I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the Illinois Conference. I will create rivers of blessing from the difficulties within the Conference, Associations and your local congregations.” Isaiah 43:19 (New Living Translation with a little help from Justo.)

I am So HUMAN. We are So HUMAN. We know that things are constantly changing around us. We are certain God is Doing God’s Work and YET WE RESIST. We can either DARE to RISK BOLDLY, DISCERN and TRUST GOD or we can REFUSE to LISTEN/DISCERN/CHANGE and BECOME an OBSTACLE.

It is SCARY to be INVITED to the DANCE by a NEW PARTNER. Yet, HERE WE ARE. LET’S DANCE. If you look closely, the music is somewhat familiar, many of the dancers are the same folks we’ve danced with before and others are not. These are OUR PEOPLE. Let us not shy away from Discerning the NEXT Steps to the Dance, playing the music that honors ALL OF OUR PEOPLE and acknowledge that Some Music We like Better Than Others. We Prefer This Over That. We’d like OUR CAKE and EAT IT TOO. Yet, LIFE leads us in Comfortable and Uncomfortable paths.

We are NOT OPPOSED TO CHANGE AS LONG AS EVERYTHING STAYS THE SAME. Let the Church say Amen!

Sisters, Brothers and Siblings in Christ, I GET IT. None of us like CHANGE. Yet, God in this time and place, is calling us to speak what we already know.

- We must shift or we will die.
- We must DARE to RISK or WE WILL CONTINUE TO BE Stagnant.
- We cannot afford to be Unfocused.
- We must DISCERN and Know OUR WHY for Ministry as local congregations, clergy, Associations and as a Conference.
- If you’d like to know more about discovering your personal and professional “WHY” see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lytFB8TrkTo.

Let us, as ONE PEOPLE of God and ONE FAMILIA (FAMILY) in the Illinois Conference DISCERN TOGETHER WHAT GOD INTENDS. WE will DISCERN TOGETHER. There is no hidden agenda. RELATIONSHIP BUILDING is OUR AGENDA. Creating a Culture of Truth & Transparency is THE AGENDA. SERVING YOU is THE AGENDA.

My commitment to the Conference Council and you is to gift you by Naming the PINK ELEPHANTS in the ROOM.
- We can no longer avoid the hard and difficult choices before us.
- We cannot ignore that “Covenant” seems to have lost a clear definition among us.
- We cannot pretend that we are being gifted with OCWM dollars like we were blessed in the past.
- We cannot ignore that EVERYONE WANTS THEIR OWN ACM but that not every congregation and ministry is willing to support us financially.
- We can no longer ignore that everyone loves our camps yet they are draining us of resources. Either things shift or we are all dead.
- We can no longer pretend that shifting the deck seats doesn’t mean that we’re not on the Titanic. A comprehensive restructure is needed to align our conference, association and church structures to the reality of 2019 and
I am EXCITED and SCARED to inform you that we cannot continue to be or have the same organizational structure of the past. We must discern together where God is Calling Us in the NEXT CHAPTER of OUR COMMUNAL Lives. We can do this.

I need, (as our Conference Leadership Team both lay and clergy) your wisdom, grace, support and ability to LISTEN to the Whispers of The Holy Spirit as we Discern our Future.

Warmest Regards,
Justo

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Annual Celebration captured moments...

Rev. Justo González II, Interim Conference Minister was the opening worship preacher.

Youth Energizers checking in P.I.E.S. style! How are you doing physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually?

2019-2020 Newly Installed officers.

Annual Celebration was truly a joyful celebration. Let’s get off the bench and Just Dance. Thank you all for joining us.

Click the links below to view capture moments at Annual Celebration...

2019 Illinois Conference Annual Celebration-Day 1 (June 7, 2019)

2019 Illinois Conference Annual Celebration-Day 2 (June 8, 2019)

While no video can capture the powerful experience of song and worship echoing through Hammerschmidt Memorial Chapel in Elmhurst, you may watch the video below of the Opening Worship and keynote address by the Rev. Justo González II, Interim Conference Minister.

Opening Worship and Keynote address by Rev. Justo González II, Interim Conference Minister

Welcome to the team Rev. Michelle Hughes as the Associate Conference Minister for Vitality, Transformation
and Sustainability

We are proud to announce that The Reverend Michelle Hughes has been affirmed as our new Associate Conference Minister for Vitality, Transformation & Sustainability. She replaces the Rev. Dr. David Russell. He retires on June 30, 2019.

Michelle is a Chicago native and mom to her adult children, Nia and Joshua. She is a Chicago Theological Seminary graduate and was ordained at Coppin AME Church in Chicago.

Michelle brings vast experience to her new role within the Conference Staff. She has served as an interim pastor within local churches, an associate conference minister, an associate chaplain, college professor, vice president of the Illinois Conference Council, and as a consultant for various Chicago-area agencies. Michelle has worked for the Chicago Mayor’s office, National Rainbow Coalition and Protestants for the Common Good. She also developed Hughes & Associates Consulting which specializes in pre-employment and personal development training.

Happenings Around the Associations...

The Mexico delegation from First Congregational UCC in Moline and part of Illinois Maya Ministry travel to San Cristobal de Las Casas in May to learn from ministry partners, particularly INESIN - the intercultural institute.

Picture credit: Michael Swartz

The Reverend Catherine Watkins celebrated her Ordination service on June 2 at First Congregational Church of Evanston, UCC.
First Congregational United Church of Christ in Downers Grove participated in this past Sunday’s Pride Parade in Aurora.

“God is love...we try and love all our neighbors, no exceptions, best as we can.”

We will continue to celebrate and share capture moments throughout the Illinois Conference, Associations and Camps. Follow us at the sites below:

Facebook | Instagram | YouTube | Twitter

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Farewell Worship and Reception for Rev. Dr. David Russell

You are invited to attend Rev. Dr. David Russell’s Retirement and Worship Celebration as he retires from ministry at the Illinois Conference as Associate Conference Minister for Stewardship and Church Vitality. On Sunday, June 30, 2019 at 4:00 p.m. St. Paul UCC, Palatine.

RSVP at lconfnaomi@gmail.com by Friday, June 21, 2019.

View invitation here

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Thank you message from Rev. Tom Norwalk

Dear Friends of the Illinois Conference,

Words cannot express how very touched I was with the outpouring of love and appreciation shared with me at my retirement celebration in Bloomington. It was a wonderful worship service followed by a time of fellowship that was planned by a wonderful team of friends from the Eastern and Western Associations.

Many thanks to all who contributed toward the travel fund that was presented to Becky and me that day – we shall make some special plans for the future that will help us to achieve a “trip” off our bucket list! The generous gifts will keep all of you close our hearts as we enjoy the days of our retirement. We have been blessed to serve in the Illinois Conference with so many fine
persons.

Blessings,
Tom Norwalk

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**Conference Calendar for June**

June 15: Service of Ordination for Brian L. Clary, noon at Faith United Protestant Church, Park Forest.

June 17-19: Our Whole Lives Training for Facilitating Jr/Sr High OWL, at the Best Western Plus Milwaukee Airport Hotel and Conference Center, Milwaukee, WI. Sponsor by UCC Open and Affirming Coalition and National Offices of UCC.

June 18-20: National ONA Gathering in Milwaukee. Rev. Justo González II, Interim Conference Minister, will be one of the Keynote speakers.


June 21: Celebration of 10th Anniversary of Advocate UCC, Chicago, 7:00 p.m. at The Grand Ballroom Chicago.

June 21-25: United Church of Christ's Thirty-Second General Synod at the Wisconsin Center, located in the heart of downtown Milwaukee.

June 24-28: Sea of Tiberias Summer Retreat at Eureka College, Eureka, Ill. Continuing education opportunity - Open to clergy and laity.


June 27: Generations Care Partners Workshops: The Zen of Caregiving, 1:00 p.m. at Edgebrook Community Church, Chicago. “Caregiving need not and should not be done alone!”

June 28: Generations Care Partners Workshops: The Zen of Caregiving, 6:00 p.m. at Immanuel UCC, Streamwood. “Caregiving need not and should not be done alone!”

June 30: Rev. Dr. David Russell's Retirement Celebration, 4:00 p.m. at St. Paul UCC, Palatine.

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**Upcoming Events**

July 14: Ecclesiastical Council for Jagan Samuvelraj, 3:00 p.m. at St. Matthew UCC, Wheaton.
July 17: Off the Pews/Advocate Youth Program: Live from the Heart, 8:30 a.m. - noon, Stein Auditorium Advocate Christ Medical Center, Oak Lawn (via video Conference).

July 28: Rev. Justo González II, Interim Conference Minister, 10:15 a.m. will be preaching at Zion United Church of Christ, Peru.

August 5-9: Mediation Skills Training Institute for Church Leaders (MSTI), St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, Glen Ellyn.


October 2: Clergy Day Away with Barbara Brown Taylor at Pilgrim Park, Princeton.